

Soundtrack to Radical Times: Patrice Lumumba and the United States of Africa

Documentary film: Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat (2024) is an extraordinary new documentary in cinemas at the moment that looks at the events leading up to the UN Security Council meeting when musicians Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach burst in to protest the murder of the Congolese leader **Patrice Lumumba**.*

It is a documentary that combines music, film footage from the news, musicians playing and folk heritage, interviews, quotes from academic books and articles, novels and magazines, voiceovers from the literature of the time, all into a powerful and exciting journey through the 1950s and 1960s.

The use of jazz is not merely a soundtrack but follows the lives of musicians and singers discussing contemporary social and political issues in parallel with the footage of the political shenanigans of the time.

The documentary makes much use of colourful and dynamic graphics combined with quotes from academics and creative writers. Cut into the mix is recent footage from Tesla and Apple advertisements whose modernity is a jarring contrast to the black and white world of much of the 1950s footage. It is also a reminder that the economic value of rare earth metals mined in the Congo are just as important today (in batteries, for example), as they were back then.

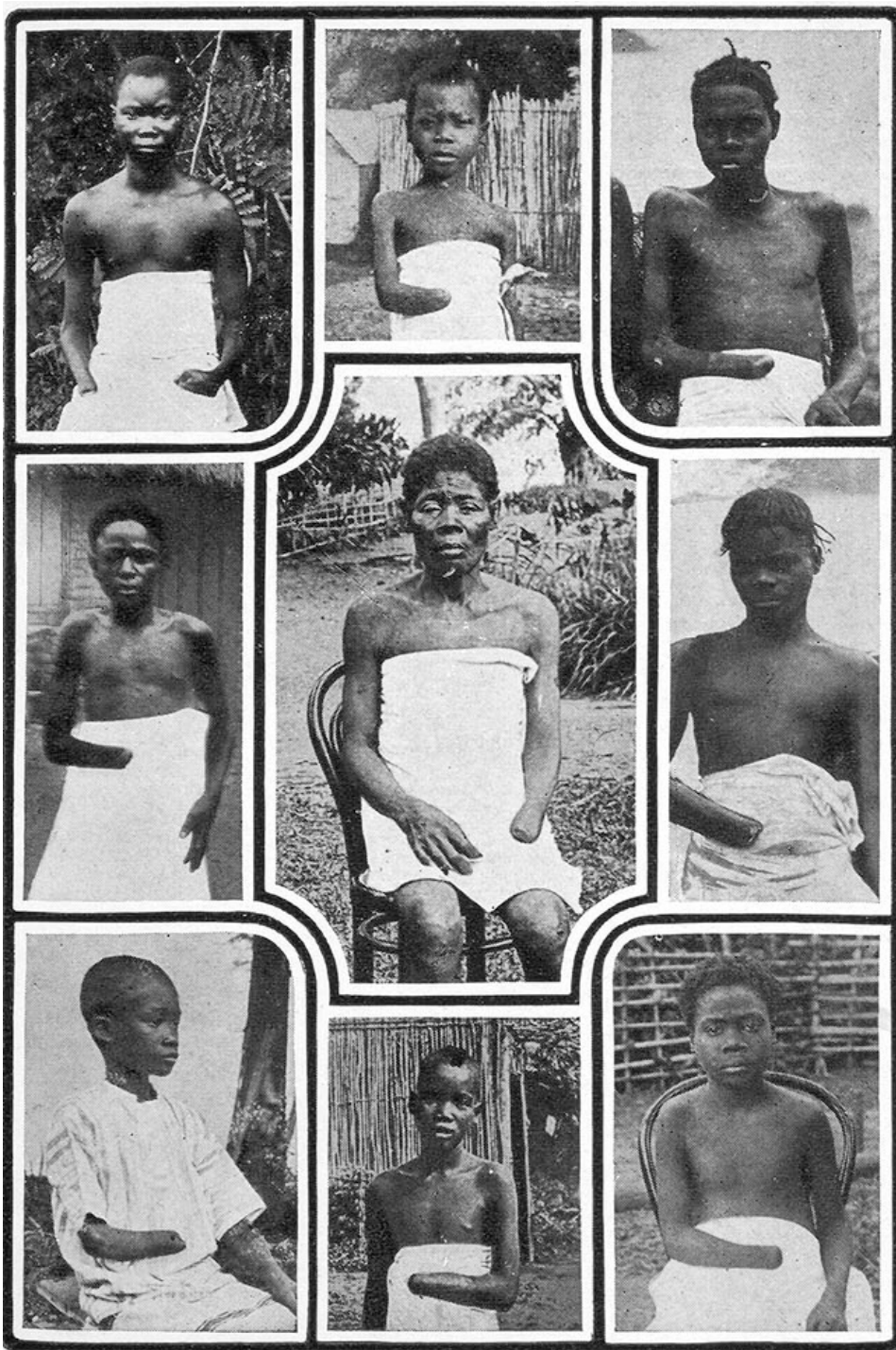
Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat is a long documentary, running two and a half hours. Yet the editing, music and graphics kept one engaged throughout as the story of Lumumba reached a crisis point with his execution, as the new post-colonial world clashed with the machinations of the older colonial powers desperate to retain political control.

It is also a timely and important documentary. It was commented on during the film that if Africa was shaped like a pistol then Congo would be the trigger, the hot point that could trigger revolutions all over Africa. The geopolitical history of the Congo, the talk of a United States of Africa, and the decolonisation process during the 1960s, not to mention the overall general level of radical activity and thinking, is not so well-known or talked about now.

History

The Congo has had many name changes over the years from the Congo Free State, Belgian Congo, the Republic of the Congo-Léopoldville, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Zaire, before returning to its current name the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In the 1880s the country came into the hands of King Leopold II of Belgium when he acquired it from the colonial nations of Europe and made it into his own private property. One of its most important exports was rubber and the horrendous treatment of the locals to maximise profits was made infamous by Roger Casement in his Casement Report of 1904 ([Casement](#) travelled for weeks in the upper Congo Basin to interview people throughout the region, including workers, overseers and mercenaries. He delivered a long, detailed eyewitness report to the Crown that exposed abuses: “the enslavement, mutilation, and torture of natives on the rubber plantations”).



Civilian victims of [mutilation](#) by Free State authorities (Mutilated Congolese children and adults (c. 1900-1905) — in Congo Free State (present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo) Privately owned

territory of Belgian King Leopold II, with numerous enslaved rubber collection/production areas in the rainforest and on plantations. Rubber production used human rights abuses against the Congolese people, including amputations for unmet quotas and other colonial offenses.)

By 1908 Leopold ceded the country and it became a Belgian colony. By the 1960s the burgeoning nationalist movement was strong enough to put Patrice Lumumba of the Mouvement National Congolais into power as the first Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo.

When a mutiny broke out in the army the ensuing violence led to the former colonial powers and the UN sending in troops. However, when UN **Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld** refused to let the UN troops help the Lumumba government, Lumumba reacted by asking for support from the Soviet Union.

Thus began the Cold War competition between the West and the East for control of the neo-colonial state.

Image: Patrice Lumumba, first democratically [elected](#) Prime Minister of the Congo-Léopoldville.



The jazz element of the story comes to the fore when the US State Department sends **Louis Armstrong** to win the hearts and minds of the people of Africa, while at the same time the government was covertly organising the overthrow of the government. The irony of American attempts to retain control by using black culture and music as an influence though hailing from a country where the colour bar was still in operation, was not lost on the audience.

The situation was forced when Mobutu, Lumumba's chief military aide, organised a coup d'état and established a new government.

The news that Lumumba had been killed was released gradually and this eventually led to the Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach demonstration at the UN Security Council meeting in 1961.

Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat harks back to a time when radical political activity was so much more to the fore than it is now. It could be seen in the open revolt by figures such as Khrushchev within the UN, Lincoln and Roach from without, and in the content and form of

the jazz music of the time. To understand the power that the right combination of politics and culture can unleash, this film is a rare gem, guaranteed to send shivers down your spine.

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