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The Afrobeat goes on for Antibalas

'Antibalas'
ANTIBALAS

★★★½

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Brooklyn Afrobeat band Antibalas

Formed in Brooklyn almost 15 years ago, Antibalas has long weathered the storms of semi-obscurity, building a reputation as the global champions of Afrobeat, a deeply rhythmic sound pioneered in 1970s Nigeria, even as their beloved genre operated largely in the shadows of popular culture. It would be disingenuous to say that everything changed with the success of "Fela!," the award-winning Broadway musical based on the life of Fela Kuti, the most legendary figure in Afrobeat. But opening thousands of ears to the combination of jazz, funk, and traditional African styles can only help better the chances for the success of Antibalas' fifth studio album.

Of course, anyone who saw "Fela!" is already familiar with the work of the Antibalas crew, as members Aaron Johnson and Jordan McLean offered musical direction to the show. But for those seeking a purer expression of the form, "Antibalas" offers as inspired an introduction to modern Afrobeat as one could hope for.

The band is playing with a new sense of economy and precision, and the grooves are as lean and tight as a tiger on the prowl. Political criticism, long a central pillar of the genre, is front and center, but the best tracks are those that strike the balance between brevity and flat-out soul, such as "Ari Degbe," perhaps the most reminiscent of Fela's own boisterous Africa '70 band.