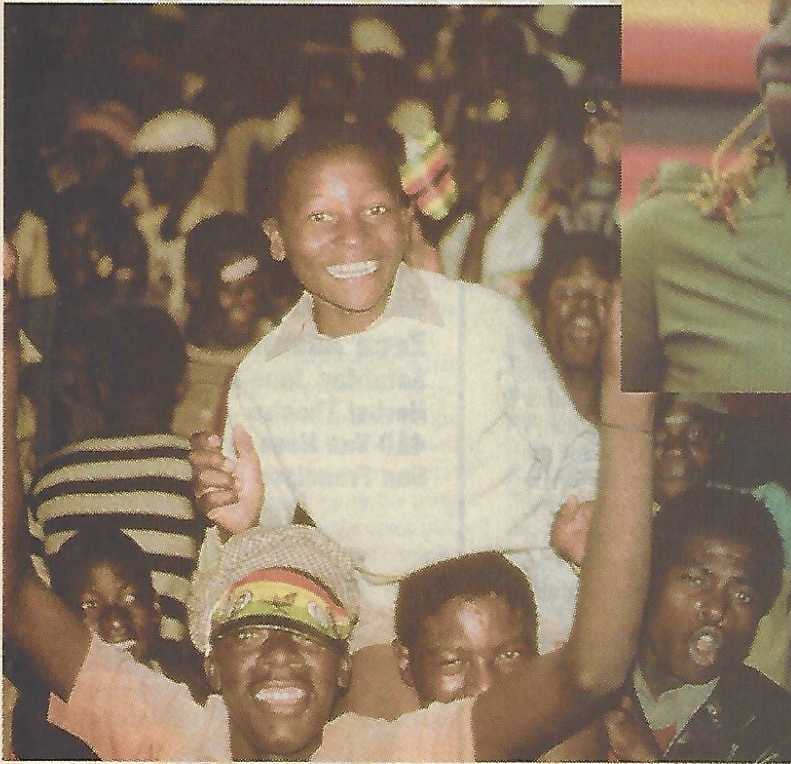


I - WITNESS :

# DERA TOMPKINS

BY ROGER STEFFENS

PHOTOS BY DERA TOMPKINS



AT LEFT, A GLIMPSE OF THE JUBILANT CELEBRATION OF THE BIRTH OF ZIMBABWE, RUFARO STADIUM, HARARE, APRIL 18, 1980. CENTER, RITA MARLEY WITH BOB MARLEY AND A BYSTANDER IN THE STADIUM. RIGHT, THE ZANU ARMY CHOIR SINGS SONGS OF FREEDOM.

## *Zimbabwe Victorious:* Bob Marley's African Triumph

“You think you know what really happened to Bob Marley in Zimbabwe, but no one’s ever published the full story. Tonight, I’m ready to spill.”

It’s late on a frosty Monday night in Washington, DC. Dr. Dread, founder of RAS Records, and I are in a cozy-warm rowhouse living room, spellbound by the soliloquies of a modern Sojourner Truth. Our eloquent host, Dera Tompkins, scholar, master medical librarian and activist, has at last consented after a 15-year prodding to sit for a lengthy debriefing of her crucial role in Bob Marley’s most triumphant moment, as he stood before a stadium filled with dignitaries and welcomed Zimbabwe into the community of nations.

Dera is head librarian for a major neuroscience research center, and was a prime medical consultant during Marley’s fight against melanoma. Her tawny classical African features are constantly shifting as a veritable Victoria Falls of language leaps off her



tongue. She’s an Uzi of verbiage, a gatling gun of insight, an embodiment of all the important movements of modern black Americans’ struggles. As her dreads, coiled loosely around her head, begin to shake free, she begins her story, her pace nonstop, relentless, her barrage of memories complex and complete.

Her mid-’70s researches into Jamaican religion, culture and music had led her to meet the Wailers back then. But it wasn’t until 1979 at the Black Music Association convention in Philadelphia that she and Bob began to reason heavily. “I was in different places with the Wailers,” she recalls happily. “I was invited to come tour. Sometimes I would come meet them in New York, and I would move with them. I was there for the four

days in Harlem at the Apollo, the International Year of the Rasta Child show in Kingston, Reggae Sunsplash ’79 in Montego Bay, Madison Square Garden. And of course Zimbabwe.”

How she arrived in the war-torn capital of the newly emerging African state, and ended up linking there with the reggae king, is a tale that has its roots, oddly enough, in an “uptown church in Roxbury, Massachusetts,” her home town. Taking quick hummingbird sips from a cup of herbal tea as her words spill forth, Dera recalls, “It was called St. Mark’s and there was

*Continued on page 50*

Continued from page 49

a council that sends ministers to different congregations. Many people were fair-skinned in our church. They sent us a brother from home. The people in church were not pleased. He was dark-skinned and he was from a place they probably never heard of—Rhodesia.

"Now, my father was a radical. He looked white at a distance, but he was not white at all. He was very black, and my father was my political guide, how I got where I am. He was a Pan-Africanist socialist, very progressive throughout his life."

The African minister, the Rev. Mazobere and Mr. Carrington, Dera's father, struck up a strong friendship, visiting prisons, attending the sick. But three years before Rhodesia's transformation into Zimbabwe, the Rev. Mazobere returned home to contribute to the final struggle. Dera's dad took out his first adult passport and prepared to join him. Dera convinced him to wait until the war was over. When, in January 1980, it was announced that independence celebrations would take place on April 18, Dera received a phone call from Boston. "My father called and said, 'Dera, do you want to go home?' And I said, Yes! You kidding?! We're going to go to Africa!!"

On their arrival the week preceding the festivities, Dera found Rev. Mazobere to be a staunch

supporter of Joshua Nkomo, whose ally in the civil war, Robert Mugabe, was also a political rival, and was to be the nation's first Prime Minister. And so the good reverend decided he'd boycott the festivities, opting to watch them on a little black-and-white tv. Dera gathered her robes around her and hightailed it to downtown Harare (actually still Salisbury for a few more days), where her dreadlocks caused her to be mistaken for Rita Marley, Bob's wife.

She had brought 10 copies of Bob's African liberation album, *Survival*, with her as gifts, thinking that it would be new to everyone. Instead, "When I got off the plane, very soon I found out

that *Survival* was the number-one album in the country. And number two was Eddy Grant's—he had a revolutionary song, 'Living on the Front Line.' Those two songs were the unofficial anthems of independent Zimbabwe! So they did know about the albums and the music, but nobody knew about Rasta, really.

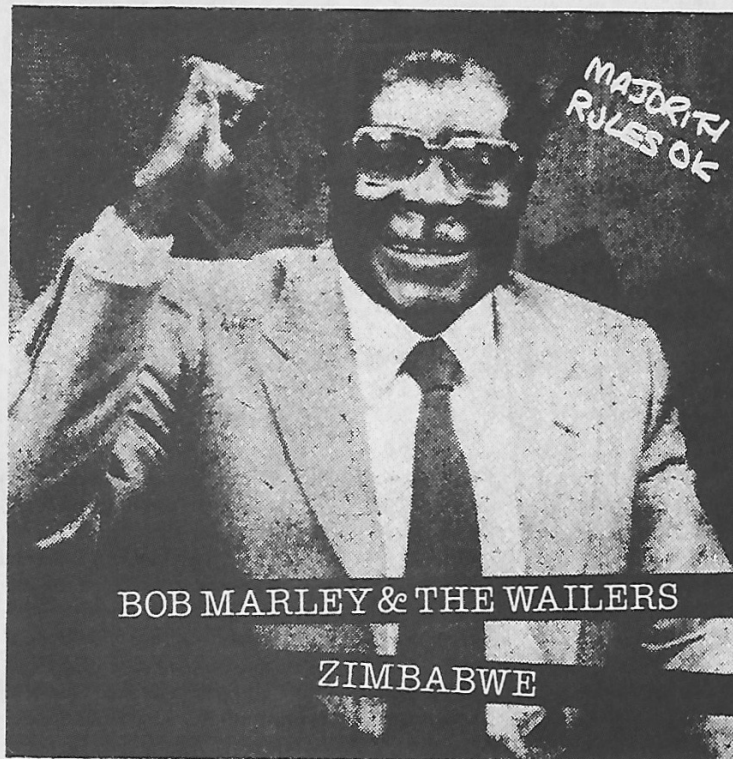
"The energy on the streets and in the homes was electric, like a thousand Christmases celebrated at one time. We had flags! The red, black, green and yellow flags of the new nation of Zimbabwe were everywhere. It was Zimbabwe and that sounded and felt just

right. We had won a seven-year war and endured many more years of wicked colonial oppression. Now we were going to have the biggest African Liberation party we could have. We won in Zimbabwe! Their guns were greater but our cause was greater than their guns. We chased those crazy baldheads out of town!

"When I say it was like Christmas, I mean that there was just pure excitement all day everywhere. The people of Zimbabwe chant. They sing beautiful a cappella songs wherever they may be gathered. The streets were always full of music. Every day there were bands playing in the city center and the school children would come to town after school in their uniforms to join the daily celebrations. Their parents were busy shopping

for new clothes, food, fabric and decorations—hats, posters and flags—banners that were fluttering everywhere in the city that said "Welcome to Zimbabwe" with pictures of Mugabe hand-painted. But the flag was the more important, representing to us that we had our country and our land back in the hands of our people. It was Viva Zimbabwe! Long Live Zimbabwe!"

When Dera heard a few days before the big day that Bob Marley had made a last-minute decision to come and headline the celebrations from a stage that he was sending from Europe especially for the occasion, "It was just too fantastic to be believed.



Rare picture sleeve single of "Zimbabwe" featuring President Mugabe on the cover.

At the invitation of ZANU, Mugabe's party! It was as if Jah had interceded to place his son just where he was supposed to be on this great African Liberation Day. The street excitement grew into a wild and joyful frenzy."

**I**t was absolutely impossible to get a pass into the stadium for the climactic, and heavily diplomatic, events. But the determined Dera made certain she was at the airport when Bob arrived on April 16, just at the same moment as Prince Charles' plane landed. "Some officials were there, but most of the top officials were present to greet Prince Charles. There were not many members of the public there to meet Bob because Bob's arrival time was not publicly announced." Delighted to see Dera, the Wailers were however a bit suspicious at her unexpected appearance so far from home. "I'm certain that everyone wondered if I was really an agent," she says matter-of-factly. "This was, of course, an incredible coincidence for all of us. During the bus ride from the airport, I was able to tell my story and all fears were calmed.

"The entourage included the band: Bob, Tyrone, Wya, Family Man, Carly, Al, Junior, Seeco, [soundman] Dennis Thompson, Judy, Rita, Marcia, [sons] Stevie and Ziggy, Tommy Cowan, [art and lighting director] Neville Garrick, [Jamaican lawyer] Donna McIntosh, and [Island Records'] Denise Mills. First we were taken to Rufaro Stadium, because Bob wanted to see the stage. That was in the afternoon.

"While we all stood on the slope of a hill inside of the stadium beside the stage, we heard beautiful chanting and the sound of people marching coming from the outside of the stadium to the right. It sounded like an African choir. At first, we could only hear the voices because the stadium bleachers blocked our view. The voices drew closer and closer and soon the entire group rounded the corner. All eyes were watching. The officials at the stadium told us that they were the ZANU Freedom Fighters arriving at the stadium for practice. They were singing *chimurenga* songs, songs of the revolutionary war. There was one soldier out front who led the chanting. The marching was strictly African—rhythm and style.

"They were at least 300 strong, brothers and sisters. It is important to note that the women of Zimbabwe have the

maximum respect of the people because they fought the guerilla war in the bush side by side with their brothers for all the years of the revolution. They all wore green army fatigue pants with different solid color shirts in the colors of the new flag, red, green, yellow and black. And when you heard them chant, you know that it was songs of freedom! And we all collectively felt so unbelievably proud. These are the brothers and sisters who put their life on the line for all of us. Frontline soliders. They were the reason we all could be standing there today. We owed everything to them.

"I turned to look at Bob, who was standing beside me, and he was staring directly at the soldiers and he had tears in his eyes. I knew exactly how he felt. These were tears of the deepest and highest respect from one committed freedom fighter to another. This

moment touched my soul. I cried too. I don't know if you understand in Rasta how much we look up to our freedom fighters. There's just an overwhelming sense of pride and respect. We all had that. But I saw him cry, and it was because he loved revolution and he loved revolutionaries. Because, you know, he was really like them, he identified with them, he's one of them, and he just felt it. He was captivated

by the presence of an African army. It was the first time he had seen a revolutionary African army—the ZANU Patriotic Front. These were the people who fought and won this war for us. So you could really see that in him. He was very proud. I will always keep that moment in my mind and heart.

"After that we were taken to a hotel that was 12 miles outside of the city, the only available hotel space for the number of rooms required. The accommodations were sub-standard," says Dera, her screwface leaving no doubt that they were waaaay bad. "Everyone was disappointed and soon we were rerouted back to the city. "From there, everyone got taken to a nightclub owned by an entrepreneur named Job. They took us there to eat—and they served pork! Our hosts did not know the dietary restrictions for Rasta against pork, and took the appetizers off the table immediately. When Job learned that the hotel situation had failed, he offered his own home complete with pool and house help, while he stayed in the city. The only thing was, his

*Continued on page 52*

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Continued from page 51

phone had been disconnected.

"It appeared that Job was in the black upper class. And this is where everyone had to stay until hotel rooms were available. But it was a really strange situation for the Wailers to be in. I mean, this is Bob Marley! We are in a home where no one knew the address, with no phone, and no one attending the group other than the house help.

"Now I became a vital link to the group—this is my special story—because when they arrived, they were taken from place to place so nobody had time to change their money to Rhodesian dollars. They didn't even know what the exchange rate was. I had Rhodesian dollars because I had been there a week."

There was invariably a Jamaican posse in each of the cities that Bob played, to give him a back-home vibe, but in Harare "there was only one Jamaican, Joe Steblecki, who was living there. Horace Campbell, who wrote *Rasta and Resistance*, was there. And me. That was the whole 'team.'

"They took some of the Wailers to another house that was vacant in the same neighborhood. The I Three [Rita Marley, Judy Mowatt, Marcia Griffiths] and Bob, Tommy, Denise and Neville and a few

others stayed at Job's. The I Three only stayed two days. They had promised to be at a 12 Tribes performance back in Jamaica, so they stayed for independence and left."

As the long-anticipated day dawned, artists and audience began to fill the stadium. "From six o'clock that night up until about 11 on the field, there were performances by mostly local African traditional dancers and drummers, Indian religious groups, Christian choirs. Then, in a flash, Marley took stage at the far end of the field, declaring 'Greetings brothers and sisters of Zimbabwe. Bob Marley and the Wailers give thanks for the invitation to your independence celebration. One Love. Rastafari. Yeah, Rastafari live. Viva Zimbabwe! Viva Zimbabwe! Viva Zimbabwe!'

As he broke into 'Positive Vibration,' the crowd began to sway to the groove, swaying joyfully into 'Dem Belly Full,' and 'Roots Rock Reggae.'" Suddenly, halfway through "I Shot the Sheriff" the brutal stench of tear gas rent the air. "I had come down front to take pictures of Bob's performance. I was on the field when the tear gas hit. I was crying because I thought it was all over. I thought there was going to be a riot. Here we're coming to celebrate independence, and now it seemed that the whole event would be spoiled. I remember I ran all the way to the back, and that's where I grabbed the cloth banner that said "Welcome to Zimbabwe" from the rear wall of the stadium. My eyes were burning badly and I needed something to protect my face from the tear gas.

"But soon everything calmed down. People calmed, the air cleared, and finally activity resumed on stage. But somebody took Judy, Marcia and Rita back to the house, along with Stevie and Ziggy. What it was, was some people who were just anxious to get inside the stadium. The crowd got more excited when they heard Bob Marley playing and they pushed their way in through the barricades, so the police shot tear gas and it floated into the stadium. It was not a riot at all! No one got hurt, maybe



Bob Marley on stage in Rufaro Stadium, Harare.

just small bruises. Nothing really happened."

As Bob resumed with "War," the audience pressed forward for the sixth and final song, the one they had raised their battle standards to, the anthem "Zimbabwe." Before walking offstage, Bob saluted the crowd. "A Luta Continua! Viva Zimbabwe! Pamberi Zimbabwe!"

Standing together on the stage, Dera and the Wailers' entourage and dozens of others watched as a decidedly discomfited Prince Charles saluted while the despised colonial symbol of the British flag was lowered in Africa for the final time. An orgasmic cheer split the air as the wind whipped the Zimbabwe flag hoisted in its place. "We all cried and cheered, and Bob saw me cry again, and he remembered that. I mean, people screamed, yelled, shouted, just vocalized for 30 minutes straight," says Dera, letting

loose an impassioned ululation and expressions of frenzy.

"Ahhhhh, all the suffering of 90 years of white minority rule were drowned by the cheers of the people You know, people just shouted it out. That was like Glory Day. That was one of those hallelujah times like Bunny Wailer said, 'Hallelujah time, when the people will be singing.' It was like, we won, we won, Zimbabwe is

knew a thing. And there was nobody to ask."

Laughter fills the room, as Dr. Dread, dozing on the couch, comes awake to Dera's rapid exhalations of wry amusement. "A couple of times we all just stood there and looked at each other. This was unbelievable. Bob Marley had just finished the most important performance of his career and we had no way home. It was early in the morning and everyone was tired. The truck was there but no driver,



# PRESIDENTS SAMORA NYERERE, KHAMA, KAUNDA. WELCOME TO ZIMBABWE



ours again! It was

much, much more than any football game. And we just couldn't believe it. And the cannons are right near us, so we felt them, 21! And that was it. And that was the highest moment, the highest I've ever been."

Cheering and drumming followed, capped by the earthquake shock and roar of a low-flying jet formation. Then, exhilaration turned to incomprehension and abandonment for the night's superstars who had flown from half a world away at their own expense to baptize the nation with Jah's grace.

Shaking her head and squinting her eyes in disbelief nearly 20 years later, Dera still can't figure out quite what happened next.

"Following the independence celebration, all the balls began for all the diplomats and invited guests. Job and our other hosts all left Rufaro Stadium to attend the balls. The I Three had taken a vehicle and a driver to return to the house following the tear gas episode. The rest of us were left with a truck and a driver who could not drive a manual transmission vehicle. So everybody who could help had abandoned the Wailers!

"To make matters worse, we didn't know where we lived! We didn't know which street Job lived on and we did not know what section of the city. Nobody

and nobody in our group could drive the truck

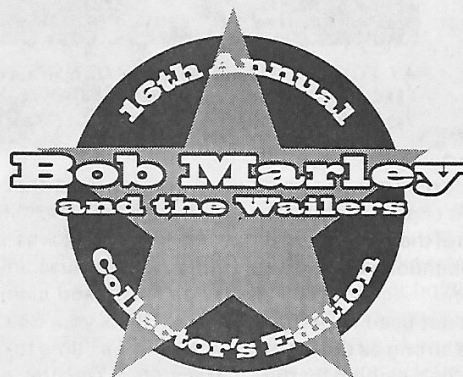
either. That's why I want to learn how to drive a truck, in case it ever happens again. So finally we get a driver, but then we still don't know where we are going. So we literally drove around for hours! 'Cause you figure you're driving, you're going to run up on it somewhere, right, somehow, eventually, maybe. But we don't even have a map of the city and we drove around till daylight.

"Everyone's trying to take control, but there was no control to take. Every once in a while the truck would stop 'cause we would not know where we were, and we would all get out of the truck

and we would all just look at each other. There were about seven times we stopped, and people just got out of the truck and stared. Who you gonna yell at—Bob Marley? Bob would just stand there with his arms folded. Sometimes we all just had to laugh. No one would believe that this happened to Bob Marley in Zimbabwe. I was angry because none of these brothers could drive a truck. A good revolutionary should be able to drive a truck. This is crazy.

"But," she says with a sigh, "at last we found it. "Judy, Rita and Marcia

*Continued on page 54*



Continued from page 53

were at Job's house, because they had left early, so they were sleeping when we arrived. They didn't even know what happened to us. Bob and the others went to sleep." Rounding up the household help and slipping them all her Rhodesian money, Dera set about making their rising time a rootical experience. "I took it upon myself to look after everyone. While



everyone got their rest, I prepared breakfast: bread, fruit, tea, butter and eggs. We had just had a very stressful evening. I thought we all deserved a pleasant morning.

"When everyone arose to cooked breakfast and tea, they were most appreciative. It was the least I could do for all the work they had done collectively through the years. We were out at the house for the whole day, and this is where I heard a lot of conversations between Bob and the band, because we were in the living room. Bob was lying on the couch, everybody else was in the room, and they were just reasoning about everything that had happened."

That night, Bob played a second, unplanned show. "The equipment was there, the stage was there, so Bob felt that he—I don't think that anybody knew that the celebration was just going to be diplomats. So he said he wanted to play for the people. Now, it was originally going to be a paid show, but what happened is that we couldn't figure out how to set that up. We didn't really know the value of their money, and what was fair to charge. So luckily they abandoned that idea and decided to just do a free concert.

"But Zimbabwean audiences were just not used to performances. So Bob did a show, and it was as strong as the night before, because he probably felt more like he's singing for the people tonight. So it was a powerful show. The first night there were 40,000 people, but not nearly as many the second night. It was unannounced, the lights weren't as bright, they didn't use the bleachers. The people were standing on the field. And

when he sang 'Zimbabwe' it was unbelievable the energy that he felt, and the people too. The crowd just stood and just cheered.

"So Bob did his set, and as you know Bob would do a set and go off stage, and at an appropriate moment, with enough applause, he would come back out and do an encore. And he's been know to do as many as three encores. And I'm sure that Bob had mentally planned to do the show that way, with encores. He probably would have done five encores if people called for more. But what happened was, Bob ended his last number, and everybody turned around and filed out of the stadium."

Again, Dera laughter is curdled with giddy despair. "Because they didn't know that if they applauded that he would come back to perform more songs. They really just didn't know. So they left! And everybody in Bob's entourage was shocked! It's a culture that didn't understand the concept of an encore—that's an acquired habit. They walked out, and we wanted to say, 'Come back!'"



AT TOP, NEVILLE GARRICK, DENNIS THOMPSON, ERROL BROWN AND SEECO AT THE AIRPORT IN ZIMBABWE. BELOW, BOB MARLEY TALKS WITH YOUNG ZIMBABWEANS IN A NIGHTCLUB IN HARARE.

I remind Dera that Bob's prematurely final number was "Exodus." "Yeah," she smiles, "The people said, 'Exodus?' And they did. It was really kind of funny, and it was kind of innocent. Because anywhere else, people would be begging, hammering and clamoring for more, and they just politely said, 'Thank you, Bob Marley. Okay, it's over. Bye.'"

Now it was time to get the lay of the land, and many events transpired. The first, and most important, was the location of a supply of herb, sadly missing since their arrival. "I was taken to meet a man who said he was a prince from New Zealand," Dera admits, "He really checked for Bob and he gave me a large portion, and said take it back to him. So I took it to Bob

and Bob was most grateful. By this time they had moved the whole family to a hotel, the St. James in downtown Harare, nice hotel.

"Now one thing to really comment on that reflects Bob's whole personality and style—the door to his room was open, all day, and maybe all night. He wanted people to come. It was Bob's spirit to have his door open. There were still opposing forces within the guerilla forces. Things were still volatile. In fact, the young brother who was part of the family I stayed with was put out of Bob Marley's room at one time because he did not fight in the war. And one time ZANU came in and they recognized him, and they made him leave Bob's room. And we couldn't say anything. But Bob's room—I think that was just so admirable—that anyone who came in could have access to him and meet him. It wasn't like it was a horde of people, but those who came were welcome. That's the kind of presence he had there.

"You heard the most reporting about Bob's visit on the radio. What was nice about Bob—sometimes they would send a limo, and Bob would say, 'No, get an open-back truck. I want people to see me.' He wanted no separation between him and the people. I have a radio tape that says, 'If you haven't seen Bob Marley just look down the street,' because that's how visible he was and accessible he was to the people.'

other item was a red, gold and green badge with his name imprinted on it."

Among all the traveling about, there was time for some one-on-ones, deep conversations about politics, the band, his children and manager and friends. "Sometimes the conversations were light and sometimes they were heavy. I remember that he said to me, probably 'cause I'm always telling jokes, 'You laugh—but you are serious.' The context in which he made this statement was a high compliment to my political consciousness. He let me know that he respected my energy.

"The day before he was to leave Zimbabwe, he called me to



TOP: DERA TOMPKINS WITH A YOUNG ZIMBABWEAN BROTHER ON THE FIELD OF RUFARO STADIUM FOLLOWING MARLEY'S PERFORMANCE, APRIL 18, 1980. BELOW, DERA'S BANNER THAT WAS TAKEN FROM THE WALL TO PROTECT HER EYES FROM TEAR GAS.



PHOTO BY ROGER STEFFENS

"One of the most important outings was when the ZANU soldiers came to pick him up at the hotel to take him to the bush. I heard that they gave him a uniform. Those were important things to Bob Marley. He wanted to identify with the soldiers and the bush. He wanted to go looking for lions, he wanted to go and see lions. They took him to the zoo!

"One day the Wailers played soccer with an Italian team that was in town. He was on several radio programs. We went to nightclubs. He gave gifts to the people everywhere they went. He had a special picture sleeve single of 'Zimbabwe' with Mugabe's image, and on the other side was 'Survival.'" The

sat by the window on the right hand side and I sat beside him."

It's now way past two a.m. Dr. Dread is upright and itching to get home. We take a few moments to shoot some pictures of Dera and Doc holding the banner that covered her face in the tear gas, and a jar of soil from the precious earth of Zimbabwe. "It was a revolutionary dream come true," she sighs. "The people were victorious."

*These excerpts represent seven pages of a 32-page transcript, which will be published in full in a future issue of Distant Drums.*