



Artist: **J.P. Bimeni & The Black Belts**

Album: **Free Me**

Label: **Tucxone**

Debut Single 'I Miss You': **July 6th**

Album Release Date: **October 26th**

**Format:** CD, LP & DIGITAL

**A royal refugee turned soul survivor with a remarkable story of resistance having fled Burundi's civil war after three attempts on his life landing in Wales as a teenager**

**Live Launch: Ronnie Scott's (31st October) – Tickets TBA**

**Interview on BBC Radio 2 Cerys Matthews (2nd Nov)**

**Session on BBC London's Rober Elms (1st Nov)**

**'Rising' Mojo** feature confirmed | "I'm loving his voice...we'd love to have him on Radio 2" **Cerys Matthews (BBC Radio 2)** | "One of the very best soul voices I've heard for a very long time" **Craig Charles (BBC 6Music)** | Track of the Week & interview Guest **Robert Elms (BBC London)** | "Lovely voice and arrangement - real soul fans will love it" **Keb Darge**

On his debut album *Free Me*, Burundian-born JP Bimeni astonishes with a voice that recalls Otis Redding in his prime whilst resonating with the soul of Africa. A refugee who's been living in London since the early 2000s, Bimeni songs of love and loss, hope and fear deliver with a conviction that comes from the extraordinary experiences life has thrown at him.

A descendant of the Burundian royal family, Bimeni fled his country aged 15 during the 1993 civil war. Following three attempts on his life - at school he watched as his schoolmates were murdered, he was then chased by motorcycle militia-men and finally poisoned by doctors in hospital - he was given refugee status and fled to the UK where he's remained ever since.

With classic 60s-sounding Motown and Stax-inspired grooves the album was written by musical director Eduardo Martínez and songwriter Marc Ibarz and Bimeni imbues these tales of love and loss with his tragic experiences making 'Free Me' a deep soul soundtrack to his pained life: "When I sing I feel like I'm cleansing myself: music is a way for me to forget".

On "Free Me" tough funk jams segue into deep southern soul and heart-felt ballads, with a unique vibe present throughout this modern funk-soul masterpiece thanks to Bimeni's uplifting African 'soul' style. Whether it's the conscious funk of 'Honesty', the defiant, empowering 'Fade Away' or the tearjerker 'I Miss You', with each twist and turn Bimeni displays an astonishing depth with his vocal range. The fact that Bimeni has lived a life most extraordinary and lived to tell the tale makes these songs even more resonant: "When I was on my death-bed, after I'd been shot, they brought a priest to read my last rites" he remembers. "I looked at the priest and I said 'I don't feel like I'm going to die. I feel like I'm

gonna' live long, meet the world and I'm going to prove to myself that the world is not just hate or killings.' ”.

Bimeni was born in the capital Bujumbura to a republican-leaning, high-ranking military official father and a mother who was a descendant of the royal family. With parents on opposing sides - the military overthrew the royal family in 1966 - their relationship fractured and Bimeni's mother had to raise him and his three brothers alone. As a member of the former royal family Bimeni enjoyed a relatively carefree childhood: sent to a boarding school in the countryside run by nuns that was also attended by local children he was aware of his privilege: “we had shoes, they didn't”. For Bimeni music started with dancing: “In Burundi, dancing is as natural as breathing. At school we sung traditional African folk songs - everyone sang”.

Bimeni's childhood ended abruptly at the start of the 1993 civil war and subsequent mass killings. Ethnic rivalries have set off several devastating wars in Africa, but none come near the deadly legacy of the Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi – hundreds of thousands of people died in the 1994 genocide. It was whilst trying to escape that Bimeni was shot: “I got a lift from the military in a vehicle but people followed us. The first bullet missed my head, the second went through my chest and on the third attempt they had run out of bullets. The guy giving me a lift died yet somehow I hid”. Bimeni was taken to hospital yet someone, thinking he was in the military, injected him with poison - a nurse gave him the antidote: “I lost half my body weight – from 76 to 36 kilos”, he recalls. “I was in intensive care, full of tubes, covered in stinking wounds, rotting on a life-support machine that wasn't functioning properly”. Whilst convalescing in Nairobi after being airlifted, Bimeni heard he was on a wanted list, so with his life at risk he registered as a refugee and applied for a scholarship program run by the UN Refugee Agency.

Aged 16 he left Africa for Wales, to attend UWC Atlantic College. “I was on my own, I was a wreck, full of painkillers – but I was so happy to be away and to finally feel safe.” Music offered respite in these dark times: “In Wales was the first time I bought music - compilations by Ray Charles, Otis Redding, Bob Marley and Marvin Gaye”.

After two years at college Bimeni secured a place at the University of Lancashire to study economics and politics where he performed his debut live show in a little pub. He moved to London in 2001 and here he embraced the myriad musical possibilities London offers: jam sessions with Roots Manuva's band, open mic nights with Shingai Shoniwa from Noisettes, and an encounter with a teenage Adele. Yet it was an invitation to join an Otis Redding revue in 2013 that set him on the course he is on today. As a guest of funk group Speedometer at a show in Spain in 2017, Tucxone Records spotted Bimeni... and they knew they'd found their man. They paired him with the Black Belts - Rodrigo Diaz "Niño" (drum & percussion), Pablo "Bassman" Cano, Fernando Vasco "Two Guns" (guitar), Ricardo Martínez (trumpet) and Rafael Díaz (sax). Bimeni recorded the album with them in Madrid over the winter of 2017.

For Bimeni, music is a way to survive: “You can't entertain the pain of your problems all the time – you have to put them away and let something else fill the space where it's just been pain, worry and terror.” He's a spiritual soul singer yet also a soul-singer with spirit, and his infallible positivity can be an inspiration to us all: “It's my dream to return to Burundi one day - but I always remember that getting shot enabled me to meet the world.”

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