

A Wild Night at the Hackney Empire

*African Congolese band **Staff Benda Bilili** is wowing audiences round the country. **Louise Wallis** spoke to two lucky people who went to one of their gigs.*

Staff Benda Bilili is one of the hottest bands around. This acclaimed African 8-piece is fronted by five middle-aged wheelchair users (one of them a champion arm wrestler), and backed by three able-bodied musicians, including Roger Landu a former street kid who plays his homemade satonge (a onestring electric 'lute' made from a tin can) like Jimi Hendrix.

Their music has won them 5 star reviews and many fans. Last year, they sold out the Royal Festival Hall, an unprecedented feat for an unknown band. This year they played Glastonbury and Womad, and in July the Hackney Empire where the audience included a group of staff and service-users from the Elfrida Society. I interviewed two of them, Yvonne Swift and Paula Heath.

Louise: How did it come about?

Paula: Seán (Seán Kelly, Elfrida's CEO) told me there were some tickets to see the show. He said it was a disabled African band from the Congo, and I said I'd love to go.

Louise:What was it like?

Yvonne: Absolutely brilliant. I was downstairs dancing nearly all the time. Everyone enjoyed it – they played for over an hour and came back for an encore. The music was great to dance to – really brought people together.

Paula: The gig was wonderful. I like listening to African Congolese music. I didn't know what they were saying – it was the beat that kept me going. The atmosphere was wild!

Louise: Did you think about the band members being disabled?

Yvonne: I didn't really see their disabilities. They were so amazing. At the end everyone stood up and clapped. The atmosphere was electric. The band

members all danced – me too. I lost pounds that night!

Paula: I was aware they had a disability and I was surprised at their ability to play music. Everyone was standing up and I couldn't see anything so I went down to the front. I was dancing from start to finish. The band members were moving their wheelchairs to the beat. The guy on crutches – he can do some movements he can! One of the artists came out of his wheelchair and got on the floor and danced and then climbed back in.

Louise: I heard you went backstage. How did you wangle that?

Yvonne: Susanne (a staff member) asked if we wanted to meet the band. It was amazing to go backstage at the Hackney Empire. They were very friendly. Even though it was hard to speak the language they made us feel welcome through their body language. We communicated by copying the dance and sign language. The manager even offered us a glass of wine but we didn't take it as we thought the band needed it more.

Paula: I was amazed seeing them. I said, "*Je m'appelle Paula*". He told me his name was Coco. Then he sang a song to me and I had a little dance. We talked about Zaire artists like Koffie Olumide and Papa Wemba. He stuck his thumbs up. I said, "*Ça va?*" and he said, "*Ça va bien*".

Louise:What was the highlight?

Yvonne: Seeing the band backstage and their music – it was awesome. It was also great to meet lots of other people from Elfrida.

Paula: Everything! It was a wonderful experience.

Staff Benda Bilili's album *Tres Tres Fort* is available now on the Crammed World label.

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