

From Kinshasa to Coventry The amazing story of Staff Benda Bilili

Staff Benda Bilili wanted to be 'the best handicapped band in Africa'. They have become one of the most exciting live bands on the planet, and play at **Warwick Arts Centre** in Coventry on **Thu 12 November**.

Their name translates as "look beyond the appearances" or literally to "put forward what is hidden." They make music of astonishing power and beauty. The mesmerising rumba-rooted grooves, overlaid with vibrant vocals, remind you at times of Cuban nonchalance, at other times of the Godfather of Soul himself.

The band's core members are disabled street-musicians, who drive custom-built motorised tricycles, and live in the grounds of Kinshasa Zoo in the Congo. They are backed by a younger, all acoustic rhythm section pounding out tight beats. Over the top of this are infectious guitar-like solos performed by a 17 year-old prodigy on a one-string electric lute he designed and built himself out of a tin can.

Staff Benda Bilili have a strong following on YouTube and have performed alongside **Massive Attack** and **Damon Albarn**. Their acclaimed debut album *Très Très Fort* was recorded out in the open using a dozen microphones, a MacBook laptop and a mains cable connected to a deserted refreshment bar nearby.

In part this gig is made possible by the redevelopment of the Butterworth Hall earlier this year. The multi million pound improvements to access and backstage facilities mean that it's now easier for the award winning venue to work with disabled musicians and artists on this scale.

Support is from Cameroonian **Muntu Valdo** - a talented vocalist, guitarist, harmonica player and percussionist. He has played with many heroes of African music - *Manu Dibango, Richard Bona, Lokua Kanza, Tony Allen*. His music is rooted in the blues, mixing African traditions with striking modernity and technical mastery building up layers of sounds with loops and samples. His songs range from velvety blues to passionate grooves.

Tickets and more information from the Box office on **024 7652 4524** or online at **www.warwickartscentre.co.uk**

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Staff Benda Bilili
Thu 12 Nov 8pm
Butterworth Hall £12.50

Warwick Arts Centre, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL

Box Office: 024 7652 4524
Book Online: www.warwickartscentre.co.uk

Images: <http://gallery.warwickartscentre.co.uk/gallery/v/press/autumn09/music/staffbendabilili/>

[See reverse for syndicated interview]

Syndicated press interview September 2009 by Vincent Kenis

What kind of music do you play?

Ricky: We play international music...a mixture of Congolese music and the rhythm of the whites

Vincent Kenis (the band's producer who conducted the interview in Kinshasa): what do you mean by "the rhythm of the whites" ?

R: Well, jazz, rhythm and blues, reggae, zouk

V: The music you mention is generally considered as black music, you know

R: Oh really ?

What do you see as the purpose of the group?

Coco: Our job is to transmit messages. We artists, we are like journalists. We carry messages in our songs.

Ricky: Our name means "open your mind, "look beyond appearances". The idea of the group came because all our proposals to play in "normal" groups were put down, although some of us are pretty good musicians. So we thought why not create an "all-disabled band" to show our real value? We're singing about the suffering in our bodies. The suffering of those who sleep outside, on cardboard. The suffering of street kids. We're bringing a message to them. The title of the album is "Trés Très Fort" - in French it means "very very strong". You have to be "very strong" to survive in the streets of Kinshasa. This album is a tribute to all the people who live in the streets with us. All of us have been completely neglected by the authorities. We are the true heroes of The Congo and we are a time bomb. "Trés Très Fort" is our manifesto.

Are you inspired by other musicians, and if so, who and why?

Ricky: Franco, Tabu Ley, Manu Dibango, Fela Kuti, Jimmy Cliff, James Brown, Eboa Lotin (Cameroonian singer & guitarist) Vadio Mambenga (Congolese singer who used to sing "it's never too late in life" before us) the latter two are both disabled people. Why ? Because they were inescapable, and also maybe because we were able to see them live. We saw James Brown when he came to The Congo. He was dancing like a madman - as if he were skating. He seemed to be gliding on the ground - amazing!

How did Roger (the youngest band member, who plays the satongé, a self-built one-string electric lute made from a tin can and the strut of a basket) come to be involved with the group?

Ricky: I kept seeing this kid walking around with that instrument. He was very good but didn't know the notes ... it was messy. So we took him in with us, like we do with other street kids, and we started training him to play it properly. Within three weeks he had understood everything. He's been with us ever since - it's been five years now.

Roger: My life before Staff? I was out in the street. I was suffering like a street kid. I had made my own instrument, the satonge. I was busking on the markets, making 100 francs here and there with my satonge... now I've got a real job - and respect too. No need to roam the streets.

Are you looking forward to playing at Warwick Arts Centre?

Ricky: We're totally thrilled. The only judgement that matters to us is on stage, and we will rock the place wherever it may be.