

WOMEX 2020 Film Programme

WOMEX, the premier world music expo, went digital this year. Here **Simon Broughton** reviews some of the film documentaries on the programme

There were 21 music documentaries screening at this year's digital WOMEX, ranging from a feature-length film about minority musics across Russia to the birth of Afrobeat and the club sounds of Lusophone Africa in Lisbon. A handful of the films are available on demand for a month at dafilms.com, the online documentary cinema, which are the ones in the round-up here.

Contradict

Made by Peter Guyer and Thomas Burkhalter, this film looks at the new realities of African music through a number of examples in Ghana. It memorably focuses on the rappers FOKN Bois, who satirise evangelical preachers, the US and Donald Trump. It explores the way young artists are using digital technology and social media. As rapper Akan says: "A lot of people are doing music now, more than 20 years ago. You just need a smartphone and a megabyte of internet and you're there." Female singer Adomaa takes the lead in a video against skin whitening and asks, "why are black bodies so obsessed with the Western gaze?" The film is rambling and too long, but there's humour, perceptive interviews and it raises important questions – not just for Africa, but all of us.

Kinshasa Beta Mbonda

Directed by Marie Françoise Plissart, this is set in the Congolese capital and focuses on a drumming group called Beta Mbonda made up of ex-petty criminals. It's slow and observational, usually from a still camera watching the action of the back streets of the city. The musicians are seen rehearsing with their massive wooden drums, kids watching on before trying to imitate with tin cans and then taking shelter from heavy rain. Interviews with band members are just heard in voice-over. There's a wonderful set piece scene half-way through where the musicians gather in a 'laundry' in an open breeze block yard full of washing machines, many of them broken. The musicians start playing the washing machines as well as plastic pipes, metal plates and other bits of scrap. 'White men use



Contradict

these machines in Europe, Now they're worn out and they send them here, We people of Kinshasa recuperated them, They start to work again... they sing as a man keeps ironing sheets implacably in the centre of it all. This is a really memorable moment, although this doc is nothing like as good as *Benda Bilili!* about Staff Benda Bilili by Renaud Barret and Florent de La Tullaye. But you do begin to get an idea of how music can be a salvation in the downtrodden corners of Kinshasa.

Khamsin

This is a very personal view of Beirut, Lebanon and a group of musicians fed up with the political corruption of the country. Directed by Grégoire

Couvert and Grégoire Orio, it's a depressing stream of consciousness. Close-up interviews are intercut with seemingly random shots of Beirut and other parts of Lebanon – even ancient Roman Baalbek. The musical sequences with guitars and electronics are distorted, edgy and abrasive. This is, after all, protest music. What's remarkable is that this was filmed before the huge explosion in August that brought the government into further disrepute. One of the interviewees rails against a Lebanese saying – 'the world shakes, but it never falls down' – and people using it as an excuse to do nothing. The film portrays a city in crisis and, while it sidesteps the issues, clearly shows that something needs to be done.

A Sonic Pulse

While most of these films are much longer than they need to be, *A Sonic Pulse*, directed by Dorothy Allen-Pickard and Antoine Marinot, is just seven minutes long. But it reveals a world few of us probably know about: the attraction of electronic dance music for deaf people. "Here we all party in the same world," says one fan at a club night. "It doesn't matter if you're deaf, you can't hear to talk anyway. Music shouldn't be defined by hearing people because it's about feeling vibrations and frequencies." Well said.

Indus Blues

A substantial and important film also available to view is *Indus Blues*, directed by Jawad Sharif. Shown at WOMEX in 2018, it's a vivid account of endangered music in Pakistan. It showcases traditional masters of folk instruments that are being targeted in places like Peshawar by Islamists who disapprove of music. An important piece of work featuring wonderful musicians from Baluchistan in the south to Hunza in the north.

These films, along with almost 2,000 other documentaries, are available on dafilms.com. Subscriptions are €6 a month or €36 a year dafilms.com/subscription



Kinshasa Beta Mbonda

WIN

We have ten vouchers for a free one-month subscription to dafilms.com to give away.

To enter, answer: Who directed the film *Kinshasa Beta Mbonda*?

See p23 for competition rules and deadline



AMERICAS

Brazil: Rio's 2021 Carnaval parade has been indefinitely postponed due to safety concerns around COVID-19. São Paulo already decided to delay their parade by eight months until October 2021.

US: Singer Johnny Nash, known for his hit 'I Can See Clearly Now' and for being one of the first non-Jamaican artists to record reggae in Kingston, helping launch Bob Marley's career in the process, died of natural causes on October 6.

EUROPE

UK: The University of London's Institute of Latin American Studies and Institute of Commonwealth Studies have both been threatened with closure by the end of November due to budget cuts.

Switzerland: Home of cutting-edge music research, Norient have followed up the launch of a new crowd-funded website with their first *TIMEZONES* podcast, featuring insight and music from Nairobi's next generation of music producers.

AFRICA

Nigeria: Seun Kuti, Wizkid and Davido have been among those joining #EndSARS protests for the disbandment of the notorious police unit SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad), following clashes that led to 38 deaths on October 20.

Ethiopia: The 1960s recordings of pianist Emahoy Tseguè-Maryam Guebrou – collected on *Éthiopiennes Vol 21* – have become the unlikely soundtrack for US director Garrett Bradley's documentary, *Time* (available now via Amazon Prime).

ASIA

Azerbaijan: Amid rising tensions with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the Azerbaijan military released 'Atos' (Fire), a blustering metal song featuring chugging riffs and overblown vocals over scenes of their military might.

South Asia: A new compilation, *chalo*, released by The Jazz Diaries, compiled by jitwam and featuring Sarathy Korwar, Aroop Roy and others, is raising money for Human Rights Law Network and Pakistan's Zindagi Trust.

PACIFIC

Australia: Ticket reseller Viagogo has been fined seven million dollars for misleading Australian customers through Google ads, adding unnecessary fees and making false claims about the scarcity of tickets.

New Zealand: The Auckland Folk Festival will return in 2021 with a homegrown line-up. Taking place Jan 29-Feb 1, the festival will feature The Eastern, Delaney Davidson & Barry Saunders, Jenny Mitchell and Aro among others

OBITUARY

Bunny Lee (1941-2020) *Influential Jamaican music producer*

Bunny 'Striker' Lee, the pioneering Jamaican music producer, has died at the age of 79. Lee liked to describe his own discography as "the greatest reggae catalogue in the world" and few would dispute this. Born Edward O'Sullivan Lee, he began working as a record pluggger – someone who pushes songs on radio stations – in 1962 and, that same year, began engineering and producing singers working in the then new sound called 'ska.' Working alongside and learning from the likes of Duke Reid and Leslie Kong, Lee had great ears – signing talent and developing songs now regarded as classics – while proving himself an astute businessman. Lee played a major role in introducing reggae to the UK when he struck a licencing deal with Trojan Records in 1968, ensuring the records he produced were released here. *'Bunny was massively influential in shaping Jamaican music, from the rock steady era through to the dancehall years of the 80s,'* tweeted

Trojan Records. In the 1970s Lee worked closely with King Tubby, the engineer who helped pioneer dub music; Lee is credited with creating the 'flying cymbal sound' that punctuated dub singles at the time. Always forward-looking and engaged, Lee was a familiar and much-loved character on the reggae scene. In 2008, the Jamaican government gave Lee the Order of Distinction to honour his contributions to reggae music. DJ David Rodigan tweeted that Lee was *'one of the most charismatic and inspirational record producers in Jamaican music.'*

GARTH CARTWRIGHT



Jamaican Recordings