

BENDA BILILI!





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SOPHIE DULAC DISTRIBUTION

Screnrunner, La Belle Kinoise & STUDIO 37 present

BENDA BILILI!

A film by Renaud Barret & Florent de La Tullaye



QUINZAINÉ
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2010
OPENING FILM

France - 1:85 - Dolby SRD - 1h24

SYNOPSIS

Ricky has a dream: to make Staff Benda Bilili the best band in Congo Kinshasa. Roger, a street child, more than ever wants to join these stars of the ghetto, who get around in customized tricycles.

Together, they must avoid the pitfalls of the street, stay united and find the force to hope in music.

For five years, from the first rehearsals to their triumph in international festivals, Benda Bilili ! (“beyond appearances”) is the story of this dream come reality.





When the disc “Très très fort “ came out in March 2009, the news spread like wildfire. A group of musicians composed of four paraplegics and three “abled” men, living in the streets of Kinshasa, had created with homemade

DIRECTORS STATEMENT

instruments music like none other. Reporters came from all around to see for themselves and interview the band. What they saw and heard astounded them and the buzz grew stronger. Then, in 2009, a European concert tour gave body to the legend of the Staff Benda Bilili.

The story began in 2004, on the devastated streets of Kinshasa. From the start, Coco Yakala, singer and guitar player in the band, perched on his customized tricycle, set the tone : “One day we will be the most famous disabled men in all of Africa.” Five years later, the same Coco Yakala, braced on his guitar, was singing “It’s never too late in life...” in front of an astonished audience of a renowned French music festival. The miracle had taken place. Marginal outcasts had forced the hand of fate.

The origins of a legend always hide a dark side. Our luck as directors, was to be able to film, from the inside, the chaotic epic of a street band pursuing its dream in one of the most wounded cities of Africa. The film paints with impressionistic strokes portraits of these extraordinary musicians fighting in unimaginable conditions. Ricky, Coco, Roger, and Théo are true “forces of nature” transformed by a will as strong as steel. This crazed will to succeed and refusal to give up

would allow the group to keep their goal and remain united in the midst of indescribable urban chaos. The narrative also relies on the close relationship that unites the leader Ricky to a street kid, a genuine musical genius, whom he takes in and teaches to play on stage.

The street is the very Darwinian world of the Staff Benda Bilili. That is where they work, sleep, eat, raise their children, create their songs, and rehearse all night in front of abandoned kids to whom they have become honorary “papas.” This is the heartbeat of the film. The Staff Benda Bilili, crooners with scruffy velvet voices, can’t be disassociated from this environment, nor from

the situation in the Congo. Their struggle, their mad hope, is that of an entire population that sleeps with them in cardboard boxes: street kids, big-hearted thieves, one-dollar hookers, war refugees, the disabled forced to beg for a living... A forgotten humanity, yet still full of resource and humour, who are held hostage by the political powers that be and for whom the music of the Staff Benda Bilili is like a marvelous, soothing balm.

Benda Bilili! is not a musical film. It is a film about marginal outcasts who defy a system that defines them as such. The songs are only complementary to the narrative. Every problem encountered by the Staff Benda Bilili gives rise to a song that they can test on street people in real time. The film is set in emblematic sites. The

Sonass traffic roundabout in the center of Kinshasa. A genuine “court of miracles” like a wart in the heart of the financial district. Here is the headquarters of the Staff Benda Bilili, Ricky’s shop, the band’s leader, is summarily implan-



ted there. This sidewalk corner is a true crossroads of broken destinies. A parliament of the starved and dying. The Kinshasa zoo, a wasteland garden, littered with decaying cages haunted by emaciated animals. It is a world apart. Populated by shégués (street kids), military dealers, hoods and thugs of all kinds. In this deafening and asphyxiating city, it is the only place of relative calm. It is a place of truce that acts like a sedative on the more violent aspects of the city and evokes a lost paradise for the Congolese. The Staff Benda Bilili rehearses and even recorded parts of their album there.

You also see the city streets, sites of transition, the wandering of the Staff, its "migration." An ever moving and dangerous physical environment, full of spikes and pitfalls. Visually, it is the ultimate expression of elitist corruption. Vertiginous holes right in the middle of the roadways, lakes of rancid water, crevices that create monstrous traffic jams. The calm determination of our heroes and the hypnotic clicking of their tricycles contrasts with the din of the overcharged megapolis that has no idea where it is headed. As the success of the orchestra grows, the street people get worked up, unite, and regain hope. They acquire the status of spokespersons for all of the disenfranchised.

From the seedy sidewalks of Kinshasa to the hype clubs of Copenhagen, the limping odyssey of the Benda Bilili overthrows the clichés regarding handicaps and misery and keeps us questioning our own limits and our ability to bounce back.

Renaud Barret & Florent de la Tullaye

Kinshasa

Former Léopoldville until 1966, is the capital and the largest city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Located on the south bank of the river Congo at the level of Pool Malebo, it faces the capital of the Republic of the Congo, Brazzaville. The city-county is the most populated in the nation with 10,076,099 inhabitants. 11,446,711 including the agglomeration Kinshasa-Brazzaville. It is also the largest Sub-Saharan city in Africa, and the second Sub-Saharan agglomeration behind that of Lagos. It is a multi-ethnic city.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has suffered the worst of hardships over the past forty years : a dictatorship (Mobutu Sese Seko) in the guise of a cultural revolution, a terrible civil war, the polio virus. And endemic poverty : 95% of the population in Kinshasa survives thanks to a parallel economy based on mutual aid and makeshift ways of getting by. Kinshasa is the kingdom of the shégués, tens and thousands of street kids grouped together in gangs and relentlessly pursued by the police. These kids are sometimes killed or deported. They constitute the largest disenfranchised community in the city and are protected by the disabled. The musicians of the Staff Benda Bilili are the forever-watching conscience of Kin-the-beautiful which, in local parlance, has become known as Kin-the-trashcan.



PORTRAITS

Ricky

The elder and the soul of the band with a beautiful melancholic voice.

Ricky brought together the musicians of the Staff and his contagious energy and innate sense of making-do keep the band alive no matter what. At the exits of nightclubs for expatriates, he sells cigarettes and aniseed liquor from his customized tricycle. By day, he's also a clothes designer and mechanic. He basically never sleeps. Ricky loves women. He has two "regular" spouses, one of whom is able-bodied, and supports five children. He takes particular care of his appearance: tweed hat, black glasses, shimmering shirts: "In life man must be suka (meaning in Lingala, looking sharp)." His dream, once he has earned enough money to send his children to school, is to found an NGO for street musicians, disabled and abled.

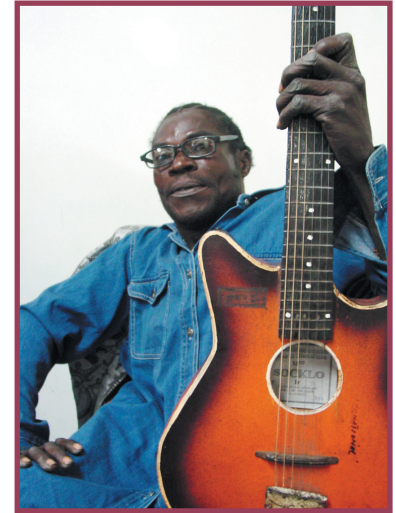


Coco

Everybody in Kinshasa knows his customized scooter. A singer with a lovely cracking voice and a virtuoso guitar player, he is the Staff composer and founding member alongside Ricky. He is also a metal worker and welder. Father of seven children, he is married to an able-bodied woman who lives in a solid house on the outskirts of Kinshasa. He goes home only at the end of the week after having earned enough money to take care of the family. He can only afford to pay for one tuition, so his children take turns and go to school one day a week. He is an enlightened observer of the ways of the streets which is his greatest source of inspiration. He is a wise and reserved man with impressive physical strength. He regularly wins arm wrestling contests staged between neighborhoods. As he often says, "Music, that's all I got, it takes care of me very well."

Junana

He's the official Staff choreographer. He is also the one most stricken by polio, a shattered body, truly a test model for Western medicine. Nevertheless, he knows how to do everything with his hands: he makes guitars, tricycles for other disabled people, repairs TV sets and radios. He lived through hell, was abandoned, taken in by the church, and has been tossed around to suffer failed operations and visit makeshift dispensaries. But he has never stopped dancing and singing. His presence throughout the film is discreet, but his unfailing good humor, which he often expresses through his dance, proves that he is a true survivor of life on the streets.





Roger Landu

Roger is a child who was picked up at the age of 13 and looked after by Ricky. He's a musical genius. He's a kid "in" the streets, not "of" the streets, meaning that he doesn't attend school and must help his family with the fruits of his labour. He is the main character in the film. Roger made his own instrument, the satongé, a one-string guitar with a wooden bow stuck into a tin can and held together at both ends by a single metal wire. It's an instrument very complicated to handle from which Roger emits hallucinating sounds. He has earned the admiration of all of the guitar players in the city. Until he met the musicians of the Staff, he lived the daily life of the Kinshasa shégués: running around, drugs, violence...

But Roger never fell into delinquency thanks to his passion for music. With the Staff Benda Bilili, Roger found a family, protection, and the opportunity to practice his art. Over time, he has earned the status of a full-fledged artist.

Théo Coude

Bass player and soprano singer. Fan of James Brown and Bob Marley. He collaborates with many Kinshasa rappers. He was born in a relatively well-to-do family close to those in power. But at the fall of dictator Mobutu, his family lost everything. He found himself on the street with his abled brothers and sisters.

Théo is a clothes designer but especially a highly appreciated electrician in the ghetto. In a city where the electricity is regularly cut off in poor neighbourhoods, he knows how to pull lines to give current to whole streets Théo is an incorrigible gambler. He always has gambling debts. This is a constant source of contention with Ricky. Tired of earning no money with the band, he left for a moment. Ricky went around to get him when the concert tour was announced.



Randi

Randi is a shégué, a percussionist with a unique instinctive touch. He is a child of the streets with a tormented fate. An orphan of both father and mother, he found himself on the street at the age of five. He has seen and known it all. From the day the Staff took him in and fed him, Randi could spend his time on percussion instruments and dancing. Still, during the day, he shined shoes in the administrative district. His hunger to lead a better life and his innate rhythmic genius made him a valuable recruit for the Staff Benda Bilili. He participated in parts of the recording of the album, then disappeared mysteriously in 2007.

INTERVIEW RENAUD BARRET & FLORENT DE LA TULLAYE

How did your film come into being ?

Renaud Barret In 2004, I was directing a small advertizing agency in Paris and Florent was an international photojournalist. But we were both sick of what we were doing. We went to Kinshasa and, through encounters and people we met, we made a television documentary called *La danse de Jupiter* (Jupiter's Dance), a long walk through the ghetto with musicians. It was during that time, in that energy, that we met the Staff Benda Bilili. We quickly decided to make an album with this incredible group, all the while filming them. In fact, we became producers because they told us that's what we were! We stayed with them for a long time, often under the impression that their story was closely tied to ours. They always motivated us, even during the worst moments. In 2007, we decided to make a film about the band, thinking that we would stop after recording the album. Then concerts became a possibility in Europe and we decided to carry on with what little means we had.

Florent de la Tullaye Benda Bilili ! is our first feature-length film for the cinema, but it's our third film on Kinshasa and we're developing a fourth, thus developing a real insight into the workings of the city. We live with the characters we film, that's what interests us. We work with lightweight cameras which allow us to work like photojournalists and always be ready when something is happening.

RB In any case, we couldn't work with a conventional crew. Little by little, we've learned to speak Lingala, the official language of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which allows us to enter into a different kind of relationship with the people. We have become experts on Kinshasa and we believe that its people have suffered misrepresentation because of the endless clichés exploited by foreign television. That creates a certain anger among the population which one can tolerate as white people if you stay on the surface of things. We prefer seeking out the good and beautiful. Our luck lies in the fact that we work with musicians and it's thanks to them that people in the ghetto welcomed us with open arms. Kinshasa is a broken, shattered city, yet still very photogenic. Its people are Don Quixotes who are forever making up dreams. The Staff Benda Bilili made itself a dream and it is now coming true.

How did you meet them ?

RB A chance encounter during one of our many wanderings. We'd been hearing about them for a while, like a gang hard to localize. One night they were playing in front of a restaurant frequented by whites and the local brass. Their music immediately attracted us, with hints of Elmore James blues. The Staff knew us by reputation because we had spent a lot of time immersed, like total crazies, filming other Kinshasa bands.

FT The next day after meeting them, we started filming. Renaud was behind Coco and to our bad luck he passed by the General Intelligence building with his camera. Police officers showed up on all sides and the Staff's reaction was violent. Coco even started to make a charge on the station in his wheelchair! That first day created a very strong tie between us. We helped each other out. The following year, we came back to Kinshasa with a bit of money to produce an album. After three days in the studio, a fire devastated the housing center where several members of the Staff were sleeping. The recording had to be interrupted because it had little connection with reality, they had nothing left at all. They were terribly upset because the fire came at the very moment they were fulfilling their dream. They had to stop sessions to find money and carry on living as best they could. In 2006, we returned to Kinshasa to make *Victoire Terminus* (Victory Terminus), a documentary on female boxers, and continued filming and helping the Staff. At the end of 2006, toward the end of our stay, Vincent Kenis (producer of the series



Congotronics for the Belgian label Crammed Discs) came to record the Staff in the Kinshasa Zoological Park. And we came back in 2007 with enough money to take care of the musicians during the recording sessions. Their lives on the street were literally eating them alive. It's an endless war. The public roads are abandoned and it's very hard for the disabled to get around. They're real supermen.

When did Roger, the little satongé player, show up ?

RB We'd already seen him in 2004 at a rural center where he'd come to get food. He played his curious instrument and we wanted to talk to him but he disappeared before we met him again by chance in 2005. We told him to go



see the Benda Bilili which he joined after an audition that blew everybody's mind. Roger was a shégué, a kid living on the streets. Kinshasa has a population of around 10 million. It's a devouring city in which families live on less than a dollar a month and where, most often, children don't attend school. A lot of people are forced to put their kids on the streets because they can't take care of them. Some decide to leave on their own because there's nothing to eat at home and others are war orphans. The population of shégués is estimated at 100,000. They shine shoes or sell cigarettes on the outskirts of Kinshasa and return home on weekends with their paltry earnings to feed their family. The government deports them to Eastern Congo or forces them to join the military. This situation is a bomb waiting to explode because the kids who receive no help sometimes become violent and join street gangs. The members of the Staff Benda Bilili are kind of like their papas, especially Ricky.

FT The Staff Benda Bilili is a street syndicate that makes the law. They are highly organized because they need to stay tight to exist. They organize mutual aid. They need the children to get around and the kids need the disabled to defend themselves, so this creates a small society consisting of papas and adopted children.

What do the songs of the Staff Benda Bilili talk about ?

RB They're an expression of the streets, primal and melancholic chant mixed with funk. The lyrics are simple in appearance but they pass on influential educational messages to a largely illiterate population. Lingala is a rather poor language, so many of the meanings are hidden. The songs appear to be harmless, but in fact they show real force, humor, and a straightforward look at daily life in Kinshasa. For a long time we've been fans of Black music of many kinds, from funk to soul, and this city attracted us because of the rhythm, wealth, and vitality of the music scene. Today our goal is to help musicians we've met and filmed to record their albums and lead better lives.

FT While the Staff is a group of handicapped musicians, struck at an early age by polio, from the start they were gifted musicians who played in other groups. But they always showed up late, because time in Kinshasa is very elastic! So they decided to play together. The recording conditions of their album were very complicated and it took us four years to finish. Same for the film: we played our time, waiting for things to take off for the Staff so that they could leave Kinshasa for a few concerts. The first big break was their show at the Belfort Eurockéennes in July 2009, one of the biggest music fes-

tivals in France. It's really moving to share this adventure with the Benda Bilili, especially thinking back a few years when they told us, "With you, we're going to make it!" The festival also allowed us to hear their music on good equipment for the first time and to realize their force on stage.

RB We followed the 2009 tour, which went all the way to Scandinavia. We found ourselves in a 5-star hotel in Oslo, whereas not so long ago we were sharing cardboard boxes on the outskirts of Kinshasa. But when it comes down to it, the Benda Bilili don't give a damn about where they are, even though they can be surprised by the conditions of life in Europe (and the existence of highways!). For them, success was never a matter of doubt. It's normal, especially after such a life of hardship. Most of the musicians are mature and therefore remain clearheaded. They create small businesses with their families. Roger, who is soon to become a dad, for example, founded a video supply company that brings in a regular income for his family..

How did the group react to your film being selected to screen at the Cannes Film Festival ?

FT They raised their canes at us and laughed! They were delighted for us. With earnings from the film, they want to found an organization and build a place to teach young musicians and pursue the Staff Benda Bilili adventure. Most of the members in the band have surpassed the average life expectancy of the Congolese, which is 45 years. They are aware that all could come to a stop soon. We want to return with them to Kinshasa to show the film. That's the most important thing on our agenda right now. We're convinced that this will allow the people to discover things they no longer pay attention to.

Interview by Benoît Hické

Ricky

“The film is great ! It allows us to see what we’ve done, without staging it. That how things happen back home, it’s the truth. We laughed a lot when we saw it, even though certain sequences reminded us of difficult moments. But now everything is going good, we all have a home and our life in Kinshasa is calm. And the success of our music allows us to travel and discover all sorts of things: namely highways, beautiful houses in Paris and London, and especially... cold weather!

You know that Staff Benda Bilili, in Lingala, means “beyond appearances.” It’s a message of hope. We want to make the whole world understand that anything is possible if you want it bad enough and are willing to work for it. We’re like reporters. We speak about the realities of Kinshasa. We have to take the film there so that our families discover our journey and realize all of the change that has occurred. We succeeded because we always thought that one day it would come about. I hope this will be an inspiration to all of our people and everybody.”

Ricky



Roger Landu

“At the beginning of the film, I’m little, and you see me growing up with the group. I started playing the satongé in my family. My mother wasn’t very happy about me playing music because in the Congo some think that musicians are part sorcerers. But I wanted to continue and started to sleep outside so I could play when I wanted, all the while continuing to help my family. Living on the streets allowed me to work and become a real musician. It was very rough, I suffered a lot, but maybe without the street, I wouldn’t have amounted to much. The Staff Benda Bilili, they’re my papas and big brothers. Thanks to our success and concert tours, I have my own house and my family lives with me now. But in the end that doesn’t change much. I’m the youngest member of the group and I grew up with the others, so I can’t let them down. When I met Ricky, he told me that someday I’d become the conductor of the Staff Benda Bilili, so I have a lot of responsibility and a lot of work to left to do.”

Roger

It's one of the major success stories of the international music scene Staff Benda Bilili have the public and media alike enthused right from their first album and their first European concerts. While the accolades accumulate, the force, sensitivity, and the stunning beauty of their music, the impulse of the eternal Kinshasa rumba, the swaying grooves of reggae and the wild ones of funk, and the superb voices that resemble the sparkle of the entire continental diaspora (the Havana crooners, the Kingston toasters, the Godfather of Soul himself) vibrates and transcends an audience which doesn't cease to grow bigger by the day. Entitled "Très Très Fort" (Very very strong), Staff Benda Bilili's first album was produced and recorded in Kinshasa by Vincent Kenis for the

Belgian indie label Crammed Discs, which released the album in early 2009. The reception was unanimous: the group was awarded the prestigious Womex Award 2009 (the main annual World Music award, generally the reserve of well established artists) as well as several awards in Britain. Highly anticipated, their first European tour took place in autumn 2009, and created quite a stir: the biggest European media institutions (newspaper dailies, radio and news broadcasters) were allot considerable coverage for Staff Benda Bilili and the album. Today, international festivals are competing to program them and the group will undertake a tour of over 50 concerts all over Europe in June, July and August 2010, before heading off to Japan and starting a big European and US tour in 2011.

SOME INTERNATIONAL KEY DATES 2010

GREECE	June 11th	ATHENES	SPAIN	July 15th	MADRID
SWEDEN	June 15th	STOCKHOLM	UK	July 20th	LONDRES
POLAND	June 17th	POZNAN	SWITZERLAND	July 25th	NYON
NETHERLANDS	June 18th	AMSTERDAM	GERMANY	July 27th	FRANKFURT
BELGIUM	June 26th	BRUXELLES	GERMANY	July 30th	NUREMBERG
UK	June 27th	GLASTONBURY	PORTUGAL	July 31st	SINES
SPAIN	June 29th	GIGONA	GERMANY	August 15th	BERLIN
DENMARK	July 2nd	ROSKILDE	JAPAN	October	
CANADA	July 5th	MONTREAL	JAPAN TOUR	(15 dates)	
SPAIN	July 14th	BARCELONE			

2011

Tours are already scheduled in **NETHERLANDS** (8 dates), **GERMANY** (11 dates), **UK** (7 dates), **ITALY**...



Filmography **Screenrunner**

Benda Billili ! , feature documentary directed by Renaud Barret & Florent de La Tullaye (2010)

Ensemble, nous allons vivre un très, très grande histoire d'amour,
feature film directed by Pascal Thomas (associate producers - 2010)

Kamikaze, feature film directed by Philippe Faucon (shooting)

Would you ?, feature documentary directed by Yolande Zaubermaier (in prep)

Les miens, feature documentary by Hedi Sassi (in prep)

Le fils du king, feature film directed by Estelle Larivaz (writing)

Technical List

Directors	Renaud Barret & Florent de La Tullaye
Production	Screenrunner, Yves Chanvillard et Nadim Cheikhrouha La Belle Kinoise, Florent de la Tullaye et Renaud Barret
Coproduction	O.L. Production (Olivier Laffon), Studio 37
Project Coordination	Emmanuel Saunier
Cinematography/Sound	Renaud Barret & Florent de La Tullaye
Music	Staff Benda Bilili
Editing	Jean-Christophe Hym
Color Grading	Nicolas Perret
Sound Mix	Mikaël Barre
Promotion	Le K - Mathieu Piazza
Music Label	Les Editions de la Bascule, Strictly Confidential, Belle Kinoise, Crammed Discs
International Sales	Funny Balloons / Studio 37
French Distribution	Sophie Dulac Distribution

Artistic list

Script	Renaud Barret et Florent de La Tullaye
Direction	Renaud Barret et Florent de La Tullaye
Music Supervisor	Cubain Kabeya
Band	Staff Benda Bilili : Léon "Ricky" Likabu, Roger Landu, Coco Ngambali Yakala Theo "Coude" Nsituvuidi, Claude Kinunu Montana, Paulin "Cavalier" Kiara-Maigi, Djunana Tanga-Suele, Cubain Kabeya, Makembo Nzalé Zadis Mbulu Nzungu, Waroma "Santu Papa" Abi-Ngoma Kabanba Kabose Kasungu, Maria Barli Djongo



Special thanks to *agnès b.*

Conception graphique Pierre Lefèvre - Photos Christophe MacPherson, Noël Quidu, Renaud Barret, Florent de La Tullaye, Enrico Dagnino, Benoît Musereau

