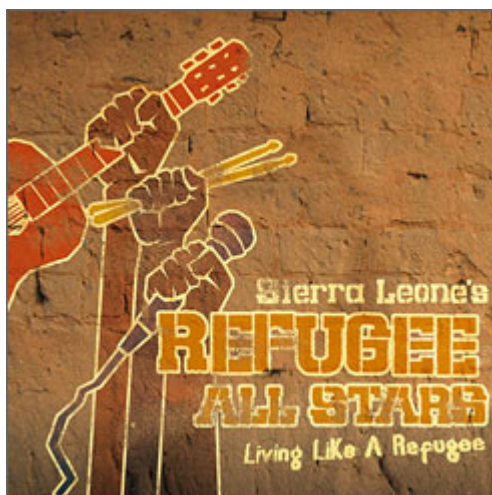




## Music, film open eyes to war in Sierra Leone

Updated 9/27/2006 11:10 PM ET



**By Steve Jones, USA TODAY**

Two music projects offer views of Sierra Leone's civil war through the eyes of some of the people who experienced it.

Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars, already the subject of an award-winning documentary this year and a U.S. summer tour, released *Living Like a Refugee* this week.

The album features music recorded by the 11-member band during the musicians' time in exile and after they returned home. They'll return to North America starting Oct. 21 in Atlanta for a 19-date tour.

In December, VH1 is scheduled to air *Bling: A Planet Rock*, a documentary that traces hip-hop's fascination with diamonds and the illegal gem trade that helped fuel the war.

Director Raquel Cepeda goes to Sierra Leone with reggaeton's Tego Calderon and rappers Paul Wall and Raekwon to see the devastation firsthand.

The war between the government and rebel forces over control of the country's diamond trade lasted from 1991 to 2002, killing tens of thousands of people and displacing 2 million. Much of the country remains without drinking water and electricity.

Refugee All Stars founder Reuben M. Koroma gathered his band in Guinea refugee camps after fleeing the capital city, Freetown, in 1999. The band was discovered by first-time filmmakers Zach Niles and Banker White, who followed them for three years.

Koroma, who witnessed the slaughter of several family members, turned to music to ease his pain.

"I used music as a therapy, and I noticed that anytime I'd strum my guitar, most of the refugees would gather around me," he said from his home in Sierra Leone.

The band went from playing in the camps to performing before 75,000 people at this summer's Bonnaroo Festival in Tennessee.

"I hope that people will learn about the situation in our country," Koroma says. "I hope that it brings a positive change to the world."

Cepeda wishes the same for her film, which she hopes gets hip-hop artists and fans to think about the diamonds they wear.

"I hope that by seeing rappers travel, it would encourage young people to see how people live around the world so that they can become a different type of American — one not so insulated and kind of selfish," says Cepeda, who co-produced the film with Article 19 Films, VH1 and the United Nations Development Program.

Houston rapper Wall, a professional jeweler who is known for his custom diamond-studded teeth grills, says he had never heard of the country until last year's Kanye West single *Diamonds from Sierra Leone*.

Wall says he met miners who earned \$2 for each diamond they found. He says he presumes the diamonds he uses are legal but says he feels obligated to spread the word about what he saw.