



Staff Benda Bilili

Très Très Fort (craw51 cd)

UK Press Book

crammed  *discs*

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Staff Benda Bilili

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ONE STEP BEYOND

Staff Benda Bilili could be the most inspiring group you will ever see – after transcending their ambition to be ‘the most famous handicapped band in Africa’. Caspar Llewellyn Smith reports from Kinshasa. Photographs by Andy Hall



THEO (WITH THE BLACK BERET), COCO (AT THE WHEEL OF HIS BIKE) AND RICKY (ON CRUTCHES) OF STAFF BENDA BILILI, NDJILI, KINSHASA, CONGO (DRC), 14 SEPTEMBER 2009.



It is just after 11pm at the Senat bar in the roughshod district of Ndjili in Kinshasa, half an hour's bone-jarring drive straight from the clammy hell that is the international airport. The bar comprises a roughly 12-metre square outdoor space with plastic chairs and tables on the dirt floor, a string of lights hung up and above a tree, and then what is the stage – a level surface three-quarters covered by

a tin roof, and then a second tree that looks like it has erupted through its left-hand end; three coloured lights decorate the set – yellow, blue and red – but it is also harshly illuminated on this starless evening by the lights of a French film-maker. There is paint peeling off a concrete block that houses the bar itself and a small flophouse, and there are ads painted on the walls, for Heineken and two local beers, Primus and Turbo King (the latter's slogan: "une affaire d'hommes").

Outside, there is a woman selling cassava loaf, and inside there are perhaps 40 locals, men in T-shirts, jeans and flip-flops, a mother and her sleeping baby, plus two western reporters from the BBC and Reuters who look barely out of their teens. There are three guys in wheelchairs. Someone is smoking a fat joint. And on stage are three men in plastic chairs, Ricky Likabu, Coco Ngambali and Theo Nsituvuidi, another on crutches, Kabamba Kabose Kasungu, and a drummer and a bassist, Claude Montana and Paulin "Cavalier" Kiara-Maigi, who – tonight at least – sound like the best band anywhere in the world, their funk and rumba rock blasting out into the thick air.

In this setting, it almost feels irrelevant that the leaders of the group are polio victims and as such severely disabled. Or at least it does until Djunana Tanga-Suele, the band's fifth vocalist and resident dancer, spins on his head and tumbles six feet forward towards me, apparently out of control – the fact that he has no legs, only withered stumps in their place, turns him into a ball. It's some grin he manages as he rights himself, and as wholly discombobulating as the moment is in an evening that is already disorientating enough, the only possible response is to grin right back.

The band are Staff Benda Bilili, which translates loosely from Lingala as "look beyond appearances", and already they have transcended their ambition to become "the most famous handicapped band in Africa" – their debut album, *Très Très Fort*, was critically hailed on its release by the Belgian label Crammed in March, and they are currently embarked on a long tour of northern Europe, including nine imminent dates in the UK and an appearance on 1 November at Womex, the international world music fair in Copenhagen, to receive this year's Womex Award, the industry's equivalent of an Oscar.

Such success has been made possible through the involvement of a motley cast of characters including the film-maker in his combat vest at the Senat, Renaud Barret, who has been making a feature-length documentary on the band with his partner Florent de la Tullaye since 2004; and the balding, scatter-brained Belgian record

producer Vincent Kenis, whose electric guitar I've carried with me on the flight from Brussels. Missing from the group tonight, for reasons that remain unclear, is 17-year-old Roger Landu, who plays an instrument of his own invention called a *satonge*, made out of a milk-powder tin, the frame of a fish basket and an electrical wire. I suddenly notice Vincent playing discreetly at the back of the stage, replicating Roger's role.

There has been the endorsement of the Africa Express organisation, too, whose Damon Albarn and a gaggle of others met Staff on a recce to the Democratic Republic of Congo in late 2007 – but no one could ever think that Staff Benda Bilili weren't masters of their own destiny. Over the course of two days, seeing them play and seeing where they live in Kinshasa, it is their resilience and determination that is most amazing of all.

It was only in July that the group left Kinshasa for the first time, for a three-date tour of France. In the shade of a clump of trees in the Parc de la Villette in Paris, I had briefly met Ricky and Coco, two fiftysomethings in suits and pork pie hats, as they rested in their wheelchairs before their gig at the Cabaret Sauvage. It was a peaceful scene, with a breeze picking out ripples on the canal, quite at odds from what I imagined to be their everyday existence in Kinshasa. Nonetheless, "it doesn't feel strange here, no," Ricky said to me. "We always knew we'd make it here – we're a band, and this is what we do."

I asked flippantly what he liked most about France: the women or the food. "Listen," he laughed, "I've already got two wives back home; that's enough for me."

Kinshasa, with a population of 7.5m, is the largest city in sub-Saharan Africa after Lagos: it is desperately poor, civic institutions barely exist and the infrastructure has long since decayed. In 1997, there was open fighting in the streets when the forces of Laurent Kabila entered the city from the east to topple President Mobutu, the dictator who had brought the country to its knees over three decades; riots followed in 2001 when Kabila was assassinated in the Second Congo War (the deadliest conflict since the Second World War). The good news is that the most recent fighting – when more than 100 died in shoot-outs between forces loyal to the new president, Laurent's son Joseph Kabila, and his political rival Jean-Pierre Bemba – was back in 2007.

One of the ironies of Staff's burgeoning success is that in a Congolese music scene still dominated by soukous stars such as Koffi Olomide and Werrason, they're not known as a band in Kinshasa – but on the streets they are recognised with a smile by policemen (to be avoided at all costs, we're warned) and by the *sheges*, the street kids (many of them former child soldiers, numbering perhaps 40,000) who somehow scratch a living in the city. Staff see themselves as spokesmen of the dispossessed – other *handicapés* and *sheges* – and at the Senat, deep into the night, Ricky and Coco sing the likes of Tonkara, with its celebratory lines "the children of Mandela Square are big stars/ They sleep on cardboard".

The following morning we head to a nearby *Centre d'handicapés*, where Ricky usually lives



with his first wife Chantal (his second lives in the district of Kintambo) and their children, Justin, aged 13, Michel, nine, and seven-year-old Sharufa. They have been there in a state of semi-permanence for 12 years. "Well, we used to be over by the river, in Kingabwa," he explains, "but there was a flood. The government moved us here. We're refugees." They share their pitifully cramped living quarters with 40 other families – perhaps 200 people. The breezeblock walls of the building are open at the top to the elements and a piece of ragged plastic sheeting barely covers the immediate headspace over what passes for his two rooms, separated from others by flimsy partitions. Ricky makes no apology for his quarters' appearance, although he does concede that "in the rainy season, then it's terrible".

I ask – and in our present surroundings, this feels an idiotic question – if there's a lot of prejudice towards handicapped people in the DRC. "Normally, I mean, if you're not a musician..." he says. "Round here, handicapped people have to go round begging. But, you know, we've got our heads screwed on, we're not stupid, despite what people think."

Ricky and Coco met years ago, on the ferries that ply back and forth across the Congo



Above, Staff Benda Bilili on stage at the Senat bar. Far left, Ricky at home in the Centre d'handicapés; left, Djunana; right, Theo near where he lives, in a wheelchair he brought back from France.



CONGOLESE MUSIC A BRIEF HISTORY

Africans began making music with their handclaps and drums. The rhythms and melodies they developed over centuries survived the grisly passage to the Americas in the heads of African slaves. There they evolved into the multitude of styles we commonly know as Latin.

The early 1900s witnessed Latin music's return voyage, this time on radios and records. Congolese, then living under Belgian and French occupation, warmly embraced them, especially the sounds of Cuba. Budding musicians came together in the new colonial capitals, Kinshasa (then called Léopoldville) and Brazzaville, where they mastered imported guitars, horns, and the newfangled recording technology. Cuban sounds re-Africanised with a pinch of jazz and a dash of cabaret.

By 1960, Congolese rumba emerged from the mix and won continent-wide popularity for the likes of Kabasele's African Jazz, Bantous de la Capitale, Franco's OK Jazz, Docteur Nico, and Tabu Ley. Younger musicians such as Papa Wemba and Emeneya eventually entered the scene under the influence of rock and soul and Paris fashion. They spiced the music with sartorial splendour and a harder edge. By the mid-1980s, however, economic calamity, provoked by the tyrant Mobutu, undermined the music's supports, forced many musicians abroad, and brought the glory years to an end.

Gary Stewart, author of *Rumba on the River: A History of the Popular Music of the Two Congos* (Verso)

river to Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of Congo which lies on the northern shore in view of Kinshasa. In the 1970s, *handicapés* were granted exemption from custom taxes, and many turned their wheelchairs into pick-ups. "In order to cross, people would give me money," Ricky explains, "and I would arrange for them to travel more cheaply. A handicapped person pays less for transport and I would say this person is my helper so they would get a reduced fare. We did this as a way of earning a living. We smuggled things, too; clothes, food."

Coco still works in this way, but changes in the rules mean the *handicapés* are only allowed on the ferries three days each week. He might earn, he says, \$10 a day (US dollars are as much a viable currency here as the Congolese franc). Theo sometimes works as an electrician. Ricky sells cigarettes and beer outside nightclubs, and is also a tailor – which is why he looks so *suka*, or elegant. So far, the band isn't enough.

All three, and Kabose and Djunana, were struck by polio as children. It's a disease from which around 20 million people around the world still suffer, particularly in countries like the DRC. In Kinshasa the sight of people with withered limbs propelling themselves around

the streets by their hands, perhaps strapping them with flip-flops, proves common.

Ricky and the others were all shunned by bands because of their disability before deciding to form Staff Benda Bilili six years ago. "Congolese people see a handicapped person and they say, 'Nah, look, it's that handicapped guy, he can't play music, he can't dance...'" Coco says.

I ask Ricky about the band's trip to France. "Well, it was the first time I'd left Congo. It wasn't quite how I'd imagined it," he says now. "I liked the way the roads were lined with trees, in straight lines. And I liked the way people there behaved towards us."

"I'll tell you who liked it," says Theo. "Roger." Roger isn't disabled, but he was a *shege* before being taken under Ricky's wing. "He liked it there because he slept with two white girls!" The others laugh uproariously, although later they'll say they're worried about him, because he didn't turn up for the gig last night.

"For about five years, it really wasn't easy for us here," says Coco, "but since we went to Europe, we can see that life is starting to change."

What was the reaction of people here when you came back from France, I ask. "Well, they congratulated us," Theo says. "Other people said

we hadn't been at all, but we know it's true, we have our memories. And we brought this back." He points to the spiffy new wheelchair that he's sitting in – which has printed across its back "Centre Ambulancier de Besancon".

Unlike Theo, Coco and Ricky have extravagantly customised motorised wheelchairs. Ricky's is broken, however, and so he can retrieve it from a mechanic on the far side of town we leave now.

The following morning Vincent and I walk to Kinshasa's zoo, which was once part of the *cordon sanitaire* separating the strip of the city along the river in which the Belgian colonialists lived from the *cité indigène*. This is where the band used to hang out and rehearse and where, in the absence of any studios in Kinshasa today, Vincent recorded half of *Très Très Fort*. "We had to record at night," he says, "because otherwise the noise from the traffic and the markets outside was too much." To begin with, he had a problem with the noise that the local amphibians were making, too, "so I asked some *sheges* to stamp on them, but it was just impossible". That is why on the song Polio, you can hear the toads of Kinshasa zoo in the background, making their own atmospheric contribution. Rather than a generator to power ▶

the equipment, Theo was able to hijack the electricity supply of a refreshment stand and Vincent recorded everything on his MacBook Pro.

When the Africa Express collection of artists visited Kinshasa, Robert del Naja from Massive Attack was among those who met Staff. "You see that this is purely people's spirit. It's not electronic," he says. "It's people making their own instruments, building their own lives, and forging something amazing. And being in the zoo just made it bizarre, a complete head-trip for me."

It is a head-trip, the zoo; it seems quite incredible that the city should be able, or want, to support such an institution, and visiting it proves an utterly dismal experience. There are dozens of small concrete cages containing dismayed monkeys and a couple of furious-looking chimpanzees; there is an enclosure for some kind of antelope; there are turkeys and geese, owls and wild dogs, with bloody, chewed ears; it's a relief to see that the largest cage, presumably meant for a lion, is now empty.

It could be worse – during the direst troubles of the 90s, the animals were simply taken for food. Staring at one of the crocodiles, a gaunt man with rheumy eyes murmurs "*c'est goûtant*" (tasty). He introduces himself as Elias Kiabutunda, and makes the obvious point that "life in Africa is very hard. When we wake up in the morning, we don't know what we're going to eat."

Renaud, the film-maker, had told me that there was some resentment that Staff hadn't been at the zoo since returning from France, but Elias is proud of the group. "Their songs are educative," he tells me in faltering English. "There are no stupid words in their songs, they tell you how to live; they're not obscene like all the rest."

Later, Coco will explain the real reason why the band haven't been back: Staff's bassist used to look after the horses there on behalf of the army – hence his nickname, "Cavalier". That was why the group were allowed to practise, but Cavalier has fallen out with the military and if the band return now, they might be arrested.

"Except I think it's all been sorted out now," Coco says. Renaud told me that you were getting hassled by *shéges* wanting hand-outs, too, I say. "No, no," he insists. "There have been a few problems, but things are good just now. Everyone loves us."

It takes half an hour's walk into the district

IT COULD BE WORSE: IN THE 90S THE ANIMALS IN THE ZOO WERE EATEN

of Lingwala through semi-paved, rubbish-strewn streets with filthy open drains that run their length to find where Coco usually lives. Just outside the gates of another compound for *handicapés*, there are stalls selling phone cards, Stella cigarettes (with the warning that "*fumée est préjudiciable à la santé*" – as if nothing else

will get you), bananas, eggs and excellent small baguettes – one of the very few positive legacies of Belgian rule. There is the rusting hulk of an abandoned car, too. Inside, there are lines of washing, barefoot children running amok, room apparently for 32 families; there is a large pool of stagnant water which toddlers will piss into that is also filled with shit and scraps of cardboard, tin cans, plastic bottles, rags and clumps of hair.

Coco and one of his two wives have lived here for 12 years in two tiny dark rooms with wooden walls, where we sit surrounded by pots and pans and empty vegetable oil containers and bike tyres. From inside, you wouldn't know that you weren't in a rural village, because the only sounds from outside are of a cock crowing and of a baby crying. Someone somewhere does then start playing Staff's album, through distorting speakers, but after 30 seconds the power fails and the sound dies.

We talk about the colonial era and the Belgians, who granted Congolese independence in 1960. "Well, I was pretty young then," says Ricky, "but I think life was pretty good, people ate well, everybody got an education. Business worked well." I ask about the famous show that James Brown played in Kinshasa in 1974 as a prelude to George Foreman and Muhammad Ali's "Rumble in the Jungle". "Yeah, I remember," Coco says. The band's song *Je t'Aime* sees them shouting a refrain which I think I've misheard as "sex machine" but it turns out this is exactly what it's meant to be, in tribute to the godfather of soul.

Vincent helps explain where Staff fit into the traditions of Congolese music. He first visited the country in 1971, when he was 20, and has returned regularly for the best part of 40 years – playing guitar with the giants of Congolese music, including Papa Wemba ("a very bad loser at Scrabble") and Franco, the untouchable "Sorcerer of the Guitar". (The characteristically bizarre story of how he came to join Franco's band involves his impersonating an Israeli fish merchant when a group he was in became stranded in Kenya.) He also produced *Congotronics* by Konono No 1, the most recent band to emerge from Kinshasa's underbelly to critical acclaim in the west. But whereas Konono mine a very specific folk heritage, Staff cast their net wider – mixing traditional tunes such as *Avramandole* with what Ricky calls simply "international music".

On leaving, it takes two children to help wrestle Coco's bike across the filthy water and rubble and back outside. He complains that he's lost his horn, and that a new one will set him back \$15. From Lingwala, it is then a 40-minute drive past a UN compound with sandbagged

machine gun nests through the expat district of Gombe to Binza, nearer the banks of the Congo and its first set of cataracts that so frustrated the city's founder, the journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley, in his attempts to navigate it. Theo is squeezed into the back of a derelict taxi with a smashed windscreen beside Vincent and



me. Coco follows behind on his motorbike, weaving in and out of the traffic. "Antonov!" someone shouts at him – a witty reference to the January day in 1996 when an Air Africa Antonov aircraft overshot the runway at N'Dolo airport, killing at least 297 people in a street market.

Theo has lived out round here since 1976. "It's nice and quiet, not like in the city," he says, over a cold Primus. Do you have to pedal all the way into town, I ask. "Yes, of course. Perhaps, looking long-term, I could have a motorbike. Step by step..." Vincent talks to him about quad bikes and three-wheeled scooters. "Yeah, I saw those in France!" His wife recently left him, he says, and he shuffles across the silky dirt ground to show us the room he has to himself now in what resembles a dormitory – containing only a mattress and a suitcase.

I ask about their upcoming visit to Europe. "I do worry about them touring," Vincent says. "If you're in a routine in life, you can get by, but if you start eating differently, if your circumstances change, that can be dangerous." I say it'll be cold in the UK. "Well, you'd better keep some coats ready for us," Coco says.



With the help of a friend, Coco attempts to manoeuvre his customised motorbike across the rubble in the Centre d'handicapés, where he lives in Kinshasa.

Later that day, back at the Senat bar in Ndjili, Staff are gathered for another semi-public rehearsal. Given the vast size of Kinshasa and its appalling traffic, it's little wonder that it has taken us an hour to get here in a battered taxi from the centre, and this with a chauffeur called Platini who scares even Vincent with his harebrained driving; for the band such logistical problems are, of course, a constant – Djunaana says it's taken him two hours to get here, pushing himself in his wheelchair. This is why, when I ask Ricky what the band might do with the royalties from the album and the money they will make from the tour, he says one of their ambitions is to buy a bus to help with their transport, which they can also rent out as a taxi.

Tonight Ricky has come on his motorbike, apparently mended. And even Roger has made the gig. He is wearing high-laced black boots that disappear under three-quarter length khaki shorts and a black jacket with thin red pinstripes. He is quite the dandy, his look completed by a New York Yankees baseball cap. He takes the part that Vincent had filled with his guitar the other night, launching into extraordinary solos on his

satonge. It's another mesmeric performance, the band switching from slow hypnotic grooves to frenetic funk workouts. Djunaana is at it again, disporting himself wildly. Kabose matches him. Ricky, Coco and Theo look impeccably cool.

The set finishes with a rousing new song, but Polio is the most moving; it's a haunting piece of music – even if the toads aren't present tonight – but the knowledge of how the lyrics translate from Lingala makes it so much more powerful.

"I was born a strong man," Ricky sings, before being joined by Coco and Theo. "But polio crippled me/ Look at me today, I'm screwed onto my tricycle/ I have become the man with the canes/ To hell with those crutches."

Most impressive, in a city as inspiring as it is depressing, is the lack of self-pity. This song then urges, "Parents, please go to the vaccination centre/ Get your babies vaccinated against polio." It is as much as anything else, and unlike so much else, *necessary* music. "Parents, please don't neglect your children," the band sing. "The one who is disabled is no different from the others/ Who among them will help you when you're in need? God only knows who."

When the set finishes, the band quickly disperse, and I manage to grab Roger for a second. "La France, c'était bon?" I ask. "Oui," he replies, sensing what I'm getting at. "C'était très bon."

Ricky's two sons and two other kids are pushing his bike, trying to start it. It's pitch-black as they manoeuvre the machine on to a tarmacked road and until the engine splutters into life, they won't have any lights. The last I see of them, the children and the bike are distant silhouettes, illuminated only by the glare of passing vehicles. And then, into the Kinshasa night, they're gone. **OMM** Staff Benda Bilili's *Très Très Fort* is out now on Crammed Discs. They play the Barbican, London EC2 (10 November); Brighton (11 Nov); Coventry (12 Nov); Manchester (14 Nov); Milton Keynes (15 Nov); Gateshead (16 Nov); Edinburgh (17 Nov); Bristol (18 Nov); and Oxford (20 Nov).

WATCH ONLINE



For more photographs and footage of Staff Benda Bilili performing in the Congo visit guardian.co.uk/theobserver/musicmonthly

THE FEELGOOD

An extraordinary group of homeless, disabled Congolese musicians is taking the live circuit by storm

David Smyth



SOUND CHECK

BE thankful that Staff Benda Bilili have made it to England to perform shows in Hackney and at the Womad festival next week. Back home, crossing a pot-holed road can be a problem for the wheelchair-using members of this extraordinary band from Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

When most musicians talk about their struggle for success, they usually mean encounters with the odd dodgy promoter and a long search for a bassist. Staff Benda Bilili have endured polio, homelessness and shelter fires to become world music's latest sensation, picking up awards from Songlines and Womex, performing with Damon Albarn's Africa Express, and starring in a new documentary about their inspirational world, *Benda Bilili!*, which opened the Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival this year.

I saw the film this week, in advance of its cinema release in November, and found the group to be anything but objects of pity. The band name roughly translates from Lingala as "look beyond appearances".

That's what we do from the opening shot when we see a pair of green flip-flops dancing furiously on the dusty ground, realising only as the camera pans out that they have hands in them.

The disabled members could almost be Hell's Angels as they rumble along in their chosen means of transport, rugged, customised hand-pedalled tricycles and three-wheeled motor-bikes. They are respected as senior members of a displaced community of polio victims and "sheges" (street children), based around a tired roundabout by Kinshasa's United Nations headquarters and the city's grim zoo.

They have every reason to sing angry laments, but in fact their songs are bursting with optimism. Lines from one track are translated in the film as: "I used to sleep on cardboard/Bingo, I

They have every reason to sing angry laments, but in fact their songs are bursting with optimism



EVENING STANDARD

16th July 2010

David Smyth

BAND OF THE SUMMER

crammed  discs



Born to be wild:
Staff Benda
Bilili's name
translates as
"look beyond
appearances"

bought a mattress... It could happen to you" and sound like an upbeat Lottery advert. The downtempo groove Polio-myelitis sees band leader Ricky Likabu urging parents to vaccinate their children, instead of wallowing in his own misfortune. Recorded at night outside the zoo, using electricity nicked from a nearby refreshment stand, the background croaking of toads is audible.

Je t'aime, another song from their debut album *Très Très Fort* (Very Very Strong, released last year on Belgian label Crammed Discs) has a wiry funkiness that translates into dancing in any language, with the musicians yelling

"Sex machine!" in tribute to their obvious influence, James Brown. Seeing them perform it live, bouncing from their chairs to dance on their hands, has thrilled multiple audiences since their first European performance in France a year ago.

The documentary and the album both came about thanks to the involvement of French filmmakers Renaud Barret and Florent de la Tullaye, who discovered Staff in 2004 while making another film, *La danse de Jupiter*, about Congolese musicians. They returned with producer Vincent Kenis, the man who helped Kinshasa band Konono Noi

to achieve crossover success, and the money to enable them to record. "Their lives on the street were literally eating them alive. It's an endless war," says de la Tullaye. "They're real supermen."

The most super of all may even be able-bodied teenager Roger Landu, who first appears in the film as a shy 12-year-old street kid, clutching a homemade instrument close to his chest as though he doesn't want anyone to steal his only toy. He calls it a *satongé*, or a monochord – a single plucked piece of wire attached to a piece of wood and a milk can. Now a man, he turns out to be a real virtuoso on this piece of junk,

producing a squealing sound that gives the band's songs a vibrant uniqueness. It's yet another example of triumph over impossible adversity, an apparently useless instrument that becomes something of beauty.

Catch them live next week and Staff Benda Bilili will make you believe that anything is possible.

■ Staff Benda Bilili appear on Tuesday at Hackney Empire, E8 (020 8985 2424, hackneyempire.co.uk) and on Fri July 23 on the Open Air Stage at Womad, Charlton Park, Malmesbury, Wiltshire (0845 146 1735, womad.org/festivals/charlton-park)

WORLD

STAFF BENDA BILILI

Hackney Empire, E8

★★★★☆

JANE CORNWELL

SPINNING round in their wheelchairs, dancing frenetically on crutches and on their hands on the floor, Congolese buskers-turned-world-music-darlings Staff Benda Bilili reinforced their unofficial mantra – that handicaps exist in the mind, not in the legs – with astounding flair and joie de vivre.

The Kinshasa eight-piece is an unlikely success story: comprised of five middle-aged polio victims (one of them a champion arm wrestler) and three able-bodied musicians including a chiselled former street kid, they have garnered international awards and global stardom; a feature-length documentary about their life, *Benda Bilili!*, will be released in the autumn.

"Music saved my life", reads the T-shirt worn by 19-year-old Roger

Landu, who wields his homemade satonge, a one-string electric lute made from a condensed milk can, with *rawk'n'roll* grit. But despite the cooler-than-thou hype and the mass adulation at shindigs such as Glastonbury, band members still live with their displaced brethren next to a roundabout by Kinshasa zoo. They are, they say, the voice of their people, telling of the need to vote, to get vaccinated, to enjoy oneself in the sack.

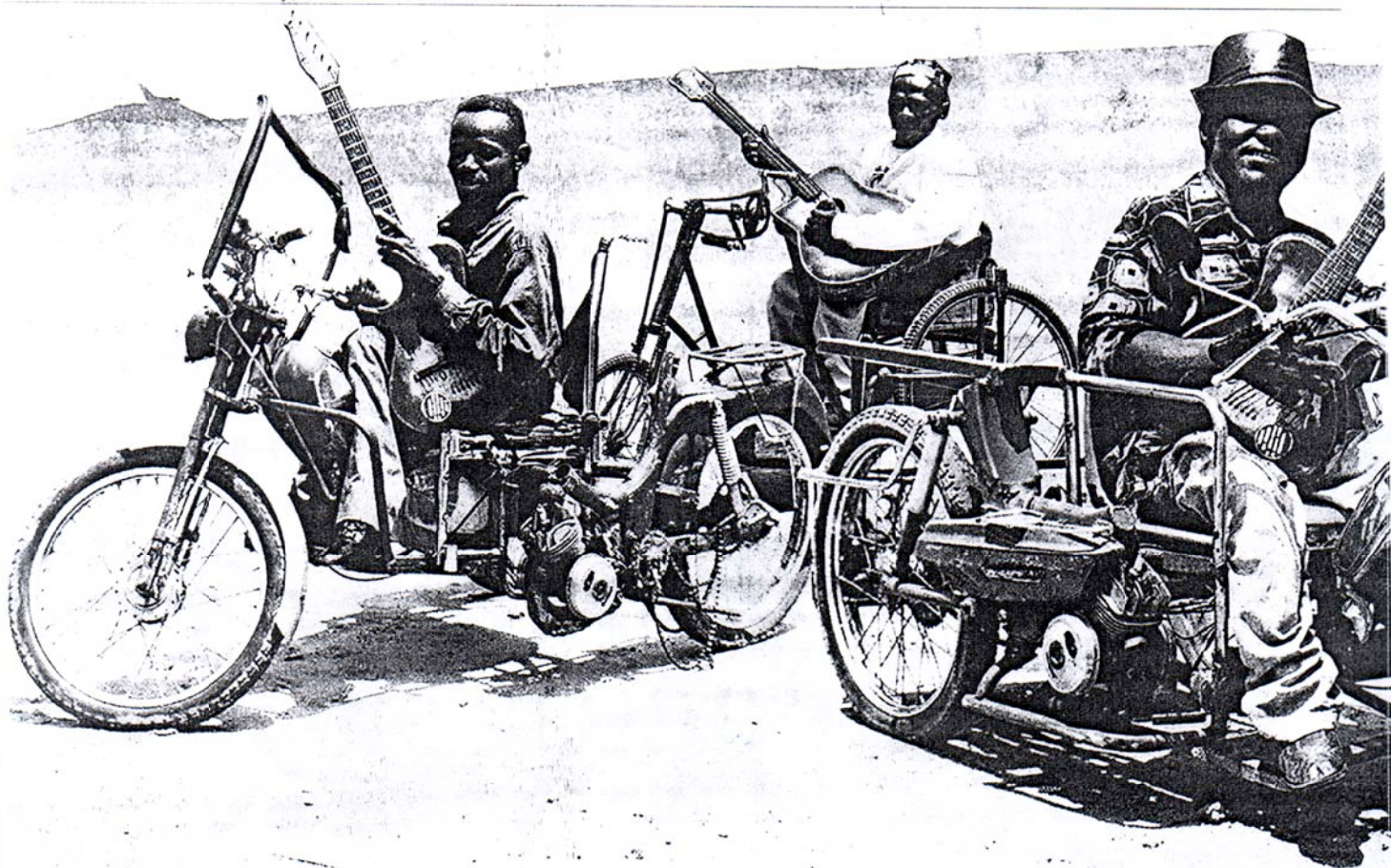
There's nothing miserable about their mix of old-school funk and classic Congolese rumba, and no anger in their Lingala-language lyrics. Self-pity is a luxury few in the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, can afford. What there is instead is optimism, warmth, even doo-wop harmonies. At the end, wreathed in grins, they wave their towels above their heads like prize-fighters.

■ *Staff Benda Bilili appear on Friday on the Open Air Stage at Womad Charlton Park, Malmesbury, Wiltshire (0845 1461735/womad.org/festivals/charltonpark)*

EVENING STANDARD

July 21st 2010

Jane Cornwell



The masters of survival,

Disabled by polio, a group of homeless Congolese buskers called Staff Benda Bilili are attracting Western film-makers

Djunana's smile is pure Ray Charles, blissful and bright. He's busy cutting a rocking rumba rug on the dirty concrete stage of L'Oeil Du Plaisir, a roughneck dance bar in the heart of the Congolese capital Kinshasa. Since he has no legs, or rather, only short floppy polio-ravaged stumps, it seems as if he's buried waist downwards, with only the upper half of his extraordinary frame visible while the rest boogies in the maw of the earth. Every part of his body is beaming, every sinew dances. I stare at him impolitely, and inside a confused voice is asking: "What has he got to feel so happy about?"

I imagine that most of the party of musicians and adventurers who have arrived with me in this beer-crate and sawdust joint on a voyage of musical discovery organised by Africa Express are asking themselves the same question. After all, finding the appropriate rank in the global hierarchy of suffering for a disabled musician who lives rough on the streets of Africa's most deranged and dysfunctional megalopolis seems like a no-brainer. Or is it?

Then Amadou Bagayoko, one half of the Malian duo Amadou and Mariam,

gets up on stage to inject some sharp and slithering guitar licks into the rippling song. Damon Albarn adds his melodica to the mix. Sam Duckworth's grin is broader than Broadway. The rappers from De la Soul look entranced. This is no time to get all morose and philosophical, but if the beer weren't so sharp and cold, the music so warm and honeyed and the whores so statuesque and impossibly graceful, the temptation to slip into a bout of soul-searching would be overwhelming.

Sharing the stage with Djuna are four other disabled musicians, an able-bodied bassist and a young B-boy dressed in hip-hop baggies who is playing his satongé like a panhandling Paganini.

I later learn that this lean, gentle-looking kid, who goes by the name of Roger Landu, invented the instrument he's playing with such dazzling virtuosity. The raw materials of the satongé consist of a milk-powder tin, a section of fish-basket frame and a single electrical wire. A few days later, at our hotel, Roger makes up san-

tongés to order and sells them to us for \$20 (£14) a pop... good business for a shégué, or homeless kid, who was surviving by busking for pennies in the Kinshasa central market.

Roger's resourcefulness makes him a model citizen, a fine practitioner of the infamous Article 15 of the Congolese constitution, which exhorts all true patriots to find a way to cope and survive by fair means or foul. The French have a fine verb for it... "se débrouiller".

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, a country that has been raped and abused by men in power, foreign and native, for more than a century, you either embrace Article 15 or die. Most residents of Kinshasa wake

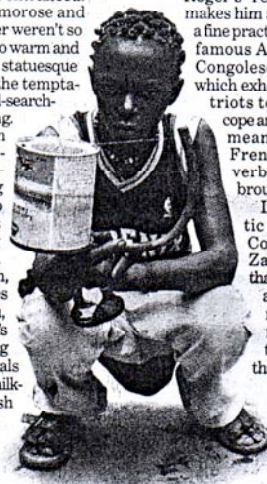
up in the morning with one goal in their heads: to find something to eat and make it through the day with wit, courage and cunning. Tomorrow doesn't even trouble their minds. Today and the next meal are all that count. Self-pity is suicidal.

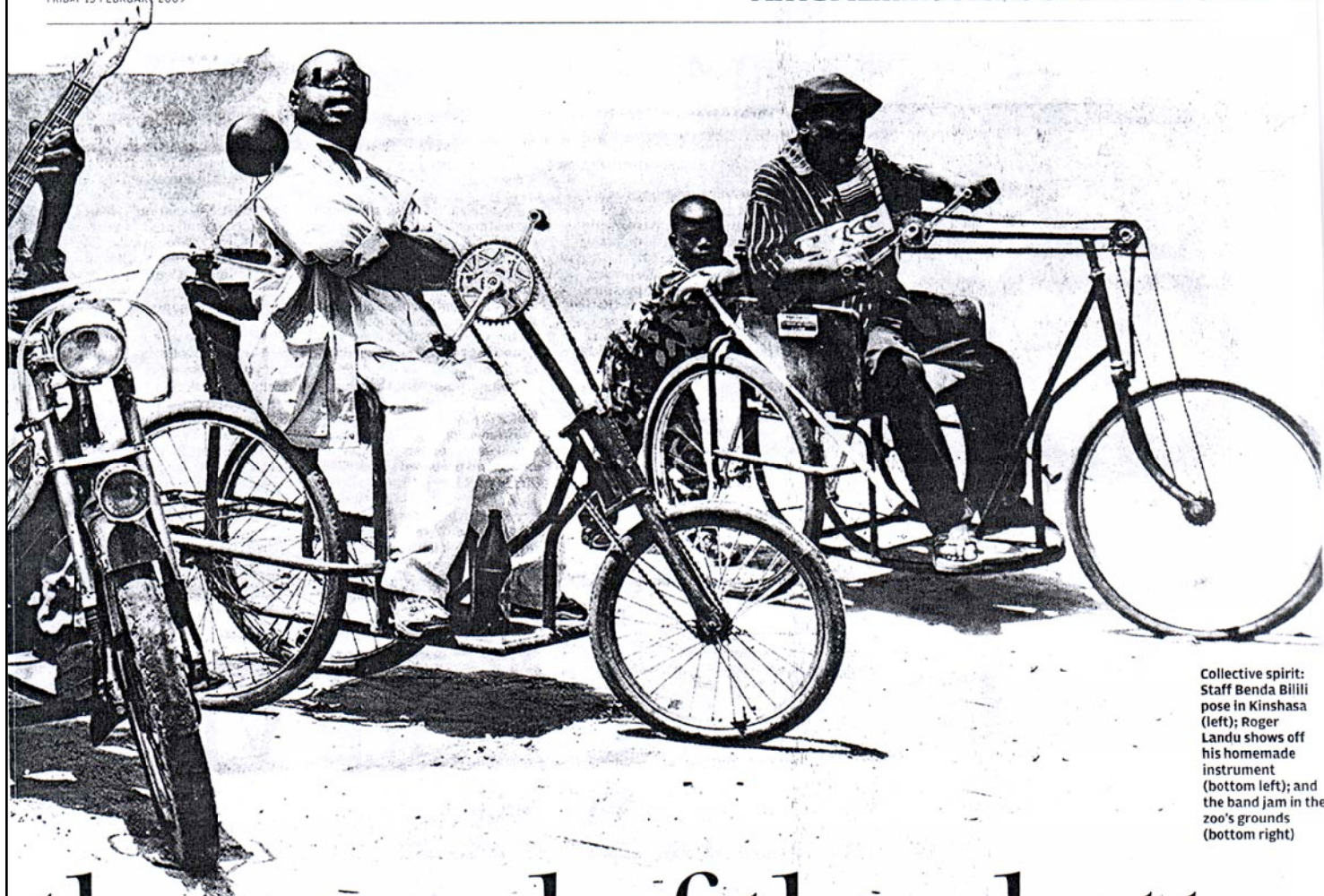
The band who are weaving spells about our ears with their dulcet rolling rumba and keening vocals are the unrecognised geniuses of Article 15, the masters of survival. They call themselves Staff Benda Bilili, which, in Lingala, the *lingua franca* of this vast and variegated country, means something like "the people who see beyond..." Beyond prejudice, corruption, the lies of priests and politicians, the grimy veneer of daily life.

Lounging after the show on his extraordinary moped wheelchair contraption, Coco Ngambali, the group's primary songwriter, explains: "We see ourselves as journalists. We're the real journalists because we're not afraid of anyone. We communicate messages to mothers, to those who sleep on the streets on cardboard boxes, to the shégués." Coco's face is like a granite boulder bathed in soft evening light, an astonishing mixture of gentle wisdom and rawhide toughness. As well as being a gifted composer, he's reportedly a champion arm-wrestler.

But let's go back a way. The story starts with a microscopic organism that wheels its way into the gastrointestinal tract and then the central nervous system. Before the mutilations of recent wars in eastern Congo added to the demographic, the poliomyelitis virus accounted for most serious disabilities in Kinshasa. The victims were often abandoned by their parents, first to various struggling religious institutions and then to the streets. The handicapped are also deemed to have demonic powers, and therefore find themselves ostracised by a fearful able-bodied society. But the hapless legion of Kinshasa's polio victims have developed extraordinary survival strategies.

One of these strategies is to form gangs, which roam the streets in bizarre gizmoidal wheelchairs, extorting protection money from shopkeepers. Another is to take advantage of one of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko's more benign statutes exempting the disabled from paying taxes on the ferries which steam across the vast Congo river, linking Kinshasa with Brazzaville, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, on the opposite shore. Wheelchairs piled high with cigarettes, alcohol, petrol, rice and all types of stock both straight and crooked are heaved by armies of young





Collective spirit: Staff Benda Bilili pose in Kinshasa (left); Roger Landu shows off his homemade instrument (bottom left); and the band jam in the zoo's grounds (bottom right)

the sound of the ghetto

akers, musicians and internet fans with their sweet and funky music. **Andy Morgan** reports from Kinshasa

street kids up the ferry ramps and on to the waiting boats. Various "associations" of disabled traders dominate the commerce of Ngobila Beach, the ferry port on the Kinshasa side. Thirty years ago, it was here that Coco met Ricky Likabu, or "Papa Ricky" as he's known to the shégués of Kinshasa's downtown.

Ricky is the backbone of Staff Benda Bilili, the group's strategist, disciplinarian and motivator, a man of many talents and a benign arbitrator of petit disputes. Most days he hangs out with the rest of the group at the Sonas opposite the UN building, busking, holding court, surveying the toxic frenzy of Kinshasa's street life.

Coco and Ricky used to be members of Raka Raka, one of the many backing combos of the renowned Papa Wemba. But when Wemba was incarcerated in France for visa and immigration fraud, the pair decided to set up on their own. At the time, they were living in a refuge for the disabled. In 2004, a pair of French film-makers, Renaud Barret and Florent de la Tullaye, happened on the group as they were busking. It was the genesis of an intense creative relationship.

Barret and De la Tullaye started filming the group, and recording them at the studios of the Congolese Radio and TV. In 2006, they delegated the record-



ing part of the project to the Belgian producer Vincent Kenis, the man behind Konono No. 1, Kasai All Stars and the Congotronics compilations. The first Staff Benda Bilili CD, entitled *Très Très Fort*, is out on Crammed Discs in March.

It's clear from a peek at the rushes of Barret and De la Tullaye's film that Coco, Ricky and their entire extended family place great store on the world release of their CD to provide the finance needed to realise their dreams. Ricky

talks of opening a centre for the disabled and homeless people of Kinshasa. He also dreams of touring Africa with Staff Benda Bilili, spreading the message of communal resilience and self-help.

Whether the crisis-riddled music industry in the West is capable of fulfilling these hopes is unclear. Staff Benda Bilili's music has no need of sentimental crutches. It stands proudly on its own formidable limbs, mixing 70s funk, old Cuban son and mambo with the

mellifluous flow of classic Congolese rumba, evoking the golden age of Franco and Tabu Ley Rochereau. The musicianship is subtle and precise, forged by the group's extraordinary work ethic, and their sound has a raw simplicity and uniqueness, thanks partly to Soklo, Kinshasa's most famous guitar maker, who supplies most of the city's street musicians. Roger's wonderful satongé solos provide icings on this well-apportioned cake.

Filming in the city has required huge amounts of courage and sangfroid, but like most people who have spent time with Staff Benda Bilili, Florent is in awe of their mental strength and toughness.

"They're obstinate and courageous, they're survivors," he says. "And they're very generous. They've taught the street children an enormous amount. Everybody is in the same misery in Kinshasa but you get the impression that the handicapped cope better than the able-bodied. They often say, 'A handicap is in the mind, not in the legs.'"

The fascinating tale of Staff Benda Bilili is about to enter a new "international" phase. A summer tour of Europe and the UK to coincide with the release of *Très Très Fort* is in its planning stages, but 400,000 people have already viewed the brief snippets of film about the band

on YouTube. It seems that an altogether more congenial and auspicious viral chain reaction than the one that robbed them of their limbs all those years ago has already been unleashed.

On the last day of our brief Africa Express visit to Kinshasa, some of us go down to the zoo to see the group. 3D from Massive Attack foregoes a trip to the crafts market to join us. The sounds of rehearsal drift our way. Ricky and Coco greet us with friendly smiles. We express our hope to see the group in England; a hope which may finally be on the verge of reality. Then after one last song we take our leave of Staff Benda Bilili and their world, where the battle against misery produces traits and values capable of making a pampered, sheltered Westerner feel jealous.

That's where all those endlessly predictable images of poverty and disease that dominate the Western media's coverage of Africa are so aberrant. Africa doesn't need our pity. Africa demands and deserves our admiration and wonder, our humility and respect. Staff Benda Bilili embody this truth with total dedication and style.

'Très Très Fort' is out on Crammed Discs on 23 March. Videos of the band can be seen on YouTube

Homeless and paraplegic, but they still tear the roof off



Staff Benda Bilili on stage at the Barbican last night ANGELA LUBIANO

First Night Staff Benda Bilili Barbican, London

★★★★★

By Nick Hasted

WHEN THE stars of the most anticipated African tour of the year spin wheelchairs, dance on their legs' stumps and pluck instruments created from abandoned debris, they are embodying their nation's contradictions.

Staff Benda Bilili are homeless youths (sheges) and paraplegic men from Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, perhaps sub-Saharan Africa's most cursed country. But last night's UK debut was proof that a history of brutal dictators, civil wars – this century's alone leaving more than 5 million dead – and corporate mineral-stripping can still fuel defiant art.

They are given two hearty ovations before they begin; gratitude, maybe, for offering a side of Africa you don't see or hear every day. The eight-piece group looks like the intellectual street-band they are, all Stetsons, flat caps, black leather caps and trousers. There is movement all over the stage: four pirouetting wheelchairs, and crutches used by mighty arms to swing on. Another of the band vaults from his wheelchair and spins on half-legs, ululating with a dazzling grin. All have turned apparent weakness to strength long ago.

By the second song, they have hit the high end of a typical Congolese groove: soukou, the adapted Cuban rumba which can change shape and tempo almost infinitely. The polyrhythms entwined through this music are driven by bustling drums and horn-like guitars, and matched by the gruff harmonies and solo interjections of veteran band leaders Coco Ngamban and Ricky Likabu.

Staff Benda Bilili add an anarchic kick to this open-ended tradition with white-suited Roger Landu's satonge. This bowed, one-string tincan guitar is his creation, artistry borne from the total necessity of Kinshasa's streets. The virtuoso, wobbling shrieks he draws from it sound like a theremin whistling through a South Seas shell. When the rhythm section hit a striding beat close to Hendrix's version of "All Along the Watchtower", Landu kneels and makes his invented marvel scream and soar.

Like all the finest African bands, Staff Benda Bilili's swirling complexity removes the option to do anything but dance, drawing two dozen from their seats even in the stiff, sedate Barbican. But there are times when the sway and croon of

ghostly Cuban rumbas animate the voice and guitars, too. Havana cantina, Kinshasa slum, psychedelic club or London arts centre – this crack outfit would tear the roof off anywhere.

Translations of songs such as "Polio" and "Tonkara" reveal unsentimental pity and protest at how the world can turn on anyone. But that was implicit at most, watching them last night. Much more than this year's debut album *Tres Fort Fort*, the hurtling, indomitable roar of their UK introduction battered down numerous doors, offering another entrance into Africa's heart.



Staff Benda Bilili

Introducing Africa's most inspiring band – a group of homeless paraplegic musicians from Kinshasa.

Words: Nige Tassell

In recent years, Belgium's Cramped Discs label has brought the wider world some truly original music from the Congolese heart of the African continent, among them Konono No 1 and Kasai All-Stars. Prepare yourself for the label's most incredible discovery yet – a group of paraplegic musicians cursed with polio who, when they're not buzzing around Kinshasa's streets on their customised three-wheeled moped/wheelchair hybrids from which they sell tobacco and alcohol, sleep rough in the city's zoological gardens.

Considering the circumstances of its creation, the music that this most unlikely of bands make is infinitely brighter and cheerier than we have any right to expect. Recorded in the zoo gardens using a MacBook laptop and a mains cable cheekily hooked up to the power supply from a nearby disused café, the results are by turns soulful, hypnotic and funky. And always humbling. Staff Benda Bilili sound like nothing you've heard before, but at the same time resonate with curious familiarity. The stately rumba sound of Congolese musical heavyweights like Franco and Tabu Ley Rochereau clearly runs through their blood, but there are also echoes of graceful Cuban son, Jamaican mento and even, on tracks like *Je T'Aime*, '70s funk.

Then there's the instrument unique to the band, the *santongé*, a high-pitched, single-string lute fashioned from electrical wire and an old milk can by Roger Landu, its 17-year-old inventor and player. Its quivering tones lend these glorious songs – songs born out of living in appalling conditions in Africa's most chaotic city – an other-worldliness, a tremulous sound to lift the band members from the harsh reality of their lives.



Pic: Belle Knoise

Even if the tale so far of Staff Benda Bilili wasn't such an inspiring one, *Très Très Fort* still wouldn't fail to melt the coldest of hearts. An incredible story. An incredible record. ☺



Staff Benda Bilili *Très Très Fort*

Cramped Discs CRAW51
★★★★ Uncut

“The toads sang chorus for us”

The members of Staff Benda Bilili collectively reveal the background to their brilliant debut record

When did you realise that music was a means of improving your lives?

Music is not a hobby. It's a true job. We play each night at the entrance of the fancy restaurants. It pays, we share the money, we eat.

You believe that you are the true journalists of Kinshasa. Please explain.

We live in the street. We eat there, sleep there, do business and rehearse there. People come to us to tell their stories, their fears, their tricks to survive. We know what's really going on in this country.

Who are the musicians who've most influenced the Staff Benda Bilili sound?

Our Congolese fathers – Wendo Kolosoy, Franco & OK Jazz, Tabu Ley, Docteur Nico... We love James Brown. We saw him play in Kinshasa in 1974. It was a true riot.

When you first formed the band, could you have believed you'd be releasing a record right across Europe?

That was our only goal during all these years. From the beginning, we knew that one day we would make it. Hard work pays.

Could you please describe how the album was recorded? The set-up sounds like it was highly unusual.

We recorded the album in different locations in Kinshasa. We did a session at the zoo and the toads sang the chorus for us...

Please tell us about the *santongé*, this extraordinary instrument made from an old milk can and some electrical wire.

It's a unique one-string guitar. Roger invented and built it when he was seven. He started to play music to get something to eat. That's how we met him. Roger had a gift for music – we taught him the notes.

What's your favourite song on *Très Très Fort* and why?

Probably *Moto Moindo*. It's a true 'rumba-blues' title. It says that Africans should wake the f*ck up, be proud and stop whining and begging and blaming everything on the colonization era. We Africans must face our responsibilities. Self-pity is the worst thing for Africa today.

Have you got any plans to tour in Europe?

The tour will be starting in July in France. We are going to rock the world you know.

HMV CHOICE
Spring 2009
Nige Tassell



Pic: Renaud Barret

What shocks people is not just the high level of crime but the wanton violence that usually accompanies it; gangs often kill people just for their mobile phones. It is not only whites (9% of the population) who complain. Almost everyone is afraid. In one poll 62% of South Africans said they would feel "very unsafe" walking alone in their district after dark. The rich lavish money on protection. The poor black majority have to live with fear.

More fortress-like gated communities are being built, guarded around the clock by armed men. Most of the white and black middle class barricade themselves behind increasing layers of security: bright lights; high perimeter-walls topped with electric fencing or razor wire; guard dogs; panic buttons and an alarm system linked to one of the many armed rapid-response security firms that promise to arrive within three minutes of a call. Since 1996 the government has quadrupled its anti-crime spending. But private spending has risen far more, by a factor of 400. Private security in South Africa is now worth 14 billion rand (\$1.9 billion) a year, with 300,000 registered guards.

In fact, despite public grumbles, the government has had some success. If new police statistics are to be believed, the crime rate for the 21 most serious categories has fallen by nearly a fifth in the past 15 years. The murder rate has fallen by almost half, rape is down by a third, and assault causing grievous bodily harm has dipped by more than a fifth. Yet South Africa still has one of the world's highest murder rates, at 37 per 100,000 inhabitants: six times America's rate and nearly 20 times Britain's. Though some types of crime have gone down, the rate of violent house robbery has doubled in the past five years. Armed robbery at business premises has risen fourfold in the same period.

The reason for South Africa's high crime rate is a topic of anguished debate. Apartheid's brutal legacy, high unemployment and poverty, gaping social inequality, the absence of a father in nearly two-

thirds of black homes, and the abuse of alcohol and drugs are all cited. Education is crucial: recent research shows that those who earn the basic school-leaving certificate are six times less likely to commit a crime than those who do not. Criminal syndicates, often run by foreigners, are rife.

Despite his recent tough talk, Mr Zuma knows there is no easy answer. He promises to boost the police from 183,000 to 205,000 in three years. He needs to improve their quality too. Most are badly trained and ill-paid; many are corrupt.

Some people want to lock up miscreants for longer, but South Africa, with 335 out of every 100,000 inhabitants behind bars, already has one of the world's highest incarceration rates, especially since tougher minimum sentences were imposed a decade ago. A DNA data bank containing samples of anyone ever arrested has been suggested. Perhaps most urgent of all is a need to improve detection rates. Of the 2m-odd crimes reported every year, barely half ever result in a charge and only 10-15% end up with a conviction. ■

Congo's paraplegic musicians

Lullabies of the abandoned

KINSHASA

Hark the heralds of Congo's disabled underclass

IN KINSHASA, the vast and sprawling capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the disabled have enjoyed just two state-sponsored perks: half-price passage on the ferry across the Congo river to Brazzaville, capital of the smaller (and arguably even less democratic) Republic of Congo; and free entry to the city's derelict zoo, which houses a handful of mangy animals. If you can hobble or wheel yourself onto the ferry, you may be lucky enough to join the mafia-like gangs trading in cheap clothes, alcohol and cigarettes. Or you can hang around the zoo, which is where four paraplegic singers, an adopted street kid and a handful of accompanying musicians spawned a band called Staff Benda Bilili.

"We tried to sing with able-bodied musicians but it didn't work," says Theo Nsituvuidi. "They weren't happy with us, they didn't want to play with us, so we did it ourselves." Four years ago they began performing in the car park of one of Kinshasa's posher rooftop restaurants, hoping that rich patrons would chuck spare cash into a pot on their way out.

The musicians, all of them polio victims with withered legs, play on home-made guitars and a bizarre single-string harp with a bit of wire stretched over a tin can. The lead drummer whacks a plastic chair with a pair of flip-flops. Benda's first album, out earlier this year and entitled "Très, Très Fort", is a vivid medley. Some lyrics tell parents to vaccinate their children; others lament the fate of Kinshasa's 30,000 homeless. Most of them preach defiant self-reliance.

Staff Benda Bilili, which literally means "show what's hidden", has begun to climb up Europe's music charts. This month the band is off on a seven-week European tour. It has yet to make a fortune. But one of its guitarists, Coco Ngambali, has replaced his ageing motor-tricycle with a new model.



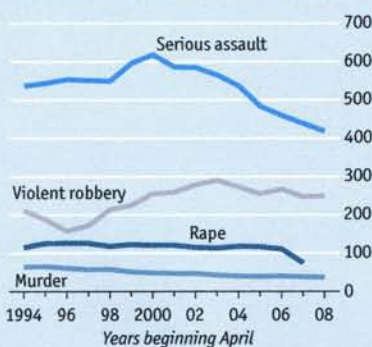
On your bike, if you have one

During the 32-year-long rule of the kleptocratic Mobutu Sese Seko, the Congolese used to cite an unwritten clause in the constitution known in bitter jest as Article 15: "Débrouillez-vous pour vivre", meaning "Sort yourselves out to stay alive". A new constitution guarantees free education, human rights and equality. Yet the UN reckons Congo's annual spending on health care is still just about the world's lowest per head. In Kinshasa's shanty towns, home to 8m-10m people, family networks have broken down. Lack of polio vaccinations has created a huge underclass of paraplegics, weaving hand-cranked tricycles (if they can get one) between shiny new 4x4s, begging from the air-conditioned elite.

Their welfare is largely left to a handful of aid agencies that can help only a tiny minority. An American and British-backed charity, Stand Proud, helps 100-plus child polio victims in Kinshasa. Benda was given help by two French filmmakers, Renaud Barret and Florent de la Tullaye. For thousands of other sufferers the outlook is a lot less rosy.

Villainous toll

Crime rate per 100,000 population



Sources: South African Police Service; IMF; SAIRR

First Night
Stephen Frears directs
Gemma Arterton in
Cannes, page 50

times2arts



Kinshasa social club

From the mean streets of Congo, a band of disabled musicians have become the unlikely toast of the Cannes Film Festival, reports Ben Hoyle

When two aspiring French film-makers stumbled upon a band of ageing paraplegic buskers in downtown Kinshasa in 2004, it was not immediately obvious that they would go on to storm the Cannes Film Festival together six years later.

Even a year and a half ago the musicians who became the subjects of *Benda Bilili!*, the documentary by Renaud Barret and his friend of 20 years Florent de la Tullaye, were still sleeping rough on cardboard boxes on the streets of the Congolese capital and rehearsing in the city's forlorn and crumbling zoo.

Now, in a triumph more unlikely than most of the fictional storylines on offer at Cannes this year, the band are the grinning face of the world's most glamorous entertainment industry jamboree, the stand-out success at the halfway point of a festival that has been light on uplifting, crowd-pleasing fare so far. "It is a crazy story," Barret says, shaking his head in breathless disbelief. "It's like a miracle."

Six years ago Barret ran a small Parisian advertising agency and De la Tullaye was a photojournalist. Both were fed up with their jobs and looking for a new direction, so they went to Kinshasa together to make a television docu-

mentary on the music scene there. One night they discovered the members of Staff Benda Bilili (it means "Staff Beyond Appearances") playing blues on the pavement for coins from the pockets of expats. It was a surreal encounter that would change all their lives.

"They were begging outside a fancy restaurant," Barret says. "They were on these *Mad Max* or *Easy Rider* style bicycle wheelchairs with all these street kids around them, listening to the music as if it was a cure that could give them strength."

The film-makers' first thought was to try to help finance a record. "We didn't mean to make a movie," Barret admits. "We only started to shoot them to get images for marketing the record but after two years we realised that we had something amazing."

With hindsight you wonder why they hadn't noticed earlier. Staff Benda Bilili are a scriptwriter's dream, particularly the two lead characters picked out in the film. Leon "Ricky" Likabu, the band leader, comes across as the archetypal wise elder of the group. Roger Landu, the teenage prodigy who performs on a sort of home-made, single-string guitar fashioned from a tin can, grows on screen from a shy street kid into a confident young man with a nice line in Jimi Hendrix-style stage theatrics.

As the film shows, however, making the record proved to be an epic struggle, as might be expected in one of Africa's most chaotic and dangerous cities. The directors' money ran out and they had to return to France. The shelter for the disabled where many of the band lived burnt down, ejecting them and their families on to the streets. Landu was forced to return to his village to look after his mother.

"Our problem was that they could all die, just like that, even the younger ones. That's the problem with Kinshasa," Barret says.

Somehow though, at the third attempt they cut the record. When *Très, Très Fort* finally made it into record stores last year the band's music and their exotic backstory prompted immediate interest from Europe, leading to a tour that provides many of the film's funniest moments. Today Staff Benda Bilili are preparing to play Womad and Glastonbury, while back home they have all bought houses and can afford to send their numerous children to school.

The film is now set to take their extraordinary story to a much wider audience. At the start of the Cannes festival one reviewer was listening to the role-call of films on offer and paused at an unfamiliar title. "Bender Bellini? Is that a porno?" the critic asked. Now everybody in Cannes seems to know about it. The band have been playing free concerts and impromptu gigs around the town for the past five days.

From the moment that it received a rare standing ovation at its first press screening on Thursday, *Benda Bilili!* has possessed that most elusive and precious of industry commodities: buzz. Screenings throughout the weekend were packed, joyous affairs and critics have predicted that the film will become a firm favourite. Bidding wars are in progress for the distribution rights for the US, the UK, Germany and a host of smaller territories. Deals have already been struck for France and Japan.

After the official premiere at the Thursday night opening of the Director's Fortnight section of the festival, the band received a five-minute stand-

“It is a classic underdog-come-good cinema moment”

ing ovation. Half an hour later they were performing on stage at a rammed after-screening party on the beach in front of the two most prestigious hotels in Cannes: Landu and eight middle-aged men, four in wheelchairs, one on crutches, most in dapper panama hats, tearing into an ecstatically received live set while fireworks burst overhead. They looked utterly unfazed by the occasion.

"It's normal," Likabu said. "It's great but we worked hard for this. It's because of that that we are in Cannes." From the very start, Barret says, the band were convinced that they were on a fast track to superstardom.

"In 2004 Coco [one of the guitarist-vocalists] told us: 'We are going to be the most famous African band in the world.' We were like, 'Yeah sure, man.' But they said: 'We are going to work with you. With you we will do something great.' So we started to believe it even though it was not really rational. They gave us the strength and power and energy."

The music, a raw blend of traditional Congolese soukous (a form of African rumba), reggae and elements of James Brown-style funk, is only a small part of the film's appeal. Mostly, it is the story of the band's indomitable desire to make more of themselves, their refusal to give up their dreams in the face of apparently insurmountable odds. On the lawless streets of Kinshasa the band's survival is surprising enough. As disabled men on the margins of a society that does nothing to support them it is little short of astonishing. They must be tightly disciplined and well organised just to get through the day, which they can only do with the help of a network of street kids who help them to get around.

Now all the band's dreams are coming true. Near the end of the film they are seen huddled in an Oslo hotel room in winter, passing round a joint. "Nobody believed in us," Likabu reflects. "Now they can see they were wrong." It is a classic underdog-come-good cinema moment.

For their part, the two film-makers are looking to the future too. "Staff Benda Bilili is over for us," Bennet says, wearily but sadly. "They've got their own story to live now. They will stay as friends but they are out of the streets and they've got a world tour coming. They can tour for years. So, wow."

He is not sure if he and De la Tullaye can ever repeat the emotional high of their six-year attachment to the band but they have already lined up another act for the next project, at the recording studio they have set up in Kinshasa on the back of Staff Benda Bilili's success. Once again it sounds an unlikely proposition.

"Our next band is Jupiter," he says with a broad smile. "They play heavy Congolese metal."

Staff Benda Bilili play Glastonbury, June 23-27, and Womad, Malmesbury, Wiltshire, July 23-25

Top, Staff Benda Bilili; right, Roger Landu, with his home-made guitar



Read Wendy Ide's review of *Benda Bilili!* from Cannes
timesonline.co.uk/cannes

Rumba rides again... on tricycles

Gervase De Wilde talks to the paraplegic rockers who have made an instant classic

Staff Benda Bilili are a group of paraplegic street musicians who live in the grounds of the zoo in Kinshasa, Congo. Even amid the tales of gun-toting guerrilla factions or rapping child soldiers that often surround African music, the publicity behind this particular band grabs the attention.

Even more compelling than their unusual back story is their debut album *Très Très Fort*, which mingles the classic Congolese sounds of rumba and soukous, the original 20th-century African dance music, with bursts of funk and melancholic reggae. Rousing choruses and call-and-response singing are underpinned by punchy rhythms, while the high-pitched inflections of a homemade single-string guitar, fashioned from a milk can and electrical wire, appear intermittently for hypnotic solos.

A contemporary African classic, recorded on the fly and outdoors in the Kinshasa Zoo, the album will appeal to fans of the blues or the Buena Vista Social Club, as much as followers of Fela Kuti or the cult Congolese act Konono No 1, the group which Staff Benda Bilili's Belgian label, Crammed, released to much acclaim in 2005.

Congolese music incubated the spirit of Cuban rumba in the Forties and Fifties, to create an Africanised version of a genre which was itself indebted to the music of enslaved Africans who had been brought to the Caribbean. In the decades that followed, funk and reggae took root in Africa through international stars like James Brown and Bob Marley. This interplay between Africa, the Caribbean and the United States is what makes *Très Très Fort* such a special record.

Via email from Kinshasa, Ricky, the leader of the group, explains that the group's enticing mix of styles came naturally to them. "We had always been listening to our Congolese fathers like Franco & OK Jazz, but when the American black music arrived here in the mid Sixties it was like a revelation.

"James Brown is a true inspiration and when he played in Kinshasa in 1974 all

the musicians went crazy." Like their musical heroes, Staff Benda Bilili – *benda bilili* means 'look beyond appearances' – have the loose, easy confidence born of extensive practice. They have long relied on music to earn a living.

"Music has always been a job to us, it is not a hobby," says Ricky. "We play outside the fancy restaurants, people give us money, we split it, we eat. We have many other jobs, but music is our favourite."

The life-affirming qualities of the group's music, heard on uplifting tunes like the driving *Avramandole*, are all the more surprising given their circumstances. At the group's core are four singer/guitarists who have been handicapped since childhood by polio, a condition they talk about on the album in

*'In Kinshasa we play outside
restaurants, people give us
money, we split it, we eat.
We have many other jobs,
but music is our favourite'*

one doleful ballad. To free them from using crutches they all ride eye-catching customised tricycles. The one-string guitar which is key to their sound is played by Roger Landu, a 17-year-old *shégé* or street kid, who met the group when he was 12.

This unlikely alliance, between the older "handicapés" and the much younger *shégé* reflects the extraordinary solidarity that seems to exist among Kinshasa's dispossessed. As well as offering memorable tunes, the album is a fascinating portrait of their lives on the margins of a city which is itself hardly acknowledged by the rest of the world.

"We don't have a real home," explains Ricky. "Like hundreds of thousands of people here, we live in the street, where we rehearse, do business, eat and sleep. We live among the street 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." The album's title (which in English means "very very strong") is a kind of manifesto: "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."

Kinshasa-based French filmmakers Renaud Barret and Florent de la Tullaye have been following Staff Benda Bilili since a chance encounter in the street five years ago, and have been instrumental in securing the group a record deal and promoting them on YouTube, where striking videos of the group's members dancing furiously, using only their impressively muscular arms, first appeared last summer.

While their music contains echoes of the past, the story of *Très Très Fort* is resolutely contemporary: from a chaotic urban locale in the developing world, they have, with a little help, harnessed cheaply available technology and digital media to create a record with global appeal.

"Staff Benda Bilili are true survivors, nothing is impossible to them," says Barret. "This is a message to the world. That's why we started the movie.

"Being handicapped is not an issue – in Kinshasa everybody leads the same harsh life and the handicapped are well organised compared to the healthy."

Like the resolute core of the band, who abandoned their crutches and adapted technology to give themselves independence, their record stands for itself. According to Barret the group's disabilities are not the key to understanding them, however fascinating this aspect of their story may be.

"The daily burden of being handicapped in a manic and brutal city like Kinshasa has certainly framed their 'blues'," he says. "But Staff Benda Bilili don't define themselves as handicapped. They define themselves first as musicians."

❖ 'Très Très Fort' (Crammed) is out on Monday.



'True survivors':
street group Staff
Benda Bilili, who live in
the grounds of
Kinshasa Zoo, Congo

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Staff Benda Bilili (No 530)

If you're only going to buy one album by a gang of paraplegic Congolese funk veterans this year, this should be it



Paul Lester

guardian.co.uk, Monday 20 April 2009 16.13 BST



Staff Benda Bilili ... Afrocentric mutant funk Hell's Angels OAPs. Photograph: PR

Hometown: Kinshasa, the Congo.

The lineup: Ricky Likabu (leader, vocals), Coco Ngambali (vocals, guitar), Theo Nsituvuidi (vocals, guitar), Djunana Tanga-Suele (vocals), Kabamba Kabose Kasungu (vocals), Paulin "Cavalier" Kiara-Maigi (bass), Roger Landu (satonge, vocals), Cubain Kabeya (drums, vocals).

The background: Staff Benda Bilili means "look beyond appearances" in Lingala, the language of Kinshasa in the Congo, but it's easier said than done when the band in question are a gang of elderly homeless paraplegic buskers, disabled by polio. When they're not busy prowling their local dilapidated zoological gardens or flogging cheap booze and fags outside nightclubs, the band sing and play their instruments while sitting on bizarre customised tricycles as a bunch of younger, all-acoustic players – including an ex-street kid who plays a one-string electric lute he designed and built himself out of a tin can – bash out various infectious rhythms behind them. What's Congolese for, "We're not judging or anything, but what is THAT?"

Western film-makers, internet users (400,000 people have seen the brief snippets of film about the band on [YouTube](#)) and musicians, notably Damon Albarn and Robert del Naja of Massive Attack, are apparently smitten with these characters who are like Afrocentric mutant funk Hell's Angel OAPs. Well it beats queuing up for your heating allowance or going to the bingo. You can see what has drawn Albarn and del Naja to them. Even if they were able-bodied twentysomethings on unicycles, this stuff would be gripping. The music on their debut album, *Très Très Fort* (translation: "very, very loud"), which was recorded out in the open and produced by [Vincent Kenis](#) – whose MacBook was powered illegally from a refreshment bar in the aforementioned zoo – is a mesmerising blend of rumba-rooted grooves, vibrant, keening vocals, reggae, baile

and old-style R&B. Sala Keba isn't a million miles away from doo wop. Then again, a track such as Avramandole has a real (African head-)charge to it, even in its unelectrified state, while Tonkara is the sort of township disco that gets the world-music crowd doing embarrassing drunk-uncle manoeuvres to it every year at Womad. They've even got a song called Je T'aime, which funnily enough isn't a cover of Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin's infamous heavy-breathing sex epic but a hypnotic invitation to bump'n'grind of the terpsichorean variety.

The buzz: "There's a wonderful warmth and an often ramshackle jollity to proceedings."

The truth: If you're only going to buy one album by a gang of paraplegic Congolese funk veterans this year, this should be it.

Most likely to: Make British buskers up their game.

Least likely to: Sell expensive cigarettes.

What to buy: The debut album, Très Très Fort, is out now on Crammed.

File next to: Amadou and Mariam, Bhundu Boys, Vampire Weekend, Talking Heads.

Links: www.myspace.com/staffbendabilili

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From Kinshasa to your town: the incredible rise of Staff Benda Bilili

They wanted to be 'the best handicapped band in Africa'. They have become one of the most exciting live bands on the planet. On the eve of their UK tour, Caspar Llewellyn Smith meets the band on home turf in the Democratic Republic of Congo



Caspar Llewellyn Smith
The Observer, Sunday 1 November 2009

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Theo (with the black beret), Coco (at the wheel of his bike) and Ricky (on crutches) of Staff Benda Bilili, Ndjili, Kinshasa, Congo (DRC), 14 september 2009. Photograph: Andy Hall

To see [Staff Benda Bilili](#) in action click [here](#).

It is just after 11pm at the Senat bar in the roughshod district of Ndjili in Kinshasa, half an hour's bone-jarring drive straight from the clammy hell that is the international airport. The bar comprises a roughly 12-metre square outdoor space with plastic chairs and tables on the dirt floor, a string of lights hung up and above a tree, and then what is the stage – a level surface three-quarters covered by a tin roof, and then a second tree that looks like it has erupted through its left-hand end; three coloured lights decorate the set – yellow, blue and red – but it is also harshly illuminated on this starless evening by the lights of a French film-maker. There is paint peeling off a concrete block that houses the bar itself and a small flophouse, and there are ads painted on the walls, for Heineken and two local beers, Primus and Turbo King (the latter's slogan: "une affaire d'hommes").

Outside, there is a woman selling cassava loaf, and inside there are perhaps 40 locals, men in T-shirts, jeans and flip-flops, a mother and her sleeping baby, plus two western reporters from the BBC and Reuters who look barely out of their teens. There are three guys in wheelchairs. Someone is smoking a fat joint. And on stage are three men in plastic chairs, Ricky Likabu, Coco Ngambali and Theo Nsituvuidi, another on crutches, Kabamba Kabose Kasungu, and a drummer and a bassist, Claude Montana and Paulin "Cavalier" Kiara-Maigi, who – tonight at least – sound like the best band anywhere in the world, their funk and rumba rock blasting out into the thick air.

In this setting, it almost feels irrelevant that the leaders of the group are polio victims and as such severely disabled. Or at least it does until Djunana Tanga-Suele, the band's fifth vocalist and resident dancer, spins on his head and tumbles six feet forward towards me, apparently out of control – the fact that he has no legs, only withered stumps in their place, turns him into a ball. It's some grin he manages as he rights himself, and as wholly discombobulating as the moment is in an evening that is already disorientating enough, the only possible response is to grin right back.

The band are Staff Benda Bilili, which translates loosely from Lingala as "look beyond appearances", and already they have transcended their ambition to become "the most famous handicapped band in Africa" – their debut album, *Très Très Fort*, was critically hailed on its release by the Belgian label Crammed in March, and they are currently embarked on a long tour of northern Europe, including nine imminent dates in the UK and an appearance on 1 November at Womex, the international world music fair in Copenhagen, to receive this year's Womex Award, the industry's equivalent of an Oscar.

Such success has been made possible through the involvement of a motley cast of characters including the film-maker in his combat vest at the Senat, Renaud Barret, who has been making a feature-length documentary on the band with his partner Florent de la Tullaye since 2004; and the balding, scatter-brained Belgian record producer Vincent Kenis, whose electric guitar I've carried with me on the flight from Brussels. Missing from the group tonight, for reasons that remain unclear, is 17-year-old Roger Landu, who plays an instrument of his own invention called a *satonge*, made out of a milk-powder tin, the frame of a fish basket and an electrical wire. I suddenly notice Vincent playing discreetly at the back of the stage, replicating Roger's role.

There has been the endorsement of the Africa Express organisation, too, whose Damon Albarn and a gaggle of others met Staff on a recce to the Democratic Republic of Congo in late 2007 – but no one could ever think that Staff Benda Bilili weren't masters of their own destiny. Over the course of two days, seeing them play and seeing where they live in Kinshasa, it is their resilience and determination that is most amazing of all.

It was only in July that the group left Kinshasa for the first time, for a three-date tour of France. In the shade of a clump of trees in the Parc de la Villette in Paris, I had briefly met Ricky and Coco, two fiftysomethings in suits and pork pie hats, as they rested in their wheelchairs before their gig at the Cabaret Sauvage. It was a peaceful scene, with a breeze picking out ripples on the canal, quite at odds from what I imagined to be their everyday existence in Kinshasa. Nonetheless, "it doesn't feel strange here, no," Ricky said to me. "We always knew we'd make it here – we're a band, and this is what we do."

I asked flippantly what he liked most about France: the women or the food. "Listen," he laughed, "I've already got two wives back home; that's enough for me."

Kinshasa, with a population of 7.5m, is the largest city in sub-Saharan Africa after Lagos: it is desperately poor, civic institutions barely exist and the infrastructure has long since decayed. In 1997, there was open fighting in the streets when the forces of Laurent Kabila entered the city from the east to topple President Mobutu, the dictator who had brought the country to its knees over three decades; riots followed in 2001 when Kabila was assassinated in the Second Congo War (the deadliest conflict since the Second World War). The good news is that the most recent fighting – when more than 100 died in shoot-outs between forces loyal to the new president, Laurent's son Joseph Kabila, and his political rival Jean-Pierre Bemba – was back in 2007.

One of the ironies of Staff's burgeoning success is that in a Congolese music scene still

dominated by soukous stars such as Koffi Olomide and Werrason, they're not known as a band in Kinshasa – but on the streets they are recognised with a smile by policemen (to be avoided at all costs, we're warned) and by the *sheges*, the street kids (many of them former child soldiers, numbering perhaps 40,000) who somehow scratch a living in the city. Staff see themselves as spokesmen of the dispossessed – other *handicapés* and *sheges* – and at the Senat, deep into the night, Ricky and Coco sing the likes of Tonkara, with its celebratory lines "the children of Mandela Square are big stars/ They sleep on cardboard".

The following morning we head to a nearby *Centre d'handicapés*, where Ricky usually lives with his first wife Chantal (his second lives in the district of Kintambo) and their children, Justin, aged 13, Michel, nine, and seven-year-old Sharufa. They have been there in a state of semi-permanence for 12 years. "Well, we used to be over by the river, in Kingabwa," he explains, "but there was a flood. The government moved us here. We're refugees." They share their pitifully cramped living quarters with 40 other families – perhaps 200 people. The breezeblock walls of the building are open at the top to the elements and a piece of ragged plastic sheeting barely covers the immediate headspace over what passes for his two rooms, separated from others by flimsy partitions. Ricky makes no apology for his quarters' appearance, although he does concede that "in the rainy season, *then* it's terrible".

I ask – and in our present surroundings, this feels an idiotic question – if there's a lot of prejudice towards handicapped people in the DRC. "Normally, I mean, if you're not a musician..." he says. "Round here, handicapped people have to go round begging. But, you know, we've got our heads screwed on, we're not stupid, despite what people think."

Ricky and Coco met years ago, on the ferries that ply back and forth across the Congo river to Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of Congo which lies on the northern shore in view of Kinshasa. In the 1970s, *handicapés* were granted exemption from custom taxes, and many turned their wheelchairs into pick-ups. "In order to cross, people would give me money," Ricky explains, "and I would arrange for them to travel more cheaply. A handicapped person pays less for transport and I would say this person is my helper so they would get a reduced fare. We did this as a way of earning a living. We smuggled things, too; clothes, food."

Coco still works in this way, but changes in the rules mean the *handicapés* are only allowed on the ferries three days each week. He might earn, he says, \$10 a day (US dollars are as much a viable currency here as the Congolese franc). Theo sometimes works as an electrician. Ricky sells cigarettes and beer outside nightclubs, and is also a tailor – which is why he looks so *suka*, or elegant. So far, the band isn't enough.

All three, and Kabose and Djunana, were struck by polio as children. It's a disease from which around 20 million people around the world still suffer, particularly in countries like the DRC. In Kinshasa the sight of people with withered limbs propelling themselves around the streets by their hands, perhaps strapping them with flip-flops, proves common.

Ricky and the others were all shunned by bands because of their disability before deciding to form Staff Benda Bilili six years ago. "Congolese people see a handicapped person and they say, 'Nah, look, it's that handicapped guy, he can't play music, he can't dance...'" Coco says.

I ask Ricky about the band's trip to France. "Well, it was the first time I'd left Congo. It wasn't quite how I'd imagined it," he says now. "I liked the way the roads were lined with trees, in straight lines. And I liked the way people there behaved towards us."

"I'll tell you who liked it," says Theo. "Roger." Roger isn't disabled, but he was a *shege* before being taken under Ricky's wing. "He liked it there because he slept with two white girls!" The others laugh uproariously, although later they'll say they're worried about him, because he didn't turn up for the gig last night.

"For about five years, it really wasn't easy for us here," says Coco, "but since we went to Europe, we can see that life is starting to change."

What was the reaction of people here when you came back from France, I ask. "Well, they congratulated us," Theo says. "Other people said we hadn't been at all, but we know it's true, we have our memories. And we brought this back." He points to the spiffy new wheelchair that he's sitting in – which has printed across its back "Centre Ambulancier de Besancon".

Unlike Theo, Coco and Ricky have extravagantly customised motorised wheelchairs. Ricky's is broken, however, and so he can retrieve it from a mechanic on the far side of town we leave now.

The following morning Vincent and I walk to Kinshasa's zoo, which was once part of the *cordon sanitaire* separating the strip of the city along the river in which the Belgian colonialists lived from the *cit  indig ne*. This is where the band used to hang out and rehearse and where, in the absence of any studios in Kinshasa today, Vincent recorded half of *Tr s Tr s Fort*. "We had to record at night," he says, "because otherwise the noise from the traffic and the markets outside was too much." To begin with, he had a problem with the noise that the local amphibians were making, too, "so I asked some *sheges* to stamp on them, but it was just impossible". That is why on the song Polio, you can hear the toads of Kinshasa zoo in the background, making their own atmospheric contribution. Rather than a generator to power the equipment, Theo was able to hijack the electricity supply of a refreshment stand and Vincent recorded everything on his MacBook Pro.

When the Africa Express collection of artists visited Kinshasa, Robert del Naja from Massive Attack was among those who met Staff. "You see that this is purely people's spirit. It's not electronic," he says. "It's people making their own instruments, building their own lives, and forging something amazing. And being in the zoo just made it bizarre, a complete head-trip for me."

It is a head-trip, the zoo; it seems quite incredible that the city should be able, or want, to support such an institution, and visiting it proves an utterly dismal experience. There are dozens of small concrete cages containing dismayed monkeys and a couple of furious-looking chimpanzees; there is an enclosure for some kind of antelope; there are turkeys and geese, owls and wild dogs, with bloody, chewed ears; it's a relief to see that the largest cage, presumably meant for a lion, is now empty.

It could be worse – during the direst troubles of the 90s, the animals were simply taken for food. Staring at one of the crocodiles, a gaunt man with rheumy eyes murmurs "*c'est go tant*" (tasty). He introduces himself as Elias Kiabutunda, and makes the obvious point that "life in Africa is very hard. When we wake up in the morning, we don't know what we're going to eat."

Renaud, the film-maker, had told me that there was some resentment that Staff hadn't been at the zoo since returning from France, but Elias is proud of the group. "Their songs are educative," he tells me in faltering English. "There are no stupid words in their songs, they tell you how to live; they're not obscene like all the rest."

Later, Coco will explain the real reason why the band haven't been back: Staff's bassist

used to look after the horses there on behalf of the army – hence his nickname, "Cavalier". That was why the group were allowed to practise, but Cavalier has fallen out with the military and if the band return now, they might be arrested.

"Except I think it's all been sorted out now," Coco says. Renaud told me that you were getting hassled by *sheges* wanting hand-outs, too, I say. "No, no," he insists. "There have been a few problems, but things are good just now. Everyone loves us."

It takes half an hour's walk into the district of Lingwala through semi-paved, rubbish-strewn streets with filthy open drains that run their length to find where Coco usually lives. Just outside the gates of another compound for *handicapés*, there are stalls selling phone cards, Stella cigarettes (with the warning that "fumée est préjudiciable à la santé" – as if nothing else will get you), bananas, eggs and excellent small baguettes – one of the very few positive legacies of Belgian rule. There is the rusting hulk of an abandoned car, too. Inside, there are lines of washing, barefoot children running amok, room apparently for 32 families; there is a large pool of stagnant water which toddlers will piss into that is also filled with shit and scraps of cardboard, tin cans, plastic bottles, rags and clumps of hair.

Coco and one of his two wives have lived here for 12 years in two tiny dark rooms with wooden walls, where we sit surrounded by pots and pans and empty vegetable oil containers and bike tyres. From inside, you wouldn't know that you weren't in a rural village, because the only sounds from outside are of a cock crowing and of a baby crying. Someone somewhere does then start playing Staff's album, through distorting speakers, but after 30 seconds the power fails and the sound dies.

We talk about the colonial era and the Belgians, who granted Congolese independence in 1960. "Well, I was pretty young then," says Ricky, "but I think life was pretty good, people ate well, everybody got an education. Business worked well." I ask about the famous show that James Brown played in Kinshasa in 1974 as a prelude to George Foreman and Muhammad Ali's "Rumble in the Jungle". "Yeah, I remember," Coco says. The band's song *Je t'Aime* sees them shouting a refrain which I think I've misheard as "sex machine" but it turns out this is exactly what it's meant to be, in tribute to the godfather of soul.

Vincent helps explain where Staff fit into the traditions of Congolese music. He first visited the country in 1971, when he was 20, and has returned regularly for the best part of 40 years – playing guitar with the giants of Congolese music, including Papa Wemba ("a very bad loser at Scrabble") and Franco, the untouchable "Sorcerer of the Guitar". (The characteristically bizarre story of how he came to join Franco's band involves his impersonating an Israeli fish merchant when a group he was in became stranded in Kenya.) He also produced *Congotronics* by Konono No 1, the most recent band to emerge from Kinshasa's underbelly to critical acclaim in the west. But whereas Konono mine a very specific folk heritage, Staff cast their net wider – mixing traditional tunes such as *Avramandole* with what Ricky calls simply "international music".

On leaving, it takes two children to help wrestle Coco's bike across the filthy water and rubble and back outside. He complains that he's lost his horn, and that a new one will set him back \$15. From Lingwala, it is then a 40-minute drive past a UN compound with sandbagged machine gun nests through the expat district of Gombe to Binza, nearer the banks of the Congo and its first set of cataracts that so frustrated the city's founder, the journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley, in his attempts to navigate it. Theo is squeezed into the back of a derelict taxi with a smashed windscreen beside Vincent and me. Coco follows behind on his motorbike, weaving in and out of the

traffic. "Antonov!" someone shouts at him – a witty reference to the January day in 1996 when an Air Africa Antonov aircraft overshot the runway at N'Dolo airport, killing at least 297 people in a street market.

Theo has lived out round here since 1976. "It's nice and quiet, not like in the city," he says, over a cold Primus. Do you have to pedal all the way into town, I ask. "Yes, of course. Perhaps, looking long-term, I could have a motorbike. Step by step...." Vincent talks to him about quad bikes and three-wheeled scooters. "Yeah, I saw those in France!" His wife recently left him, he says, and he shuffles across the silky dirt ground to show us the room he has to himself now in what resembles a dormitory – containing only a mattress and a suitcase.

I ask about their upcoming visit to Europe. "I do worry about them touring," Vincent says. "If you're in a routine in life, you can get by, but if you start eating differently, if your circumstances change, that can be dangerous." I say it'll be cold in the UK. "Well, you'd better keep some coats ready for us," Coco says.

Later that day, back at the Senat bar in Ndjili, Staff are gathered for another semi-public rehearsal. Given the vast size of Kinshasa and its appalling traffic, it's little wonder that it has taken us an hour to get here in a battered taxi from the centre, and this with a chauffeur called Platini who scares even Vincent with his harebrained driving; for the band such logistical problems are, of course, a constant – Djunana says it's taken him two hours to get here, pushing himself in his wheelchair. This is why, when I ask Ricky what the band might do with the royalties from the album and the money they will make from the tour, he says one of their ambitions is to buy a bus to help with their transport, which they can also rent out as a taxi.

Tonight Ricky has come on his motorbike, apparently mended. And even Roger has made the gig. He is wearing high-laced black boots that disappear under three-quarter length khaki shorts and a black jacket with thin red pinstripes. He is quite the dandy, his look completed by a New York Yankees baseball cap. He takes the part that Vincent had filled with his guitar the other night, launching into extraordinary solos on his *satonge*. It's another mesmeric performance, the band switching from slow hypnotic grooves to frenetic funk workouts. Djunana is at it again, disporting himself wildly. Kabose matches him. Ricky, Coco and Theo look impeccably cool.

The set finishes with a rousing new song, but Polio is the most moving; it's a haunting piece of music – even if the toads aren't present tonight – but the knowledge of how the lyrics translate from Lingala makes it so much more powerful.

"I was born a strong man," Ricky sings, before being joined by Coco and Theo. "But polio crippled me/ Look at me today, I'm screwed onto my tricycle/ I have become the man with the canes/ To hell with those crutches."

Most impressive, in a city as inspiring as it is depressing, is the lack of self-pity. This song then urges, "Parents, please go to the vaccination centre/ Get your babies vaccinated against polio." It is as much as anything else, and unlike so much else, *necessary* music. "Parents, please don't neglect your children," the band sing. "The one who is disabled is no different from the others/ Who among them will help you when you're in need? God only knows who."

When the set finishes, the band quickly disperse, and I manage to grab Roger for a second. "La France, c'était bon?" I ask. "Oui," he replies, sensing what I'm getting at. "C'était très bon."

Ricky's two sons and two other kids are pushing his bike, trying to start it. It's pitch-black as they manoeuvre the machine on to a tarmacked road and until the engine

splutters into life, they won't have any lights. The last I see of them, the children and the bike are distant silhouettes, illuminated only by the glare of passing vehicles. And then, into the Kinshasa night, they're gone. OMM

Staff Benda Bilili's Très Très Fort is out now on Crammed Discs. They play the Barbican, London EC2 (10 November); Brighton (11 Nov); Coventry (12 Nov); Manchester (14 Nov); Milton Keynes (15 Nov); Gateshead (16 Nov); Edinburgh (17 Nov); Bristol (18 Nov); and Oxford (20 Nov).

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Brace yourself for the arrival, in souped-up wheelchairs, of Staff Benda Bilili, a remarkable band from the Congo, says Rob Fitzpatrick

All bands need a back story, a carefully constructed series of ever more improbably tumultuous events and circumstances that aim to grab as much of the potential audience as possible. In the history of back stories, however, none has come close to the Congo's Staff Benda Bilili, and the more you read about them, the more you listen to them and watch them, the more you think none ever will. How could they?

Formed by a group of homeless paraplegics and polio victims living in an area of Kinshasa close to the city's zoo, Staff Benda Bilili are more of a force of nature than anything as prosaic as a group. In Lingala — the Bantu language spoken in Kinshasa — Benda Bilili means "look beyond appearances", which may help when first confronted with four songwriters and musicians riding heavily customised, hand-built wheelchairs accompanied by a young, all-acoustic rhythm

section, while out front stands 17-year-old Roger Landu playing the *satonge*, a one-string lute ("like the mythological monster of our traditional tales who has only one eye") he invented and built himself from the remnants of a tin can, a bit of old basket and a lone electrical wire.

Ricky Likabu, the band leader, singer and guitarist, is a battle-hardened veteran of Kinshasa's streets, yet his songs are largely graceful laments suitable for the wine-dark corners of an abandoned dancehall. His hero is "James, the American. I don't know his name. Is it Bram or Broo? The one who sang Sex Machine". Coco Ngambali is a songwriter and arranger, Theo Nsituvuidi sings soprano and plays guitar, Djunana Tanga-Suele sings, Kabamba Kabose Kasungu raps and dances, Cubain Kabeya plays his makeshift drums and Randi is on percussion, while Cavalier Kiara-Maigi plays the acoustic bass guitar.

If this all sounds a bit hair shirt, a bit worthy, it isn't, because, most important, Staff Benda Bilili are a really, really good band, the sort of band who, from the moment you hear them, make all the rest of their story, as amazing as it is — this is a band that sued the UN for \$100,000 in a royalties row over their song Let's Go and Vote — simply fall away. Likabu describes their sound as a mix of "rumba, blues and tribal salsa", but what that amounts to on the Très Très Fort album is a string of incredibly affecting songs that also draw on funk, soul and mambo while they deal with corruption, poverty, disease and

the waste of lives they see around them every day. Recorded at night, near the zoo, in the open air, with a dozen microphones, a Mac laptop and electricity stolen from a deserted snack bar, the songs are delivered with a devastating melodic ease; nothing is forced, everything just flows.

Since 2004, they've had their daily lives documented by the film-makers Renaud Barret and Florent de la Tullaye, whose movie about the band will be released later this year. "We were making a film in Kinshasa at that time and heard about this band of crazy handicapped people playing a blues of their own construction somewhere downtown," says Barret. "Our first encounter with Staff was one night in a district called La Gombe. They were rehearsing in front of a fancy restaurant where all the white expats go. We were guided to them by the power of their music. It was like, 'Do you hear that? Where does it come from?' We found them and started following them and began to realise that they were the strongest people we had ever met. Staff are true survivors."

"The idea for the band was born when we used to do import-export between Kinshasa and its sister capital, Brazzaville," says Likabu in an e-mail from Kinshasa. "Coco and I used to sing together on the boat on the way back home, our first name was Staff Raka Raka, we played with [the Congolese rumba star] Papa Wemba."

In England, the Congo only ever appears in the news as a place skewered by war and

poverty, but Staff Benda Bilili have called themselves "the true press", while Ngambali calls local journalists "slaves to power". Likabu insists that within the group everyone has his strongly held opinion, but as a group "we never talk about politics except to plead for the unification of all Congolese people. We might talk about the sorry state of medicine and education in our country, but that's it". The emphasis is always on music, how it can teach and heal, how it can make people who have nothing feel they have something to live for.

Ngambali, 50, and Likabu, 55, have known each other for 30 years and have worked together all that time, despite the spiralling problems of their homeland. In 2004, they found Roger living at the Kinshasa central market — he was one of the *shégués*, abandoned street children who number 40,000-100,000 in Kinshasa alone, children who get by selling drugs, polishing shoes, begging and guarding cars. They decided to adopt him, despite being homeless themselves. Soon, he was making music with them. "For us," says Likabu, "it's all about their attitude." Their song Staff asks a single question: "What are you going to do today to find something to eat for your kids?" "That's the only real issue in Kinshasa," says Barret. "Staff is a song of dignity and respect and it pays tribute to all the people who live in the streets."

Likabu says the true heroes in the Congo are "the orphans, the refugees, the street kids and the whores who support their families."

They all are 'Bana Staff', the children of Staff.

For Barret and de la Tullaye, five years following the band has taught them an enormous amount. The people they've met through SBB have been warm and friendly, with a huge sense of humour, but, he says: "They're also extremely aware of the fact that nobody gives a shit about them, or the fact that their country is being robbed by foreigners while their own people are starving. The conditions here are extremely harsh and, being white, you represent something to the population: you are a walking dollar bill. One day Ricky told me, 'You're with us, but you'll never be one of us.' They're true bad boys, they drink 'tshweke', smoke 'diamba' and go 'chop-chop' with sexy 'mabata'. But they still sleep on 'tonkara', their cardboard beds. It's pretty easy for us to stay humble."

This spring, the band will leave the Congo for the first time for a European tour. "We will be glad to meet the public," Coco says. "We want to learn from them as they will learn from us."

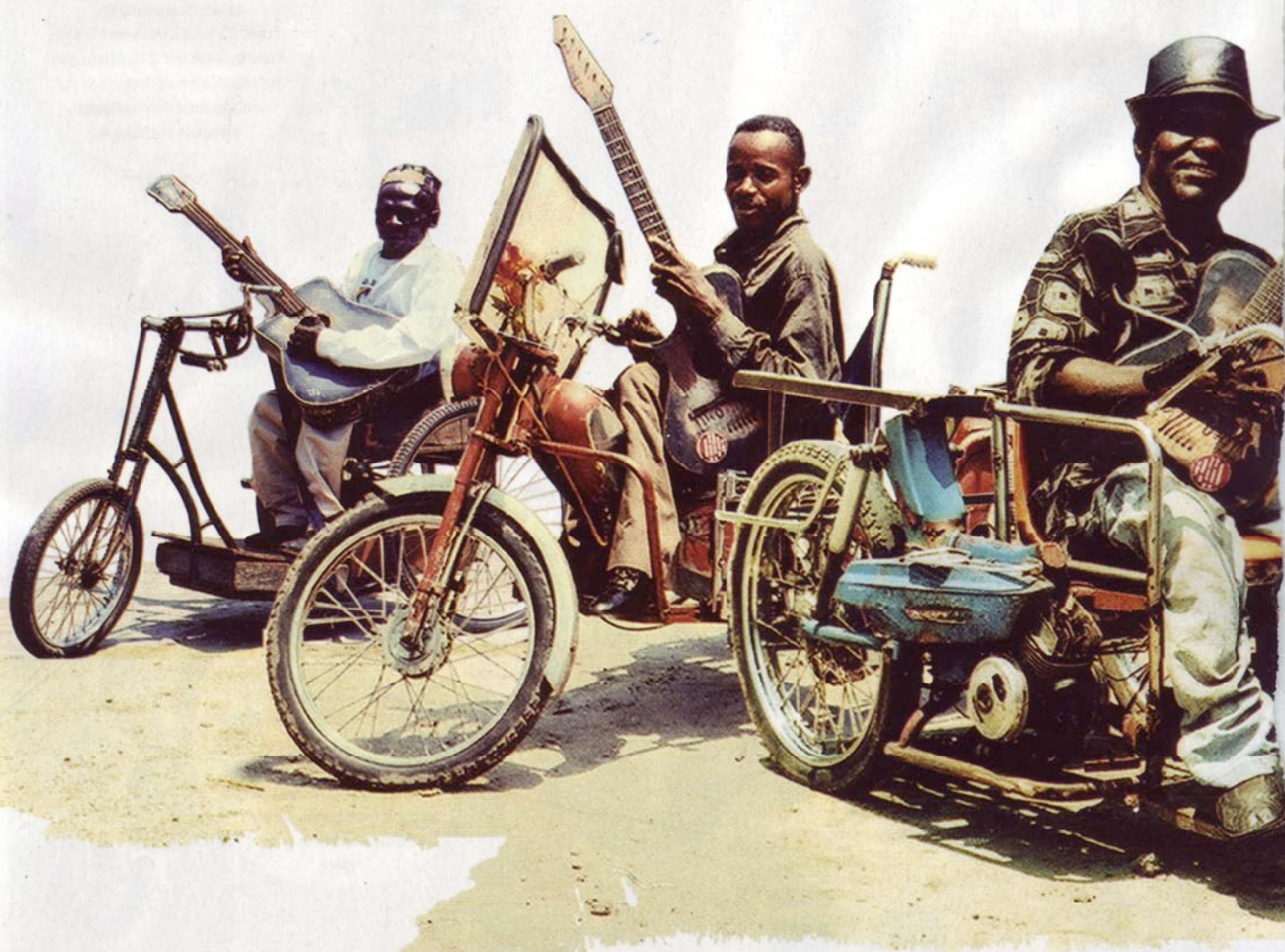
"It'll be exciting to get away," Likabu says. "People know about the bad situation in the Congo, but the music keeps us strong. Whatever we've been through, we make jokes. We insult each other for fun. I'll say, 'Hey you, with the lazy foot!' — just private jokes. The difference is we have confidence now. We know we'll make it." □

Très Très Fort is released on Crammed Discs on March 23

THE SUNDAY TIMES
22nd February 2009
Rob Fitzpatrick

STREET

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



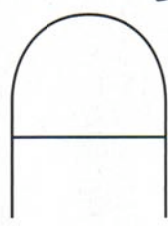
SONGLINES
April / May 2009
Andy Morgan

R 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



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

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

sawdust of an odds-against lifestyle. And riding atop it all was a mellifluous treble 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 subculture. 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.

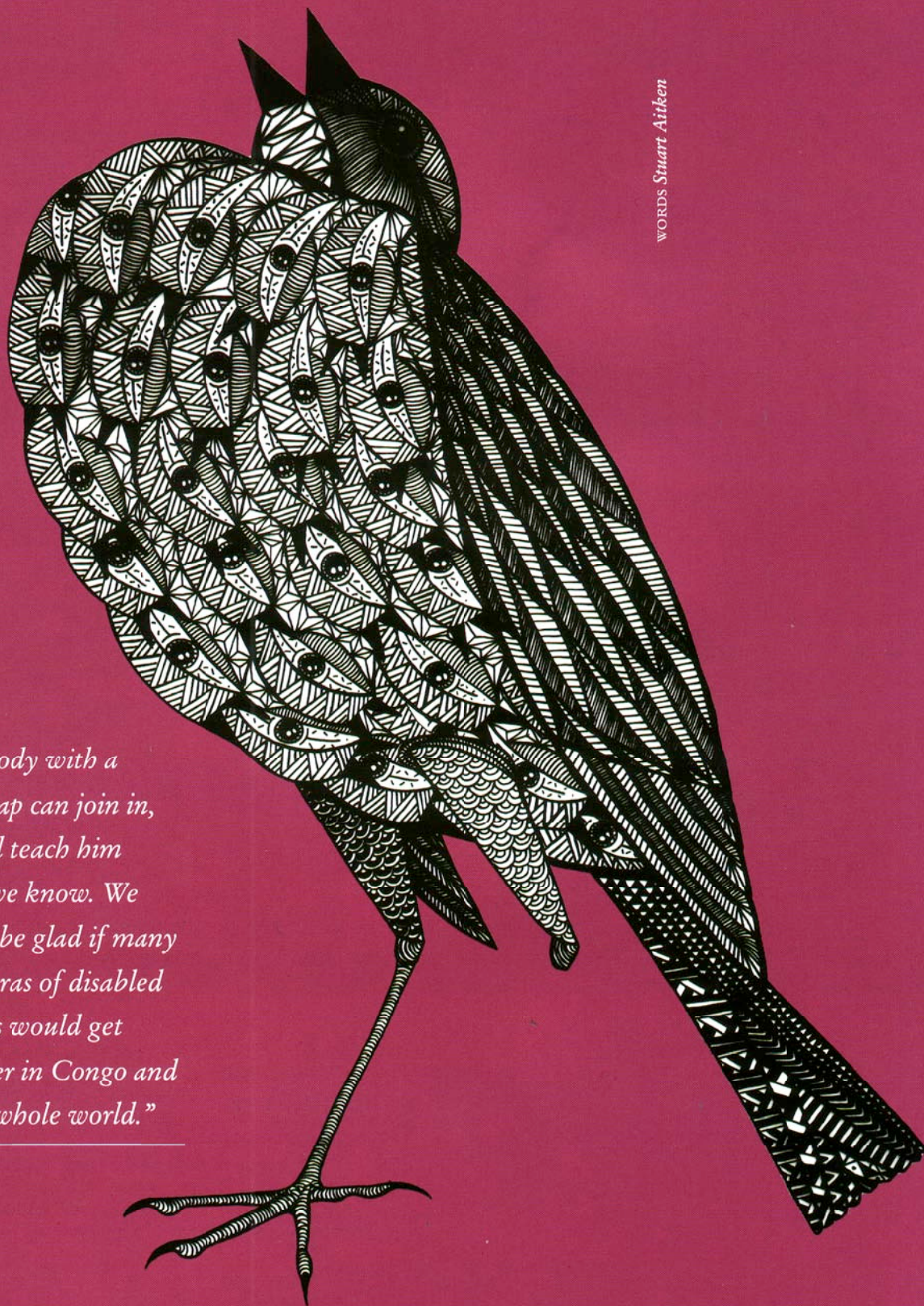
In fact, that's what '*benda bilili*' means in Lingala, the lingua franca of the great Congo river: 'open up your spirit,' 'look deeply,' 'see beyond...' ●

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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• Staff Benda Bilili

WORDS Stuart Aitken

"Anybody with a handicap can join in, we will teach him what we know. We would be glad if many orchestras of disabled persons would get together in Congo and in the whole world."



artwork THE DOGLIVED



STAFF BENDA BILILI IS NOT YOUR AVERAGE BAND. A COLLECTION OF PARAPLEGIC STREET MUSICIANS WHO LIVE IN AND AROUND THE GROUNDS OF THE ZOO IN KINSHASA, CONGO, THE GROUP MAKES MUSIC FROM A SELECTION OF HOMEMADE INSTRUMENTS.

OK *It's the beginning of a new year.*
What to listen to? Well, according to most music magazines, you have a choice – you can listen to any one of hundreds of artists who will be attempting to create a credible pastiche of 80s synthetiser

pop. Maybe this is not a bad thing. Synth pop had some great moments after all. However, there is another way. If you want to listen to something totally different this year then maybe Staff Benda Bilili is for you.

Staff Benda Bilili is not your average band. A collection of paraplegic street musicians who live in and around the grounds of the zoo in Kinshasa, Congo, the group makes music from a selection of homemade instruments. Their album *Tres Tres Fort* is the latest in the Congotronics series, released by Belgium's Crammed Discs. Following highly acclaimed releases from *Konono No.1* and *Kasai All Stars*, Staff Benda Bilili's music contains traces of funk, blues, reggae and rumba. However,

while it may be possible to trace the music's sonic antecedents, there is still something utterly unique about this album. The band's spirit in the face of adversity is one of the things that sets them apart – and also makes them perhaps the most likely of the three Congotronics acts to cross over to mainstream western success. Indeed, with a documentary already being made about the band, there is even the possibility that they could become Africa's answer to the Buena Vista Social Club.

While they seem set to become household names, given their current circumstances, it's not exactly easy to set up an interview with Staff Benda Bilili. After much negotiation, my questions are



forwarded to 55-year-old band leader Ricky Likabu, a tough guy of his Kinshasa neighbourhood who still sells cigarettes and alcohol outside nightclubs straight from his tricycle. Ricky, who sleeps in a cardboard box in the street, tells me that the band was formed in 2003 when a group of friends in the "import-export" business used to get together and sing as the ferry carried them between Kinshasa and Brazzaville on the other side of the Congo River. "It gradually became a permanent occupation," says Ricky. "Then to make it a complete group I recruited other musicians and street kids."

One of these street kids is 17-year-old Roger who was adopted by Ricky many years ago. He created his own instrument, which he calls a satongé – a one-string guitar consisting of a length of electrical wire attached to a small wooden bow inserted in a dried milk can. The unique sound of Roger's satongé is a key feature throughout the album, his virtuoso playing even more surprising given the simplicity of the instrument.

Community is crucial for Ricky. "We see ourselves like a musical school," he says. "Anybody with a handicap can join in, we will teach him what we know. We would be glad if many orchestras of disabled persons would get together in Congo and in the whole world." This is the driving force to the sense of joy that underpins Staff Benda Bilili's music. "We want to give pleasure to those who are sad, whether they are disabled or valid," says Ricky. "But our first goal is to encourage other people living with a handicap. For example, we dance not only for our pleasure but also to tell them that even they can dance too, they don't have to be ashamed."

The western experience of the Congo is filtered through Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and sporadic reportage on the ongoing war tearing at the heart of the country. Ricky does not believe, however, that it is his place to sing about the troubles of the Congo as a whole; he can only sing about his own experience. "War is happening 1500km away from Kinshasa," he says. "We don't want to talk about it because there is very little direct information about it coming here. We'd rather talk about the personal problems of people we know."

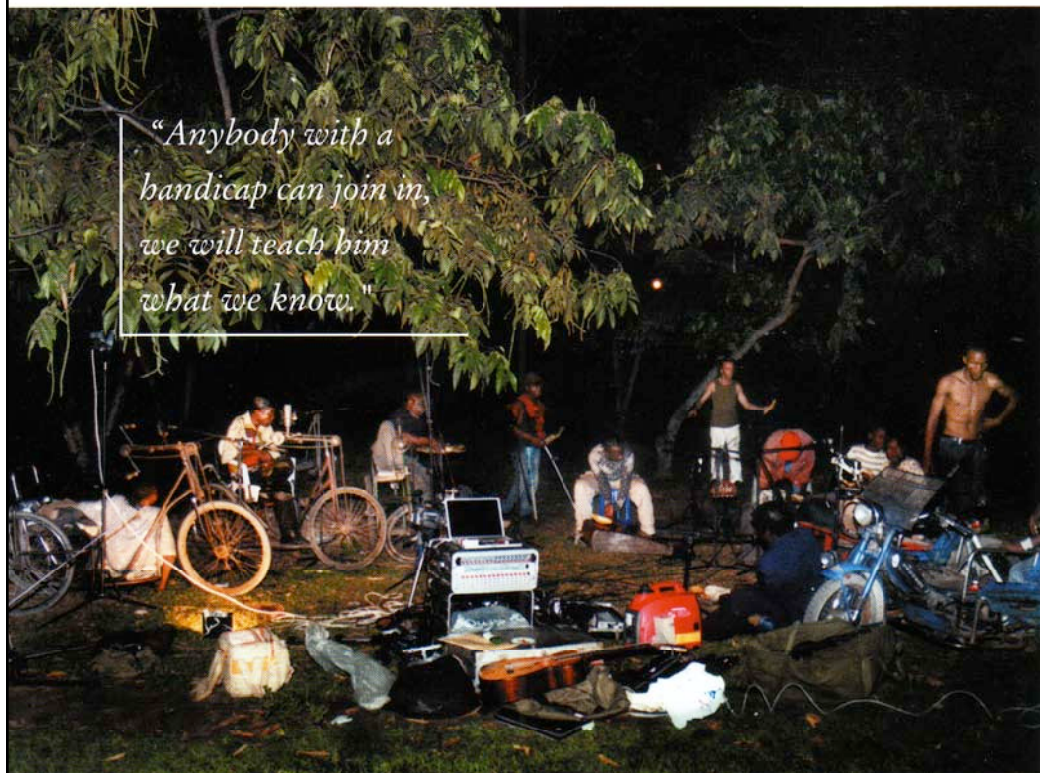
Kinshasa may be a long way from the heart of Congo's troubles, but it is not the best place for an aspiring band to be located. As a result, bringing the sound of Staff Benda Bilili to the rest of the world has not been an easy journey. Vincent Kenis, who produced all the albums in the Congotronics series, is well used to the logistical challenges of producing a band from Kinshasa. Alongside issues such as the lack of real recording studios, constant power shortages and transport difficulties, Kenis explains that there were

some unique issues to deal with when it came to Staff Benda Bilili. "Another challenge was to record the drums, which consist of a plastic armchair," says Kenis. And of course Roger's satongé was not exactly easy to deal with. "The electrification of Roger's instrument and his initiation to effect pedals were fascinating experiences."

Bringing the band to a western audience is no easy feat for Crammed label boss Marc Hollander either. "We've been hampered terribly by the difficulties in obtaining passports and visas for the musicians," explains Hollander. "This is partly due to the situation in the Congo, but mostly to the unwelcoming and not very coherent attitude of the authorities in various European countries." As a result, the band was forced to cancel its first scheduled trip to Europe last October when they were due to play in London at one of Damon Albarn's Africa Express events.

While Hollander is hopeful that the red tape will be sorted out to allow Staff Benda Bilili to join Konono No 1 and Kasai All Stars at events throughout Europe this year, audiences will have to make do with Tres Tres Fort for now. So, as you plough through the music press wondering which "new Joy Division" to spend your money on next, spare a thought for Staff Benda Bilili. •

Tres Tres Fort is out on Crammed on 23 March. A feature film about Staff Benda Bilili is due to be released later this year. For more info see www.crammed.be.



*"Anybody with a
handicap can join in,
we will teach him
what we know."*

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Staff Benda Bilili: Barbican, review

'Staff Benda Bilili' at the Barbican was a strange and strangulated evening.

By [Tom Horan](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/tomhoran/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/tomhoran/>)

Published: 3:58PM GMT 13 Nov 2009

Staff Benda Bilili

Barbican

In world-music circles, this eight-piece from the Congo are the most talked about band of the year. But then there aren't many acts who met while living rough in Kinshasa zoo and are composed predominantly of middle-aged polio victims in wheelchairs. Not many either whose key instrument is made out of a single electric wire, half a fish basket and an empty tin of milk powder.



But there is much more to Staff Benda Bilili than their unusual provenance. Their award-winning debut album, *Très Très Fort*, released by the excellent Brussels label Crammed Discs, is a thing of distinct beauty, a collection of songs that mixes joy and lamentation in equal measure, all set to a rumba rhythm track that has the intense but ramshackle flavour of music forged in abject poverty.

So their first ever British appearance boded well – yet this was a strange and strangulated evening. The band's name in the Congolese language Lingala means “look beyond appearances”, but initially the Barbican main hall found it hard to do so. In print, the tales of the musicians zooming round the zoo on customised trikes had a certain novelty. But, viewed up close in wheelchairs and on crutches, the withered bodies of the band produced in the crowd that tangible sense of not knowing how to behave that people often feel around disability.

Add to this the tendency to post-colonial guilt and hand-wringing that surrounds the world-music scene, much old-fashioned British reserve, and the fact that the fellas don't have a word of English between them, and you had the recipe for a general atmosphere of emotional constipation.

Staff Benda, meanwhile, were having a riot. There were eight players and eight hats: two stetsons, two beanies, one

pork pie, one bandana, a Trotsky and two flat caps. The home-made instrument was much in evidence, a one-stringer called a satonge, invented and played by 17-year-old Roger Landu. He had the bandana on, and fancied himself as a bit of a guitar hero – the Eddie Van Halen of the milk-powder tin.

Slowly they defrosted the room. Every good band needs a Bez figure, and Staff Benda's was the man on crutches, Kadosse Kabama. When singer Djunana Tanga got out of his wheelchair and started breakdancing with him a huge cheer went up. They built their mixture of Latin and African rhythms up to a feverish level, until at last the whole room was on its feet.

What a shame they had to wait until the very last song.

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Staff Benda Bilili**Très Très Fort** (Crammed) £12.72

Here's a raw slice of African street life from a group who live it. Disabled by polio and confined to customised tricycles, the members

of this Congolese troupe sleep rough and spend their days playing inside Kinshasa Zoo. Their sound is steeped in the lilting vocal traditions of Congo's soukous, by turns mournful and exuberant, backed by loping guitars and rudimentary percussion, while a one-string "guitar" (a tin can job) also zings zanily through the mix (try "Mwana"). It's a haunting album, extended by four well-judged film clips; the live performance of "Polio" ("Parents, save your babies from that curse") has pathos and fortitude. **NEIL SPENCER**

THE OBSERVER

March 22nd 2009

Neil Spencer

STAFF BENDA BILILI

★★★

Très Très Fort

Crammed World CRAW51



Survivors in the human maelstrom that is Kinshasa, these musicians belong to a cadre of disabled performers who hustle a precarious living on the streets. That they have managed to make an album at all is little short of miraculous, and if the results don't quite live up to all the hype about a new Buena Vista Social Club, there's still much to enjoy in the defiantly unselfconscious collision of styles, from Congolese pop to James Brown funk and edgy reggae riffs straight from downtown Kingston. The guitar-driven music forms a running commentary on the daily existence of people whose idea of upward mobility is finding a mattress to sleep on. Bonus videos add no end of atmosphere. **CD**

THE SUNDAY TIMES

29th March 2009

Clive Davis



Staff Benda Bilili

Très Très Fort

Crammed

★★★★★

Staff Benda Bilili are composed of a mixture of street children and paraplegics, based at Kinshasa Zoo. Reggae, funk and rumba are all in the mix somewhere. The older members of the group perform from improvised tricycles, singing and playing guitar. At the top end of the sound is a satongé, a one-string lute made from electrical wire and a powdered milk can: half musical saw, half rubber band, it nags and flutters over the pounding percussion. In full flight they are sound as if they will never stop.

THE FINANCIAL TIMES

21st March 2009

David Honigmann

World CD**Staff Benda Bilili: Tres Tres Fort**

(Crammed) £12.72

This remarkable band of paraplegic musicians live in the zoological gardens of Kinshasa, and were recorded on location by the



producer Vincent Kenis. Traffic and a local frog chorus provide subliminal percussion, which stokes the album's atmospheric intensity. Heart-tugging melodies ride on sweetly ragged vocal harmonies; the rhythm section and guitar work sway between rumba, soul, funk and blues. Extraordinary story, extraordinary music. ★★★★★

Tim Cumming

THE INDEPENDENT
21st March 2009
Tim Cumming



THE DAILY TELEGRAPH
March 28th 2009
Mark Hudson



Staff Benda Bilili
Très Très Fort



Even if the world were overrun with albums that were recorded by paraplegic street musicians beside a Congolese zoo using a MacBook and a mains cable “fraudulously” connected to a nearby bar, it’s hard to imagine any that would outcharm *Très Très Fort*. The funkier interludes exude irresistible physicality, whilst a cluster of lovelorn laments lacerate the heartstrings. **PP**
(Crammed, TS £12.72)

Download these tracks

Je T’Aime, Tonkara



THE TIMES
21st March 2009
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WORLD

STAFF BENDA BILILI

Très Très Fort (Crammed Discs)

★★★★★



AS paraplegic musicians in hand-cranked wheelchairs on the streets of Kinshasa, Staff Benda Bilili have an incredible story. Their name translates as “look beyond appearances” and that’s where their music comes in. With a rumba groove, rattling multi-layered percussion and the sound of a recycled tin-can going spacey solos, the music is fantastic. The creativity and skill in adverse circumstances are a metaphor for Africa. The warm vocals, led by Ricky Likabu, who sells cigarettes and liquor outside nightclubs, also have a message. Africa belongs to the Africans, says the opener, Moto Moindo. This is an essential purchase.

SIMON BROUGHTON

THE EVENING STANDARD

20th March 2009

Simon Broughton

Staff Benda Bilili

Brighton Dome



Staff Benda Bilili's story makes them sound like something Richard Littlejohn invented to work his readership into a fury about arts funding: severely disabled African musicians and street children, discovered living in poverty in Kinshasa performing songs about the polio that afflicted them, and about life on the streets using, among other things, an instrument made out of rubbish.

But, as tonight's show proves, Staff Benda Bilili would be a remarkable band regardless of their background. Not only do they sound incredible, they exude an inscrutable cool: four middle-aged men in wheelchairs and one man on crutches perform startling, precarious dance moves, while another able-bodied band member drops to his knees in a manner even Jimi Hendrix might have considered showy and florid, performing squealing solos on an empty can with a piece of wire stretched across it (a satonge, apparently).

Pitched somewhere between reggae, old-fashioned R&B and the African variant of rumba called soukous, their music is explosively funky and vibrant - Je T'aime even quotes James Brown's Sex Machine - and lent an extra edge by that satonge, which howls over the vocalists' rough-edged harmonies. Almost every song builds to a panicked urgency, at which point the guy on the crutches, Kabamba Kabose Kasungu, unleashes something between a rap and a foam-mouthed rant.

The audience (which presumably thought it knew what to expect) looks a bit stunned at first, but then begins to dance. On stage, one of the singers, Djunana Tanga-Suele,



Stunning ... Staff Benda Bilili

who doesn't appear to have any legs, suddenly drags himself out of his wheelchair and does something between a breakdancer's headspin and a forward roll. Then he grabs the microphone and begins chanting "Yes! Yes!", a delighted grin splitting his face. In the crowd, jaws drop, as well they should in the presence of such an extraordinary band.

Alexis Petridis

At RNCM, Manchester, tomorrow.

Box office: 0161-907 5555. Then touring.

THE GUARDIAN

13th November 2009

Alexis Petridis

Staff Benda Bilili

Très Très Fort



(Crammed Discs) £12.72

This is one of the most extraordinary albums of the year - a gloriously uplifting set from surely the most disadvantaged musicians on the planet. Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is a rough city, and life is all the harsher for those who are disabled or homeless. Staff Benda Bilili are a group of polio victims and abandoned children who live in or around the grounds of the Kinshasa zoo, and have eked out a living performing on the streets. Their songs are lyrical, thoughtful, remarkably cheerful and occasionally startling, thanks to the virtuoso solos performed by 17-year-old Roger Landu on an instrument he built himself from a tin can, a piece of wood and one guitar string. His wailing, edgy playing is matched against the soulful vocals and guitar work of the children, who perform from customised tricycles. They are influenced by the classic rumba of the Congolese guitar hero Franco and by the funk of James Brown. These young people deserve to become celebrities - and that could happen. Film-makers Florent de la Tullaye and Renaud Barret are working on a film about the band, and there are plans to bring them to Europe in the next few months. So let's hope they are granted the visas denied to several other Congolese musicians. **Robin Denselow**

THE GUARDIAN

20th March 2009

Robin Denselow



**Staff Benda Bilili: Tres Tres
Fort** Crammed Discs ★★★★★

The eight-piece collective Staff Benda Bilili comprises multi-instrumental and multi-generational artists who also happen to be paraplegic street musicians based in the Congo capital, Kinshasa. Like fellow Congolese musicians Konono N°1, this outfit play on instruments crafted from recycled scrap; teenage performer Roger Landu overlays tracks with twanging riffs from a 'lute' he fashioned from a tin can. Unlike Konono N°1, Staff Benda Bilili specialise in snappy melodies, flowing from the James Brown-inspired funk of Je T'aime to the vivacious reggae of Sala Mosala, with Congolese rumba rhythms added to the blend. The sleeve notes translations are invaluable, as these witty tunes relate everyday struggles; the track Polio exhorts parents to vaccinate and educate their offspring, while Marguerite laments family separation across phone networks. This is real street music that resounds with a lust for life.

AH

METRO

30th March 2009

Arwa Haider

WORLD

BY DAVID HUTCHEON




Staff Benda Bilili

★★★★★

Très Très Fort

CRAMMED DISCS

First came Konono No.1, but this is the one: the funkiest, grittiest sound yet out of Congo.



POLIO-SUFFERERS, paraplegics and street kids who live around Kinshasa zoo, Staff Benda Bilili are the latest find from the Crammed team who uncovered the Congotronics series. Already a YouTube hit, the group has an incredible back-story, but as their debut recordings explode from your speakers you'll realise the last thing they want is your sympathy. Though the rhythm section pumps out an awesome rumba-funk (with a bit of reggae thrown in, particularly on Sala Mosala), it's the one-note solos of Roger Landu, a teenager who built a monochord guitar with some wire and a milk can, that will blow you away. On Je T'Aime, they deconstruct James Brown's Sex Machine; on Avramandole they set up a groove so fast even The JB's would have balked. There may be better albums this year, but this is one you'll want to tell all your friends about.

MOJO
June 2009
David Hutcheon