

Kinshasa: A Reckless Joyful Dance amidst Despair

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I have never been to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. After hearing my friends, after reading many articles and meeting musicians who are the subject of the present article, such a visit is not especially desirable. In her article “On Wars in Congo” Czech journalist Lenka Kllicperová considers Congo a prototype of hell.

The bloodiest war since Adolf Hitler went through Europe has fortunately already finished in Congo, but in the East of the country, with resources of gold, diamond and oil, there have still been heavy fights, financed by illegal mining. Due to this fact, people from burned and massacred villages and war veterans have been coming to Kinshasa for years to make the capital with its millions of inhabitants one of the most dangerous metropolises of the planet. The motto of Kinshasa then is: “A cult of violence and despair, unbelievable poverty and corruption, AIDS, and no one to do anything about it.” Surprisingly, reckless dance music has originated amidst this apocalypse and it brings more optimism than sadness. First of all it was represented by Konono No.1, then Kasai Allstars, and recently by Staff Benda Bilili. The world of world music was stunned. Staff Benda Bilili, a totally unknown group of homeless people who had been sleeping on paper boxes, gained the prestigious WOMEX prize in Danish Copenhagen in 2009. In other words, there has been a music revolution going on in Kinshasa for a decade. The city has turned into an area of unlimited possibilities, the place where the most unbelievable ideas can come true, even despite the fact that nobody knows what the next day will bring.

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kids, the crooks, the whores, the bad cops, the refugees from the war in the east. So we have a good vision of what the Congo is today. We have to find ways to survive, no matter how. Like all the people who live in the streets of Kinshasa, disabled or not, we have to be strong,” says a guitarist of Staff Benda Bilili Coco Ngambali in the interview for *Songlines* magazine (Morgan, 2009, p. 27). Andy Morgan, English manager of a Tuareg band Tinariwen, comments further: “Most residents of Kinshasa wake up in the morning with one goal in their heads: to find something to eat and make it through the day with wit, courage and cunning. Tomorrow doesn't even trouble their minds. Today and the next meal are all that count. Self-pity is suicidal.” (Morgan, 20, p. 29).’

In spite of the fact that the music of Staff Benda Bilili grows out of despair, everyone dances joyfully when listening to it. It is a well-known fact that Africans are able to escape from the worst situations through fascinating reckless rhythmical dance music.

While Konono No. 1 and Kasai Allstars (also well known in the Czech Republic) with their handmade instruments made from items from car scrap yards brought the original village traditional music and rituals to the suburbs of Kinshasa and adapted it to the noise of the city, Staff Benda Bilili, the band of homeless and disabled people, offers an individual mixture of Congolese rumba, Cuban mambo, sweet vocals, reggae, funk and rhythm'n'blues. The sound of the one-stringed instrument called the *satongé* dominates over the sound of cheap guitars and percussion. The instrument cannot be found in any encyclopaedia. Nineteen-year-old Roger, one of thousands of homeless street children who follow the band and consider them good 'uncles', invented the instrument himself from a milk powder tin, electrical wire and a curved piece of wood. Even Jimi Hendrix would envy Roger's ability to play on the *satongé*.

Staff Benda Bilili came to the world music scene from a tumbledown ZOO in Kinshasa on three-wheelers that looked like bizarre Harley-Davidsons. They are disabled, stricken by polio in their youth, homeless, street musicians and leaders of orphaned street kids; they were



Staff Benda Bilili while recording the album. Retrieved from http://worldmusiccentral.org/artists/artist_page.php?id=7737.

discovered by chance in the street of Kinshasa by French filmmakers. The French made four videos with the band and put them on YouTube: the totally unknown guitarists, singers and drummers became famous all over the world almost overnight.

The founders of Staff Benda Bilili, Coco Ngambali and Ricky Likabu met thirty years ago on the ferry between Kinshasa and Brazzaville (the capital of that 'other' Congo on the opposite shore). Ex-dictator Mobutu exempted the ferry from taxes for disabled people in wheelchairs, so they took cartons of cigarettes, boxes with alcohol and rice, petrol cans – whatever was in demand – and travelled from port to port. But in the end they devoted their time mainly to music. When they speak about their situation they never complain. They accept life as it is.

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Vincet Kenis from the Belgian label Crammed Disc recorded the album *Trés Très Très* with Staff Benda Bilili in 2009, which has been in the European world music chart for a long time, and together with the French documentarists' videos it contributed to the fact that the music of the homeless from Kinshasa makes us dance and consider what is and isn't possible in African music. I am honestly persuaded that everything is possible in African music. It follows directions set by life, surroundings and economic and political situations. Africans, like the Romani people who are geographically closer to us here in the Czech Republic, in their intuitive performance do not think about results or even lack of instruments, because they are able to make them from anything. They consider music a cure, a therapy to kill pain, but also a way to tell others that now is the time to entertain ourselves, even amidst despair and chaos. They do not need studios equipped with modern

technology; they are satisfied with bargain guitars and rusty tins but most of all, with an unimaginable desire to get rid of all misery.

When Staff Benda Bilili performed at WOMEX in Copenhagen in 2009 some people wept with emotion. They were touched by this natural, lucid music of the utmost heavenly beauty, but also by the band itself. They did not cry from compassion for the band, but from the resolve and power that came from the musicians. Petr Dorůžka wrote on Facebook after coming home: “Sunday's award ceremony in Copenhagen completely changed my view of human abilities and disabilities.”

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