

Soundtrack to a Coup d'État [12A]

2024 France

150 mins

UK released **15 November 2024**

Director **John Grimonprez**

Screenplay **Johan Grimonprez; Daan Milius**

Cinematography **Jonathan Wannyn**

Cast **Louis Armstrong; Dizzy Gillespie; Abbey Lincoln; Max Roach; Nina Simone; Miriam Makeba; John Coltrane; Duke Ellington; Charles Mingus; Nikita Khrushchev; Malcolm X; Fidel Castro (and many more...)**

In February 1961, the jazz singer Abbey Lincoln and drummer Max Roach gatecrashed the UN Security Council to protest against the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the Democratic Republic of Congo's first post-independence prime minister. In a decade of seismic protest, it's an incident that might seem a fleeting early tremor. But Johan Grimonprez's *Soundtrack to a Coup d'État* takes this collision of politics and jazz, Cold War and colonialism, and lays out with cool precision the different strands of its backstory.

The core of Grimonprez's narrative is as grimy and gripping as any spy novel: how Belgium, forced to concede Congolese independence, poisoned it through a divide-and-rule strategy that saw the Katanga province (which happened to contain the country's most valuable mineral deposits) secede in turn from Congo. Backed by a United States determined to hold on to Congo's uranium, UN intervention to maintain the peace became the enforcement of American interests – with fatal consequences for Lumumba.

Grimonprez – himself Belgian – literally soundtracks the slow unfolding of this malfeasance with jazz of the period fired up with a new sense of political activism and Afrocentrism, from Max Roach's *Freedom Now Suite* to Nina Simone, Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane and mellower figures such as Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie. This music presents

a kind of commentary on Lumumba’s struggle and defeat but, in Grimonprez’s telling, has a tragic dimension of its own: musicians such as Armstrong and Gillespie were convinced to tour Africa and Asia as cultural outreach – activities that later turned out to be CIA-backed PR exercises. “America’s weapon was a blue note in a minor key,” ran one report.

Soundtrack to a Coup d’État tells its story without voiceover. There are a few clips of elderly American and British intelligence operatives reminiscing decades later about what great fun the blackmail, bribery and assassination plots were. But it is overwhelmingly told through contemporary voices, giving it a similar feel to the oral history of Göran Olsson’s 2011 documentary *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*. Grimonprez allows himself the occasional symbolic detail: grainy film of an elephant hoisted into the air and later dumped crudely into a cargo ship is a motif, while flash-forwards to modern Tesla and Apple products remind us that the scramble for Africa (and its mineral wealth) continues. Setting aside the conceptual playfulness of *Double Take*, his delightful 2009 riff on Hitchcock, Borges and the Cold War, Grimonprez accesses a new level of serious historical filmmaking.

Sam Davies, *Sight and Sound*, 4 October 2024

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