



Out of all this year's winners, Staff Benda Bilili have had the most meteoric rise in public interest and media acclaim. The buzz about the Congolese group first started as a result of an Africa Express trip to Kinshasa in 2007. Soon afterwards an email started doing the rounds with a link to a YouTube video showing a group of polio-inflicted musicians in motorised wheelchairs jamming in the grounds of Kinshasa zoo. The group, led by vocalist Ricky Likabu, were playing James Brown style Congolese funk and became the most talked about African band of last year. They released their debut album *Très Très Fort* on the Belgium record label Crammed, played over 35 concerts in Europe and then culminated the year by winning an award at the world music annual trade event WOMEX.

Their manager Michel Winter had just returned from Kinshasa when *Songlines* caught up with him to talk about their latest win. "I'm delighted. Everything that's happened with this group is quite amazing. What's great is that they are people who really deserve it. They're just good, decent people. They deal with everything in a philosophical, positive way, without any delusions. It's really a pleasure to work with people like this."

Winter is experienced at working with groups from the margins of society – he also manages the Romanian Gypsy group Taraf de Haidouks. "Staff Benda have always worked in very difficult conditions but never lost hope. They've always said, 'our time will come', not in a religious, fatalist sense, which is rare for the Congolese!"

Last year's touring success meant the group were able to return home and really improve their lives. "Often the worry is what will artists do when they suddenly have money," says Winter. "These are people who lived on less than a dollar a day and now returned to Kinshasa with several thousand euros – it can sometimes be risky. But they instantly invested the money."

The youngest member of the band is Roger



Landu, aged 18, who plays the *satongé* which gives the group their distinctive sound. It's a rudimentary instrument crafted out of a milk can, electrical wire and curved piece of wood and sounds a bit like a theremin on acid.

Winter's most recent trip to Kinshasa was to help renovate a new venue. "We've created a place we've called 'Le Cabaret Sauvage.' It's become a sort of cultural centre, where people can come and have a drink, rehearse, hold concerts. All week it's full of people." It's not



Above left: Ricky Likabu with his brand new motorised scooter. Right: Kinshasa's new multi-ethnic music venue, Le Cabaret Sauvage, where Staff Benda Bilili hang out and play with bands like Konono No 1 and Kasai Allstars

just Staff Benda Bilili who hang out in this new location, but Konono No 1 and Kasai Allstars too. "Normally different ethnic groups don't play together, but now they all play together. The Cabaret Sauvage is quite unique in Kinshasa as it's perhaps the only place which is multi-ethnic."

2010 is revving up to be another busy year. The group are part of End Polio Now – a campaign headed by Desmond Tutu, a fellow polio sufferer. This autumn they're off to Japan on tour, but before that, they'll be performing at UK festivals Glastonbury and WOMAD. Come along and see for yourself why we think they're the best band around at the moment.

Jo Frost

FEATURE Cover feature and album review in #59
AWARD We will be presenting the award at WOMAD on July 23



BEST GROUP
Staff Benda Bilili