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nigerian natural genius

Artist Ghariokwu Lemi handcrafted classic Fela album covers

by Carter Van Pelt

images courtesy of Ammo Talwar

The cover of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's 1976 album *Zombie* portrays the singer in a glorified stance of defiance, nose to nose with ghoulish, darker-than-blue Nigerian soldiers. The rugged, hand-painted text by artist Ghariokwu Lemi underscores the urgency of the entire collage, a potent album cover by any standard and the perfect complement to the ferocious music inside.

From 1974 to 1978, Ghariokwu Lemi was near the eye of the storm that was Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's professional and personal life. It was also the high arc of the Afrika 70 band's rate of output and musical prowess. Lemi illustrated twenty-six of the sixty-plus albums Fela released during his career, helping the musician's revolutionary iconography. Lemi was a trusted member of Fela's inner circle before he left over personal differences, like so many others did during the tumultuous years at the end of the '70s.

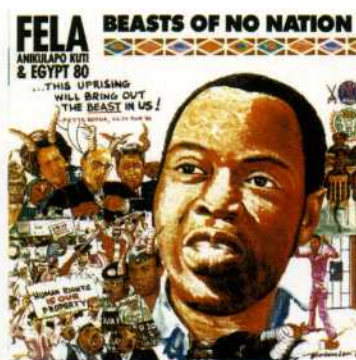
The affable Lemi, born in Lagos on December 26, 1955, describes himself as largely self-taught, beyond a handful of primary school art classes. In the newly post-colonial Nigeria, Lemi's exposure to Western representations of Afrocentrism was key to a worldview that would inform his work for Fela. "In 1972, when George Jackson was killed in San Quentin, I was conscious [of the event]," says Lemi. "His photograph was in *Drum* magazine. He was sitting on a prison bench. I made a drawing of that picture. I read the story, and I cried."

Lemi recalls Fela's rapid ascension to local fame after his return to Nigeria in 1970 with his first big local hit, "Jeun Ko Ku

(Chop'n Quench)." "I was a member of NAPWA, the Nigerian Association of Patriotic Writers and Artists. They used to have their meetings in my school compound, Yaba College of Technology. Fela would [sometimes] give a free show after the meeting. Never in my wildest imagination could I have foreseen that I was going to work for him [a few] years later."

Several coincidences drew Lemi directly into Fela's vortex in the fall of 1974. The owner of a bar near the Lemi household commissioned the young artist to do a painting of the characters from the film *Enter the Dragon*. Around the same time, Lemi did a rendering of the Fela album cover *Roforofo Fight* to enhance his portfolio. A journalist and friend of Fela's, Babatunde Harrison, frequented the bar where Lemi's painting hung and asked to see more of the artist's work. When Lemi showed Harrison his version of the Fela album cover, Harrison said he was going to bring a photo of Fela for him as the basis for a portrait. "I did the portrait," Lemi recalls. "The very next day, [Harrison] saw it. He said, 'Okay, let's go to Fela's place.' I thought I was dreaming. Fela saw the portrait. I'll never forget. He said, 'Goddamn!' [laughs] I used to take thirty naira for my portraits in those days, but Fela wrote out a check for 120 naira... I refused to take the money. He tore out a sheet of paper and wrote out a gate pass for me to attend his shows free of charge. So I took that!"

Shortly thereafter, on November 23, 1974, the police attacked Fela's communal compound, known as "Kalakuta Re-



public,” in a well-documented event in which the singer was hospitalized. Lemi asked Babatunde Harrison about Fela’s condition, and the two of them went to the hospital. “When [Fela] saw me in his hospital room,” Lemi continues, “he said, ‘The Artist...’ I was so happy that he recognized me. We started talking about ideas. He was going to write a song to lampoon the police. The song was ‘Alagbon Close.’ That was my first opportunity. The [Fela image] was cut out from my original drawing of *Roforofa Fight*. I actually pasted that [into the new work]. I used this [album cover] to celebrate his victory over the police. The whale is just the force of nature that supported Fela’s drive for freedom. This police patrol boat is [getting overturned]. As the whale came out [of the water], Fela’s chains were broken. Alagbon Close was the street where the police station is in Ikoyi in Lagos: a ‘close’ is a cul-de-sac; ‘Alagbon’ is a Yoruba word that means coconut tree.”

The public response to Lemi’s first album cover for Fela helped solidify the relationship, and Lemi did more covers including *Kalakuta Show*, *No Buredi*, and *Ikoyi Blindness*. At the same time, an earlier designer, Grace Mamuli Oktie-eboh, who had been the first to illustrate a Fela album with *Why Black Man Dey Suffer*, continued to work for the prolific Afrobeat star.

Lemi remembers the cover for *No Buredi* in 1975 as another important illustration. “That was how I created my style of juxtaposition of images. When I’d go to [Fela’s] place, they’d ask me what I’d like to drink, and I loved to drink Fanta, the orange drink. Fela said, ‘How can my artist be drinking Fanta?’ He said, ‘You should smoke *igbo*, so you can be more creative.’ I wasn’t born a smoker, neither a drinker. Because I respected him so much, I tried and I got *hiiiiigh*! He said I should take it easy, when I sleep, I should think...meditate about the new cover. I did that actually. I woke up very late the next day... all the while, I was thinking in my state of high ideas. I started making notes. [*No Buredi*] was an oil painting on cardboard... It took me two weeks. When I finished, I took it to Fela, and everyone screams. Fela said, ‘Wow, see, I told you you needed to try some marijuana!’ I only smoked here and there after that. I really wasn’t cut out for it. I was studying metaphysics then. I learned how to meditate. I felt I needed to learn how to meditate so I don’t need to smoke to get high.” Notably, Lemi later encouraged the singer to write the song “N.N.G.”

(“Nigerian Natural Grass”), a song that was performed live but never recorded.

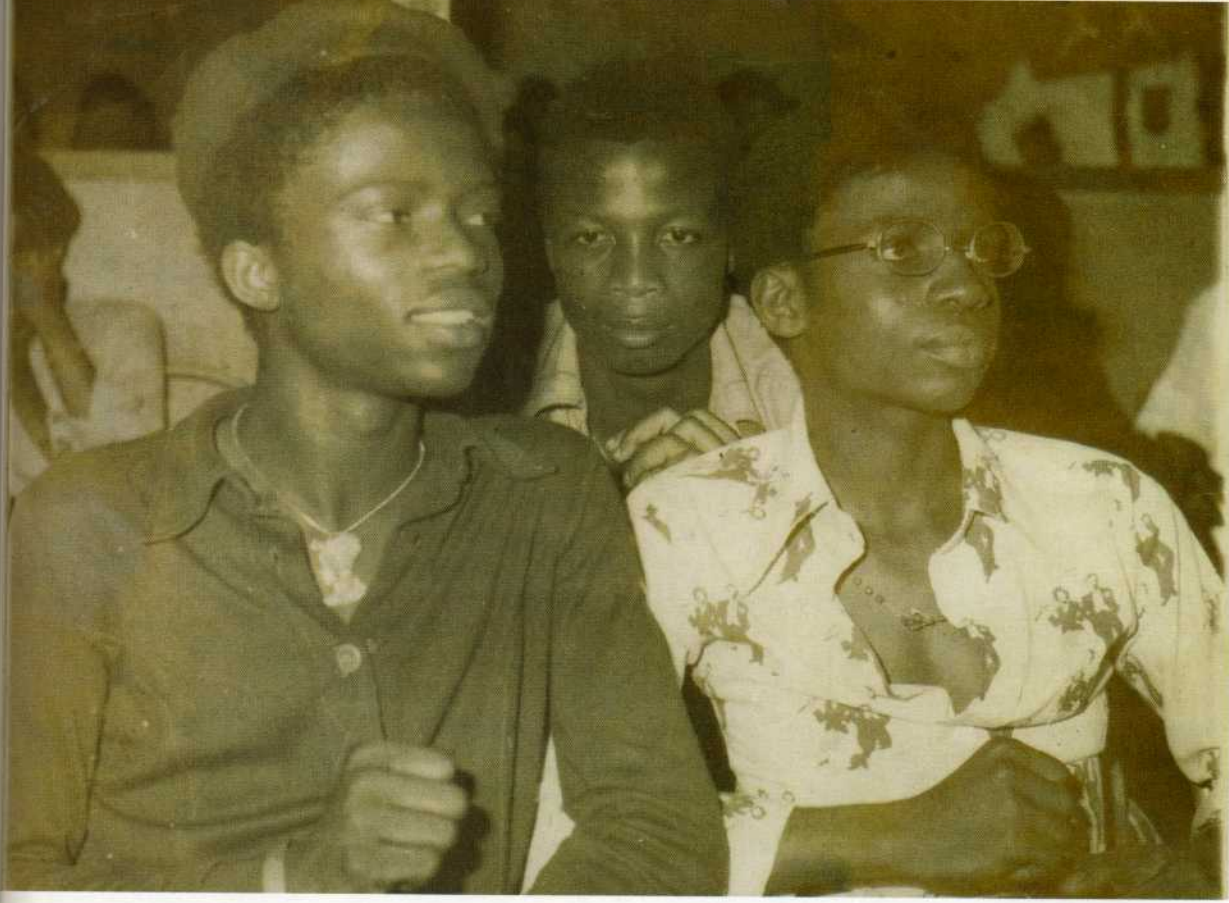
With full access to Fela’s performances at the Shrine, Lemi was able to hear Fela’s work develop in stages. Any album to be recorded was always performed live until Fela felt the arrangement was perfected, at which time it was recorded, then never performed again. “If you notice on all the covers,” Lemi says, “I did not illustrate literally the lyrics, but sometimes I would take a popular phrase and do an illustration based on that. Generally, I just illustrate from my own perspective, as a third person trying to portray what Fela is saying. It flowed naturally.”

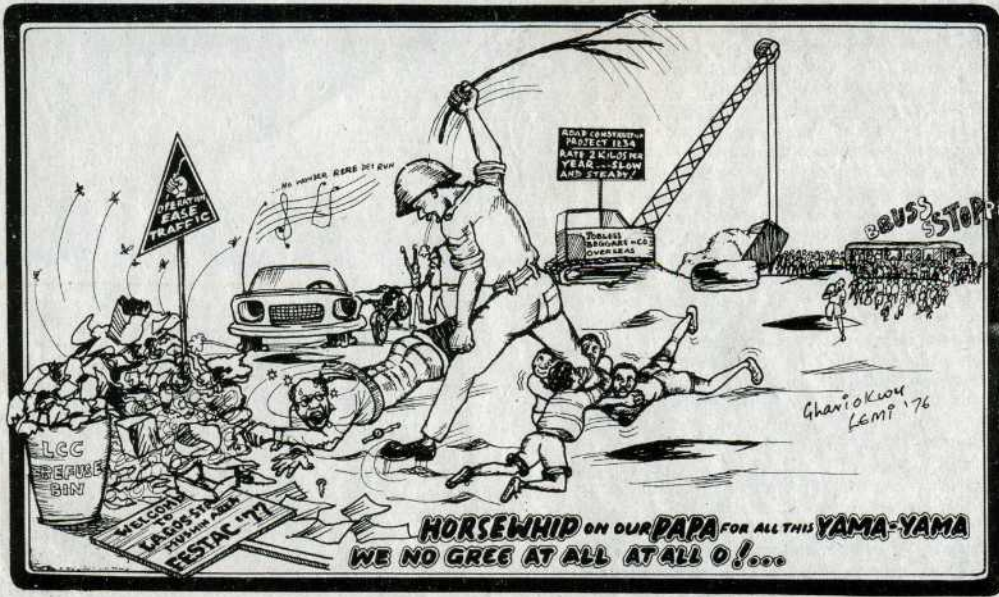
Another of Lemi’s outstanding pieces from the period was the cover for drummer Tony Allen’s 1977 solo album *Progress*. The fracturing lines in the musician’s face were meant to reflect that “he was suffering.” While Lemi declines to elaborate, Tony Allen, who was Fela’s most significant musical collaborator and Afrobeat’s effective co-architect, would leave along with the entire Afrika 70 band (except for baritone saxophonist Lekan Animashaun) in 1978.

Asked about his strongest memory of the singer, Lemi pauses. “When I think of Fela, the images that come to me are both positive and negative. His biggest flaw was... I don’t know why my people, any small achievement, they just get swollen headed. It has happened to a lot of people I grew up with. I used to read Fela’s fan mail. I said to him, ‘Why don’t you start to produce young people so that Afrobeat can spread?’ He said, ‘Lemi, you don’t start with me again.’ I just bugged off. By now, Afrobeat should have spread, but nobody is playing it... What I’m bringing out is the ego that just defeats the purpose of everything. There is no continuity. The legacy is not sustainable.”

Fela and Lemi’s only serious creative clash was over the design for *J.J.D.* (Johnny Just Drop) in 1977. “*J.J.D.* was the only one that had two covers,” explains Lemi. “The one on the back is the guy in denim jeans dropping from the aircraft. There is no parachute there. The one on the front cover had the parachute. He was dressed in a three-piece suit with a bowler hat. That was an oil painting.

“The original cover was the one [that ended up] on the back. That was my own concept. When I talked [to Fela], he said, ‘*J.J.D.* was to disparage Africans who go overseas, come back home, and start behaving with Western mannerisms.’ I was in the streets. I saw how the young people were behaving. They used the four-letter words like Americans. They wore jeans. I





Yap News cartoon, 1976.

felt that we should talk to the youths, so I used a young person to illustrate that with all these buttons, et cetera.

“When Fela saw it, he said no, he didn’t want it to look like he was attacking the youth. He prefers the cover to [critique] the bourgeois people, the Ikoyi people,” Lemi says, referring to residents of a wealthy area of Lagos. “When he saw [the alternate painting], he was happy, but I wasn’t happy. In my own original concept, I knew why I did it.”

Lemi surreptitiously submitted both images to Decca as a front/back design. “Decca’s director sent [the proof] to me. It was beautiful. I showed it to Fela and said, ‘This is your cover,’ and turned it over: ‘and this is my cover.’ He said, ‘Lemi!’ And I ran out of the room. I had the last laugh. It was too difficult for him to get totally pissed off with me. He respected me. Between getting pissed off and just taking it like that, it’s already done. It took him by surprise. He realized that I was smart, but *he* was very smart [too], very trickish.”

For the *Zombie* cover, Lemi allowed happenstance to influence the final design. “When I have a cover to do,” Lemi says, “the first thing I think about is which words to paint. It depends on how my mood transpires. For *Zombie*, I intended to do a drawing, maybe a military march. Every time I went to sketch something, I wasn’t feeling right. That one particular day, I went to Fela’s place and he was asking if I’d started. I said, ‘I’m still thinking about it.’ I always trust the universe to provide me with materials. That [same] day, Fela’s in-law walks in with his camera and a bunch of pictures. He was just coming from the Independence Day parade. That means it was October 1976. He just threw down the pictures, maybe one hundred different scenes. So I was checking, and my spirit said yes...it was going to be a collage.

“How those pictures were arranged, that’s the interesting part. I had my card, a box I had drawn out for the sleeve. The one picture of Fela from another show, I had that one. I was placing them, trying to position them; they overlapped, [and] everything just arranged [itself]. I took masking tape and stuck

them into place and said, ‘I’m not going to move them.’ There was this gum we used to use called cow gum. It’s very translucent. I was very sensitive to the position of the pictures. I would turn them without moving them and put them back in place. I started cutting and removed the overlap. I used my T square to cut off the sides and balance the edges. I took my paintbrush and painted [the title] directly on the work. Fela loved it. ‘Ah, perfect,’ he said. So even to today, [as far as] people’s responses [to my work], *Zombie*, *Yellow Fever*, and *Beasts of No Nation* are the top three.”

Lemi’s last cover before a long hiatus was *Sorrow, Tears, and Blood* from 1977, an alternate version of which he still displays at his gallery shows. “It was eight years before I saw him again,” Lemi says. “I had my own head screwed on tight. I didn’t get carried away or become a junkie or hero-worshiper. I remember my friends were worried for me. I was never employed by Fela anyway. I was too smart for that. When I left, that shook a lot of things. A few months after I left, everyone was frustrated.”

Over the past nineteen years, since his last work for Fela on the *Just Like That* and *Beasts of No Nation* covers, Lemi has continued a celebrated career as an illustrator and album designer, having done work for dozens of artists in Nigeria and elsewhere including Sonny Okosuns, Majek Fashek, the Mandators, and more recently for Dele Sosimi, Antibalas, the Akoya Afrobeat Ensemble, and other Afrobeat revival groups. His work still expresses the political ideology first explored on Fela’s album covers, and he still expresses great pride for the work he did more than thirty years ago. “My working with Fela was preordained,” he says. “It wasn’t by accident. I was working for my spirit. It was from the universe, programmed to be so, for the liberation of Africa.”

Lemi’s art has been exhibited internationally and was prominently featured at the Black President exhibition at the New Museum for contemporary art in New York in 2003 and most recently in London at Rich Mix in an event sponsored by Wax Poetics. ●