

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

BONGA

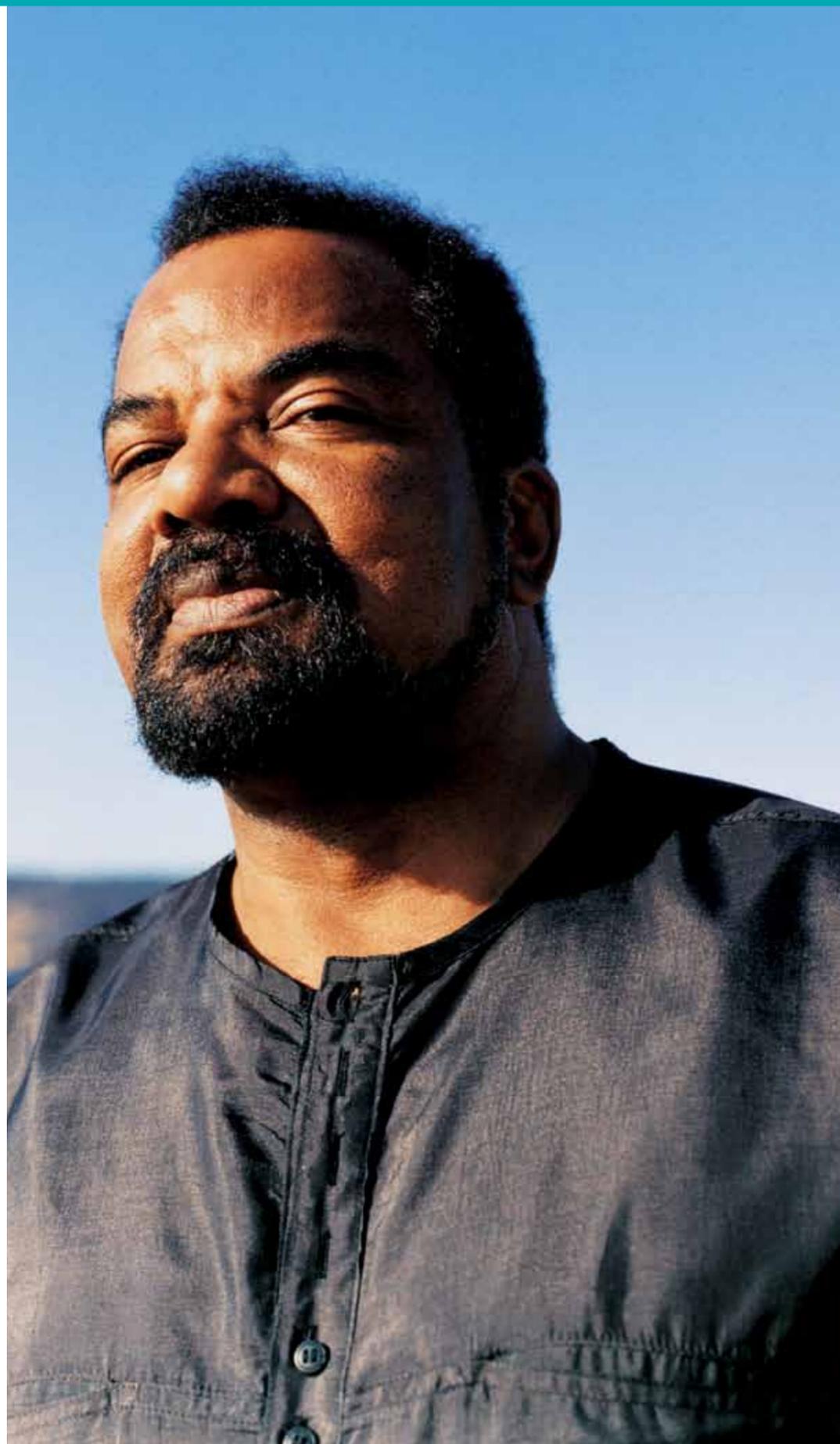
Alex Robinson looks at the amazing career of the Angolan singer-songwriter who sparked a revolution in the 70s, helping to overthrow Portugal's military dictatorship

IN SEPTEMBER last year Bonga celebrated his 70th birthday – and the release of his 30th album, *Hora Kota* – with a big party at Club B Leza in Lisbon. The show honoured an extraordinary career, both musical and political, and served to show how much has changed in the Portuguese-speaking world since his life began.

Bonga was born José Adelino Barceló de Carvalho on September 5 1942 in the Portuguese colony of Angola. Porto Quipiri, his birthplace, lies some 100km north-east of the country's capital city, Luanda. His was a musical family. "My father played accordion in a *rebita* band," Bonga remembers, "and we had to learn the dance steps. Of my nine brothers, I was the one who accompanied my father on the *dikanza* [traditional percussion instrument] and this was the beginning of all that would happen later."

José Adelino was a talented athlete. He became the Angolan champion at the 100 metres – and then 200 and 400 metres – before moving to Lisbon at the invitation of the Sport Lisboa e Benfica club in 1966 to pursue an athletic career. In Portugal he broke the national record for 400 metres and ran for the country, seemingly a model Portuguese. But he was leading a double life, attending secret meetings of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and carrying secret messages for the MPLA as he travelled to tournaments abroad. And under the alias Bonga Kuenda (which translates as 'he who is looking, who is always ahead and moving'), he worked as an accompanist to the traditional Angolan singer Elias dia Kimuezo and began a clandestine career as a protest singer. It was a dangerous move in late 60s Portugal.

"All Angolan culture was under Portuguese domination," Bonga recalls. "Traditional languages were banned and African music too. Since we had no weapons to fight with, we resisted on a cultural level, especially by forming folk music groups and



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performing songs that re-adopted ancestral African forms. Although their lyrics clearly referred to the unrest at the time – the poverty, colonial violence and latent revolt."

Under the Estado Novo regime, led by fascist dictator António Salazar, Portugal was conservative, backward-looking and oppressive. Its guiding philosophy of 'Lusotropicalism' struggled to remember a mythical golden age of racial harmony administered by beneficent colonial Portuguese. This was in part born of the nostalgic idealism articulated in the writings of Gilberto Freyre. Salazar imposed his Lusotropicalism on the remaining Portuguese colonies, including Angola and Mozambique. But Portugal's power and its empire were crumbling. Salazar ceded the Portuguese colonies of Goa, Daman and Diu to India after a humiliating war in the early 60s and had lost the iconic fortress of São João Baptista de Ajudá to the Republic of Dahomey in 1961. Portugal clutched Angola and Mozambique close, like straws. Moves towards independence were ruthlessly suppressed in the name of 'racial harmony.'

By the early 70s, realising that he was attracting attention from the secret police, Bonga left Lisbon and went into self-imposed exile in the Netherlands. He was determined to record an album that related his own experiences and his sense of commitment to Angola, an album that would crystallise a sense of pride in suppressed African culture and tradition. The record would be a state-of-the-nation address, a call to cultural and political arms. Bonga simply called it *Angola 72*. The album became one of the most powerful collections of protest songs ever recorded. A potent mix of haunting, prophetic lyrics, taking pride in indigenous Angolan culture, and a lament from political exile, it inspired a revolution. The record was banned by the Salazar dictatorship, giving it far more publicity than it might otherwise have received. Smuggled into Lisbon and Luanda as contraband, it was distributed to young would-be revolutionaries and listened to in the dead of night under bed covers. Being caught with *Angola 72* meant brutal interrogation and possible imprisonment. In Bonga's own words, his record "became a musical beacon for all our demands in Africa."

The revolutionary theme was expanded

on *Angola 74*, and this time Bonga's message was for all Portuguese Africans, with music and songs from Cape Verde, in Cape Verdean Creole, not just in the Angolan Calão language. The album included the first (and greatest) recording of 'Sodade' – a song that would later be made famous by Cesaria Evora. By 1974 Salazar's desperate attempts to cling on to Portuguese Africa were attracting worldwide condemnation. Articles in the international press exposed atrocities such as the notorious Wiriyamu massacre in Mozambique. Guerrilla campaigns in Angola and Mozambique had turned into protracted wars that were bankrupting Portugal and alienating a generation of Portuguese, forced into conscription. Lisbon's people took to the streets to decry their government. And then in April 1974, the Estado Novo regime was overthrown, in a bloodless coup organised by left-wing Portuguese military officers. Known as the Carnation Revolution, it brought an end to the colonial wars, and won independence for Angola and Mozambique.

Bonga moved to Paris before returning to a newly democratic Lisbon, where he was finally free to record traditional Angolan and Luso-African music. In 1975 he travelled to the US to play a central role in the concerts celebrating the independence of another Portuguese African colony, Guinea-Bissau. By the 80s Bonga was loved by the Lisbon that had once so despised and feared him. He became the first African singer to perform in the Coliseu dos Recreios concert hall – a bastion of traditional white Portuguese culture. And through the group he put together, the Semba Masters, Bonga continued to disseminate Angolan music in Europe and the US.

Bonga's most recent album, *Hora Kota*, is a reminder to Angolans of the importance that the past has for their future – an appeal for the preservation of tradition. In the face of rapid modernisation and the homogenisation of the digital age, Angolans should not forget the traditional rhythms like *semba* and *rebita* and the African-Angolan cultural identity his generation fought for. "The father of the father of your elder; the mother of the mother of your elder," he sings on the lilting title-track, "they affirm who you are and where you're heading." Even in his 70s, Bonga is living up to his name: 'he who is looking, who is always ahead and moving.' **N**

BEST ALBUMS



Angola 72/74 (Lusafrica, 2011)
The album that introduced Bonga's melancholic voice to the world, *Angola 72*

inspired a generation of Portuguese Africans. It was reissued on CD by Lusafrica with the follow-up *Angola 74*. It's Bonga at his musical peak: a collection of mature, masterfully sung tracks filled with lamentation, tinged with hope and including a haunting version of 'Sodade'.



Hora Kota (Lusafrica, 2012)

Forty years after his first album, the husky voice, melancholy and musical

mastery are all still there. Bonga is still calling his countrymen to cultural arms, reminding them to cherish and preserve their African identity.

BEST COMPILATION



The Best of Bonga (Lusafrica, 2009)

A hop and a skip through over 40 years of Bonga's career, featuring some gorgeous tracks off now long-deleted albums.

BEST AVOIDED



Swinga Swinga (Vidisco, 1997)

It's hard to find a bad Bonga album and this 90s live recording has some engaging up-tempo tracks, but the band is a little too slick to capture the magical melancholy of the slower numbers.

LIKE BONGA? THEN TRY...

WALDEMAR BASTOS



Classics of My Soul (Enja, 2012)

Bastos is another Angolan musician who lived in exile. A composer who has collaborated with David Byrne, Bastos has a voice that is as smooth as Bonga's is raw, and the music is sophisticated, rich and masterful. This compilation rounds up his best material.

COMPETITION

We have five copies of *The Best of Bonga* to give away. To enter, simply answer the question: Which Portuguese athletic record did Bonga hold? See p7 for competition terms and conditions. Competition closes September 13 2013