

News



Guitar-maker Socklo outside his workshop in the Congolese capital Kinshasa

MADE IN THE CONGO

Andy Morgan talks to the Kinshasa-based guitar maker Socklo, who makes the distinctive, hand-crafted guitars played by Staff Benda Bilili

PHOTOS VINCENT KENIS

Last summer, when Staff Benda Bilili wheeled themselves onto the main stage of the Eurockéennes de Belfort Festival in France and unveiled their bittersweet *rumba* to an exultant European audience, many listeners were intrigued by their extraordinary guitar sound. It was powerful, bright, full-bodied and yet as raw as an uncooked onion, fizzing with the kind of raunch that many rock guitarists have been searching for in vain since the end of the 60s.

On closer examination, curiosity turned to amazement. The guitars were unlike anything seen before in Europe. Their shape and décor varied from electric blue sunburst with classical curlicue sound holes to blended black and copper red tiger stripes with round sound holes. The bridges, nuts, frets and other bolt-on mechanisms were all rough-hewn yet functional. The guitars

seemed to be the product of the eye and imagination of an artist.

Staff Benda Bilili soon revealed their secret. All their guitars are made by Misoko Nzalagala, universally known as 'Socklo,' a guitar-maker from Staff's home city of Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Once a guitarist himself, Socklo now makes two or three instruments per week in a clapboard shed in the Lembas district of this enormous teeming city. Tools are rudimentary – just a heap of hammers, chisels, planes, saws and anvils made from recycled ordnance, all lying at the feet of the kind-faced Socklo while he sits and patiently fashions his artisanal wonders on his lap.

A hand-cranked turning machine serves to make guitar strings from bicycle brake wire coiled with copper filament, which has been recycled from old engines and dynamos. Apart from the plywood used to make the sound boxes of the guitars, all the other raw

materials are recycled from bits of wood, old engine parts, refrigerator innards and plastic chairs. Socklo's workshop is a shrine to all the positive things mothered by necessity: ingenuity, skill, artistry, imagination, pride and plenty of invention.

Across the city in Bandal, Socklo's rival, Almaz, has a few more mod cons in his workshop. Almaz stands for Atelier Lutherie Mazanza, but the avuncular white-haired patron is also known by that name. He owns a few electric tools, but an 11-month power cut made them inoperable until recently.

Their main market has been Kinshasa's own legion of hopeful guitarists. But though a typical Socklo guitar sells for only about \$25 locally, they're beyond the reach of most of Kinshasa's wannabe guitar heroes, thanks to the relentless economic crises and general poverty that clings to the DRC like a curse.

But help is at hand. A Belgian NGO called Music Fund has decided to support both Socklo and Almaz, initially for a year. Lukas Pairon of Music Fund travelled to Kinshasa in 2007 and met both guitar-makers. "They're struggling to survive, which is hard to see," he tells me over the phone from Ghent in Belgium. "They're both very proud of their work, and they're very well known locally, and supported by musicians like Jupiter and Staff



From top: Manuaku Pépé Felly, Zaïko Langa Langa's guitarist, together with Lukas Pairon of Music Fund and Socklo outside his workshop



Manuaku Pépé Felly (right) with Socklo who is creating a signature guitar for him. Pépé Felly wants to set up a music school in the Congo



The distinctive hand-painted Socklo logo and an Almaz guitar (right)



conscientious. I think he makes the best guitars in Kinshasa. But he's a bit discouraged with the economic situation. Nevertheless he manages to keep going." Kenis helped Staff Benda Bilili to

adapt their guitars for their European tour, adding Western tuning mechanisms and piezo mics for amplification. "These guitars have a real personality. I bought a guitar from Socklo last December and I was pleased to see that following the visit of the Belgian luthiers, many basic problems have been ironed out. They last long too," Kenis reassures me. It seems that Staff Benda Bilili's musical rallying cry also extends to the amazing artisan guitar-makers of Kinshasa: *Très Très Fort!*

Music Fund imports the guitars to Europe in batches of ten and sells them through its website, paying 50% up front, which allows Socklo and Almaz to buy better materials and support themselves while they fulfill the orders. Pairon is actively seeking a European guitar distributor to take over the operation and increase the marketing push and invites any interested parties to contact him (email below).

Socklo himself has little doubt that his future survival depends on finding new markets. "I am VERY happy to work with Lukas," he shouts through a telephone blizzard from Kinshasa. "It's important for me to sell guitars in Europe. But to develop, I really need more tools. They're hard to find here and very expensive. With tools I could work faster and produce a higher number of guitars."

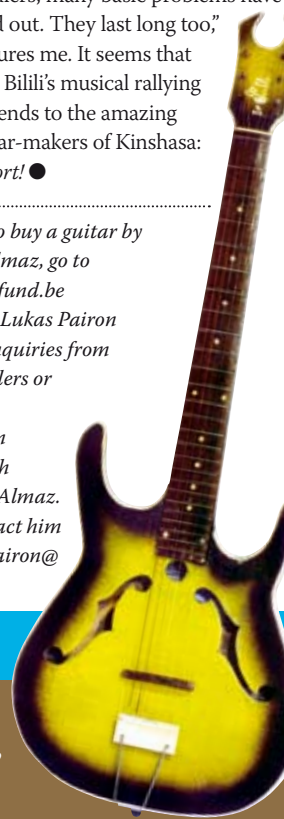
Vincent Kenis, the Belgian producer of many bands to emerge from the Congo, including Staff Benda Bilili, is a huge fan of Socklo. "He's very modest and very

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ONLINE To buy a guitar by Socklo or Almaz, go to www.musicfund.be
CONTACT Lukas Pairon welcomes inquiries from guitar retailers or distributors interested in working with Socklo and Almaz. Please contact him at: Lukas.pairon@ictus.be

Win a Socklo guitar!

We have a beautiful, hand-crafted Socklo guitar to give away to one very lucky reader. To enter, simply answer the following question: Which *Songlines Music Award* did Staff Benda Bilili recently win? See p5 for *Songlines* competition rules and address. Closing date August 6 2010



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