

Born Jules Shungu Wembadio Pene Kikumba on June 14, 1949, in the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (then known as Belgian Congo). Addresses: Record company--Sonodisc, 85 rue de Fondary, 75015 Paris, France.

Papa Wemba, also known as the "King of Rhumba Rock," is one of Africa's most flamboyant and cosmopolitan musicians. He broke out of his native Democratic Republic of Congo to become one of the most internationally successful world music artists of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Long a hero in his native country with bands such as Zaïko Langa Langa, Isifi Lokole, and Yoka Lokole, Wemba reached superstar status there with his band Viva La Musica. After some time in Europe, Wemba set his sights on international acclaim, and achieved it with the group Molokai International. Still singing in his native tongue, he headlined Peter Gabriel's World of Music and Dance (WOMAD) tour and secured a global audience.

Papa Wemba was born Jules Shungu Wembadio Pene Kikumba on June 14, 1949, in the Kasai region of what was then known as the Belgian Congo, then later as Zaire, and now is called the Democratic Republic of Congo. He is a member Tetela tribe and was raised as a direct descendent of a long line of BaTetela warrior chieftains. He later earned full Tetela warrior chieftain status from the clan's elders for his contribution to music and culture. His family moved to the Congolese capital of Kinshasa when he was six. His mother, who died in 1973, was a "pleureuse," or professional mourner, hired to sing at funerals. Wemba counts his mother as one of his leading influences; he spent many days as a child watching her work. "If Mother was still alive, I would be rich in words and rich in melodies," he is quoted as saying on his official website. "She was my first teacher and my first audience." After his father's death in 1966, Wemba joined the choir of St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church. He gave up religious music when he left the church, but counts it as an influence.

Led Popular African Group

Wemba founded his own group, Zaïko Langa Langa, which became one of the nation's most popular youth bands of the Rhumba-rock movement. His singing style, influenced by American R&B, earned him the nickname "Presley." When President Mobutu Sese Seko launched his "Campaign of Authenticity"--modeled after China's Cultural Revolution--in 1971, Zaïko Langa Langa flourished. The campaign instituted a return to Zairian identity, and Zairians dropped their Christian names--Wemba stopped using his first name, Jules, as well as his nickname, Presley--and abandoned European-influenced music and fashion. Because Zaïko Langa Langa was thoroughly Zairian, they were supported by the president's campaign. Because they appealed to Zairian youth, they were tremendously successful and influential. On Wemba's website, the group's impact on Zaire's musical culture is even likened to that of the Sex Pistols on Britain in the late 1970s. Wemba recalled it as a heady and rebellious time, when he and his bandmates were experimenting with music. They used as many as six singers, and forsook traditional wind instruments for electric instruments and drum machines. Wemba composed many of the group's hit songs, including "Pauline," "C'est La Vérité," "Chouchouna," and "Liwa Ya Somo." The group disbanded in 1974, citing internal differences. He had brief success after founding the groups Isifi Lokole and Yoka Lokole over the next two years.

In 1977 Wemba established the village community of Molokai in Kinshasa, which he set up as a type of commune for musicians. He founded his own group, Viva La Musica, soon after. As leader of the commune, he took on the nickname "Papa." The name Viva La Musica comes from an album title of the same name by New York salsa star Johnny Pacheco, whom Wemba also counts as an influence. The new group debuted in February of 1977, at the height of the Campaign for Authenticity.

Wemba's new group was obviously influenced by Western culture, as least as far as fashion was concerned. This appealed to Zairean youth, but drew attention from government censors as well. "I decided to focus on the clothes--to be very well dressed," he said in an interview with the music magazine Straight No Chaser. The band members wore banned European-designed clothes in such nontraditional fabrics as velvet and denim. Each vocalist in the group donned a different color beret, and fans would wear the color of their favorite singer. To balance their flamboyant appearance and head off a conflict with censors, Wemba added some traditional touches. The group's percussionist used a lokole, a traditional drum made from a hollowed-out log, and the group's repertoire was built on folk rhythms. Wemba was not really trying to be



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back on their rhythms. Wemba was not really trying to be sneaky--he actually backed Mobutu's campaign, and was a spokesman for a return to Africanism. One of Viva La Musica's first songs was dedicated to the first wife of President Mobutu, which likely did not hurt his cause. Less than a year after forming, Viva La Musica was named Best Orchestra, Papa Wemba Best Singer, and "Mère Supérieure" Best Song by Kinshasa's daily newspaper, *Elima*. The next two years saw an incredible wave of popularity for the group, fueled by a string of hit songs and dances, including "Moku Nyon Nyon," "Nyekesse Migue!", and "Cou Cou Dindon."

Paris Opened a New World

After a 1977 trip to Paris, Wemba became convinced there was a market for Zairian music abroad. Because only state-sponsored musical acts were allowed to tour outside Zaire, however, there was little chance of finding it. So in 1979 Wemba took a six-month break from the band and headed to Paris to join the group Afrisa International. The collaboration produced such successful singles as "Ngambo Moko" and "Levres Roses." Wemba performed with Afrisa International on Zairian state television and toured with the group to Senegal, Germany, and France, building European connections all the while. "I'm speaking from the heart when I say that Paris has allowed me to go everywhere--to reach the summit of international show business," he told CNN.

By the time he returned to Zaire, Wemba's pro-Authenticity stance had changed--he had gotten a taste of Europe and liked it. He launched the youth movement Sapeur, or SAPE (Society of Poseurs and Persons of Elegance) as it was commonly known, which promoted clean living and education to African youth. The movement was also controversial, as it challenged the Authenticity campaign's strict dress code to allow European imports. Wemba thrilled Zairean teens when he flouted the dress code on live Zairian television in 1981, dressed head to toe in European designer duds. Viva La Musica took fashion-worship to a new level, even writing designer names into song lyrics. The song "La Firenze" is a tribute to Italy's fashion influence. The group's fans were, in fact, fanatical about the band's snubbing of the government dress code. Wemba's music remained grounded in tradition, however. One of Wemba's most popular songs, "Ana Lengo," was sung in the KiTetela dialect and sold half a million copies in Africa. The government press criticized Viva La Musica, which only increased their popularity. The group regularly played to crowds of more than 50,000 fans. Ultimately, he told CNN, "I'm much more of a singer ... but I love dressing up."

Wemba's increasingly frequent trips to Europe put a strain on the band, and four members left. In 1982, he recorded solo material with two of France's leading artists, which broadened his solo appeal. He was gone so long--six months--that Viva La Musica began recording without him and rumors spread that he was dead or in jail. Fans poured into the streets of Kinshasa upon his return. He immediately recorded the popular song "Évacuation" and released two songs recorded in Paris, "Matebu" and "Santa." Wemba's distance from the band proved too much--in 1982, ten of Viva La Musica's 19 frontline musicians left to start their own group.

Turned His Back on Zaire

By 1983 Wemba had pieced together a new lineup for Viva La Musica. The new group released "Rumba Rock--Frenchen" which began selling well in Europe. In response to this, Wemba returned to Belgium to record his first album of non-Zairean music, *Malimba*. In 1984 Wemba "decided to slam the door on Zaire," as he reminisced on his website. "I said to myself, I don't want to play music only for Zaireans anymore. I am going to play music for all humanity." In 1985 Belgian television produced a documentary on Wemba called *Chef couturier de la rumba rock* (Chief of the rumba rock tribe). In 1986 he appeared in *La vie est belle* (Life is beautiful), the first feature film made in Zaire since 1960, the year of the country's independence from Belgium. In it he plays a young singer trying to make his way in Kinshasa.

Wemba then returned to music with the Viva La Musica album *L'Esclave*, on which he addresses slavery and racism. The releases appealed to both Wemba's diehard Zairian fans as well as his growing European base. Viva La Musica's 1986 Japanese tour expanded the group's audience into that region, as well. In Wemba's opinion, several of the Zairian musicians in Viva La Music were unable to adapt to the group's new international profile, and cuts were made. He believed, according to his website, that many Zairian musicians were "limited in their abilities to work with other non-African, musics [sic]. The only handicap of Zairian musicians is that they don't listen to music from outside of Zaire, like music that is done in Europe, the United States or other African countries."

After Wemba signed a solo worldwide management deal and he and several core Viva La Musica members relocated to Paris in 1987. His first solo world music album, Papa Wemba, was released in 1988. Fans and the remaining band members believed his solo career would eclipse that of the group, and that Viva La Musica's days were numbered. Indeed, Wemba formed a group of non-Zairian musicians he first called Viva, but later changed to Molokai International.

Found Global Audience

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the international spotlight began to shine on African music, and African artists such as Youssou N'dour and Baaba Maal found worldwide appeal. 1989 saw Wemba onstage in London and New York with Molokai International, and then on a world tour with Peter Gabriel's successful WOMAD tour. Wemba signed a solo record deal with Gabriel's Real World record label in 1991 that produced *Le Voyager* (1992), *Emotion* (1995), and *Molokai* (1998). *Emotion* was produced by Stephen Hague, who has produced records for such British pop acts as the Pet Shop Boys, Erasure, and New Order. Wemba was the opening act on Gabriel's 1993 *Secret World* tour and also performed on a string of charity concerts and recordings. He also has worked with an international cast of musicians that includes Gabriel, Eric Clapton, Stevie Wonder, Youssou N'dour, Lucky Dube, and South African vocalist Brenda Fasi. Despite his ever-widening appeal, Zairian purists criticized the watered-down crossover music he was making.

Wemba returned to Kinshasa in 1996, just before the fall of President Mobutu Sese Seko. He maintained the Europe-based members of Viva La Musica and Molokai International for his work abroad, but founded a new group of Zairian musicians, called Viva La Musica-Nouvelle Ecriture. "My original group is there for my Zairian fans who come to hear typical African sounds," he told *Straight No Chaser*. "But ... I formed another group to appeal to a different public." He earned an award for Best Artist at the first-ever All-African music awards in 1996, and later added the prefix "M'zee" (wise man) to his name. In 1999 Nouvelle Ecriture, Molokai International, old and new lineups of Viva La Musica, and even some members of Zaïko Langa Langa, played onstage together in Brussels and Paris. Also that year, Wemba was named chieftain of the Democratic Republic of Congo's Mongo ethnic group for his contributions to Congolese music and culture. He released *M'Zee Fula-Ngenge* in 2000 and *Bakala Dia Kuba* in 2001.

by Brenna Sanchez

Papa Wemba's Career

Started singing in a Roman Catholic Church choir, 1966; cofounded the group Zaïko Langa Langa, producing such hits as "Pauline," "C'est la Vérité," "Chouchouna," and "Liwa Ya Somo," 1969-74; founded and was lead vocalist in Isife Lokole, 1975-76; founded Viva La Musica, 1977; released the hit singles "Moku Nyon Nyon," "Nyekesse Migue'l," and "Cou Cou Dindon," 1977-79; took a six-month break from the band to join Afrisa International, releasing "Ngambo Moko" and "Levres Roses," 1979; toured Japan, 1986; moved to Paris, formed a European version of Viva la Musica, 1987; formed Molokai International, 1987; released Papa Wemba, 1988; appeared on the WOMAD tour, late 1980s; toured as the opening act for Peter Gabriel's *Secret World* tour, 1993; released *Emotion*, 1995; performed with Nouvelle Ecriture, Molokai International, old and new lineups of Viva La Musica, and members of Zaïko Langa Langa in Brussels and Paris, 1999; released *M'Zee Fula-Ngenge*, 2000; released *Bakala Dia Kuba*, 2001.

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