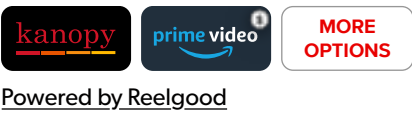


STREAM IT OR SKIP IT

# Stream It Or Skip It: ‘Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat’ on VOD, a Vibrant, Angry Documentary About Music Amidst Political Turmoil

By [John Serba](#)  
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Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat ([now streaming on VOD platforms like Amazon Prime Video](#)) commands you to lean in and pay attention and connect the dots of its story and, well, just summon the fortitude to hang with it. It’s a challenge, but a worthy one. It’s the latest documentary by Belgian filmmaker Johan Grimonprez, who exclusively uses archival video and audio – with frequent title cards that cite quotes and sources like an academic research paper – to piece together a dense, fast-moving narrative about the 1960 Congo Crisis, the assassination of Congo’s prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, and the role that American jazz music played in the saga. And in turn, Grimonprez structures and paces the film like a complex mid-century jazz suite, skittering and scatting through a real-life political conspiracy dense with names, faces and places. It’s far, far from your typical historical doc.

## SOUNDTRACK TO A COUP D’ETAT: STREAM IT OR SKIP IT?

**The Gist:** Nikita Khrushchev is quoted as saying, “When I hear jazz, it’s as if I have gas in the stomach.” There’s no accounting for taste, obviously. What does the Cold War-era Soviet prime minister have to do with this story? Well,

it’s mid-20th-century history, so it’s complicated. We’ll start here: During the 1950s and ’60s, many African nations under colonial rule vied for independence by lobbying the United Nations, establishing democratic governments and asserting themselves against their (usually) White oppressors. The vile ideology of colonialism was dying, but not without resistance – the resources in many of these African countries were valuable. Congo was an especially tenuous spot because it housed a uranium mine, and superpowers like Russia and the U.S. needed it to fuel their “peacekeeping” operations, namely, oh, you know, atomic bombs. So it’s not like we’re talking about a stash of rare Pokemon cards here.

One of the ways the Eisenhower administration tried to win the loyalty of African peoples was by sending jazz greats like Etta James, Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie overseas to perform. The artists were happy to participate, as the trips could allow them to connect with their Black heritage and participate in acts of diplomacy. But the notion quickly soured because, well, politics, that’s why. Ugly politics. Ugly, *deadly* politics. Congo elected President

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Joseph Kasa-Vubu and Prime Minister Lumumba as its leaders, and the latter tackled the task of releasing the country from the ruling oversight of Belgium. The growing faction of independent African nations often banded together to win votes in the U.N., and were even pushing to create their own United States of Africa. That didn't sit well with Eisenhower, who surely was even less thrilled when Khrushchev sided with Lumumba, probably more because of the uranium thing than because it was the right and moral thing to do.

Although Belgium agreed with the U.N.-voted mandate of Congolese independence, the Euro country quietly reneged on the deal and spurred a coup that eventually forced Lumumba from power. At the same time, Eisenhower and the CIA just as quietly conspired to assassinate Lumumba, concocting nasty little schemes with poisoned toothpaste and a "heart attack gun" that fired a dart of frozen poison that kills its target and leaves no trace. Meanwhile, the '60s are really starting to become THE '60S, you know, the decade of turmoil. Vile racism in the American South undermined the country's ideology. The Cold War was intensifying, when Cuban leader Fidel Castro ventured to the U.N. to support Congo, where he met Khrushchev for the first time, which obviously didn't help the situation one bit. Civil rights leaders like Malcolm X and Maya Angelou ramped up their movements. Also meanwhile, jazz artists began to feel leery about their international visits, wondering if the government was using them as a smokescreen for covert op seeking to take out political leaders. Their art became protest music – and they became protesters as well, crashing the U.N. with Angelou to speak out against Lumumba's death.



PHOTO: Sundance

**What Movies Will It Remind You Of?:** *Soundtrack* is a melange of tones, styles and conspiracies bringing to mind '60s-set historical dramas like [Malcolm X](#) and [JFK](#), and docs [When We Were Kings](#), *Louis Armstrong's Black and Blues* and [I Am Not Your Negro](#).

**Performance Worth Watching:** Dare you to take your eyes off Max Roach as he plays the drums. Not gonna happen. Doesn't matter who you are.

**Memorable Dialogue:** An unidentified voice narrates: "America's weapon was a blue note in a minor key."

**Sex and Skin:** None.

**Our Take:** I parse my commentary with bits of humor for sanity's sake – it feels necessary in the face of Grimonprez's intensity, which never wavers over the course of *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat*'s girthy two-and-a-half hours. The director's method is to mirror the stylistic variances within jazz, giving the film an improvisational feel to its construction, sometimes emulating the virtuoso melodicism of Abbey Lincoln or the avant-garde freakouts of John Coltrane (note, these descriptors sometimes can be swapped, such is the breadth of their musicianship, which

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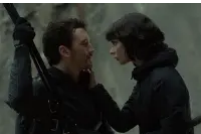
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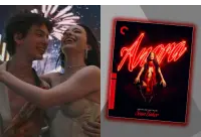
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we see and hear throughout). But as chaotic and hyper-edited as the movie can be, and dizzying in its paste-up collage of characters and settings and needle drops, Grimonprez maintains focus on a subtextual undercurrent of injustice and rage against shortsighted alpha-dog political superpowers and the ugly extremes of American capitalism.

In a less ambitious filmmaker’s hands, this twisty, intrigue-riddled saga would feel like an endless rabbit hole – and likely wouldn’t be nearly as effective. It’s rollicking and energetic, and will sweep you up and keep you in its grip even when it begins to feel like too much packed into too small a space. That’s an intentional choice, mind you. I believe Grimonprez’s intent is to make us feel overwhelmed, surely like the most aware minds were in the ’60s. He cuts some of the intensity with comical bits addressing Khrushchev’s clownish shoe-pounding incident at the U.N., and Gillespie’s half-serious run for President (Miles Davis would’ve been the CIA director!), but for the most part this documentary is like Roach sweating profusely over his kit – I’m not sure I always comprehended every fill and flourish amidst the density of the performance, but I absolutely felt the intensity of its kaleidoscopic emotion.

**What do you think? [Be the first to comment.](#)**

**Our Call:** *Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat* asks a lot of us, but it’s absolutely rewarding, a history lesson told like no other. **STREAM IT.**

### ‘Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat’ on VOD: Stream It Or Skip It?

*You've read our critic's opinion, but what do YOU think? Make your voice heard.*

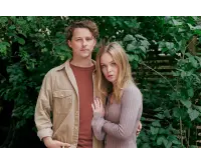
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