

because I am respecting the other people involved," she says. "But I started saying no to him. I fought to make change for my mum and sisters."

It was her father, nonetheless, who nicknamed her Pongo after Congolese singer M'Pongo Love (who'd been unable to walk after polio treatment). Her long rehabilitation (she'd broken a leg) involved catching the train to physiotherapy sessions; she'd arrive early to watch kuduro group Denon Squad perform on the platform. "I was always there, so shy, dreaming of joining in. One day they called on me to show them a dance move," she says. "I reached deep inside myself and danced, and they invited me to join the group. I was so happy. Later they brought me into the studio to sing because their vocalist was away. It was really only for fun. I was a dancer, not a singer."

"Somehow a tape made its way to Buraka Som Sistema" – an electro-kuduro group signed to Sony BMG – "who wanted me to sing with them too. I was 15," Pongo shrugs. "So I went and recorded my song 'Kalemba (Wegue Wegue)', which talks about my father's street dancing competitions, and the street I grew up on in Luanda. Then they took me on a big tour of Portugal. I had to learn fast."

Loosely translated as Storm (Victory), peppered with references to semba, baobab trees and *makumba* (sorcery) 'Kalemba (Wegue Wegue)' was a monster hit that featured on soundtracks for video games including *Need for Speed* and *FIFA 10*. But Pongo received no royalties. "By then my father had left and I was carrying a lot of responsibility. I thought I was helping my family financially but I was naive. After two years I left. It was not a good first experience with the industry."

Several years of menial jobs followed. Pongo was working as a cleaner when she heard 'Kalemba (Wegue Wegue)' on the radio and – a lightning bolt realisation – understood that she could re-enter the biz on her own terms. And her timing was right. Technological advances and an influx of sounds from postcolonial Angola, Guinea, Cape Verde and Mozambique were transforming the Lisbon music scene.

Her 2018 EP *Baia*, with its hints of Caribbean *zouk* and Brazilian samba,

marked her out as an artist taking kuduro in new directions. Her second coming began. In 2019 she played the Fête de la Musique in Paris before French president Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte ("I felt equality in this moment; he told me she dances to kuduro"). 2020's *Uwa* broadened her fanbase and consolidated her themes. "In my songs I have diversity, liberty, freedom. I believe in positivity."

And in keeping negative energy at bay. In 2021 Pongo's coiled, joyful *COLORSxSTUDIOS* performance of 'Bruxos' (Witches) drew so many YouTube hits it got her onto Spotify's EQUAL Global playlist. Her image duly featured on a billboard in New York's Times Square.

'Bruxos' with its chattering '*digui digui digui*' refrain and bold self-references ('*Pongo on beat, annihilates without fear*,' she declaims in Portuguese), was a stand-out of Pongo's Oslo World 2021 concert, the catalyst for ecstatic fans to jump onstage and dance. It was a high point that clinched Pongo's repeat invite, and brought her to Tromsø, the furthest north she's ever been. "Pongo has the X Factor," says Oslo World's Alexandra Archetti Stølen. "We loved her so much we decided to create a tour for her in Norway and, as expected, from Bergen to Tromsø the response was amazing. She works very hard. She runs in the morning. She is a mother. She loves playing live and brings the same power

to a small venue that she does a 10,000 strong arena. People go crazy for her."

Pongo tours intensively, appearing always in a flamboyant and ever-changing array of outfits, hair colours and nail designs. She has form at Glastonbury, across Europe and in Canada. She'll tour the UK again in June, and in July she's at WOMAD. Tromsø, she tells me, was life affirming. "Walking outside at night and seeing these lights in the sky, this aurora borealis, was a very spiritual experience that touched me deeply."

Pongo flashes a smile. "I have come a very long way." ♦

+ **LIVE** Pongo plays WOMAD (July 27-30) among many shows this summer

"AT SCHOOL [IN LISBON] I WANTED TO **SHARE MY CULTURE**, BUT THERE WAS SO MUCH DISCRIMINATION. I WAS TAUNTED BY THE OTHER KIDS, EVEN BY TEACHERS"



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