

...from LAGOS

Nigeria's sprawling capital is oil rich, yet plunged into frequent darkness by power cuts. Rose Skelton meets the musicians speaking out against the status quo

Out in the suburbs of Africa's most populous city – a megalopolis of around 14 million people all simultaneously racing to survive – a tall, dreadlocked singer shows me into his modest breezeblock bungalow. The latest hi-fi and television, booming speakers and the cold crisp air of the air-conditioning unit are all being powered by something that Lagosians see very little of in this hot, sprawling city: grid electricity. The silence of the grid electricity system that feeds power into houses and businesses is so startling that, as I step inside his house, I comment on it, just moments before the house falls dark, the television blinks to a blank, and the music grinds to a halt.

"Welcome to *Naija* [Nigeria]!" grins Six Foot Plus, my host for the day. "It's true we have grid power every once in a while, but it's a pretty rare occurrence."

Lagosians, and most of Nigeria's exploding population of 140 million, live with the constant strain of an electricity crisis in a country that is also one of the world's largest oil exporters. Billions of petrol dollars have passed through Nigerian coffers in the last decades, yet the country fails to light its own cities as oil money disappears into the pockets of a corrupt minority. A new government came into power one year ago, and solving the electricity problem was one of president Yar'Adua's priorities on assuming office. But a year on, things are still bad. The city – a chaotic, frantic, raw and exciting place by day – becomes, at night, anarchic pandemonium. Those who can afford it run their own generator, the rest live in complete darkness.

"People identify with the things musicians say because they see you as a voice," says Six Foot Plus, whose songs speak of topics such as government corruption, domestic violence, as well as the electricity crisis. "It was Fela Kuti who first stirred things up. He went to jail for his music and what he believed in. He was an activist who made music."



Clockwise from above: the overloaded electricity lines; downtown Lagos; rapper Six Foot Plus



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Conscious MCs are few and far between in this city of extraordinary wealth and political chaos. The 70s Afro-beat giant Fela Kuti may have awoken the masses at a time when the military dominated political life, but Nigeria's musical history has been more about escaping the harsh realities of life through jazzy-toned highlife, and the evolving electric styles of *juju*, *fuji* and lately, hip-hop.

"Lagosians love to party," says Kunle Tejuoso, founder of Jazzhole Records. "Fela was a radical, but the others were not so educated, they were more funky-funky."

Downtown, I meet up with one of the music scene's most challenging MCs. "Our history has always been dance music," says Terry Tha Rapman who, despite his boyish looks and sweet demeanour, has some pretty hard-hitting things to say about the

Nigerian government. "We like living in denial." Terry is currently mixing a track called 'How Far?' which is a pidgin English salutation meaning 'how are you coping?' To a jumping beat, he muses on the country's electricity problems: '*If NEPA [the National Electric Power Authority] has no light in its own office, how are they going to give me any? Don't give up on your country is what they keep on telling me,*' he continues in his distinctive squeaky rap voice. '*But it's the same idiots that keep oppressing me.*'

One of the latest hot hits in Lagos is a song called 'NEPA Bring the Light', by a young band called NEO. Sounding more like American teenage rock, the song recounts the tale of a guy and his mates sitting around watching TV, and the subsequent power-outage that causes his television set to blow. '*This is to NEPA,*' rap the angry trio, as the song turns to a hip-hop beat. '*We haven't seen light through the weekend. The truth is, we can no longer pretend that Nigeria and NEPA can be friends.*'

Although NEPA, popularly known by Nigerians as 'Never Expect Power Always,' has changed its name to PHCN (subsequently dubbed by locals as 'Problem Has Changed Name'), nothing has changed on the ground.

"As an artist, the problem affects us directly," says Terry Tha Rapman. "When booking a recording session, you have to pay extra for fuel for the generator. It's really slowing things down." Terry also complains that Nigerians, with their love of bright and breezy dance beats, don't want to be reminded of reality. "When you're coming with conscious songs, people say, 'why are you reminding us of our problems?' The challenge now as a conscious MC is to have those messages in our songs, but with a club appeal."

The last I hear from Terry is a text message: '*I want to send you the finished mix of 'How Far?' but the studio has no light. Sorry.*' ●

Felabration, a festival commemorating the 70th anniversary of Fela Kuti's birth, will be held in Lagos from October 14-19. The festival will also feature a show by Africa Express

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