

world music

‘Each time we dream something happens’

It's been tough, but a chance encounter has taken a band of disabled musicians, Staff Benda Bilili, from the streets of Kinshasa to global acclaim. Jonny Hogg meets them

R

icky Likabu is sitting in the shade of a tattered parasol that leans drunkenly against the wall, just about shading him from Kinshasa's intense morning sun. He sips a beer and shuffles through his papers, searching for something. He pulls out a document with a flourish. It's the delivery note for a second-hand Mercedes. At 60, for the first time in his life, he owns a car.

But like so many things in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the reality is rather different. Likabu's prized possession — bought with the earnings of an album that was released in 2009 and captured the world's imagination — is blocked at the port because he can't afford to pay the import taxes. In fact, of the eight members of the band, Staff Benda Bilili, seven have purchased cars that are now sitting on the docks.

Still, Likabu — known affectionately by all as ‘Papa Ricky’ — remains philosophical. “Before I was living in the streets, but now I own some land. I've bought a house for the first time,” he says. “It'll take time to succeed, but little by little we'll get there,” he adds with one of his trademark smiles.

Considering the remarkable history of Staff Benda Bilili, many would argue that they have already succeeded beyond anyone's wildest imaginings. The group was formed in 2003 by a group of disabled and ‘abled’ men living on the streets of the DRC's chaotic and crumbling capital.

The city is home to more than ten million souls, many of whom eke out a living on less than \$2 a day. It is a hard place, a dangerous place, suffering from chronic crime and sporadic periods of political upheaval. While the elite drive new cars and eat in eye-wateringly expensive restaurants, the vast majority of the population live in a netherworld where the State barely exists and life is a constant struggle. Nonetheless, Kinshasa is famous for its music, which has flourished despite, or perhaps because of, the desperate poverty.

Staff Benda Bilili are an extreme example of success against the odds in a place where tenacity and guile are part of the cultural make-up. In the DRC those with disabilities are the underclass of an underclass, the lowest of the low, often abandoned by their families and forced to crawl on their hands and knees through the tumultuous traffic, begging at car windows.

Until recently, Likabu, Coco Ngambali and the other disabled members of the band lived a hand-to-mouth existence on the streets, making clothes, selling cigarettes or ferrying produce back and forth across the Congo river to Brazzaville, the capital of the neighbouring Republic of the Congo. Their aim when they created Staff Benda Bilili was to become the best band in the DRC and to bring a message of hope to the millions of unfortunates whom they see themselves representing. Perhaps even they, eternal optimists though they are, could not have predicted how far they would come.

Through sheer belief and hard work, coupled with the good fortune of being spotted in 2005 by two young French filmmakers, Florent de la Tullaye and Renaud



STREET SPIRIT Staff Benda Bilili in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. From left to right, Ricky Likabu, Kabose, Djunana, Montana, Theo Nsvuidi, Cavalier, Coco Ngambali and Roger Landu

Barret, Staff's album, *Très Très Fort (Very Very Loud)*, was released in 2009, catapulting the group to relative worldwide fame.

The story of the band, culminating in a triumphant tour of Europe, is the subject of a documentary five years in the making that paints an extraordinary picture of life in one of the most brutal and brutalised cities on Earth.

The film, which received a standing ovation when it opened the Cannes festival last year and is soon to be released in cinemas, was never supposed to exist. Tullaye and Barret stumbled across Staff Benda Bilili playing in the street outside a popular restaurant in Kinshasa. After building up a rapport with the group they decided to help them to make an album, and to chronicle the project.

“First it was the music, second it was the personalities of Ricky and Coco. They knew everything about the street, they gave us access to that world and they protected us,” Tullaye recalls, adding that the first time they had tried to film, the DRC's notorious and shady intelligence services had arrested them and held them until Ligckbu, Ngambali and the others launched an impromptu attack on the police station and demanded their release.

Sobegan a relationship that gave the pair intimate access to the band and the world they lived in.

They play with an infectious enthusiasm, swaying and writhing to the beat in their battered wheelchairs



Nonetheless, it wasn't until two years later, looking at the footage that they had collected, that Tullaye and Barret realised they had the beginnings of the material for a full feature.

In the five years that the pair travelled back and forth from Europe to Africa, they captured every twist and turn of Staff's extraordinary rise to success; their first, hopelessly inept, attempts at recording in a studio; the fire that devastated the shelter where Likabu was living, forcing them to abandon the project; attempts to gather the group back together for one last shot at making a record; and finally the fear and exhilaration as these rough, tough, street-wise characters prepare to leave the DRC for the first time on tour.

Surprisingly, Tullaye says, Staff remain very much unchanged by everything they have experienced. “Musically they've evolved a lot, they've worked hard at it. But Ricky and Coco, they're just the same as when we met them,” he adds.

Meeting Likabu and the group, only a few days before they embark on their latest trip, it is clear that, although they now own houses and have at least a little disposable cash, their links with their old lives remain strong.

Each Sunday, just as they have done for years, the band holds open rehearsals at the Cabaret Sauvage, a scruffy and sweltering room in the rundown commune of Ndjili. There's a family atmosphere among the hard-core fans who have come to listen. But that's very much at the heart of what Staff are all about. Their songs display a breathtaking musical virtuosity, while the lyrics are instructive, warning of the dangers of polio, chronicling life in the streets, even encouraging people to vote in elections.

They play with an infectious enthusiasm, swaying and writhing to the beat in their battered wheelchairs. The audience responds, whooping, hollering and dancing on the dusty concrete floor. The music, Ricky says, is a mixture of Congolese rumba and the blues, but you'll also notice nods to James Brown, reggae and Cuban rhythms. After the rehearsal — a sweaty, energetic half hour in which they whip through some of the songs from *Très Très Fort* — the band decamps to the plastic tables strewn haphazardly in the road outside the cabaret, where they drink beer and swap cigarettes and stories.

One member of the group stands out both on and off stage — and that is Roger Landu. Although he is not disabled, his story is almost the most remarkable of all. A former *shogue* (Kinshasa slang for street kid), he joined Staff at the age of 11 after they heard him playing a single-stringed instrument called a ‘satonge’ that he had designed and built himself out of an old milk can. His journey from lost boy to music maestro playing electrifying solos in front of thousands of fans is a central theme of the documentary.

Landu, now 20 years old, has many of the affectations of a rock star: jazzy clothing, a languid sense of ‘cool’, but Tullaye insists that this young man who grew up experiencing the harsh realities of an itinerant existence on Kinshasa's mean streets remains very much the little boy we meet at the beginning of the film.

“I know Roger very well. The image he projects now is a protection. He's very sensitive, very fragile, Tullaye says.

Ricky believes that it is Landu, with his unique musical talent, who has made the biggest impression on audiences.

“He has the most success in Europe, because of his instrument, which is the only one in the whole world,” he pronounces with a fatherly pride.

But if you speak to Landu, or indeed the other band members, for whom he is like a son, he remains disarmingly grounded.

“We're the children of the street,” he says. “Now our lives have changed. The best thing for us is the work. If we want to buy cars we have to work, if we want to rent a house we have to work. So, really, it's about working.”

Ask Landu whether he could have expected to have come so far, so fast, and he is insistent that he always believed it was possible. “Of course,” he says. “We're optimists!”

Likabu wants to show us the shelter where he lived for seven years. We follow his modified scooter along a dusty track and pull up outside a decrepit building with a carpet of rubbish outside. It used to be a hall where the community could hold parties; now it is home to 57 handicapped families.

Inside, each living area is separated from the others by thin woven reed partitions no more than 6ft high. It is hot and crowded. Children scamper about while women prepare for the evening meal. From one roofless anteroom off the main hall comes the sound of traditional Congolese music. This is Handi-Folk, a group of perhaps 15 disabled people whom Ricky helped by buying them instruments. Now he has bigger plans. Following Staff's success in Europe the Government has given some land over. Likabu is now trying to raise the cash to build on it, providing new and better housing for the families in the shelter. He is determined to leave a legacy.

“I'll work until I fall down and they put me in a tomb,” he says. “It's not just for me. I'm working for the future, for the other handicapped.”

Seeing where Likabu comes from and where many of his friends remain, it is easy to understand the pride that he has in the slightly scruffy one-storey house he now owns. He has visions of expanding but is under no illusion that it will require continued effort. Indeed, one of the strange things about Staff Benda Bilili is that although in Europe their reputation is growing daily — they have now won countless world music and film awards — in the DRC and the rest of Africa they remain relative unknowns. But this is not disheartening for Likabu. It is simply another challenge. Next year he says, they want to make a tour of their home continent.

In the meantime the band is gearing up for more than two months on the road in Europe. Likabu is looking forward to the money, which will enable him to disentangle his car from the clutches of the bureaucracy. He also likes European life; he



says that it's organised, that people get paid to work that and human rights exist. He even enjoys baked beans. He is not, on the other hand, much looking forward to the cold and has no plans to leave the DRC permanently. “I can live anywhere in this country,” he says. “This is my home.”

While we're talking, Likabu's mobile phone rings. He spends a couple of minutes gesticulating wildly and talking in Lingala.

It turns out that it's Landu, ringing to check that they are leaving on March 8. “No, we're leaving on the third,” Likabu replies. “If you leave on the eighth of March we'll already be in Europe!” He shakes his head with a fond smile: “Roger really is like my own child,” he explains.

So, what next, for this band that has come so far? Well, they want to keep growing. Bigger even than Michael Jackson, someone suggests. Likabu is planning more tours and a second album (to be entitled

Trop Trop Fort or Too Too Loud). He also, at the age of 60, wants to marry his girlfriend and provide for his children. Of course given the age difference within the group, Likabu knows the future is uncertain and he accepts that.

“If we stay together and make some money, then I'm happy if we go and do something different. We have to create something new, that's the evolution of music,” he points out.

Still, they have yet to become the best, or at least the best-known, band in the city.

“It's a dream, yes,” Likabu says. “But each time I dream something, it happens.” And despite everything, the chaos of Kinshasa, the almost insurmountable problems of life in the DRC, it is hard not to think that maybe, just maybe, they'll do it.

Benda Bilili! is released nationwide on March 18. Staff Benda Bilili! tour the UK May 12-21. bendabilili.co.uk

WE'RE OPTIMISTS
Above, Depo and Roger Landu. Inset, centre, Staff Benda Bilili on the main stage at Womad, 2010. Left, Coco Ngambali on his modified scooter wheelchair

T
See a slideshow of Staff Benda Bilili and watch exclusive clips from the film *Benda Bilili!* at thetimes.co.uk/music

SHEN YUN
PERFORMING ARTS
中国戏曲

A performance
5,000 years
in the making

5-10 April
London Coliseum
0871 911 0200
www.eno.org

www.ShenYunPerformingArts.org