

Our Artistic Expression Must Be Honest

The Fifth Pan Africa Newsletter (2025)



Heavier Yet (Lays The Crownless Head) album cover.

Late last year, I released *Heavier Yet (Lays The Crownless Head)* which was produced by Lenny Kravitz. My seventh studio album, and my fifth album with Egypt 80, a tale of capitalism and imperialism, that demystifies colonial logic, and breeds class consciousness, and workers' rebellion. I believe that art is evidence of humanity's great need to socialise. Extraordinarily, across vast cultures and generations, the human mind has found it important to create so many different art forms that enrich our lives in the world. After thirty-three years of being a musician, art remains for me, one of the strongest social bonds that bind humanity together.

Being able to do consciousness-raising work and interpreting my people's reality through making Pan-Africanist music is my biggest joy. I forgot who said this but it resonates with my experience: 'In the fight against imperialism and neo-colonialism, one finds that as you fight the imperialist and colonialist with one hand, you have to use the other hand to fight your own people too'. I think that is the challenge of making Pan-Africanist music, because Africans themselves have been programmed to resist it. The problems ordinary people are facing in Nigeria today range from the economic, social, political and infrastructural; food prices have skyrocketed in the last two years. Inflation was as **high** as 35% in December 2024, that's how crazy things have been in my country. It is almost as if there has been a concerted effort by our government to deny the majority of Nigerians a decent existence, to reduce them to some kind of inhumane state of endless roaming and insecurity. To create such a society is truly diabolical.



Modupeola Fadugba (Nigeria), *How to do a Platform Lift*, 2016.

However, one niggling contradiction bothers me – most contemporary art is totally devoid of any socialist ideals. Many artists do not speak for working people. Many artists do not speak for the majority. Most art is made to be consumed by the ultra-wealthy, as seen in record-breaking sales at auction houses. This trend is evident in the thousands of African artefacts **estranged** from the African people, hidden in private collections. I don't see this as fine art. There's nothing 'fine' in it. It is the indulgence of global elites and their excessive consumption.

For the past ten years in my career, I've tried hard to write albums that speak from poor and working-class perspectives. While music can be about life's joys, and allow listeners to shake off their stress, that kind of music doesn't tell the whole story of who we are and what we go through. Too much music, in its form and content, revels in the comforts of the world and can function like anaesthesia. I often say to my friends, if an alien came to Earth and looked at mainstream African art, the alien would believe that everything is fine. Arguably, it might be a good thing for the alien to perceive us in a positive light, since Africans are also fed up with being seen as perpetually troubled, but the alien's assessment of our lives would be incomplete and untrue. Art must be rooted in honesty. That need to be honest has emboldened me to speak about things hidden by the mainstream narrative in my music.



Romauld Hazoume (Benin), *Nanawax*, 2009.

It was no different for the creation of *Heavier Yet (Lays the Crownless Head)*. I'm an avid reader, and although

I don't read much early colonial English literature, a line from *King Henry IV, Part Two* by William Shakespeare stuck with me. Act 3, scene 1 closes with the lamentations of the king about his insomnia and his vulnerability, and the words 'uneasy lies the head that wears a crown'. Over time the use of the saying has evolved. Now elites use it to justify their own 'hard work', and the mental and psychological pressure that they feel. 'Heavy lays the head that wears the crown' is a common revision of the line with different implications. When used in this way, it implies that even if you sleep in satin sheets and lie on silk pillowcases in the largest houses, eat the best food and shit in golden toilets – the rest of us should have sympathy for you because 'heavy lays the head that wears the crown'. It's such hard work to be an elite. It's so sad that they do not enjoy it. Shakespeare's exploration of King Henry IV's torment disappears and we are left with attention-seeking elites, burying the real labour of working people. My new album is a reminder that we pay the price and bear the brunt of the decisions that the rich make with their 'heavy heads'. Hence the title: *Heavier Yet (Lays the Crownless Head)*. No matter how bad elites want us to feel on their behalf, the poor and the working class have it worse.

Nigerian people have not stopped organising and resisting. Online, young Nigerians ran a **30 Day Rant Challenge** to discuss the difficulties of their lives under this government. Recently, they took this protest to the streets. We have never stopped organising for our liberation. Our elites are unique, they do not have an African agenda, their agenda is linked to Western agendas, hence there is no real support for African people when we do revolutionary things for our continent.



Wangechi Mutu (Kenya), *Yo Mama*, 2003.

So, this album is the people's unapologetic response. We say, 'No, we have no sympathy left to give you; we have just disdain and utmost contempt'. Tracks like **'T.O.P.'** (meaning Things Over People) to **'Emi Aluta'** (with the Zambian rapper Sampa the Great) to 'Love & Revolution' make that point explicitly. We call for a shift in working class and poor consciousness; it is time for us to recognise our situation astutely. I regularly see less privileged people spewing excuses for the likes of Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Aliko Dangote. Capitalist propaganda and brainwashing are so deep, that many of our people admire these billionaire men, hoping one day to be like them.

Heavier Yet has Africa at its centre, but it is only volume one. The next album will be volume two, and by the end of that we will be able to kill the king. There are a few kings that need to be killed. We all have our own king. Get in line.

Warmly,

Seun Kuti



Seun Kuti

Seun Kuti is the son of Fela Kuti and now leads the band, Egypt 80. He is on a worldwide tour for his most recent album, *Heavier Yet* (Lays the Crownless Head).