

Fela Kuti, PoC, Nigeria

Fela Kuti – Nigeria – 1980s – POC/Individual case

Fela Kuti was a musician and political activist in Nigeria during the 1970s and 1980s, writing and performing songs with political messages. On numerous occasions he was detained and harassed by the authorities and in 1984 he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Amnesty International began campaigning for his release and many fans of his music from around the world contacted Amnesty International to find out how they could help. He was released from prison in 1986, and that year played at a series of benefit concerts for Amnesty International in the USA.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Nigerian musician Fela Kuti was widely known as a critic of Nigeria's military government and a number of his songs included political elements. From 1976 he was detained on at least five occasions. In 1977 his house was burned down and members of his family seriously injured when several hundred soldiers arrested him at his home.

In September 1984, Fela was arrested again, this time for attempting to unlawfully export foreign currency, which he had drawn from his British bank account. He was handed down a prison sentence of five years in November 1984. There were several indications that his arrest and imprisonment were politically motivated. Brigadier Tunde Idiagbon, Chief of Staff, announced that the government would ensure Fela would be imprisoned for a long time, concluding: "and I hope he will rot in jail." Moreover, there were allegations that important defence witnesses, including customs officials, were prevented from testifying at Fela's trial. Amnesty International began campaigning for Fela's release due to concerns that his trial was unfair and that he may have been imprisoned for his non-violent political behaviour rather than any criminal offence.

Letters of support for Amnesty International's campaign began arriving in 1985, including the following message from Pennsylvania, USA: "*I became familiar with [Fela's](#) music when I worked as a disc jockey at a radio station... He's tremendously talented, and I believe he is being musically silenced by the Nigerian government for his anti-autocratic compositions.*" Other fans of Fela's music wrote to ask how they could help to bring about his release from prison. One correspondent from Geneva, Switzerland, wrote: "*I'm a musician, I'm Swiss... [Fela](#) was explaining in one of his songs that the soldiers came, broke everything in his house and killed his mother. I've been told he is now in prison for political reasons. If you know anything more and if you have some work I could do to help his situation, will you please send it to me. I'm ready to follow your instructions.*"

On 24 April 1986, following months of pressure from Amnesty International activists and Fela's supporters, Fela was released from prison. One of his first musical engagements

following his release was to play at a series of six benefit concerts for Amnesty International. During these 'Conspiracy of Hope' concerts, which took place in the USA in June 1986, Fela played alongside headline acts including U2, Sting, Bryan Adams, Peter Gabriel, Lou Reed and Joan Baez.

In 2010, the stage show Fela! opened in London, bringing Fela's story and music to a new generation. His son Femi sent the following message to the show's audiences:

"My father, Fela Kuti, was released from prison in 1986 after Amnesty International took him on as a prisoner of conscience. So I am one of the thousands of people whose life has been directly affected by Amnesty's work. Please support Amnesty by taking action for those whose freedom of expression has been taken away from them."

[Stories of Success / Fela Kuti - Amnesty International Conspiracy of Hope Concert](#)