I Go Shout Plenty

For the late musician and pan-African activist Fela Kuti, the Afrobeat goes on

July 1, 2003 By Miles Marshall Lewis

Six years after his death from AIDS-related heart failure, the rhythms and fury of Nigerian musician and activist Fela Anikulapo-Kuti haven't stopped churning. On the recent *Red Hot + Riot* album, such musicians as Me'shell NdegéOcello and D'Angelo cover Fela's tunes to raise bucks for AIDS prevention.

And, on July 11, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City is launching *Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti*. The multimedia exhibit, on display through October 19, will feature 40 artists of the African Diaspora, showcasing paintings, photography, music and film inspired by both the rhythms of the Afrobeat genre Fela pioneered and by the pointed political criticism that helped to define his decades-long career.

Born in 1938 to Yoruban parents in Abeokuta, Nigeria, Fela began his singing career at 16, performing in the free-form, highlife style with the popular band Cool Cats. In 1968, Fela fused his own hybrid of highlife and jazz to spawn Afrobeat—a combination of stomping rhythms and catchy blasts of brass atop Fela's politically charged lyrics. His relentless attacks on the Nigerian government, with incendiary albums such as *Coffin for Head of State and I Go Shout Plenty*, culminated in the 1979 inception of his own political party—Movement of the People—and his subsequent three-year imprisonment during the mid-1980s.

Black President, curated by Trevor Schoonmaker, director of the Fela Project exhibition, includes contributions from the likes of DJ Spooky (the computer-rendered virtual space, "Afro-Futuristic Shrine") and photographer Iké Udé (the color print diptych, "Shakara"), among others. Accompanying the exhibit is a 250-page catalogue exploring Fela's contributions as a musician, politician and visionary, written by scholars and music journalists alike, such as Yomi Durotoye, a professor of African Studies at Wake Forrest University, and Knox Robinson, an editor at *The Fader* magazine. *Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo Kuti* is a satisfying, bells-and-whistles artistic journey down the lifeline of a pan-African Renaissance man.

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