



Staff Benda Bilili

www.myspace.com/staffbendabilili



The mesmerising music of Staff Benda Bilili and the band's extraordinary story have been making a strong impression worldwide. A group of paraplegic street musicians who live in and around the grounds of the zoo in Kinshasa, DR Congo, one can hear raw power, fragile delicacy and incredible beauty in their music: the eternal pulse of Congolese rumba combined with voices that conjure the crooners of Havana, the toasters of Kingston and even the Godfather Of Soul himself.

The core of the group consists of four seasoned singer/guitarists perched on spectacular customized tricycles, occasionally dancing on the floor of the stage, arms raised in joyful supplication. Behind them is a young and entirely acoustic rhythm section, and to top it all there are the weird, infectious guitar-like solos of Roger, a teenage prodigy who plays a one-string electric lute he designed and built himself out of a tin can.

Staff Benda Bilili consider themselves as the real journalists of Kinshasa, as their songs document and comment events of everyday life. One of their key messages is: the only real handicaps are not in the body but in the mind.

Benda Bilili means "look beyond appearances" - literally: "put forward what is hidden"

This extraordinary group was encountered in 2005 by Florent de La Tullaye and Renaud Barret, two young French filmmakers who were shooting a series of films on the many musicians and other amazing figures living and working in the urban jungle of Kinshasa. They were instantly blown away by Staff Benda Bilili, and quickly decided to devote an entire feature film to the band. They also introduced the band to Crammed Discs in-house producer Vincent Kenis. Crammed decided to sign the group, produce the album and release it to the world.

The resulting album, "Tres Tres Fort", was recorded in the grounds of Kinshasa Zoo under the guidance of Vincent Kenis, then mixed in Brussels. So, this remarkable musical adventure commenced. The media went crazy, and Staff Benda Bilili have been featured and praised in newspapers worldwide. International festivals are queuing up to book them, and the band's first extensive European tour took place in the autumn of 2009.

Staff Benda Bilili were introduced to the British and US musicians who came to visit Kinshasa as part of the Africa Express trip in Nov. 2007, and won the hearts of the likes of Massive Attack and Damon Albarn, with whom they jammed. Here's an account of that meeting, as published in UK daily newspaper The Independent:



It was a perfect moment, symbolising the purpose of the Africa Express trip to the Congo: some of the most celebrated musicians in Africa and the West playing with members of Staff Benda Bilili, a group formed by homeless and disabled polio victims living in the grounds of Kinshasa Zoo. It was unrehearsed, teetered on the edge of disaster, yet inspirational. (...) The band swayed in time in their antiquated wheelchairs, while a couple of kids danced around. It was achingly lovely music, created out of the most terrible adversity. 'That was beautiful,' said [Massive Attack's] Robert del Naja at the end, visibly moved. 'It was worth coming all this way just to hear that'.

Background

It is said that Kinshasa hosts more than 40 000 abandoned street kids, or sheges. The name supposedly hints at the Che-Guevaresque child soldiers who seized the capital in 1997, but the story might have been forged later as a reminder of Laurent Désiré Kabila's connection with Che Guevara in the Sixties. Fleeing poverty in the suburbs and family violence, sheges can be seen everywhere in centre ville, waxing shoes, guarding vehicles in parking lots, selling pills, cola nuts and roasted crickets, slaloming on the boulevard between brand new SUVs, U.N armored vehicles, battered taxis, and customized tricycles driven by intrepid paraplegic pilots.

When handicapés (disabled people) were exempted from customs tax in the Seventies, many turned their vehicles into pickups and used them to make a living transporting goods across the river between Kinshasa and its sister capital Brazzaville. Handicapés form the second most important group among the street outcasts of centre ville. Regrouped since colonial times around a hostel near the general hospital, they have a reputation for being loud, fearless, well-educated, and well-organised in a powerful syndicate called Plateforme. Many sheges benefit from their protection and advice.

Band line-up

Ricky Likabu - leader, vocals
Coco Ngambali - vocals, guitar
Theo Nsituvuidi - vocals, guitar
Djunana Tanga-Suele - vocals
Zadis Mbulu Nzungu - vocals
Kabamba Kabose Kasungu - vocals
Paulin 'Cavalier' Kiara-Maigi - bass
Roger Landu - satonge, vocals
Cubain Kabeya - drums, vocals
Randy Buda - percussion

Discography:

- Tres Tres Fort (Crammed Discs, 2009)