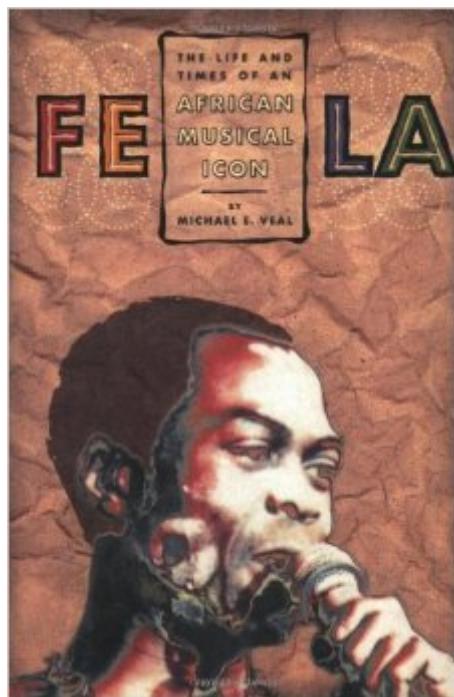


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Fela: The Life And Times Of An African Musical Icon



Synopsis

A study of Nigerian musician and political critic Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. It demonstrates that over three decades Fela synthesized a unique musical language while also clearing a space for popular political dissent and a type of counter-cultural expression rarely seen in West Africa.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A timely exploration of the father of Afro-beat. Veal, who we learn had occasion to play with Fela and spent time at the Shrine, is obviously a fan of the music and his enthusiasm is palpable. Veal's work is distinguished on many levels. As an ethnomusicologist, Veal offers rigorous descriptions and insights into the compositional aspects of Fela's work. We are given the specifics of Fela's innovations and refinements with Afro-beat. Veal locates Fela's accomplishments within the context of its forbears (E.T. Mensah, James Brown, John Coltrane, etc.) and 20th century African/Afrodiaporic music in general. From Nkrumah to Obasanjo, Veal's discussion of Nigerian/African culture and politics is well researched and thoughtful. There are great nuggets of biographical information from Fela's brief feud with Paul McCartney to November 14th, "Fela Day" in Berkeley (go figure). Veal offers a wealth of information on Fela's family and the impact his parents (his mother in particular) had on his musical and political development. We get the blow-by-blow account of Fela's confrontations with the Nigerian authorities (often, as with the Kalakuta Massacre, in harrowing detail). On the critical theoretical tip, Veal 'samples' Gilroy, Jameson, Fanon, Spivak (and others), engaging in an extended discussion of Fela's compositions as postcolonial 'texts.'

Though at times distractingly academic, Veal is rigorous in his deconstruction of Fela and gender, the "specific symbolic and psychological functions" of strategic historical essentialism, mysticism, etc., avoiding the cheap and oversimplistic assessments that often surround the man (often, as Veal notes, in service of hegemonic notions of "civilization").

I have mixed feelings about this book and while any book about Fela Kuti is to be welcomed, I don't think this is the definitive one and I do think that Fela's legacy deserves better. There is no doubt that the author is probably the most well informed of all those who have written about this iconic figure, the man who was the most important musician ever to come out of Africa. The research is unquestionably thorough and there is as much detail as any admirer would wish to know. The problem, for me, is that any biographer should be invisible in the work he's writing. Michael Veal, unfortunately, isn't and at times his presence looms larger than the subject of his book. Throughout the narrative there are long sections where the author writes an analysis of Fela and his relationship to the African experience. These passages are written in the most stilted and uncomfortable academic manner. The effect of this is to give the impression that the work is a cut and paste job between outside sources and one of the author's academic theses, an impression which renders the book an uncomfortable mix of good biography and dull collegiate essaying. There were times when reading these sections I wondered just what Fela would have made of this awkward literary style - and I suspect he would have been dismissive and written a song which parodied it. The other fault with the book is the distinct lack of objectivity from the author. That Michael Veal is in awe of the man is not in doubt, but awe is not the best starting place for a biography. The dichotomy of the contrasting aspects of Fela's personality is acknowledged on many occasions, but there is absolutely no attempt to analyse the negative aspects of his character.

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