

# Seun Kuti & Egypt 80: Black Times

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“*I be Fela Kuti,*” sings Seun Kuti on “Last Revolutionary,” from his fourth album *Black Times*, and he’s not entirely wrong. While most children of internationally renowned musicians shirk from the shadow of their pedigree, Seun embraces it, taking control of his father’s Egypt 80 band and making what are essentially modern-day Fela records. His vocal timbre is uncannily similar to the old man’s, and the differences between Seun’s sound and Fela’s owe mostly to updated themes and technology. Plus, his songs are shorter, presumably to hook an international audience with less patience for 15-plus-minute tracks.

It’s this last quality that makes the younger Kuti’s work ultimately less effective than his dad’s (at least in the studio; Seun Kuti and Egypt 80 should be a bucket-list band for any open-minded fan of live music). The musicians have less room to roam, and we don’t get as many interesting combinations of sound as on the lengthy, ruminative records Fela made with Egypt 80, like *Army Arrangement* and the four-song, blockbuster-length *Live in Detroit 1986*. Secondly, there’s less of the thrilling interplay between the bandleader and band present on Fela records. Egypt 80 seemed to orbit around Fela’s microphone-shy presence, and when he

finally walked up to the mic to speak after five or 10 minutes, the band quieted down as if in awe. Seun is never far from the microphone, and rather than interacting, singer and band bleed together holistically.

But the most crucial difference is that while Fela's one- or two-track albums generally zeroed in on one social ill, the targets of Seun's ire are less specific. The shorter the album, the less room for filler, and with eight songs over an hour at his disposal it's a little easier to let quality control slip. Seun doesn't utilize his real estate as well as his dad; he's wont to spend eight minutes on a song exalting the power of political music rather than making a point ("Struggle Sounds"), something that's hard to imagine Fela doing. Some of these songs struggle for a point, like "Bad Man Lighter," a weed ode mostly about the right to spark wherever you want. For much of its runtime, *Black Times* sounds less like a political album than an album about political music.

Appropriate to its title, which both riffs on "dark times" and cleverly updates Chuck D's "CNN for black people" adage, *Black Times* is best when it aims to inform. "Theory of Goat and Yam" centers on a reprehensible quote from Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan justifying corruption, and it works because it uses a specific incident rising from a specific evil as its starting point. "Last Revolutionary," which puts Seun in a long lineage of African freedom fighters from Sankara to Lumumba to Fela himself, is enlightening principally for the list of great Africans it namechecks. You'll probably learn one or two new names from his list, then look them up and realize how little Seun shows on this record to back up the claim to their legacy.