

Memo to The Media: Forget your Focus on Politicians. How a Teen Summit, Broadway Show, Feature Who the Real Changemakers Are

By [Danny Schechter](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, March 29, 2010
29 March 2010

One of the most popular lines about New York is still “If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.” So imagine the surprise that visitors from Africa have when they discover that one of the most popular shows on Broadway is a tribute to a rebel musician from Nigeria who many governments on the Continent loved to hate.

The show is FELA, an incredibly musically charged and entertaining tribute to the musical legend and political dissident Fela Anikulapo Kuti who was known for mocking Nigeria’s military dictators, and living what many considered an outrageous lifestyle. It was leavened with ganja smoke and over 27 wives he dubbed the Queens. (He later had only 12 but then divorced them all) They were all beautiful dancers who performed nightly in a club he called a shrine. He also visualized it as a capital of his own country—actually a recording studio—the Kalakuta Republic. (John Lennon and Yoko imagined their own land, too. They called it Ntutopia)

Fela’s “Shrine” has now been recreated as a theatrical piece that the critics loved and audiences flock to. It draws one of the most racially integrated audiences in town where the music and dancing is as inspiring as it is non-stop. If you haven’t seen it, what are you waiting for?

Fela believed that “ music is a weapon,” and wrote danceable “Afrobeat” songs including some lampooning looting by companies like ITT—International Telephone and Telegraph—calling them “international teef teef.” (Thief, Thief!) Another political tune challenged educators to teach the truth about the country and its corrupt government. His memorable lyric there was, “Teacher Don’t Teach Me Nonsense...”

This show is no period piece, and, in fact, points to how social change does not just come out of the barrel of bombast from either the White House or the Congress. It is, instead, often driven by cultural figures like Fela and the young people who adored his music and courage as a fighter for human rights. Fela did try to run for President but the military would not let him run, fearing his popularity.

The press still doesn’t get it. As we have been seeing in the health care debate, the media looks up, focusing on people in power assuming they are the architects of change, but then ignores the real grassroots change makers and shakers down below.

Fela, for one, would have approved of another show on Broadway last weekend, not in Times Square but, downtown in Soho, where teenagers flocked to the Scholastic

Publications building for a teen version of the famous TED conferences.

TED (Ted.com) is known for innovative adult education, presenting some of the most provocative speakers from all over the world. This was the first time that approach was used to engage teenagers involved in all sorts of grass roots activist projects from some 30 countries including Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation. Their talks were passionate and focused on the need for bottom up change drawn from real-life experiences from being child soldiers, to disabled kids, to work promoting self-esteem for girls worldwide

To Fela's point about teachers teaching nonsense, several kids wore T Shirts from the impressive Canadian-founded "Think Global School." It reads in the front, "Don't Teach Me What To Think," and on the back, "Teach Me How To Think."

The We Are Family Foundation played a key organizing role in the Teen TED event. That group was founded by another well known musician who actually once played alongside Fela, Nile Rodgers, co-author of the song We Are Family which is still, decades later, considered an uplifting anthem internationally.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Nile remade his song with 200 stars and celebrities to promote tolerance and an end to hate crimes. (Disclosure, I worked with Spoke Lee on a video and film of the effort.)

The **foundation** run by Nancy Hunt, which grew out of that event holds Global Just Peace Summits and teen training programs under its unique Three Dot Dash program—the name is based on the Morse Code for V, better known as the peace signal—teaching kids from all over the world organizing and media skills. The program was inspired by the peacemaking writings and poetry of another youngster, Matti J.P. Stepanek, who was seen on Larry King and Oprah. Matti later died of his disability but his inspiration is still motivating young people to fulfill his dream.

A week earlier, the Global Team Summit (GTL) heard from two Nigerian religious leaders, the Islamic Iman Ashafar, and his Christian counterpart, Pastor James Murye, who together have been mediating and working to end bloody outbreaks of violence between Christians and Moslems in the North of Nigeria.

These two men are remarkable emissaries of Peace who have had a real impact in these conflict zones like Kaduna and Jos even if the American media hasn't really covered their brave breakthroughs, or for that matter, still ignores the work of most youth activists here.

Think about how ACORN and its young organizers were demolished by irresponsible media publicity aided and abetted by politicians, including many Democrats who overreacted to false charges out of fear, The group which did so much to promote voter registration and fight foreclosures was forced to close.

After the Pastors spoke, I spoke to them about the FELA show on Broadway, as well as my own experience in helping to spring Fela from Prison in Nigeria in the mid 80's, They immediately asked me if they could go to see it, even as they admitted that had heard bad things about Fela.

They only had one night left in New York and I wasn't sure if I could score tickets on such short notice for an often sold-out hit show.

I called show producer Steve Hendel and told him about their dangerous work, and asked if he could get them in. He immediately said yes and also had them introduced from the stage because he wanted the show itself to contribute to peace in Fela's land. The cast was flattered by their interest.

They left the theater as converts despite their earlier cultural hesitations, "It was awesome," said both of them, "Amazing!" Later, they told me that they would now reach out to young people and musicians in Nigeria to join their crusade for conflict resolution and mutual acceptance between Muslims and Christians.

If a Broadway show can inspire change in the real world, if Fela's example still can have that impact, you can see the power of culture in the process of change.

We can also learn some lessons too if we realize that politicians mostly follow rather than lead, and that the big media may be the last place to turn to if you want to know what is going on.

If you want change in the world, support the kids who are determined to make it happen.

New Dissector Danny Schechter is the editor of Mediachannel.org. His new film, Plunder, treats the financial crisis as a crime story (Plunder The Crime Of Our Time.) For more on We Are Family, See WeAreFamilyfoundation.org. Comments to Dissector@mediachannel.org

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Danny Schechter](#), Global Research, 2010

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Danny Schechter](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca