

Documentary on the assassination of Patrice Lumumba

Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat: Imperialist criminality to a jazz accompaniment

Fred Mazelis
29 November 2024

Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat, written and directed by Belgian filmmaker Johan Grimonprez, deals with the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, who became the first president of the newly independent Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1960. This murder was one of the most brutal and brazen of the many crimes committed by imperialism in the post-World War II period, as the US ruling class exerted its mostly unchallenged power.

Lumumba, a left nationalist politician, had won parliamentary elections in May 1960. He became prime minister of the Congo when it was granted formal independence by its Belgian colonizers in June. Seven months later he was dead, the victim of great power intrigue and conspiracy in which both the US and Belgium played roles. Lumumba was considered dangerous by the Belgian authorities and by the Union Minière mining company, and also mistrusted by Washington, above all because of his diplomatic overtures to the Soviet Union.

The newly independent state was immediately plunged into political chaos. Lumumba was unconstitutionally dismissed by President Joseph Kasa Vubu in early September. About 10 days later, Colonel Joseph Mobutu, who had been appointed to military leadership by Lumumba himself, staged a coup. After another few months, Mobutu, strongly encouraged in all of his actions by US imperialism, handed Lumumba over to rebels in the mineral-rich separatist province of Katanga, under its president Moïse Tshombe. Lumumba was tortured and assassinated in January 1961. Although Congolese soldiers carried it out, the killing clearly had the approval of several imperialist regimes and their intelligence agencies, particularly the CIA, then led by the notorious Allen Dulles.

This is vital history, from more than six decades ago, that the vast majority of today's global population knows nothing about. The film mostly dispenses with the usual accounts from living witnesses or historians, instead using archival footage and excerpts from memoirs and from historical accounts, complete with on-screen citations. This is combined and interwoven, as suggested by the title of the documentary itself, with recorded performances by some of the most famous African-American jazz musicians.

The musical element of the film is motivated by the fact that figures like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington served as "jazz ambassadors" during the Cold War. The Voice of America broadcast jazz all over the world for propaganda purposes. During a period when Jim Crow segregation still prevailed in most of the South, black Congressman Adam Clayton Powell is shown introducing jazz great Dizzy Gillespie and boasting that he and other musicians would be

used in a "Cool" War.

Gillespie, Armstrong and others may have been motivated by a naïve patriotism. They thought they were bringing music and culture to a broader international audience, but they were used by the State Department to advance the diplomatic aims of the US government, and indeed unwittingly used to draw attention away from Washington's role in Lumumba's murder and other atrocities.

Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat relates this history, dealing for the most part with the decade between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s. Focus is on the year 1960, and the fate of Lumumba. There are some powerful elements, including archival footage of the events in the Congo as well as their reverberations at the United Nations headquarters in New York. We see US President Dwight Eisenhower and CIA Director Dulles. Twice-defeated Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson is shown representing Washington at the UN. We also see UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev; Congolese politicians Kasa Vubu and Tshombe, in addition to Lumumba; and the young Belgian King Baudouin and right-wing Belgian Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens.

The historical context, as depicted in the film in some detail, is the Cold War of the 1950s and '60s. Attention is focused on the Bandung Conference in 1955. The meeting of newly independent African and Asian nations in Bandung, Indonesia, gave rise to the Non-Aligned Movement, which maneuvered between the Soviet bloc and the imperialist world. This process is represented on screen through the presence of such figures as Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana; Sukarno, the founding president of Indonesia; Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser; Fidel Castro of Cuba; and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India.

The film stresses the jockeying for influence between the USSR and the United States. The roots of the Cold War are not probed, however, and there is no mention of the Russian Revolution or the decades-long crusade against the threat posed to world capitalism by the international working class. We are informed about the area's huge mineral riches, especially the vast deposits of uranium that were supplied to the US from the Belgian Congo during WWII. Flashed across the screen is the estimated current value of precious mineral deposits in the Congo: \$24 trillion.

Of particular importance are the documentary's numerous interviews and other accounts, supplied with citations and footnotes, concretely exposing the role of US and Belgian authorities in the murder of Lumumba. Robert Johnson, for instance, a National Security Council staff member at the time, is quoted as follows:

“President Eisenhower said something—I can no longer remember his exact words—that came to me as an order for the assassination of Lumumba.”

Daphne Park, then representing the British intelligence agency MI6, is shown in an archival interview, smirking and practically boasting of the British role in elevating Mobutu and encouraging the abduction and assassination of Lumumba. “They will destroy each other,” she observes with satisfaction.

William Burden, the former president of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and a corporate executive with mining interests in the Congo, was appointed the US ambassador to Belgium during this period. He explained, in a 1968 interview, that the Belgians were “toying with the idea” of eliminating Lumumba. “I didn’t think it would be a bad idea either.”

“Mad” Mike Hoare, the Irish mercenary leader whose infamous role was not confined to the Congo, is shown on screen boasting that “50 well-trained mercenaries can overthrow a government.” Hoare has been quoted as saying, “Killing communists is like killing vermin. Killing African nationalists is like killing animals. I don’t like either of them. My men and I killed between five and ten thousand Congolese rebels during the twenty months I spent in the Congo.”

The events of this period, crucial for an understanding of African and world politics today, are linked throughout *Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat* with jazz performances by—in addition to Armstrong and Ellington—Gillespie, Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach, Nina Simone, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Archie Shepp and other musicians. The music is not simply an element of the film. With classic performances and recordings identified on screen, it permeates much of the documentary.

The music is of course extraordinary, but the combination of music and history is not always effective. It gives the film an impressionistic, kaleidoscopic character. The viewer who knows the history will be distracted at times, and will perhaps conclude that the music is primarily a device used to “spice up” the historical material, lest the viewer decide the story is tedious. The viewer for whom this is new will be entertained by the music but may learn less from the history.

This is not to minimize the strengths of the material, much of it riveting. In its closing minutes, the film shows footage of Lumumba being brutalized in captivity before his assassination. This is followed by the powerful protest at the UN Security Council on February 15, 1961, weeks after Lumumba’s murder. Singer Lincoln and poet Maya Angelou organized it. US representative Stevenson, the noted liberal defender of the crimes of American imperialism, stares open-mouthed as the protesters run throughout the room and scream their accusations of assassination and torture at the assembled dignitaries.

This documentary has a weakness far more serious and consequential than the hybrid manner in which it combines music and history. That is its uncritical attitude toward nationalism, and pan-Africanism in particular.

The assassination of Lumumba is seen as a particularly bitter episode in the ongoing struggle of oppressed and economically deprived peoples against imperialism. The history of the 20th century is presented in purely national terms, and without reference to the international class struggle, or to the century as one of imperialist decay. As one reviewer phrased it, the film shows how these events “led to the end of the dream of a united Global South during the height of the Cold War.”

This points to another reason for the use of American jazz in *Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat*. The musicians are seen as part of an

African diaspora, and the struggle represented by Lumumba is seen not only as the expression of pan-Africanism, but as black nationalism more broadly. This was indeed the outlook of some of the musicians included, including Lincoln, Roach and Simone.

But what is missing from this picture (both literally and figuratively)? The 20th century was not only the century of Lumumba and decolonization of Africa. It was above all the century of the Russian Revolution, the century in which socialism became an international force, and imperialism mobilized a vicious counterrevolutionary response.

Part of this was the growth of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which reinforced the isolation of the first workers’ state. Stalinism functioned as the main agency of imperialism, carrying out a murderous campaign to destroy the leadership of the 1917 Revolution while claiming to rule in its name. Stalinism betrayed the cause of socialism and of actual revolutionary struggles, and then it finally dissolved the Soviet Union itself in 1991, reintroducing capitalism.

One of the most misleading parts of this documentary is its uncritical depiction of Stalinist leader Khrushchev as a loyal ally of Lumumba and others. In fact, the colonial revolution, as part of other struggles, was only used by the Moscow bureaucracy as a bargaining tool within the framework of the Cold War.

What is the legacy of Lumumba, and of the entire Non-Aligned Movement to which he oriented? Those who sought a “middle way” for the developing countries all failed. Of those who are shown in this film, Ghana’s Nkrumah and Indonesia’s Sukarno were ousted. Nasser gave way eventually to such filthy figures as Sadat, Mubarak and the current butcher, al-Sisi. And the present president of India is the Hindu supremacist Narendra Modi and his BJP, not the Congress Party of Gandhi and Nehru. The only nationalist leader who can be said to have survived politically was Castro, but “survival” must be used advisedly. The bankruptcy of Castro’s national road is plain for all to see.

Today a new siren song is heard, one that portrays the central struggle as one of the Global South against the North. This myth is used to erase the class distinctions between the capitalist rulers and the oppressed workers and peasants in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This is behind the appeals for “multipolarity” and the call of the BRICS countries for the reorganization of the world order. It is not to bring the working class to power and do away with the outmoded nation-state system, but rather to advance the interests of the reactionary ruling classes in these countries. The valuable and educative elements of *Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat* need to be seen in that context.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)