

# Oliver Mtukudzi

## KEY TO THE PROMISED LAND • By Sid Whelon

Back in the 1970s when Thomas Mapfumo and Oliver Mtukudzi formed the Wagon Wheels and began incorporating traditional and folk elements of Shona music into an electrified urban popular music style (in particular the thousand-year old song traditions associated with the *mbira*), there were tremendous objections raised, even as they enjoyed tremendous success. Obviously the Rhodesian white minority government responded poorly to anyone espousing pride in local cultural traditions, but more significantly, noticeable segments of the indigenous urban population

reacted with consternation and accusations of "witchcraft," attempts at "spirit possession" and such. It's difficult for Americans to understand that, but most American fans of African music are at least aware of the fact that music in Africa has a lot more power than it does here, as does the belief in witchcraft, sorcery, magic and the paranormal/supernatural/spirit world.

Having not heard any live Zimbabwean music between Mapfumo's 1990 *Corruption* tour and this year's Mtukudzi and the Black Spirits tour, I was struck for the first time by what those late-'70s Harare audiences were responding to. When Mtukudzi and the Black Spirits hit the stage at Celebrate Brooklyn after several hours of workaday Afropop warmup acts, the emotional and spiritual power of the mbira-based "tuku music" was nothing short of awesome. It became clear in that moment how someone unwilling to confront his relationship to a maligned pre-European past would be horrified by the oceanic force of that sound—the traditional ensemble of two mbira *dzavadzimu*, *hosho* and voices writ large with drums, guitars, keyboards and 10,000 watts of electricity behind it.

After more than 20 years of winning over the initially reluctant masses to his message that "no one culture is superior to another," Oliver Mtukudzi has proven to be somewhat of a Moses figure, even though he, with characteristic modesty, would deny having achieved anything other than to have written a body of songs that huge numbers of people love. Says Mtukudzi, "I'm glad because I'm able to travel to further lands, you know. I'm glad of all the support I'm getting from my fans and fellow artists. They've always encouraged me. But being a statesman, that's a bit more than what I am." From his beginnings as a revolutionary musician who pushed people to confront the value of the past they preferred to forget, he has become a visionary who presents his countrymen with lessons they need to learn in order to reach a future in which they'd prefer to live. There's no doubt that they are listening, though to what extent they've taken his messages to heart is still an open question.

The core of Mtukudzi's message is his solid base in Christian beliefs and the teachings of Jesus. "My music has got a Gospel aspect. The ideology behind my music also promotes Christianity, really." For American intellectuals fatigued by the outrageous behavior of televangelists and the anti-constitutional militancy of right-wing fundamentalists, the very term "Christian" has sadly become a bad word. But Mtukudzi is no false prophet. His ability to stand



*Photo by Dione Adam*

with the courage of his convictions, while also turning out beautifully crafted songs that call for justice in human relations, is no doubt a huge factor in his success:

*You beat your chest/Feeling all your importance  
How will it all end?  
You look down upon others, despising/as if they are not human beings  
How will it all end?  
You don't respect God/What will be the end?  
How will it all end?  
You may have power, much power/and you oppress those who are weak  
How will it all end?  
Do whatever you do in a cultured way  
Softly, softly in a dignified way.*

—“Magumo,” on *Vhunze Moto (Putumayo)*

It is in fact very important to Tuku’s career that he be a credible preacher and a man of integrity, because he takes the risky position of promoting traditional Shona and Ndebele culture in songs like “Tsika Dzedu” while also taking aim at traditions—and current dysfunctional social behaviors—which undermine the kind of progress that he so firmly believes is possible in Zimbabwe. For instance, songs like “Neria” confront the traditional second-tier status of women, while “Ndima Ndapedza” takes on a traditional Shona method of displaying success and leadership through competitive braggadocio and suggests a new, more modest and helpful way of being a leader. Given the specific problems of governance in Africa—leaders turning entire nations and economies into personal fiefdoms—that’s a higher-stakes suggestion than it might immediately seem. “Ngoromera” takes on the culture of war with an ironic and contrarian comment on a Shona tradition aimed at winning fistfights. “Tapera,” “Todii,” and

“Mabasa” anguish over the AIDS pandemic with occasional blunt messages of personal responsibility. And the serious messages continue coming, confronting child abuse, alcoholism, societal short-sightedness and onward.

The synopses of his songs really do look more like a summary of a year’s worth of high-quality sermons than the output of one of Africa’s most successful hitmakers. That a musician can be as well-loved as Tuku, while delivering uncompromising, complex, subtle and often difficult messages is quite miraculous. And it isn’t hype. The ecstatic welcome of Tuku and his band by the Zimbabweans at Celebrate Brooklyn was well beyond anything mere nostalgia could have produced. Says Mtukudzi of that phenomenon, simply: “We take them home when we play for them.” But since he sings of home as it was, as it is and as it ought to be, it’s no surprise that his audience identifies with his music at a deeper level than they would if its only attribute were that it sounds great.

The musical foundation of Oliver Mtukudzi’s sound is first and foremost the mbira. When asked, he said: “No, I don’t play mbira, but I love mbira. I was just not exposed to it. [meaning how to play it]. I did not have an mbira instrument itself, until lately my wife bought me one. In my music I sort of adapt the style of mbira, the

*Continued on page 30*

# oliver Mtukudzi

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29



## FROM HIS BEGINNINGS AS A REVOLUTIONARY MUSICIAN WHO PUSHED PEOPLE TO CONFRONT THE VALUE OF THE

PAST THEY PREFERRED TO FORGET, ZIMBABWEAN ICON **OLIVER MTUKUDZI** HAS BECOME A VISIONARY WHO PRESENTS HIS COUNTRYMEN WITH LESSONS THEY NEED TO LEARN IN ORDER TO REACH A FUTURE IN WHICH THEY'D PREFER TO LIVE.

way the mbira is played, I adapt the similar thing to a guitar but actually create my own song out of that style. I've never really taken a harmony of a traditional song, but the style of doing it, there is a fusion of different styles of Zimbabwe music in my music." So really it's the sound aesthetic of mbira and other types of Zimbabwean roots music that inspired Mtukudzi to participate in creating what was once called *chimurenga* and has now—in his case—evolved into a style known as tuku music.

If you've ever heard mbira performed live, it's a bit surprising how quiet, mellow and intimate it is, and therefore how few people it can reach. Step out of the backyard where it's being played and you won't hear it anymore. Close-miked recordings reproduced on the home stereo don't really give the feeling of it. By contrast it's quite a revelation to stand in front of Oliver Mtukudzi and the Black Spirits and hear mbira music come at you with a roar. So what Tuku (along with Mapfumo and Stella Chiweshe) has done is take a rural tradition and adapted it wholesale to the volume and scale of modern urban life, making it possible for the power of that tradition to reach the population of the concrete jungle. And why use this tradition at all, instead of a more pop-sounding style? Says Tuku: "It's like I can't run away from myself. Though I was born in Harare, every school holiday I would go to the rural areas where we originally come from, which is the northern part of Zimbabwe. Every weekend my dad would bring his friends and sing different types of music, different styles of rhythm: mbira, *jiti* and so on. So I was always exposed to traditional music."

Of course, foreign music has had its influence. "We had our first radio station starting in 1958, I was six years old then. The only recorded music which was available was from the West, which was country music, soul music, pop music. We started being exposed to that, though we didn't have radios in our homes. We'd find one radio the whole community would use. I remember there was a period when we used to go to the shopping center 'cause one of the businessmen was the only one with a radio. So we used to go there to listen. By six o'clock when our parents would come home from work they would chase us away because they wanted to listen to news. In my family we got a radio quite late,

because my father couldn't afford it. We started having a radio in the early '70s."

More important even than American sounds was the music of South Africa, which has had a tremendous influence on the entire region. There are several reasons for this. In the early 19th century the coalescence of Zulu power, nationalism and imperialism drove groups such as the Ndebele, unwilling to assimilate into the new Zulu nation, northward and outward. Around the turn of the century all of Southern Africa began to form one massive migrant labor market, one massive mineral mining industry, and one massive railroad network—and all three have been dominated by South Africa now for many generations. Those demographic, economic and infrastructure factors created a pan-Southern African musical culture that is particularly strong between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

In addition there have been specific inroads into Harare's popular music industry by producers like West Nkosi and later, Steve Dyer. Dyer is a white South African musician who fled his home country during the apartheid years and allied himself with the interests of black liberation in places like Botswana and Zimbabwe. Roughly six years ago Dyer (back again in his home country) and Mtukudzi hooked up and began a tremendously fruitful musical relationship that has resulted in the four CDs available in the States on Putumayo: *Paivepo*, *Tuku Music*, *Vhunze Moto* and *The Tuku Years*. All together it's a remarkable body of work and considering that Tuku has something in the order of 40 discs under his belt, it's impressive that his latest work shows him to be at the top of his game in terms of quality songwriting and performance.

Tuku's entire family is musical: "My parents were musicians. My late younger brother was my keyboard player until his death. My sister is also a musician. All my children are musicians." He has three daughters and one son, all "playing in their own groups." Asked about the musical interests of the young, he had this to say: "More and more youngsters are into a rap music, hip-hop kind of thing, though doing it in Shona. Quite a few are playing tuku music now. There are a very few doing traditional music and so on. They don't mix the two; either they're doing traditional music or pop." Some things haven't changed though. Anyone familiar with the

*Continued on page 55*



## OLIVER MTUKUDZI

*Continued from page 30*

stories of various stars of Afropop knows about the difficulties of obtaining the necessary instruments and equipment back in the golden era of African pop. Says Tuku: "It was difficult. Up to now it is difficult to get instruments as well, because we don't really manufacture; everything is imported. In our time it was even worse. There were very few groups, and all bands used to share equipment."

We discussed that most elusive of ideas: What makes a person—in this case Oliver Mtukudzi—an accomplished and successful songwriter? It's interesting to note that Tuku doesn't recall a conscious learning effort or period of training. "I guess I was just a born musician, because I didn't decide to be a musician, I just had this love of music, love of creating my own songs. I just got interested, like at home, I would stand up and perform something the whole family didn't know. And I enjoyed that, creating my own thing and giving it to them and seeing how they felt. And from there I started writing songs for church choirs. When I left school I spent three years without any job or anything, I guess because I hadn't done any particular career course, I had just done my academics to all five levels. My parents couldn't afford to let me carry on.

"Through the regime that was there I couldn't get a job. I started writing about how I felt about my life, because all my friends were working I was the only one who had no job and that frustrated me, spending the whole week having nothing to do and no friends, 'cause all friends were at work. I remember going door to door to find work and I couldn't find any. I started resorting to writing and the first song was hit, because a lot of people could relate to it. It wasn't a marvelous recording, I have a copy today, I go back and listen to it and think 'this was the best I could do then.'" Tuku did offer one point of his craft, though: "My system of writing songs, I prefer to have my lyrics first."

Oliver Mtukudzi and the Black Spirits are continuing to tour heavily. This year there's a major tour of festivals in Southern Africa: South Africa, Mozambique, Swazi, Lesotho, Namibia and Botswana, as well as returns to Europe and another U.S. tour taking shape for April 2004.

Mtukudzi has been a late bloomer in terms of breaking big time in the international music market, and that's probably a good thing. His base in Zimbabwean life and culture is so strong that it seems capable of filling a very deep well of creativity. That much of the inspiration for his music comes from factors that are tragic only serves to deepen the power and importance of his songs and his sound which, in the end, convey a sense of optimism and an appreciation of life's beauty even in the midst of seemingly insurmountable trials. Don't think of the Moses evocation at the start of this piece as hyperbole or overstatement. For while it's true that those figures in human history who brought their people to a promised land mostly seem larger than life (Beowulf, Moses, Jesus, Gandhi, M.L. King, Marley, Mandela), that's only because they're the ones whose stories had such an impact that they can't be forgotten. A man like Mtukudzi—as reluctant to take credit or status from

his work as any of the above figures, to the point of actually denying his role—is really fulfilling the same mission in his society as they did in theirs, regardless of any differences in scale, and it's for that reason he is so popular and his music so vital and compelling.

The crucial question really, is not whether or not Tuku is comparable to any of the above figures, but rather whether the people of Zimbabwe are capable of turning his messages into concrete, positive action the way the citizens/followers of those other figures were. Because that's why we even know who those people were and what they did. Is Tuku an ordinary man, a great man, or an ordinary man doing great things? The answer is irrelevant and the question pointless. The point of the Moses comparison is not to say that Tuku is like Moses, but that the people of Zimbabwe can be like the Israelites if they so choose. Tuku's just doing the best he can to help them. Given the depth of Zimbabwe's problems, he may not still be on this earth when his life's work comes to fruition, but as far as that goes, he'll be in good company in that other promised land. In the meantime, international fans of African music are just as fortunate to be able to partake of tuku music as Tuku professes to be in having the opportunity to play it for us. ★

## IRVING BURGIE

*Continued from page 31*

tation, sight-singing. If I thought of a melody I could write it down. That has been my approach."

As far as lyrics were concerned, Mr. Burgie wrote most of the lines himself, but he also enlisted the help of screenwriter and Barbados native William Attaway, who was Harry Belafonte's best friend and played a crucial role in the young songwriter's career. Attaway's sister told him about Burgie. "He was the one who told Harry Belafonte about me and changed the 'John Henry' show to the 'Caribbean Show' and that is how we got tied in together. He helped me with the lyrics on four of my songs which I gave him credit for," explains Burgie.

An avid traveler, Irving Burgie returns to the Caribbean from his Queens, NY residence an average of four times a year. He has a favorite place in Barbados he frequents: "I am very well known down there so it is like going home."

Burgie's nephew Kim plays trumpet on *The Father of Modern Calypso*. As far as his own children are concerned, he says proudly, "I have two sons who are both Yalies [Yale graduates]. One is a schoolteacher and the other works in environmental health."

The energy and time that Mr. Burgie has put into his own compositions has been applied to instill the value of music in education with those of the next generation. In 1973, he devised the Caribbean Day Assembly Program for New York-area public schools. It was built around his publication *The West Indian Song Book* and this took him into the school system teaching Caribbean music in the curriculum for seven years. Additionally, a lesson/activity music book, *Share the Caribbean Music: The Songs of Irving Burgie*, is now available as part of the McGraw-Hill Education Share the Music series of

music education products with Hal Leonard.

In 1980, he established the Irving Burgie Award for Excellence in Literary and Creative Arts in Barbados and Jamaica, a \$500 U.S. literary prize that is given to seven high school and college students who exhibit excellence in writing.

Additional achievements and accolades have included a collaboration with the Jamaica National Dance Theatre in 1984. The JNDT choreographed an album performed by the Royal Philharmonic of London consisting of Irving Burgie's songs. In 1987, Burgie received the Silver Crown of Merit from the Government of Barbados, and in 1989, Burgie received an Honorary Doctor of Letters degree from the University of the West Indies.

Newly recorded and remastered, *The Father of Modern Calypso* is Burgie's first full record which includes beloved classics and the recent compositions "I'm A Candy," and "Love Will Come By," written for an upcoming theatrical production the artist is working on entitled "Day-O," which takes place in a Jamaican village. He is also working on an autobiography.

As for the high-profile attention he is receiving, including a write-up in *Billboard* and an interview with NPR's Tavis Smiley, Burgie responds, "I am glad that at my age people are still interested in my music and that I am in good health and can participate and enjoy it."

The 16 compositions are vibrant with lush vocal and orchestral arrangements, which are handled by longtime Burgie collaborator and Jamaican native Eugene Gray, who acts as musical director. Expert guitar solos (performed by Burgie) and sentimental vocal delivery invite the listener to "join one of the greatest composers of Caribbean music as he takes you on a festive, musical journey to the islands!"

[[www.valley-entertainment.com](http://www.valley-entertainment.com)]

## RASTLIN' JACOB

*Continued from page 51*

The Spiritual Baptists of Trinidad, like their Spiritual Baptist counterparts in other parts of the Caribbean and North America, practice a singing style in which exaggerated overbreathing (hyperventilation) along with a variety of other sounds (grunts, yells, murmurs) create a stirring form of vocal percussion. The technique is known as "trumpeting," and *Rastlin' Jacob* offers numerous examples of the astonishing soundscape their voices create.

A perfect example is "Onward Christian Soldiers," for many an all-too-familiar hymn identified with Salvation Army bands. In the hands of Spiritual Baptists, it begins as a familiar hymn, then gradually, thrillingly, out of the form of the Christian hymn spring voices creating a syncopated line of drum sounds. My first association was that corny Christmas carol "Little Drummer Boy" "I come to praise him/a rump-pa-ta-tum"—except the "rump-pa-ta-tums" keep exploding with emotional intensity and rhythmic complexity. It is unlike any music from anywhere on earth I've ever heard, maybe a form of neo-African spiritual doo-wop.

*Continued on page 56*