



BLUFUNKING AT THE BATACLAN

PHOTOGRAPHS: FRANCIS VERNHET | WORDS: PAUL WATSON

I've decided that Paris is like Marmite – you love it or you loathe it. This was my 10th visit to the French capital, and I'm forever changing my mind. It's aesthetically stunning, especially at night, yet if you're planning a romantic stroll along the Seine then you'd better bring a mask – the stench is genuinely staggering. But I can get past this; and even (at a push) the inevitably languid reception that you know is coming the minute you utter the words 'excusez moi' in a desperately British tone.

But what Paris does have in abundance is character and history; there's a certain *je ne sais quoi* about the place that does kind of 'have you at hello'. A fine example of these qualities emanates powerfully from the four walls that house the city's most esteemed music venue, the Bataclan, which has been entertaining punters since the late 19th Century. Headliner popped inside to check out Nigerian-born Keziah Jones' guitar-slapping 'blufunk' that's been gripping capacity crowds across the globe.

Jones moved from Lagos to London when only eight-years-old, and has lived in the UK ever since. He got his first break whilst busking in London's Portobello Road in 1991 after being spotted by Culture Club's keyboard player (who penned *Karma Chameleon*), Phil Pickett. Rather charmingly, Pickett's son, Harry, is now Jones' tour manager.

This artist uses a plethora of [US-manufactured] Lag Signature guitars, and it takes five channels to generate the right tone from various DIs and mics that capture the sound from his two Vox cabinets (one muddy, one clean), as well as his cool percussive style.

Because all of the low mid from stage is coming from the guitar cabinets, it's a very loud stage, and FOH engineer, Darren Connor chooses not to fire any of it through the house system. He's also very busy riding the vocal fader.

"I use an Avalon 737 on Keziah's vocal and do some parallel compressing: I send it to a stereo group, then send a mono signal to the PA, which is then compressed

using the 737; and I've then got a stereo group which is also compressed, and I send that to a stereo bus," he explains. I try to process the information, then thankfully he summarises. "Basically, I end up with three channels of vocals, one heavily compressed and a grouped stereo pair."

Connor then adds colour to the vocal using "a smooth plate reverb from the house rack". He'd normally bring his own rack, he tells me, but for this trip he was flying Ryan Air... Enough said.

Jones' monitor engineer, Daniel Paine, actually started out as his guitar tech. He cites that as a great foundation for any monitor engineer, as he believes it helps build a trust with the artist.

"It definitely gives me an edge, and for Keziah in particular, as his tone is so unique," he explains. "I studied music technology and audio systems design at the University of Derby as I wanted to find out more about mixing and the tech behind it; but as a musician, I can see it from a perspective of the guitarist. For example, if someone shouts to turn up the wedge, I am aware that sometimes it isn't necessarily volume they need; it helps when you understand the guitar tone."

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Jones' monitoring setup centres around Nexo's 45N-12. He uses four of them: two per side configured in an inner and outer configuration. A pair of Nexo PS15-R2s are also used as stage sidefills.

"It's mainly vocal and guitar through the wedges, and it's extremely loud - one of the loudest mixes on stage for monitoring that I've ever come across, which was partly the reason for going with the N-12s; they have mountains of headroom," Paine reveals. "We've been experimenting on this tour, and currently we are using a harmoniser on his vocal, which makes it more spatial rather than attacking; Keziah's guitar sound is actually louder out of the wedges than his backline sound in some situations, so it's very important to get the tone correct.

"What we've been able to achieve using the N-12s is the equivalent of tilting his Vox amps in front of him, because the wedge is flat enough sounding for me to do whatever I want with it, therefore we can replicate not only the tone, but the volume too; I've got a lot of bottom end in there, yet I've also got the cut from the vocal without it sounding too harsh. It's gobsmacking how stable the N-12 is at high volume; it's the least volatile wedge I've come across."

On the night, Jones and his band had the 1,500-capacity crowd jumping. His two-hour set at times reminded me of

CAPTAIN RUGGED

When Keziah Jones approached long-time friend, Native Maqari, about a collaboration project which would fuse his music with Maqari's artwork, he accepted... mainly out of antagonism! This led to an intense period in Nigeria's capital, Lagos, where *Captain Rugged* was born...

In this multimedia graphic novel, *Captain Rugged*, you've ultimately captured Lagos as a city in art form, right?

Native Maqari: Yeah. Keziah called me and asked if he could create a soundtrack to my visual art, which is pretty unusual, as it's normally the other way round. It was a weird experience; we spent three months cooped up together in Lagos with his Dad, who is a vegan, which was even harder for somebody like me who loves his red meat!

Inspiration was drawn from the two of you interacting, then?

Yeah, we used the character *Captain Rugged* to visually capture Lagos - and with 17 million souls living in it, it's not easy! Because there's so much African and English history in Lagos, Keziah, and I had a removed, almost bird's-eye view, which allowed us to capture a lot of its dynamism.

So what does the book represent?

I'm still so close to the project so it's hard to say, but it's ultimately a creative dialogue between me and Keziah. We do not necessarily agree with the ready-made constructed African identity; a lot of this is about showing people if you've got something to say as a creative person, you're going to say it. It's like Oscar Wilde said: 'there is no morally right or wrong story - there is either a good or a bad story'.

the early and funkier side of Lenny Kravitz, and his unique 'blufunk' technique was something to witness. He changed guitar almost as often as he changed key, each time offering a new tone, which also showed the true magnitude of the job Paine holds at monitor position.

"Music is all about communication, and I have a fantastic relationship with Keziah," says Paine, post-show. "The artist and the crew are all in one bus on this tour; we're a tight group on and off stage; and thanks to the wedges, he's always in his comfort zone, too. Capturing the vibe of the band is everything, and our setup is perfect."

