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Refugee All Stars: We are still undefeated

The Refugee All Stars were forged from civil war and atrocity, and found hope in making music. Andy Morgan meets them

Reuben Koroma has no difficulty remembering the day the dogs of war first paid him a visit. "I was in Lungi, to the north of Freetown, with my band The Emperors. There was a heavy fight between the UN peacekeepers, Ecomog, and the ruling government who were in alliance with the rebel RUF. I was hiding in my house, under my bed for about 12 hours, and I heard a lot of explosions. Then the Ecomog forces did house-to-house searches and they arrested me and took me to their camp in the international airport. There they told me to squat, tortured me and beat me up. I was not alone. They even wanted to kill us, but then an officer from a Ghanaian peacekeeping force who knew us well said, 'These guys are not rebels, they are civilians, you should let them go.' As soon as I was freed I said to my wife, 'Look, I lost my mother, I lost my father, and now I almost lost my life, so please let us leave.' So we left and walked north. Finally we arrived in Guinea where we registered as refugees."

That was back in 1997. It's now 2006 and the contrast in Koroma's fortunes could not be starker. He's sitting in a hotel room in Nashville, Tennessee, telling me his story. Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars, the band he formed at the end of the 1990s in the Kalia refugee camp in southern Guinea, is about to start a second triumphant US tour.

The award-winning documentary film *The Refugee All Stars*, shot by dauntless American duo Zach Niles and Banker White, with help from the Canadian singer-songwriter Chris Vilen, has catapulted Koroma and his fellow musicians onto the world stage and recruited a club of A-list fans and backers including Keith Richards, Sir Paul McCartney, Bob Geldof, Cameron Crowe, Aerosmith's Joe Perry and Ice Cube. And now the group's debut CD *Living Like a Refugee* is coming out in the UK, just in time to remind us all of the enduring power of music to heal.

"In a refugee situation, I believe everyone has a psychological problem," Ruben explains. "Music is good therapy. If the mind is fully occupied with problems, if there is no way to purge them, you go mad or crazy, with music, you can neutralise them."

The music that Ruben brewed up with the help of his wife Grace, guitarist Francis "Franco" Langba, vocalist Abdul Rahim Kamara, orphan rapper Black Nature and a host of other refugees back in those forlorn Guinean camps, sounds to the uneducated ear like classic Studio One reggae, a defiantly warm and good-humoured African throwback to the gorgeous harmony vocals and lilting backbeat of The Heptones, Burning Spear or Carlton and the Shores. But stylistic boundaries and lineages have long been blurred by the criss-crossing migrations of people and cultures across the Atlantic, and what sounds like reggae is in fact an age-old West-African rhythm called *baskeda*, which the Refugee All Stars have simply modernised with electric guitars, bass and drums, coupling it with other native styles like *gumbé* and Sierra Leone's hitherto most successful musical export, palm wine music.

"Baskeda... that's my father's music," Koroma tells me. "I used to love it when I was a kid so when I grew up I just tried to compose songs in that rhythm. Funnily enough people always call it reggae. I don't know how it happens. Coincidentally, Jamaica must have a relationship with Freetown. To me, it's just like a baskeda feeling."

Koroma was already a professional musician and member of The Emperors, a successful combo on the Freetown circuit lead by his musical mentor Ashade Pearce, when Foday Sankoh's rebel army of brutal enforcers and brainwashed Kalashnikov-toting kids brought his homeland to its knees. In the precarious refuge of the Guinean camps, Ruben turned again to music for strength and solace. "I had a lot to say to the world and to my fellow Sierra Leoneans," he remembers. "We had a lot of grievances and our intention was to bring a change through music."

Some far-sighted employees of the local UNHCR bureau supplied Ruben and his troupe with a basic set of instruments, mics and amplifiers. Their intentions were as pragmatic as they were charitable. "At that time when the UNHCR wanted to hold a meeting, it was very difficult to get the cooperation of the refugees," Ruben explains. "But as soon as we started people would gather round and they could have successful meetings."

The Refugee All Stars were rehearsing when Zach Niles, Banker White and Chris Vilen walked into their makeshift rehearsal room. The trio had been scouring the refugee camps for musicians who might make a good subject for a film illustrating the tragic fall-out of Sierra Leone's civil war. When they met the All Stars they struck gold.

The Refugee All Stars film is a hymn to the strength of the human spirit. It does not spare us from the graphic brutality of the conflict, but it juxtaposes it with life-affirming moments of defiant hope and forgiveness. One of the film's most poignant figures is percussionist Mohammed "Makengo" Kamara, who saw his whole family slaughtered and had one of his hands amputated. When the group are offered a chance to pay a return visit to Freetown, sponsored by the UNHCR, Kamara cannot find the strength to go. The others return to their devastated hometown.

"This was a sweet, sweet country," Koroma muses wistfully. The brutality of my fellow countrymen is one of the things that surprises me too, but this is all caused by illiteracy and greed. In my country, the rich people were not providing for the poor masses, and for the children of the poor. There was no education. So when Foday Sankoh came he was able to captivate the poor people's spirit. Most of these youths were fooled and so they went into the bush and started to commit atrocities."

Ultimately, in the darkness of despair and exile, Koroma and his fellow musicians found unexpected lodes of strength and hope. "Music is with the spirit of man," Koroma asserts. "And the spirit of man is the power of man. So if you can speak to a man through his spirit, then you have already spoken to him the best way."

'Living Like a Refugee' is out now on Anti; Refugee All Stars play Islington Academy, London N1 (www.ticketweb.co.uk) on 4 December

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