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STREET

Disabled Congolese group Staff Benda Bilili's story is incredible.

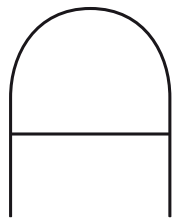


T MUSIC

But, as Andy Morgan attests, it's their music that speaks loudest



“Go on my fine friend! Pity me if you dare!”



admittedly, those words never passed Coco's lips. It was his expression that spoke to me. He was lounging on his hybrid moped-wheelchair *cocomobile*, smiling up

at me. His face was two parts life-tempered steel to three parts philosophical tenderness. There wasn't a flicker of aggression in it. But the challenge was there, somewhere. "You have everything, I have nothing," it seemed to say. "But don't get hung up on what the surface of life tells you. Look beyond..."

Kinshasa is no city for the easily scared. To begin with, it's huge: the third largest megalopolis in Africa. In November, the season of thunder and rain, the whole place sweats incontinently. The very neurons and synapses of your brain get drenched in the stuff. Down in the raucous, toxic streets, there's a hard, haunted, hungry look on the face of many a *kinois* man and woman, especially those who are the wrong side of 40. They've simply seen too much, lived too much and suffered too much to try and make their world smile any more. The city infrastructure is like a piece of chipboard furniture lying sodden in the rain: rotten, decaying, sorry as hell. Bullet-holes sprinkle the main downtown drags, mute reminders of the civil wars and murderous elections that electrocuted Kinshasa in the late 90s and mid-2000s. It's hot. I've never been to a more exciting, captivating and musically alluring African city in my life.

Coco is the chief poet and songwriter of Staff Benda Bilili, a band who were to dominate my blink of a stay. I was visiting the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo with a group of musicians, showbiz shakers, journalists and wayfarers on a trip organised by Africa Express. The group mix was as challenging as its roll call was intriguing: Damon Albarn, Rob del Naja (aka 3D) from Massive Attack, Sam Duckworth from Get Cape. Wear Cape. Fly, Tony Allen, K'naan, Amadou Bagayoko (Mariam's other half), Gale Paridjanian from Turin Brakes, The Aliens, two-thirds of De La Soul. We were a motley, curious crew, powerfully attracted to the possibilities of this dazzling, frenzied messed-up place.

On our first night, some of us ended up among the chaos of cables, speakers, guitars and gizmos that comprised the makeshift hotel room studio of producer Vincent Kenis, our official guide to the city's strange musical



eco-systems. Alongside the Belgian label, Crammed Discs, and the maverick manager Michel Winter, Kenis has been responsible for a global renaissance of interest in Kinshasa's music scene, producing award-winning wonders by Konono No 1, Kasai Allstars and a whole slew of 'electro-traditional' orchestras from Kinshasa's far-flung neighbourhoods.

"Have a listen to this," Kenis said in his bashful Belgian accent. A strange seductive brew bubbled up from the speakers: part classic Congolese *rumba* with keening honeydew vocals, part good-foot James Brown-esque 70s funk, part Cuban mambo and part ancestral trance. The singer had one of those 'ancient mariner' voices that force you to stop and listen, not because of its athletic beauty, but because it oozes the spit and

Top: Coco and his *cocomobile* in downtown Kinshasa. Above: Staff Benda Bilili recording in Kinshasa zoo

sawdust of an odds-against lifestyle. And riding atop it all was a mellifluous trebly plucking of indeterminable origin, like delicate and beguiling bird song. We were hearing the rough mixes of *Très Très Fort*, the debut album by Staff Benda Bilili (reviewed in this issue).

Even at that early stage of post-production, the music was good enough to flag up a 'possible-album-of-the-year' alert without any contextual crutches. But when the band's tale began to unfold, we knew that we had stumbled across one of those rare phenomena that Africa specialises in – a group whose music and story vie with each other to be the greater source of inspiration and amazement.

Coco Ngambali met Ricky Likabu almost three decades ago on the ferry which travels the immense Congo river, linking Kinshasa with Brazzaville, the capital of that 'other' Congo, on the opposite shore. They were in the same place at the same time because they were both disabled polio victims, and the ferry was a good place to do business. Ex-dictator Mobutu Sese Seko had decreed that the disabled could travel tax-free on the Congo river ferries and this rare piece of largesse from one of Africa's most brutal and avaricious tyrants spawned a frenetic economic sub-culture. Cross-river trade became the >>



Roger plays the thing like a ragamuffin Yehudi Menuhin, dispensing subtle flourishes of virtuosity from a tinpot wire contraption

prerogative of various disabled gangs and it was from this paraplegic workforce that Staff Benda Bilili was to emerge.

Armed with instruments made by Socklo, Kinshasa's one and only guitar maker, Staff Benda Bilili honed their art by dint of endless busking sessions at the Ngobila beach ferry port or in the wealthy downtown district of Gombe. An informal headquarters was later established under a shady tree at the Sonas roundabout, opposite the United Nations building. There Staff Benda Bilili would attempt to appease the wild and reckless street spirits with songs that spoke candidly of the daily battle for a meal and a roof that blacks out the horizon of Kinshasa's abandoned souls. Over time they became a magnet for the *shégués*, or street kids, and the roundabout a haven of relative calm and trustworthy companionship.

Ricky, or 'Papa Ricky,' as the *shégués* call him, is an impressive man. Disabled since childhood, married with several children, he possesses the courage and temper of a lion and the imperturbable authority of a natural leader. He sits in his hand-crank propelled wheelchair like a rock in rough seas whilst the flotsam and jetsam of Kinshasa's street life pounds at him with waves of emotion, tears and laughter. He's a street *caïd*, judge, counsellor and friend of the dispossessed. He's also the undisputed leader of Staff Benda Bilili.

In 2005, the refuge for disabled people in the suburb of Bandal, which was home to the group, burned down to the ground. The fallout of this tragedy was skilfully captured



by a pair of French filmmakers, Renaud Barret and Florent de la Tullaye, who had been following the group around since the previous year. They also caught Ricky and Coco's reaction, which consisted merely in urging their fellow sufferers to be strong and move on. Nary a nanogram of self-pity is perceptible in either their tone of voice or facial expressions. The group found a new rehearsal space in the relative peace of the municipal zoo, where most of *Très Très Fort* was recorded in 2007.

The main focus of Barret and de la Tullaye's forthcoming documentary on Staff Benda Bilili is the group's youngest and musically most remarkable member, a young *shégué* called Roger Landu. He plays an instrument called a *satongé*, which he invented himself. Its architecture is simple. A section of wooden fish basket frame is attached to the bottom of a medium-sized milk powder tin. A single piece of electrical wire is then tied taut between the top of the tin and upper end of the curved piece of wood. By holding the tin against the chest, and pumping the wooden handle in and out, notes, demi-notes and demi-demi-notes can be squeezed out of the

Clockwise from left: Ricky in his customised wheelchair; Roger with his invented *satongé* instrument; drummer Cubain with Coco recording *Très Très Fort*

instrument. Roger plays the thing like a ragamuffin Yehudi Menuhin, dispensing subtle flourishes of virtuosity from a tinpot wire contraption that seems at first incapable of ever venturing further than 'do-re-mi.'

Ricky stumbled on Roger when he was busking for small change in one of Kinshasa's central markets. Taking him into his fold, Ricky taught him the rudiments of music theory. He also taught him the dictums upon which the whole Staff Benda Bilili philosophy is based: take pride, be strong, hustle yourself some dignity and never be a beggar.

Therein lay the source of my own frailty and self-doubt. Listening to Staff Benda Bilili play at a crate and sawdust joint in downtown Kinshasa called L'Oeil du Plaisir, and observing them closely both after the show and a few days later at the zoo, I found it hard to think of anything that my wealthy, pampered European able-bodied frame could

offer them in terms of aid or 'improvement.' They certainly didn't need or ask for my pity or condolences. I somehow felt it was they who were smiling benignly down at me, rather than the other way round.

Long ago, Staff Benda Bilili understood that any real disability exists only in the mind, rather than in the legs. Stricken by polio whilst still young, abandoned to their fate in one of the toughest and most dysfunctional cities in the world, forced to survive by courage and wit alone, Ricky, Coco, Roger and the crew have always known that life's path clings to a vertical cliff face which towers above them. The only way has been up; the only help has been from their fellow strugglers. Now, as they possibly near some kind of ease – a plateau – and the realisation of long held dreams, all they're asking is for the rest of us to see through the outward appearance of things, through the apparent misery of life in Africa's teeming cities, past stunted limbs and ragged torn clothes, past AIDS, war, corruption and suffering to the human wealth beyond.

In fact, that's what '*benda bilili*' means in Lingala, the lingua franca of the great Congo river: 'open up your spirit,' 'look deeply,' 'see beyond...' ●

REVIEW *Très Très Fort* is reviewed in the Africa section and is a Top of the World CD 'Je T'Aime' appears on the covermount CD
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