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Fela Kuti

Nigerian musician and activist

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BY **The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica** Last Updated: Jul 29, 2021 | [View Edit History](#)



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Born: October 15, 1938 • [Abeokuta](#) • [Nigeria](#)

Died: August 2, 1997 (aged 58) • [Lagos](#) • [Nigeria](#)

Founder: [Movement of the People](#)

Political Affiliation: [Movement of the People](#)

Notable Family Members: mother [Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti](#)

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Fela Kuti, byname of **Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome-Kuti**, also called **Fela Anikulapo-Kuti**, (born October 15, 1938, [Abeokuta](#), Nigeria—died [August 2, 1997](#), Lagos), Nigerian musician and activist who launched a modern style of [music](#) called Afro-beat, which fused American [blues](#), [jazz](#), and [funk](#) with traditional [Yoruba](#) music.

Kuti was the son of feminist and labour activist [Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti](#). As a youth he took lessons in [piano](#) and [percussion](#) before studying (1959) classical music at Trinity

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FELA KUTI

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that group's experiments.



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Following his 1969 tour of the United States, where he was influenced by the politics of [Malcolm X](#), the [Black Panthers](#), and other militants, Kuti's music became increasingly politicized. He exhorted [social change](#) in such songs as "Zombie," "Monkey Banana," "Beasts of No Nation," and "Upside Down." Fela (as he was popularly known) and [Close Ad](#) ✕

nightclub in [Lagos](#). The firebrand singer, who gyrated over the keyboard as he sang in English and Yoruba, struck a chord among the unemployed, disadvantaged, and oppressed. His politically charged songs, which decried oppression by Nigeria's [military government](#), prompted authorities to routinely raid his club, looking for reasons to jail him. Near there he also set up a communal [compound](#), which he proclaimed the independent Kalakuta Republic. As head of the commune, he often provoked controversy and attracted attention by promoting [indulgence in sex, polygamy](#) (he married 27 women), and [drugs](#), especially [marijuana](#). A 1977 raid on the complex by Nigerian authorities resulted in his brief incarceration and the death of his mother the following year due to complications from a fall. In exile in [Ghana](#) in 1978, he changed his name from Ransome to the tribal Anikulapo.

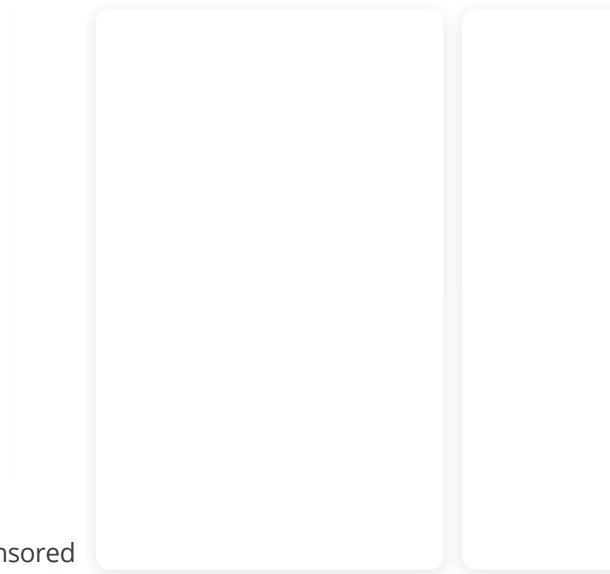
In 1979 Fela formed a [political party](#), the Movement of the People, and ran unsuccessfully for the presidency of Nigeria. Five years later he was jailed for 20 months on charges of currency [smuggling](#). Upon his release, he turned away from active political protest and left his son, Femi, to carry the torch of Afro-beat music. Fela was jailed again in 1993 for murder, but the charges were eventually dropped. He died as a result of complications from [AIDS](#).

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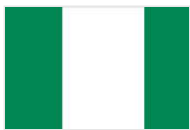
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African popular music

Nigeria's **Fela Kuti** achieved international notice as a result of his provocative lifestyle, which helped to bring attention to his Afro-beat style, in which he chanted messages of defiance and advice in a mixture of local language (Yoruba) and pidgin English to the accompaniment of...

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti

...the example of her son, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, a popular musician and a fierce critic of Nigeria's military governments from the 1960s. In 1977 some 1,000 soldiers stormed the family property in Lagos, which Fela had transformed into a commune that he called the Kalakuta Republic. During the assault, soldiers dragged...



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