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Fela Kuti Coffin for Head of State/Unknown Soldier MCA

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What would you do if government soldiers invaded your house, threw your mother out a window, mutilated the genitals of your male friends, paraded your female friends around on a flatbed truck while raping them, beat you severely, burned your house down, and then claimed they had committed none of these atrocious acts? If you were Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (1938-1997), the famous Nigerian Afrobeat musician and renegade spirit, you would respond in song. You would release two of the fiercest, most powerful tracks of your career: Coffin for Head of State and Unknown Soldier.

Originally recorded in 1979 and 1980, and now released on one CD by MCA, these epic songs chronicle the February 1977 ransacking of Fela's "Kalakuta Republic" compound in suburban Lagos, as well as other aspects of Nigerian political turmoil during the late '70s. With Fela's female vocalists - many of them his wives - chanting in the background, Fela sings on "Coffin for Head of State" of his politically active mother and her death caused by the injuries sustained in the attack. Bass, guitar, and drum patterns interlock in a slow, brooding groove as Fela's saxophone, keyboard, and vocals rage over the top. The song reaches its emotional climax when Fela sings, "Them kill my mama," his haughty, confident voice finally cracking, filled with grief.

"Unknown Soldier" is an even more ferocious example of Fela's Afrobeat

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terrifying narrative as Fela once again sings passionately and directly of his mother's death, condemning the government cover-up of the attack on his compound. Fela's backup singers chant "left, right" and "unknown soldier" (a phrase the government used in its cover-up) in a martial tempo that collides with the resilient polyrhythmic onslaught of the band. But even before we reach the lyrics of this epic, 30-minute song, Fela's saxophone solo is so packed with anger, outrage, and mourning that he barely needs to sing to get his point across. I do not forget, the saxophone cries; I cast evil spells on my enemies, it warns; and I enchant my allies, it stresses, sustaining them with a gritty, brave, determined music.

MICHAEL J. KRAMER

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