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## DVD REVIEW

*On The Rumba River*. 2008. By Jacques Sarasin. 82 minutes, colour, DVD. Distributed by First Run Features.

This documentary by Jacques Sarasin focuses on the music of Antoine Wendo Kolosoy, known as Papa Wendo (1925-2008). Papa Wendo was one of the musicians who developed Congolese Rumba, the musical style influenced by Cuban music. Set in the Congo, this documentary has been likened to 'The Buena Vista Social Club' in that it foregrounds the music and the lives of ageing players who had their heyday in the 40s and 50s. However, Sarasin's direction presents the music and the world in which its performers live as an inseparable package. In this story, the protagonists are the musicians themselves, the music that they play and the Kinshasa streets in which they live.

Papa Wendo's music was first broadcast in 1945, his song 'Marie Louise' became an international hit in 1948. However, he stopped performing in the mid-60s once Mobutu Sese Seko was in power. It was not until Mobutu's demise 30 years later that he began to play again, but by this stage civil war had brought yet more misery to the country.

With no narration containing facts about Papa Wendo's life or the music that he made famous, this documentary is low on information, but is highly evocative of how life is for the Rumba musicians. We are introduced to Wendo's fellow musicians in the context of their communities, sitting amongst washing lines, fresh faced children, and women busy peeling bananas and stirring their cooking pots. His friends reminisce about Papa Wendo and thus paint a picture of a man who is something of a legend amongst them. An ex-boxer, Wendo is described by one colleague as having been a kind of hooligan who would think nothing of beating up members of the band. That his musician friends are still very much in awe of him is evident as they sit reverently while he admonishes them to work together and stop fighting. Perhaps their awe is not only due to his stature as a musician.

Early in the film, we see Wendo at home, ignoring his wife's demands that he find work, and his daughters' arguments. He seems lethargic and unmotivated – it is only when he begins to find his former musician friends and the Rumba is thus revived that we catch a glimpse of the virility described by his friends. Once the old players are reunited, Wendo's demeanour changes, he puts on his smart clothes and we see him enjoying his authority and renown.

This documentary is woven together like an old mat – the weft made up of threads of the struggle for survival in the dilapidated and decomposing state of the Congo, against the warp of the Rumba. This music is nostalgic, but has a virility that brings back a sense of community, resilience and, dare we say, hope. The theme of oppression has had a long history in the Congo, whether in the form of colonialists,

missionaries, dictators – or grinding poverty. Yet the documentary suggests that this is not what defines the people. As the musicians gather, a saxophone accompanied by the simplicity of a slit drum starting a groove creates community, and for the time that they are involved in the music, it brings joy and a sense of belonging and power. Women dressed in multi-coloured *kitenge* cloths sway and gently spin to the music that is as sultry as the Congo River itself.

In the second half of the film we meet Papa Moundanda from Brazzaville. He joins other musicians – both young and old at a great reunion. Moundanda adds his *likembe* to the large band of players – guitars, trumpets, saxophones, slit drum and assorted percussion – and sings improvised lyrics that reflect the happiness of the occasion and the joy of reunion. Later, sitting beneath an iconic Wild Fig tree, Moundanda relates his musical story. He tells of how he learned by ear through trial and error. He says, *The only real way to learn is with the ear, not through notes on a piece of paper. The important thing is to protect the memory – because what happens if the paper gets torn?*

With scenes of the dilapidated city, open sewers, buildings and streets in total disrepair, the film is infused with sense of the suffering that the Congolese have endured through the years. The images of squalor are overlaid by scenes of music making, which come as a relief for the viewer as much as it seems that they do for the musicians. The slow pace of their lives is echoed by the film; friends gather around a table to drink together and hear Papa Wendo reminiscing. These extended scenes make us impatient for more music.

The scenes in which we see the musicians performing are visually and aurally rich. We view the performers via extreme close ups, as well as wide shots which give the sense of the event, including both musicians and dancers. In Lingala and French, the English subtitles are not always easy to read when the text is set against a similar background colour. For the uninitiated viewer, this does not help the already somewhat cryptic and unarticulated narrative.

The pathos continues to the final scenes of the film, set down at the Rumba River – the Congo. A former boat mechanic, Papa Wendo looks out over the pitiful fleet of half sunken and rusting vessels, lamenting the state of politics in his country. His sadness and the sense of how much has been wasted is palpable. Viewers hoping for detail on either Papa Wendo's life and work, or the music itself might be frustrated that this film is as much about its social and political context as it is about the Rumba. However, music always takes place in context and Sarasin has articulately portrayed a view of the music that is inextricably bound up with the lives of the Congolese musicians. Within this life that is fraught with hardship the Rumba endures with its laid back rhythms, lugubrious groove and lilting melodies. As the participants move to the beat, united by music, we get the sense that the Rumba can be seen as a celebration of Congolese resilience in the face of suffering.