

There was a time when Africa's third most populated city was number one in musical terms. The whole continent danced to its premium musical exports: rumba and soukous. Then war, corruption and chaos brought Kinshasa to its knees and its population fell back on what the French wittily refer to as *Système D*, after the French words *se débrouiller* and *se démerder*. Roughly defined, *Système D* means to cope, get by and hack out a living at the coalface of poverty with only your wits to guide you and your courage to protect you.

But Kinshasa, an immense agglomeration of shanty-villages with their disparate maze of peoples, languages and cultures, has never gone in for self-pity that much; it's too busy staying alive and being obtuse. Away from the gaze of the world, its artists, musicians and creators are cooking up their own revolt against the grotesque pantomime of life in 21st century Congo. Necessity, ingenuity and an innate sense of style are conspiring together to make "magic out of garbage", to quote producer Doctor L. It's a new spirit, concocted from the waste of consumerism in one of the most abused and rejected places on earth, with its epicentre in the rue Kato, a two kilometre long drag that slices through the pretence of Kinshasa's downtown commercial district. If that spirit were in need of slogans then "Screw your Pity!" and "Dream or Die!" might serve well.

Yakala 'Coco' Ngambali and Nsituvuidi 'Theo' Nzonza, know all about *Système D*. They've been living it for fifty years and more, down by the Congo river docks, out in the combustible atmosphere of Kinshasa's streets, in night shelters, on roundabouts, with the other 'cripples' and rejects, polio victims and shégués or street kids. Their love of Congolese rumba and its pantheon of demi-Gods - Franco, Tabu Ley Rochereau, Pepe Kallé - provided the early impulse to learn the guitar and play music. About fifteen years ago, they formed a band with other street hustlers, both handicapped and able-bodied, and named it after a local beer joint. Staff Benda Bilili - "the people who see beyond" - became an unimagined worldwide hit. Kinshasa specialises in producing the unimagined.

After releasing two albums, starring in the acclaimed film *Benda Bilili* and touring the world, Coco and Theo left the band in 2013. The split was testing and uncomfortable, but they saw no reason to shed any tears or dwell on it. Within months Coco had begun composing songs (he was the main composer in *Staff Benda Bilili*) and gathering musicians for a new project: *Mbongwana Star*. "Staff Benda Bilili? That's the past," says Coco. "I concentrate on the present."

Coco and Théo knew that they had to look beyond the rumba funk of *Staff Benda Bilili* and find a new direction, a USP, a sound that faithfully mirrored the creative genius of their home city. One day the filmmaker Renaud Barret (half of the team that gave us *Benda Bilili*, *Jupiter's Dance* and other seminal documentaries about Kinshasa) played Coco and Theo an album called *Black Voices*, by the Nigerian drummer Tony Allen. It was produced by Liam Farrell, aka Doctor L, the son of an Irish painter who grew up in Paris and became involved in the Parisian hip hop and electro scenes before applying his maverick aesthetic to African music. "That's it!" was Theo's reaction. "That's the direction we should go in. Because *mbongwana* means 'change'. Because that's the future."

The first recording sessions with Doctor L took place in a hired yard in downtown Kinshasa, with a chugging generator pumping out the electricity that the perfidious politicians of the DRC were incapable

of providing themselves. Everyone admits that initial proceedings were fairly shambolic, with friends and relatives piling in to swell the numbers and music gushing forth with joyful but unfocussed energy. When Doctor L took the masters back to Paris the alchemy began: rhythms were laid bare, voices honed, guitars given a new sonic garb. The result was revolutionary.

“I wanted to change the classical pre-conceptions about African music,” Farrell says. “Kinshasa reminds me of New York in the 1980s...a place where you could have a punk band, a gay band, a new wave band...what the fuck! Like everywhere else, Africa deserves to have artists who can choose whether they’re related 100% to Africa or not. We’re not talking about Africa, or wheel chairs, we’re talking about guys who are doing music.”

When Coco and Théo heard the demos, it was a shock, but a happy one. “In the beginning it was a bit hard,” Coco says, “But then we really understood. We work well with Liam, he’s a real artist. And he’s courageous!” Renaud Barrett remembers that the new sound was received in Kinshasa with wild dancing and escalating excitement.

World Circuit’s Nick Gold heard the demos and immediately signed the band to the label. Farrell and manager Michel Winter returned to Kinshasa in late 2014. By then Mbongwana Star had made the new sound their own: “That’s what I love about Africa,” Farrell says, “the strength and rapidity by which they can integrate whatever comes up.” The group had been honed down to Coco and Théo on main vocals, Jean-Claude Kamina Mulodi aka ‘R9’ (so called because he was the ninth child in his family) on guitar, a young street-kid called Makana Kalambayi aka ‘Randy’ who’d been Coco’s wheel-chair pusher and part-time member of Staff Benda Bilili on percussion and drums and Coco’s step-son Sage on vocals and general vibe-mastery.

And Liam Farrell on bass and effects. That’s the point. This isn’t an African band per se. It’s a trans-global barrier-busting sound machine that demands the unfettered horizons of any artist who values originality and creativity, wherever in the world he or she might live.

“We wanted to try and get out of the Afro-African straightjacket into which everyone tries to put African bands,” says Michel Winter, “We wanted to get back in spirit, if not music, to 1970s when Africans were really modern, maybe more than us. There’s a lot more creativity there than we can imagine. Kinshasa is crawling with creativity.”

Mbongwana Star’s first video ‘Malukayi (feat. Konono No.1)’ was shot by Renaud Barret and directed by Barret and Farrell. It features a character called The Congo Astronaut, a 100% pure ghetto boy who has decided that his life will, for the time being, consist of dressing up in a space suit and wandering the streets of Kinshasa. The Congo Astronaut is just one phenomenon to have come out of the rue Kato, where the city’s garbage-to-art revolution is in full spate. It’s not just about music; artists, sculptors, stylists, photographers, jewellery designers, self-made engineers and technicians, all of them are at work in rue Kato, or the nearby Academie des Beaux-Arts, refashioning waste into unimagined objects, sounds, happenings, ideas. Minimalism, style and raw urban energy hangs heavy in the air, like tropical moisture. “Here we’d call it ‘hacking’ or ‘up-cycling’ or whatever,” Barret says. “There, it’s just necessity.”

Barret set up a giant screen at the Beaux Arts in Kinshasa to premier to the 'Malukayi' video. The whole academy was there to watch it. The response was fervent: "That's it! That's us!"

System D is becoming System K, a revolution that won't be televised, not for a while at least. But you'd be fool to miss it.