

lent grit by Nigerian Afrobeats artist Swazzi. Tschala (Eliane Umuhire), Koffi's hip and vivacious sister, is intent on decamping to Nigeria or South Africa with her polyamorous, STD-passing boyfriend ("Europe's been over since 2008," she quips). Her album, says Baloji, is a paean to womanhood and female sexuality ('*We can be resilient / without having the values of men*' run the lyrics on 'Matrone'); 'Autopsy', also for Tschala, is inspired by the "freedom-fighting spirit" of Congolese singer Tshala Muana. "Muana [1958-2022] was one of the most important female Congolese singers ever," says Baloji. "She advocated for female freedom, emancipation and true sexuality in relation to men [in Congo]."

Then there is Koffi's mother Mujila (Yves-Marina Gnahoua), stiff-backed and suspicious of Kofi, Alice and Tschala until she is widowed and cast aside. She gets the reflective 'Gorgone (Too Old)' with its arpeggiated guitar and Chicago diva Jamila Woods' vocal blessings: "The mom's music is more reflective of time passing and what she is ultimately confronted with," says Baloji. He continues, "The albums became tools for the rest of the team, the designers and cinematographer [Joaquim Phillipe] as well as the actors." Baloji worked with Belgian auteur Liesa Van der Aa on the largely ambient background music within the film itself. "We took out most of the vocals... they took you away from the narration."

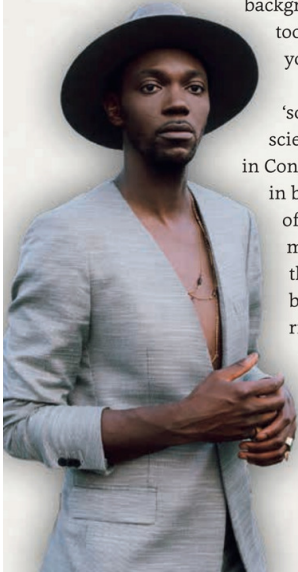
While Baloji's name translates to 'sorcerer' in Swahili ("It meant 'man of science' until the onset of Christianity in Congo"), and although filming was done in both Kinshasa and the mining town of Lubumbashi, his birthplace, 3,000 miles apart ("Congo tries to separate these two cities and their ethnicities by having no direct roads or train-rides; I wanted to join the country using a fake location") he insists the movie is not autobiographical. '*I don't write as Baloji*,' he has said. '*I write as Baloji under the skin of the characters.*'



“The image is an extension of the music and the words... It all goes together”

Fast-moving, with lurching camera angles and intriguing non-linear visuals – there's a Mardi Gras marching band, kid gang members dressed in tiaras and pink dresses and a random countertenor (Baloji's cousin, Serge Kakudji) breaking into golden song – the 90-minute film also speaks to Baloji's work as a commercials director. While he has said that this, his most lucrative side-hustle, is invariably looked down on by purist filmmakers (Baloji never formally studied film), it nonetheless equipped him to shoot *Omen* over a strict 23-day schedule. "I know how to be extremely efficient," says Baloji.

Everything he does is linked by invisible silver threads. "For me the image is an extension of the music and the words; I love to write poetry. Hip-hop is an extension of poetry. It all goes together. I used to have a one-dimensional idea of music from Congo until I went there," says Baloji, who has collaborated with the likes of *likembe*-twanging sensations Konono No 1, and whose band, L'Orchestre de la Katuba, includes veteran guitarist Dizzy Mandjeku (former bandleader of Orchestre OK



SONGLINES.CO.UK

Left and right: Stills from *Omen*



Jazz after Franco's passing), seen at festivals including WOMAD playing from a chair.

"There are lots of styles, but many of them are ignored or underdeveloped because unlike, say, South Africa, there is no real music industry." Born Serge Baloji Tshiani, he was three years old when his late businessman father stole him away from his mother, a local from Lubumbashi, and disappeared to Ostend on the Belgian coast because Marvin Gaye had written his 1981 smash hit 'Sexual Healing' there ("My dad loved Marvin Gaye, followed by Julio Iglesias"), later leaving him with his stepfamily in Liège.

Until his early 20s he was all about tagging and graffiti, hip-hop and industrial electro. He started rapping at a youth centre between running with a gang; at that same time he wrote verse, winning a poetry competition in France ("A poem about being young and bored"). Aged 15, he co-founded a hip-hop troupe called Starflam that made him a national heart-throb; aged 20 he spent four months in detention when Belgian officials unexpectedly refused to renew his visa, an experience that

became the focus for his 2017 faux-feel good "refugee disco" song 'L'hiver Indien' (Indian Winter), included on the *FIFA 18* soundtrack, and 'La Dernière Pluie', in which he asserts that his music is 'too black for the whites and too white for the Blacks.'

He'd been working in a film and record shop ("Obsessed with each new release") and on the verge of giving up music as a career when, in 2007, he got a letter from his mother, their first contact in 25 years. He recorded his autobiographical solo debut, *Hotel Impala*, in an attempt to tell her what he'd been up to. Their meeting did not go well: "There was a culture clash, a clash of expectations. Me and Congo had a tough time until I gave up trying to fit in. Once I accepted that I am from the diaspora, that the way I walk, talk and think is different, everything was fine."

This feeling of displacement – of artist-as-witness – dovetails with the narratives explored across Baloji's oeuvre. Of the Oscars selection for *Omen* (which unfortunately did not make the final shortlist of nominations for Best International Feature Film), he says "I am so pleased to be the Belgian candidate, knowing that I embody the Congo, knowing the weight of the colonial heritage that binds us."

"I hope we will see more and more African filmmakers at Cannes, at the Oscars. I come from the music world, and I know how difficult it is for musicians to have a career after two or three albums. But on a personal level it has given me a certain freedom to make a second film" – he won't be drawn on its content – "which is great because I love working."

He pauses for a beat. "Creativity is a muscle," he says. "I'm on a long journey. I have to keep it in shape." ♦

+ *Omen*, the film, will be screened in the US from April 12 and in the UK from April 26, as well as other dates across Europe. The four *Omen* albums will be released digitally on April 5 (in addition to a vinyl release).

Kristin Leen Moonman Wrong Men