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A Masterclass In [Congolese Guitar](#)



Learn the great African guitar techniques from Congo. Sign up now for free access to 4 days of expert Congolese guitar lessons and discover Soukous and Sebene music. Throughout the course, Niwel Tsumbu takes some famous lines by Congolese guitar heroes like Roxy Tshimpaka and Beniko Popolipo from Zaiko Langa Langa, and Alain Makaba from Wenge Musica, and breaks them down into digestible chunks, explaining the basic 1-5-4-5 chord progression and key intervals on which the sebene style is built.

Whereas most African guitar styles are based on riffs and a limited range of notes, the Congolese sebene style uses the entire fretboard, revelling in complex chromatic leaps and octave runs. This sophistication is partly due

to the influence of certain US jazz guitar greats, most notably Wes Montgomery, whose octave style made a huge impression on young Congolese guitarists in the late 1960s and 1970s. But it also stems from the work of a few enlightened Belgian missionaries and guitarists who promoted and taught the instrument in the 1950s and early 1960s, especially Bill Alexandre, a jazz guitarist who was once in Django Reinhardt's band. Niwel boils this complexity down to some key principles and techniques, slowing things down and using simultaneous notation to set you on your way to Congolese guitar mastery.

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When Niwel was growing up in Kinshasa, he was crazy about music. So were his friends. But it wasn't so much the antics of famous singers, the latest melody or risqué lyric that dominated the conversation; it was the 'lines'. In other words, the guitar lines. "Have you heard the lines on the new Choc Stars album?" one fan might say to another. "Yeah, Roxy Tshimpaka's been working his magic again," his friend replies. "And Beniko has even started to smile!"



Some of those guitar lines were so brilliant and complex that, for a while, many guitarists remained stony faced with concentration while they delivered them. The irrepressible Beniko Popolipo, aka 'Zero Fautes' ('No Mistakes'), changed that particular tradition with his unmistakable gap-toothed grin.

"It's their lines that sold the albums," Niwel says. "They were more popular than the vocals. Those guitarists, Popolipo, Roxy, they were like gods!" If Congolese sebene became the most popular dance style in modern African history, it's thanks to the genius of its guitarists.

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