

Death Metal Angola: Rotterdam Review

Jeremy Xido's US-Angolan documentary traces how an extreme form of rock music has taken root in war-torn corner of south-west Africa.

BY THR STAFF

FEBRUARY 11, 2013 3:51PM



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An upbeat chronicle of very hard rock in a very hard place, *Death Metal Angola* is one of the livelier and more enticingly exotic additions to the ever-burgeoning music-documentary sub-genre. An American-Angolan co-production that represents a likeably promising big-screen debut for Detroit-born globetrotter **Jeremy Xido**, this brisk survey of ear-splitting bands in an African country recovering from horrific civil war will prove a popular choice for festivals and small-

screen programmers alike following its December world premiere in Dubai and European bow in Rotterdam.

Known for most of the 20th century as Nova Lisboa (“New Lisbon”), the city of Huambo is now the second-biggest in Angola, the former Portuguese colony in south-west Africa that’s triple the size of California. As the film says, Huambo was “completely ravaged and brutalized” by the civil war that convulsed the nation from independence in 1975 until 2002. Xido’s main focus is the city’s Okutiuka orphanage run by tireless **Sonia Ferreira**, who with her boyfriend **Wilker Flores** organizes the country’s first rock festival to help the institution by raising awareness and funds.

The picture’s first hour introduces us to the orphanage, Sonia, Wilker and the “death metal” bands such as the one with which the Wilker performs — cue an amusing contrast between his soft-spoken off-stage persona and the guttural growl that’s his preferred vocal style. Then in the closing half-hour the picture becomes a kind of low-fi variant of **Jeffrey Levi-Hinte**’s *Soul Power* (2008) as the day of the festival (suddenly) dawns and back-stage chaos sees the organisers struggles to meet the announced and extremely optimistic 6pm start-time.

But whereas the 1974 Zaire mega-concert presented in *Soul Power* showcased international headliners like **James Brown**, **Miriam Makeba** and **B.B.King**, all but the most adventurous of aficionados will be unfamiliar with *Death Metal Angola*’s array of acts such as Before Crush, Dor Fantasma and Nothing To Lose. Xido and his editor **Todd Holmes** provide a functional primer to the scene, their economic briskness occasionally a little frustrating. It’s never really explained, for example, how much of a following these bands have; how they fit in (or otherwise) with Angola’s other music scenes; or if their lyrics and off-stage activities address the bloody divisions which left much of their country in ruins. Metal music can, for all its spiky swagger, be

among the most conservative and apolitical of musical forms, and a little more cultural context would have been welcome.

Instead, Xido is drawn repeatedly to the eminently movie-genic orphanage and its young residents, and there's the sense that there are dozens of potential angles and stories here which could be fruitfully explored in a picture whose professional slickness and carefully-composed images don't really match the DIY roughness of the bands on view. The unrealized potential of Angolan youth, for example, is touchingly epitomized by ill-fated young graffiti-artist 'Yakuza', whose story is only fleetingly mentioned here. The arrival of little 'Pancho' at the orphanage is, by contrast, allowed extended screen-time in a picture which sometimes give a sense of struggling to strike an optimal balance between disparate elements. The latter stages, however, settle into more conventional, familiar, will-the-show-go-on territory, Xido and Holmes wrapping up proceedings on nicely clangorous, rousing energetic and pleasurably persuasive notes.

Venue: Rotterdam Film Festival (Signals), January 29, 2013.

Production companies: Coalition Films, Cabula 6

Director / Screenwriter: Jeremy Xido

Producers: Jeremy Xido, Joseph Castelo

Executive producer: David Gallagher

Directors of photography: Johan LeGraie, Jeremy Xido

Music: Christian Frederickson