

BY CHARLES De LEDESMA

THOMAS MAPFUMO

LION OF ZIMBABWE



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In December, 1984, Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited came to London for the first time. Although it was the debut visit for the Zimbabwean singer, all four shows were packed and local audiences were charged by hearing music that expressed the pulse of the African continent — music born under civil war conditions.

When listening to Mapfumo and Blacks Unlimited one could hardly avoid being mesmerized by the sound — a perfect interbalance of the spiralling twin guitars of Leonard Chiyangwa and Lucky Mupawaenda, light flexible rhythms, and horns that were sometimes hard and sometimes soft. Interwoven through it all was Mapfumo's soulful and guttural voice, striking in its honesty, empathy and passion.

Beyond the raw feeling in his voice was the underlying lyrical message of his Chimurenga songs, tunes whose lyrics speak of economic exploitation, racial oppression, codes of conduct for the ZANU fighters of the Zimbabwean war, ancestral spirits, and the importance of "re-education" to shed the "colonial condition."



Perhaps more than any other musician in Africa, Thomas Mapfumo has been able to take an ancient traditional music and create a vibrant, popular and urgently danceable modern counterpart. And certainly no other African musician has played such an important role in the liberation struggle.

Although Zimbabwe's liberation war is over, the continent of Africa is not yet free and as Mapfumo told me after the concert, he knows he still has a role to play.

"There has been a change in the subject matter of our songs since independence," he said. "When we were fighting we were concentrating on being ourselves — Zimbabweans. And since achieving that we've looked outside. Now we hear news of people being shot, people fighting for their freedom. So we've changed the emphasis to make the message more international."

The new international emphasis is directed not just at the oppressive policies of South Africa and Namibia, he added, but at all governments that bring suffering onto their people.

Said Mapfumo: "There are some black governments who oppress their own people. We have a duty to bring them to reality."

Of course that goal may be easier said than done. Amazingly, Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited have not yet played in any independent African country other than Zambia. Changing this situation will be a top priority for 1985.

"There is nothing we'd like to do more than tour around Africa but it seems there aren't enough promoters to do that sort of thing," he said. "We went to Zambia on our own. We wanted to cross into Mozambique

but it was too dangerous. We had played there before independence when it was occupied by the Portuguese, but we didn't play to the real people. Many of our records are available there and the people know us from the Voice of Zimbabwe rebel broadcasts during the mid-seventies."

The mid-seventies was a time when Mapfumo commanded a unique position in then war-torn Rhodesia. Combatants on both sides liked him, despite his obvious political affiliation. During 1976-80 Mapfumo recorded a number of songs "under war conditions." (Ten of these songs can be found on the lp *Chimurenga Singles* on London-based Earthworks Records while others may be found on old Gramma Records pressing and on various *Hits Of Zimbabwe* compilation albums.) Chimurenga means "the second war of liberation," and while Mapfumo's lyrics were not blatant, they did speak to the fighters in the bush. It was a time of bizarre contradictions and hidden battles.

"Although we couldn't go out into a protected village or off the tarred roads, we would play as far across the country as possible, touring for ten days at a stretch," he recalled. "And we were never harassed. We had a lot of friends amongst the soldiers. And the police also loved our music. Of course we had to camouflage the meaning of the lyrics so we didn't blow our cover and lose our effectiveness in urging people to continue supporting the struggle. With many of our numbers the government soldiers thought that the songs were in support of them. Yet our real friends were the freedom fighters and they knew exactly what we were doing. It was a confusing situation. Most were in the army to get bread. Some were over in Mozambique fighting in the bush for Frelimo whilst their brothers were in the Rhodesian Army and were trying to shoot them down!"

While Mapfumo could play live, his records were banned during this period on the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation. The ban didn't neutralize the effect that the songs had but rather sharpened the potency of the revolutionary song. The music became truly underground and helped render the government's propaganda strategy impotent. To ensure that his records were reaching the people, an operation was mounted to distribute new releases to record bars throughout the Tribal Trust Lands.

"People wouldn't expect to hear me on the radio because they knew I was banned," said Mapfumo. "They just had to always watch the record bars for our next release."

Unable to halt the proliferation of Chimurenga songs, the government imprisoned Mapfumo in 1977 and demanded that he admit that his lyrics were in support of "the terrorists."

"I told them that what I was singing about I believed to be our own traditional music."

Mapfumo recalled. "They couldn't or wouldn't believe me and I was taken back to my cell."

Mapfumo was ultimately released and at independence he was thrust into the role of revolutionary musical hero. His songs "Kwaedza Mu Zimbabwe" (It Has Dawned in Zimbabwe) and "Nyari" (Be Ashamed) became anthems during the celebrations. And at the height of the festivities, Bob Marley arrived.

"I met Bob Marley very briefly when he came to play at our independence rally," said Mapfumo. "But I didn't get to talk to him. By 1980 lots of people had heard his roots reggae. Before we only knew Jimmy Cliff, Johnny Nash and Desmond Dekker. Some guy from London first played me "No Woman No Cry" and I realized how strong and clear his message was. It came like a revelation to us and from that day on my friends and I loved his music."

Although Mapfumo wears his hair in dreadlocks, he said his motives were slightly different than for Rastas from outside Africa.

"I believe Bob was very deep into Rasta," said Mapfumo. "He was very serious about the whole thing. It was something very sacred. I was never influenced by Rasta. The reason I wear dreadlocks is something different from what most people think. Dreadlocks are African. It is a thing which has been within Africans for centuries. Many people in the communal lands are wearing long dreadlocks. They are not allowed to shave their hair. I suppose I am a Rastaman from Zimbabwe but although Rastas all over the world believe in the same principles, we live it deeper somehow."



Thomas Mapfumo was born on July 2, 1945, in Marondera, Zimbabwe. When he was a few years old he moved to the capital, Harare, with his parents. It was here that he began his singing career in 1970 when he joined a popular nightclub group, the Springfields. After a few years the band broke up and Mapfumo founded his own group, the Hallelujah Chicken Run Band. It was an ensemble that departed from the soul rock direction of the day in favor of a return to the roots of indigenous Zimbabwean music, the folk rhythms of Mbira music and the vocal/lyric influences of spirit mediums.

"I lacked direction at the beginning but I realised that it was necessary that I play our music — not least because that music would be an encouragement to those fighting in the bush," he said. "I knew that I had to use my own African language to send a message to my people."

The message that he sent through the

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KING OF KINGS

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lems which confront us today are, equally, unprecedented. They have no counterparts in human experience. Men search the pages of history for solutions, for precedents, but there are none.

This, then is the ultimate challenge. Where are we to look for our survival, for the answers to questions which have never before been posed? We must look first to Almighty God, Who has raised man above the animals and endowed him with intelligence and

RAS ROJAH

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noted pianists — Little Richard and Nina Simone. Nina previewed a song from her new album (her first in seven years) called "That Is Why Bob Marley Died." Her live rendition sent chills through co-host Tom Schnabel and myself. A few days later, Nina was baptised by Father Amde of the L.A. branch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church... Preacher Little Richard recalled visiting Bob at Tuff Gong, and the King/Queen of R'n'R opined, "I staggered out of there. His ganja was *lethal!*"... Aashid, leader of Nashville's Afrikan Dreamland, has a fine new solo album called *Kosmik Gypsy*, that fans of Ras Michael-Jimmy

reason. We must put our *faith in Him*, that He will not desert us or permit us to destroy humanity which He created in His image. And we must look into ourselves, into the depths of our souls. We must become something we have never been and for which our education and experience and environment have ill prepared us. We must become bigger than we have ever been: more courageous, greater in spirit, larger in outlook. We must become members of a new race, overcoming petty prejudice, owing our ultimate allegiance not to nations but to our fellow men within *the human community.* ★

Riley roots-fusion should like a lot, especially its standout track, "Apartheid." Available from AYO Records, Box 91090, Nashville, TN 37209... With so-called "Rasta" boxer, Living-stoned Bramble out there, maybe now's the time for locksmen on the links — and the place to tee off if you're in Chicago is the *Cog Hill Golf and Country Club*, whose Yellow Pages advertisement declares it the "Home of Dubsdread." A flip of the crown to reader Phil Kolman for the info... Justin Hines' nine-years-in-the-making lp *Travel With Love* should be out about now from St. Louis' Nighthawk Records. Hines told Dixie Diamond in Jamaica recently that he was discovered years ago on a fishing boat by — cya'an ya believe it? — Eddie Fisher and Elizabeth Taylor... Jah Love, Everyone. ★



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Hallelujah Chicken Run Band and subsequent groups — the Acid Band and Blacks Unlimited — was more than simply a blending of traditional styles with modern instruments. It was music that was based in a centuries-old spiritual context, the music of Mbira.

"I listened to much Mbira music before my family moved to the city," said Mafumo. "Always that music has soaked into my writing — everything is derived from that sound."

Indeed the instrumentation of the Blacks Unlimited can be seen as a modern electric imitation of purely traditional instruments. The Mbira is duplicated by the twin picking of guitars, the hosho is heard in the highhat cymbal and the stamping feet of the dancers is replicated by the thumping of the bass drum.

The new-old mixture of Shona folk styles, according to Mafumo, has sent audiences into trance-like frenzies.

"People would get possessed at our concerts because it would be the first time

that had heard their traditional music played in such a manner," he said. "It would hit them spiritually and they would dance furiously! These tunes were similar to the ones that spirit mediums (village women who spoke in tongues during ritualistic ceremonies) use. And so when a person identified one such song they would go into a trance — just as if they were in front of a spirit medium! It would never happen immediately though. You would have to call the spirit and when the mood was right, some people would get possessed."

While the political conditions of Zimbabwe have calmed down since the seventies, Thomas Mafumo's message is in many ways more relevant than ever. Although his songs are not strictly Chimurenga now, that legacy will always be with him. It is impossible to imagine him singing of trifles. The politicizing of the exploited African masses will always be present in his songs.

Charles de Ledesma is a free-lance writer based in London.

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A: Even before dat! Even before dat happened in '76. Because it was the riots in '76 y'know. The riots came out of the fact that the police tried to police it out of existence. Was so many policemen there that people began to feel uptight. "This is Carnival, why are there so many menacing police around?" Anyway, I wanted to express the fact of the victory of the pro-Carnival forces against the anti-Carnival forces. The theme of the Masses we played was called "Forces of Victory." It was a military theme. A military Mas. We had paratroopers, sailors, guerrillas and we had a big tank, a makeshift tank that we built, we had wooden guns, very colorful red, green and yellow, blue and all that. That is what the poem is about in fact but it's also about, it's also symbolic of the victory of working class blacks against the police and the state.

Q: Is Linton Kwesi Johnson a happy man?

A: Yeah, I try to be.

Q: Would you say that as you get older you get less angry?

A: Well, one can't go on being an angry young man for the entire duration of one's life.

Q: And finally, how are you different from ten years ago?

A: I hope a little older and a little wiser. ★

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