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SAN DIEGO, Calif.--- Truth.

That is the word that wraps African musician Fela Anikulapo Kuti in a prismatic package of American jazz and Afro-beat - the fusion of Western funk with the call for African independence. Fela and Egypt 80, his remarkable 32-piece African dance band, are in the midst of an ambitious American tour, which will include a show Saturday at the Riviera theater in Chicago

Fela does not have a major record deal.

In concert, Fela eschews material from his previous 45 recordings in favor of neo-cosmic improvisation. Fela does not have corporate sponsorship. Fela does not have a clause in his contract calling for green M & Ms.

All Fela has is the truth.

"I've seen a lot of fakes in this world - artists who put on a face," Fela said after an outdoor concert at the Jackie Robinson YMCA in impoverished southeast San Diego. "But that life is not a good life. It is tough to lie to people inwards and outwards. If I say I love people, I must mix with people. I cannot be bureaucratic. If I say I'm a good artist, I must be honest with my art, be natural and be strong. That was my initial conviction of life."

Fela, 50, absorbed the intense integrity from his father, who was the first president of the Nigerian Teachers Union, and his mother, a primary-school teacher who was founder and president of the Nigerian Women's Union. She is credited with obtaining the right to vote for Nigerian women.

Fela's older brother, Koye, is Nigeria's minister of health. Fela himself dreams of being president of Nigeria. He started his own political party and ran for election in 1979, but the party later was banned. Fela plans to create another party when he returns home after this tour.

"When I was very young, my mother and I would talk (about) how so many leaders were corrupt and thieves," Fela said. "In discussions with her, I learned how it is honesty that can really give life to people. Then, in 1981, I went into a trance for about two hours. I experienced a lot of truths about this world. The trance took me back to the beginning of civilization, it took me forward to what this world has to be. And I found out that in this world there is a war between evil and good and that I have a very important part to play on the side of good. That is what my life is about."

The sides are clearly defined on Fela's current tour. According to Fela, good is a call for a united Africa, and bad is the influence of Western technology on his homeland. What's striking about Fela's music is how he translates the singularity of

oppression into polyrhythms of diversely ornamented sound.

Fela's Egypt 80 band is one nation under a groove.

A nine-piece horn section is anchored by a trumpet player who doubles on a Haitian washboard. A rhythm section features primitive congas, trap drums and a long, wooden wind instrument that looks like a log, which the musician must straddle to play. Fela has added two players since his 1986 mini-tour - a second bassist and an extra conga player (on bigger congas). There also is the imperative sound of the African guitar, and there are five costumed female background singers whose relentless vocals round out the beat. Fela totally disregards computerization and electronics in favor of airy rhythms and lush tonalities.

During the new song "O.D.O.O.," short for "Overtake Done Overtake Overtake" (Fela initials his songs in concert), Fela presents three submissive female dancers. Before they leave the stage, they engage in a mock fight for supremacy. Fela, perched behind the keyboards, looks on in approval.

the Egypt 80 musicians dress in dark purple and sharp pink African fatigues. Fela wears a loud pink jumpsuit, and halfway through the performance he removes the top. During each extended 25-35 minute musical session (as Fela calls it), Fela darts about the stage, directing the players with dangerous ferocity in his eyes. At the end of a session, Fela displays a satisfied smile.

How does Fela's spirited groove conquer oppression?

As Fela sat in the locker room at the YMCA, in front of a black-and-white picture of Jackie Robinson sliding into home, he responded, "I cannot really explain that, except to say I feel very deeply about my country, my continent and my reason for being born. I feel very strongly African; I feel very strongly about the exposition of African knowledge. Some of my friends cannot believe the conviction I have. But if your mind does not come from a great country, you cannot be a great man."

This conviction is a major part of what has made Fela controversial. He has consistently criticized Nigeria's civilian rulers and military dictators for their alleged corruption and self-gratification. On the eve of Fela's planned departure for a U.S. tour in 1984, he was arrested and jailed for 18 months on currency smuggling charges. Amnesty International charged that Fela's militant lyrics and presence promoted his arrest. In 1985, Fela told Newsweek that he was arrested because of his impending tour. His U.S. appearance, he said, would have further exposed the wrongs of Nigeria's government.

Fela was pardoned in early 1986 by Nigeria's new government. He had developed a peptic ulcer while in jail and was still mending when he made his Chicago debut in November, 1986, at the Riviera.

Fela packs more punch on this tour, ending a couple of sessions with some venomous snake dancing. When the rebirth was mentioned to Fela, he laughed and said, `Yes, I'm older now, but I'm getting my youth back. It's an African thing. You get better as you get older."

The fires within Fela clearly will continue to burn. Between sessions, Fela told the small San Diego gathering, "If you study your maps, Africa is placed in the center of the world. If the center does not hold, there will be no balance. . . . What is happening in Africa today is criminally ridiculous. One person gets shot in South Africa, and you hear `apartheid.' But oppression in Africa is at its highest level. We are entering an era of second slavery."

Fela proceeded to lead the crowd in an "Africa Must Unite" chant.

Fela was born into an upper-class family in Abeokuta, a village near Lagos, Nigeria. The region's history of turmoil dates to 1807, when British merchant ships shuttled slaves between West Africa and the West Indies. American ships would stop at the West African ports at the mouth of the Niger River in what is now Lagos. The three factions would become involved in small wars, and the accepted practice was to trade prisoners of war for slaves.

In 1959, Fela's parents sent him to study at Trinity College of Music in London. He began playing tenor saxophone in jazz clubs, copying rhythms from Louis Prima records and riffs from Frank Sinatra's "Mr. Success." (He doesn't play sax in concert, and producer Bill Laswell erased all of Fela's sax solos on the 1985 record "Army Arrangement," saying, "I don't even play the saxophone, and I could play better than that.") Fela was sent away because his family wasn't impressed with the educational opportunities in Africa.

"And the educational system continues to fail," Fela said. "As time goes on, the education becomes more affluent because the education is the culture of the white man. If you don't have (your own) culture, you cannot improve the education. African minds will only be satisfied when Africa is what it was before slave trade.

`What made Africa important then was tradition, culture, arts, knowledge of nature, knowledge of natural medicine, knowledge of the supernatural. These are the things they should be teaching in the universities. But these things are not touched at all. The government answers to the Western world. It uses the Western culture to suppress people."

Fela's uncompromising life is a chain of confrontation. He once had 27 wives (three of them reportedly are still members of Egypt 80), but he won't discuss marriage anymore. In 1986, he said, "I have re-analyzed marriage and marriage is evil. Period. It breeds jealousy, selfishness and possessiveness. It encourages deception."

In 1975, he changed his name from Fela Ransome Kuti to Fela Anikulapo Kuti (translated from Yoruba: Fela, "he from whom emanates greatness"; Anikulapo, "he who carries death in his pouch," and Kuti, "he whose death cannot be caused by the hand of man alone.")

As Fela snapped his fingers, ordering a band member to get him a cigarette, he explained his feelings about violence. When Fela was 7, his mother accompanied him to the Oracle of Ifa, where a Babalawo priest predicted Fela's future would be filled with "problems, turbulence, violence."

His mother met a violent death in 1977. According to published reports, 1,000 soldiers raided Fela's compound in Lagos, raping and assaulting the women of his group. Fela's 77-year-old mother was thrown out of a window. She died a year later from her injuries.

"Ah, this goes back to the trance (1981), which was a fantastic, special experience in my household, which I will discuss in the future at length," he said. "But the time is not right for it yet. My mother's spirit descended in my household on the 16th through the 25th of June, 1981, in Lagos (his hometown). Then, on the 25th, we went on tour. We were to play in Amsterdam on the 26th. When in Paris, I was (dictating) a book (*Fela, Fela, This Bitch of a Life*). I was telling (author) Carlos Moore about the experience of my childhood.

"About a week later, in Paris, Carlos came to me and said (Fela broke into a deep whisper and the room became quiet), 'Fela! I can't understand what is happening! My wife was in a trance all last night. Talking in tongues I can't understand. What have you brought from Nigeria? What have you brought from Africa?'

"What she had was the (book's) portions from the Oracle of Ifa."

Fela laughed harder than the half-dozen band members who were listening somewhere between attention and fear. Laughter and sorrow are more intense when you see the truth.