

AWARDS

How the CIA used jazz greats as cover for a 1961 coup in Africa



A scene from the documentary “Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat.” (Kino Lorber)

By Steve Dollar

Feb. 12, 2025 3 AM PT



History is a playlist crackling with fire and intrigue in “Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat.” The film’s heady 2½ hours are as thick with detail as a graduate seminar yet bustle like a TikTok video, a deft and nearly breathless archival exposé that centers on the January 1961 assassination of Patrice Lumumba, less than a year after he was elected leader of the newly formed Democratic Republic of the Congo, at last independent from Belgium’s colonial rule.

America’s CIA spearheaded the assassination plot, but this Cold War drama revolves like a kaleidoscope through a far-flung cast of characters, all of them intersecting at a pivotal moment in the 1960s. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev famously banged his shoe at the United Nations, which had welcomed 16 new African states to its ranks. Meanwhile, a host of American jazz greats were serving as cultural ambassadors — Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie among them — ostensibly to promote Yankee goodwill and democratic values. Instead, they acted as unknowing decoys for CIA operations.

“It’s very schizophrenic,” says Belgian filmmaker Johan Grimonprez, who fuses together global politics, subterfuge and the freedom cries of jazz giants such as Max Roach, Eric Dolphy, Abbey Lincoln and John Coltrane as if they’re of a piece. “Because those artists are asked to represent a democracy where back home they’re still second-rate citizens,” he says. “And so there’s that paradox as well.”

Grimonprez made “Soundtrack,” an Academy Award nominee for documentary feature, as a way to reckon with his own country’s colonial legacy. After directing “Shadow World,” a 2016 archival dive into the amoral world of the global arms trade, he wanted to investigate something that was right in front of him yet harder to see.

“All these things were [swept] under the carpet,” says Grimonprez, who was born in 1962. “Nevertheless, Belgium’s history is so tied to the Congo. All of Brussels is built with rubber money. It’s sort of seeped into the ground. It’s a trauma that is unacknowledged on both sides. It felt crucial ... to bring the story back home and dig into the dirt of my own country’s history.”



Review
Jazz, African independence, secret agents — it’s all in ‘Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat’
Nov. 15, 2024

The film boasts a stunning array of archival footage, from the vaults of the BBC, the U.N. and Belgian and American television networks, along with Cuba’s Havana Archive, but rarer sources as well. “The home movies are very important,” Grimonprez says.

The movie makes vital use of contributions from Congolese writer In Koli Jean Bofane (“Congo Inc.”), who was raised on his stepfather’s coffee plantation, and Eve Blouin, the daughter of writer and pan-African activist Andrée Blouin, Lumumba’s speechwriter and chief of protocol, whose excerpted memoirs are read by Marie Daulne of the group Zap Mama. Grimonprez even managed to secure private footage of Khrushchev and audiotapes of him reading his memoirs, from the fallen leader’s son.

The filmmaker spent four years putting it all together with editor Rik Chaubet, with a keen focus on visual rhythm and bursts of surprise. “There’s always a new element that is revealed,” Grimonprez says. “Sometimes it’s not chronological, but we chose [it] for a dramatic development.”

They took inspiration from a perhaps unexpected source: Alfred Hitchcock. As it happens, Hollywood’s master of suspense was the playful subject of Grimonprez’s 2009 essay film, “Double Take,” which also trafficked in Cold War tropes as it mediates a fictitious encounter between Hitchcock and a mysterious double. (Not for nothing does Khrushchev also serve as a doppelgänger.)

Thus, the tone of “Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat” is “in a sense, what Hitchcock would call ‘The Birds’: It’s a comedy that becomes a thriller,” Grimonprez says. “So we had a little bit [of that] as well, but the thriller takes over at the end.”

The music, which also spotlights the role of Congolese rumba in pan-African liberation, functions not as mere soundtrack but what Grimonprez calls a “historical agent.”

“There’s such beautiful stuff, but then it can be set against such horrible things,” he says, recalling how when vocalist Abbey Lincoln and drummer Max Roach were playing “We Insist! Freedom Now Suite” on Belgian television in 1964 — footage that is put to powerful use in the film — there was a genocide in the Congo.

Music and politics collide head-on near the end of the film, when Lincoln helps lead a group of 60 protesters — including Roach, Maya Angelou and Paul Robeson — as they loudly disrupt a meeting of the U.N. Security Council in the wake of Lumumba’s assassination.

“It’s as James Baldwin says,” Grimonprez suggests, offering a paraphrase of the author. “History is not the past. History is what we are made of. It’s the present. It’s what seeps into our skin and into our body and our bones.”