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Congo basics



There are only two institutions that extend across the whole of the Democratic Republic of Congo, I have been told: one is the army and the other is music. I am sitting in the yard of a bar on the outskirts of the capital, Kinshasa. A mango tree and a palm provide a setting for a group of four musicians. The drummer clatters away on a kit made from a jerry can, a Coca Cola crate and part of a broom; it's an impressive imitation. There are no mics or amps. The bassist and lead guitar are on 'local' instruments, as they describe them, made by an artisanal guitarsmith Grand Papa Kike; they have thick sides and narrow sound boxes that produce tinny percussive sounds. The bass is buff red with 'man has to fight' painted across it. The rhythm guitarist is playing on what used to be a folk guitar, now with reworked machine heads and metal strings. They run through part of the set. The tones complement each other, the melodies are intricate.

This is a Sunday afternoon rehearsal for Show Musica and an audience of around fifty has jammed itself into the bar's courtyard to watch the band practise. Show Musica, the name recalling the Latin influence in Congolese music during the 1950s and 1960s and more recently Wenge Musica, formed in 2001. The leader, G.D. [Gédeon] Tshaba and three other band members were in the original group and have been joined by around twenty others. They are all young men, all self-taught and they sing easily in harmony and improvise. Tshaba writes the core of most of the songs, also drawing on some numbers that were written by an older brother who has passed away.

The music is only part of the show; the entertainment extends to the wardrobe, which is meticulously prepared. The instrumentalists' trousers run from the quotidian cool of the drummer's jeans, through tartan on bass, combat on lead guitar and pale green with large pink roses on rhythm. The dancers wear a melange of orange tracksuits, designer jeans, bits of chain, zips, caps and floral print. Unifying features across all the performers are the nice shoes – chic trainers or Levi's boots – and the necklaces: crucifixes or ivory and plastic pendants (sometimes both), dress-diamonds and beads.

The dancers enter the sandy stage area in front of the musicians and dance together in prepared routines that involve coordinated stamping, kicking, thrusting and jumping. These are sequences that are traded and adapted between bands and form the visual vocabulary of the genre. Each dancer has his own style as well,

and the solo work establishes the artist's identity and creative space. The musicians have recreated themselves through their art, going by names their mothers didn't dream of – New Jack, Vitamin, Tigo (a mobile phone company) and F117 (a military aeroplane) – and adopting styles and steps from beyond their personal experience of backstreet life in Kinshasa.

With identity comes prestige and the need to protect it. Show Musica is not an aggressive outfit, but masculinity pounds through the performance. Vitamin's vest-top displays his muscles and his gyrating jeans are held low by a red belt sporting two hearts pierced by a single arrow. New Jack's moves involve simultaneous simulation of sex and gun-toting. "We have four security men," explains Tshaba in enumerating the band members. It's a country where the law, like other public goods, is often in private hands. A young man with cornbraids and a red baseball jacket hovers behind him. Having something – whether reputation or equipment – to protect is important, as is communicating the message that one has something to protect.

The contemporary Congolese music scene is dominated by a few huge names: Werrason, J-B Mpiana and Koffi Olomide command the adulation of millions. Television channels are dedicated to music performance and interviews with the stars. Tshaba is inspired by two acclaimed musicians: Reddy Masisi, and Madilu System, who died recently. That's all, he tells me, but the band's musical style and choreography is knocking on the door of the 'Wenge generation,' the musicians who have loved (and some of whom have left) the bands Maison Mère and Bon Chic Bon Genre Tout Terrain 4x4. Show Musica is also part of a long tradition of Congolese rumba, included in which is soukous, Congo's cultural export to the rest of Africa and beyond. They are also drawing in tunes from outside: at one point the music breaks into *Kirikou*, a popular Senegalese chorus, and the kids in the audience respond – they know every word.

The recording industry apart, there is a lot of other music made in Congo. When God passes our country on his bicycle he blocks his ears against the noise, someone assured me. Religion mixes readily with other areas of life here and a large part of people's musical experience comes from singing in church. There is a high degree of musical literacy; people know how to sing, know the lyrics of the songs on the radio, know the names of the artists, and they sing. They sing a lot. And they dance in the scores of nightclubs and bars where Primus, Skol and Doppel are served and walls of mirrors provide adoring on-lookers.

The caricature of Bolingo bolingo bolingo – the oft-recurring Lingala word for love – is challenged by Show Musica. "I sing about things I see," says Tshaba, and trapped and isolated as his generation may be, they've made some observations about their condition. "Ami amigo" sings Tigo, dressed in white floral cotton trousers and a white HomeBoy hoody. It's a song about the foreigners who come to Congo, most notable of whom recently have been the Chinese workers contracted onto mining concessions and road building. Except the Chinese don't speak Lingala, Tigo sings, they just say, "Hee Haw," he leaps at the audience "Hee Haw" – laughter all round – "Mummy's heart is made of sugar," he grins as the dancers form a line of synchronised pelvic movement. He's good. He's bad; the audience is loving it and so is he.

Tshaba's songs present the preoccupations of his contemporaries and his country. He bemoans, for example, the cost of marrying "marriage is just money," a major social obstacle for an unwaged population. Another song addresses the fact that the market place that has not been cleaned, "the government doesn't care if we live in a dirty place," the singers assert. New Jack extrapolates, "The love market is messy too," he wiggles around pretending to care, "We'll take you and put you in prison!" Tshaba has at times been dispirited by the difficulties that confront the band but this has also proved to be a source of inspiration. "I was lying awake at night thinking about it and wondering: where have I gone wrong?" he tells me, "that's where the song *Mapata* [Clouds] comes from." His line is, "The sky won't fall down just because of the sins that Tshaba has committed." Things are tricky, life goes on.

Do you have another job? I ask Tshaba. "Yeah, I have to work" he replies, but he won't tell me what he does. "Well, you see, that's private," he chuckles, his stud ear-ring is glinting at me. "I'm the leader of the group and there's no one here who supports us, so I have to work here and there to get some money as there are a lot of expenditures in the band, on costumes and whatever." He's not alone. The country's economy has been in tailspin for the last thirty years, a period that has seen financial mis-management,

Structural Adjustment, pillages and a series of armed internal conflicts and invasions. With very little in the way of infrastructure or services, everyone is 'helping themselves' as Mobutu ordained, just to get by, and life is precarious.

It is against this reality of economic collapse and war that the spectacle of Show Musica with its flamboyant clothes and acoustic instruments stands in starkest relief. The band bears some scars of the country's malaise: the lack of equipment and financial backing and the raw enthusiasm of the fashion parade. Show Musica, like other Congolese bands, tip 'clips' into their song, flattering and engaging their sponsors; it's a way of making money. Mobutu was famously lionised by Franco and Lomongo Alida, and now in a country in which nearly everything is for sale, there has been a proliferation of citations in songs. As the crisis weighs on pockets, musicians of all calibres turn to wealthy patrons for support, and politicians and businessmen oblige by buying song-time to have their name incorporated into the lyrics, thereby publicising their philanthropic largesse and social importance.

This commercialisation or artistic prostitution notwithstanding, there are two crucial social functions played by music in Congo. Firstly, the continued production of Congolese music is a ubiquitous acclamation of existence and national identity despite the troubles in the country. "Who says Show Musica is in the dumps?" Tshaba improvises, seeing me in the audience, "People have come miles to hear us!" There is rivalry between groups but the appreciation of music extends across political and regional groupings, and the artists are defining and redefining cultural parameters. In a country where political space has been invaded and abused, the musicians are generating a product that is distinctly Congolese. The music industry and individual musicians have survived the turbulence of the past three decades, and their artistic activity is defiance in the face of the misery and anomy caused by iterate episodes of violence.

The second social role played by the musicians is that they provide a distraction from the material destitution of everyday life. "Music has a very high value," claims Tshaba, "because people have a lot of problems in their lives, and when they hear the music, that can console them. There's that song that we sang today, Papy Nganda; it's a love song, but love is not just between people, it's something that God has given us." Again religion mingles with other aspects of life. He continues, still mixing things up, "In a way, I'm a pastor, because I leave people with happy memories and by singing, I'm in solidarity with them. It's also a drug for me, as when I'm singing I feel drugged and it gives me inspiration."

It's near the end of the rehearsal and the musicians invite the audience to dance. A hoard of tiny children surges forward, dancing like dusty elves amongst the Dolce & Gabbana T-shirts and oversized shades of the performers. The musicians will be moving on afterwards to a small studio that has been set up in one of the university's halls of residence. It's the second time the band has been to record, and they'll be there all night making the song. They are building up to their first 'maxi single' a CD of five tracks with a 'generic' – a taster that has always been part of the performance of Congolese music and has recently been incorporated into the production of CDs too.

If the army and music are the two institutions that extend across the whole of Congo, their differences are perhaps too obvious to note. But there are similarities too, in that the wars and the music have touched people at personal and social levels and in various ways demand reflection. Maybe it is that war and music are quintessential human activities that propose alternatives and pose questions about what we value, our interaction with others and the impact it has. "If the soul leaves traces, where are the traces left by the soul of the fish?" sing Show Musica, the crowd cheers. It's half joke, half profound; it asks different things of different people, and the singers offer no answer.

Zoë Marriage
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To contact Show Musica, email Léon Tsambu Bulu on: leon_tsambu@yahoo.com or phone 00243 898971507