

THOMAS MAPFUMO AND THE POPULARIZATION OF SHONA MBIRA

by

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I had an uncle on my father's side who would play *mbira* after drinking. He would start out slowly and quietly, very introspective. But as he picked up emotion, he would become animated, even aggressive, until he'd crash the *deze* [gourd]—actually break it—and he would cry at the end of it all. They'd say it was because he had reconnected with the ancestors, and the world of the living became an obstruction, an impediment to full sublimation of his spirit and emotion. Because he was flesh, he could not be free of flesh. Hence the violence (Musa Zimunya).

Introduction

The music of Thomas Mapfumo is frequently described as a pop adaptation of traditional *mbira* music, the ancient ceremonial performance art of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. While this is an oversimplification of Mapfumo's varied repertoire, *mbira* is an important, perhaps the most important, aspect of the artist's work. My book, *Lion Songs: Thomas Mapfumo and the Music That Made Zimbabwe* (2015) interweaves Zimbabwean history with the biography and music of this under-recognized African innovator, composer, and bandleader.¹ This article, adapted from the *Lion Songs* manuscript, attempts to clarify Thomas's role first in helping to revive the status of *mbira* music in his own country, and then in developing an audience for it internationally.

Thomas Mapfumo is not a traditional musician. He does not play *mbira* himself, though he grew up hearing it in rural settings while being raised by his grandparents up until the age of ten. Listening to *mbira* music and understanding its association with his own personal ancestry was one of the formative experiences of Thomas's early life. He carried that experience with him as a young man coming of age in Salisbury, now Harare, then a colonial city amid a spreading guerrilla war. In this way, Thomas's life embodies the essential character of modern Zimbabweans, which for the most part can never be strictly categorized as "rural" or "urban." One reason that Thomas has thrived as an ambassador of African culture to the world is that from his earliest years, he became adept at negotiating these frontiers.

¹ *Lion Songs: Thomas Mapfumo and the Music that Made Zimbabwe* (Eyre 2015) tells a story of music, war, and nation building in Africa. Zimbabwe's most consequential popular singer, Mapfumo is well known for his popular adaptations of Shona *mbira* songs, especially with his principle band, the Blacks Unlimited. While Eyre's book, like Turino's (2000), makes clear that *mbira* songs are far from the only element—or even the only Zimbabwean traditional element—in Mapfumo's large canon of songs and recordings; they are nevertheless central and important. This set of excerpts from the book deals with *mbira* music and Mapfumo's use of it.

Thomas long ago came to see *mbira* as a beacon of traditional culture that became stigmatized during the roughly 90 years in which white Rhodesians ruled what is now Zimbabwe. Rhodesian authorities sought to mold the local population to fit into an essentially Western and Christian model of society—and the *mbira* tradition, with its link to spirit possession and communication with deceased ancestors, was anathema to that vision. Thus, in the Zimbabwean context, cultural and political struggle have been intrinsically linked throughout Thomas's storied career. Even now, Thomas would argue, the cultural hangover resulting from Rhodesia's vilification of African traditions lingers in the hearts and minds of many Zimbabweans.

Beyond Zimbabwe itself, awareness of and participation in *mbira* music has proceeded in an organic, grass-roots manner, particularly following the arrival of *mbira* and *marimba* musician and educator Dumisani Maraire as a visiting artist at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1968. Many *mbira* musicians have followed in Maraire's footsteps, by assisting researchers and teaching at American universities; and while few of them have enjoyed any success as commercial touring and recording artists, they are supported by a devoted, informal community of enthusiasts that now extends worldwide.

Thomas Mapfumo's career has never been specifically directed at this *mbira*-focused audience. He has long sought to be a musician who speaks to all, with a universal message of empowering the poor and voiceless and uplifting African traditions. That said, he has achieved significant success both in promoting appreciation for and valorization of *mbira* and its related traditions in Zimbabwe, and in swelling the ranks of foreigners who have gone on to study, perform, or simply enjoy *mbira* music. In what follows I focus on two key events in Thomas Mapfumo's career: first, the moment when he perceived the power of performing *mbira* songs as guitar-based pop music in the context of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle; and second, the moment when he brought actual *mbira* into his band and created the sound that would establish his reputation as a champion of Shona music on the international stage. First, a little background on *mbira*.

When the spirit comes

Mbira players are made, not born. Sometimes they are touched by spirits and become suddenly gifted. Families known for their *mbira* musicians exist, but children are never ordained by birth to eke out their livings at *bira* ceremonies; they are not like the *griots* of West Africa with their professionally signifying surnames. Ask an *mbira* player how he or she learned, and you may hear a tale of magic. Stella Chiweshe and the late Beauler Dyoko speak of transformational illnesses that opened a door to the spirit world, and dreams in which they heard songs that sprung readily from their fingers when they awoke. To this day, Stella says she sleeps with her *mbira* close at hand so that music passed from the spirits in sleep will not elude her in the fog of waking.

Beauler said her awakening came when she rejected a philandering husband and fell mysteriously ill. She began dreaming about her late father playing *mbira*, and this worried her Catholic mother. Beauler obeyed the messages in her dreams. She left home

and went to Guruve, in Dande. She stayed there for nine months in the care of traditional healers, *nānga*,² and, once cured, returned home to a mother who had given her up for dead. Her mother performed a divination and soon she found herself speaking with a familiar spirit. “The spirit was her husband,” Beauler recalled. “Now, my mother said I must play *mbira*. She was happy” (interview, 1999). Beauler’s mother traded a cup of salt for an *mbira*, and soon the young woman played her first song, “*Nhemamusasa*,” singing words given to her in a dream by her late father. The family brewed beer to thank the spirit. By the mid-1960s, Beauler was performing at ceremonies and recording songs for Rhodesia state radio, the RBC.

Tute Chigamba, a serene elder man of the *mbira*, reported a childhood gift, an ability to hear *mbira* songs and play them effortlessly, without instruction. When Chigamba was a boy, an old man from a rural town wanted money to teach him, so much per song. Chigamba refused, and working on his own, he mastered five songs in his first week. When he returned, the old man was angry and said, “Oh! You have been lying to me when you said you didn’t play *mbira* before” (interview, 1998).

When Hakurotwi Mude was a boy in Mhondoro in the early 1940s, he had problems at school, “traditional problems.” He often felt ill in the classroom and asked the teacher to excuse him. “My dogs would be sitting outside,” Mude recalled, “and on the way home, we would go hunting. The moment I got home, I would be fit. Eventually I decided maybe school wasn’t for me” (interview, 1999). Mude moved to the capital to work and began to play *mbira*. He sang magnificently and eventually became a *svikiro* (spirit medium). Mude named his group, formed around 1960, *Mhuri Yekwa Rwizi* after his uncle, a Rwizi chief. In high demand for recordings and ceremonies, Mude’s group attracted some of the best *mbira* musicians in the city.

Mbira playing is a high art. It demands mastery of a repertoire rich with variations and opportunities for improvisation. Personal expression comes only within an understanding of the music’s precise rhythmic and melodic language. An outsider wishing to understand, or learn to play, *mbira* music confronts an intellectual and technical challenge—especially if one is unused to music rooted in polyphony and polyrhythm. Given Zimbabwe’s harsh experience with Western colonialism and the profound spiritual origins of this music, it’s easy to see why an *mbira* player might hesitate to share his or her art freely with a European or an American. Of course, many have. But through those experiences, some players have developed a habit of obfuscation, embellishment, even “slinging the bull,” as one longtime student of *mbira* once put it.³

² This is Anglicized Shona for the standard Shona plural form, *dzinānga*.

³ The first known notation of three *mbira* pieces comes in an 1872 entry in the diary of German traveler and geographer Carl Mauch (for analytical discussions of them see Kubik 1998: 84–91; Brenner 1997: 499–522). A century later, Paul Berliner and others would, primarily for analytical purposes, develop a system of notation for *mbira* pieces (for a comparative discussion of these see Grupe 2004: 75–94), although to this day, most players, whether in Zimbabwe or elsewhere, learn the music orally, not from notation.

Stella Chiweshe, one of the most successful *mbira* performers on the international stage, is known to give lyrically mystifying interviews to Western journalists. “When preparing myself to go on stage,” Stella once said,

first of all, I refrain from talking. Then I start to listen to sounds. The sound of the *mbira* for me represents water. It flows over the boundary of our thinking as human beings. As soon as I hold the *mbira*, my playing is taken into something that I cannot control. I cannot stop, and I am thinking, “Which song is this? Which song is this?” I am just playing and singing what I’m seeing in my vision at that time. It’s not like an old song that you keep on playing, like eating stale food. Everything is fresh. It’s like I am being driven (interview, 2003).

Such alluring conundrums, along with the music’s inherent complexities, might lead a person not raised with this tradition to imagine that the *mbira* player’s art is actually *based* on misdirection and disguise. In a concert setting, the audience sees only a large gourd (*deze*) into which the player’s busy hands vanish. The *deze* amplifies the *mbira*’s sound but also rounds out its naturally clear tones. A person watching three players might be hard-pressed to discern who is playing what. Waltz time and shuffle rub together, jostling and commingling in a polyrhythmic matrix. Beads or bottle caps fixed to a metal bar on the *mbira*, and around the edges of the *deze*, vibrate in response to each note played. The “buzzing” they produce is essential to the aesthetic—as much as distortion is to rock guitar. To a Western ear, and even to some Zimbabwean musicians, that buzzing may seem yet another distraction, obscuring the actual music.⁴ But the adept player clearly hears, through all of this, the individual parts and their interrelationships.

The *mbira* players I interviewed view the career of Thomas Mapfumo with a mix of gratitude and suspicion—gratitude for uplifting and defending their traditions, suspicion for entering the spiritual realm with neither credentials nor purely spiritual intent. Thomas has never claimed occult powers, yet some believe that spirits speak through him. “His spirit does not give him songs through dreams,” Beauler Dyoko asserted, “but through daydreaming. He can get a song on the stage. You can ask him, ‘How did you play that song?’ and he won’t know. He will have forgotten, because the spirit came while he was on stage” (interview, 1999).

“Thomas is clever enough,” observed Chigamba, with a note of skepticism. “He went to the ancestral spirits, and he paid for that permission to play the pieces any time. Each and every year, he has to go there to see the ancestral spirits, to say, ‘Thank you very much. You have done a lot. You are guiding me, and my pieces are doing well.’ And from there, they bless him again and give him more powers. He knows what he is doing” (interview, 1998).

Most *mbira* musicians I have interviewed praised Thomas’s work. Typical was one who called him “the only man who has managed to play *mbira* with modern

⁴ Some Western recordings of *mbira* do not use the *deze* and mute the bottle caps on the instrument to eliminate the buzzing. The result may be appealing in its own way, but this approach fundamentally distorts the musical tradition. To buzz or not to buzz remains a hot topic of debate among Westerners who play and record *mbira*.

instruments to my liking.” Musicians who emulate Thomas’s approach are often rebuked for combining songs inappropriately, changing their proper names, and confusing the spirits by playing them under the wrong circumstances.

Many guitarists in Zimbabwe play *mbira* songs, though few merit the approval of *mbira* musicians. Jonah Sithole is the consistent exception. Sithole never played *mbira* himself, but he took the spiritual aspect of the music seriously and drew his guitar lines directly from *mbira* performances. He performed with understated dignity, standing straight and still, all his energies directed into his hands. None of the talented guitarists who have passed through the Blacks Unlimited over the years—including his closest match, Joshua Dube—has ever challenged Sithole’s stature as the gold standard for *mbira* guitar. Now that they’ve both passed away, Sithole and Dube each have their supporters. Both were great innovators and the differences between them are more a matter of personal guitar style than anything else. “But I can tell you this,” declared *mbira* player and maker Chris Mhlanga, “you will *never* play in a *bira* ceremony with a guitar” (interview, 1998).

Ngoma Yarira (the drum is sounding)

Since the 1950s, the national radio had been working traditional music into its programming, even bringing musicians to radio studios to play on the air. These broadcasts were aimed at attracting older rural listeners, with the idea that they would then become attuned to the government’s social and political messages. But some radio programmers were genuinely interested in traditional culture. Singer, guitarist, and composer Alick Nkhata had started in radio under the Federation and had traveled through rural areas around Salisbury, encouraging local players to rehearse and record (Turino 2000: 99–101). Nkhata’s urgings must have puzzled musicians who had long been told that their traditional arts—especially *mbira*—were evil and ungodly. Now the government wanted them to perform on national radio? Nkhata found in one formerly musical village that “people do not drink beer anymore,” and that since the coming of Seventh-Day Adventists, they instead gave tea parties and sang hymns (Turino 2000: 100).⁵ Church suppression of African musical culture in Southern Rhodesia was a reality. But traditional music had not disappeared; it had simply gone underground.

Tute Chigamba saw it bubbling up in Salisbury in the 1960s. “On a Friday or Saturday,” he said, “you could walk at night and find a *bira*—people dancing, ululating, playing *hosho* [gourd rattle]. In at least ten or fifteen houses, you could find people playing *mbira*.” (interview, 1998) The sound of *mbira* flowing onto the streets of Highfield and Mbare signaled a new pride in rural ways that fit well with the rising tide of nationalism

⁵ Few broadcasters knew where to look for *mbira* players, so they aired invitations and waited to hear from them. Turino says, if more Zezuru players showed up at the radio station, that was likely a matter of geography rather than bias. Players from other regions were recorded, though not in any systematic way. “Simon Mashoko lived in Masvingo,” *mbira* player Ephat Mujuru recalled, “but he also got recognized. He played *njari* [another type of *mbira*]. If people were good, it didn’t matter where they were” (interview, 2001).

(Turino 2000: 75–78).⁶ So much of what Rhodesians had done to strengthen their position with Africans later worked against them. Education efforts produced a black elite and, with it, the nationalist leadership. Repressive laws and brutality subdued misbehavior but also radicalized citizens. Now the RBC was using traditional music to help sell a Rhodesian worldview, and that very music was reacquainting Africans with their disgraced heritage.

Nkhata believed that traditions in Southern Rhodesia were in fact under threat, even vanishing. This was perhaps exaggerated but not altogether wrong. It grew out of his experiences in the field with legendary musical documentarian Hugh Tracey, then of Roodepoort, South Africa.⁷ Throughout southern, central, and eastern Africa, Tracey had recorded music that was being eradicated by war, migration, natural disaster, and acculturation. He was an amateur scholar, an entrepreneur, and an unlikely evangelist for African traditions. Tracey's sons Andrew and Paul grew up playing African music in the heyday of apartheid, and they did so in a stage revue called *Wait a Minim*, which opened in Johannesburg before moving on to a two-year run in London and then almost a year on Broadway in 1966. While Ian Smith was rallying white Rhodesia to ensconce his racist worldview in a permanent state, two white boys from South Africa were playing Shona *mbira* music in the theaters of London and New York—and nobody called it “world music” then.⁸

The cultural knowledge of African broadcasters and educators was not always deep or firsthand. Many were, in Thomas Turino's word, “cosmopolitans,” “more likely to be distanced from indigenous lifestyles,” on account of growing up in middle-class urban settings (2000: 100–101). Broadcasters in the 1950s and 1960s were no doubt attracted to *mbira* music because it sounded beautiful but also because it fit the perception of figures like Tracey and Nkhata that traditional culture was “dying out” and needed to be rescued (*ibid.*, 101).⁹ Educated in mission schools, these cosmopolitans had long

⁶ Turino deconstructs the notion of an *mbira*—specifically *mbira dzavadzimu*—“revival” in the 1960s. Citing Hugh Tracey's work in the 1930s, Turino characterizes *mbira dzavadzimu* as a “rather specialized, small-scale tradition, at least by the early 20th century.” Even if this specific instrument's exalted status in Zimbabwe today is a relatively new development, it seems clear that there was a more general African cultural “revival,” involving *mbira* and occurring alongside the growing nationalist movement in urban centers like Mbare during the 1960s.

⁷ The International Library of African Music (ILAM) was moved to Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa in 1978, where it remains, by Andrew Tracey after Hugh Tracey's passing in 1977.

⁸ *Wait a Minim* was decades ahead of its time. The Tracey family was on its way to establishing a global legacy as preservers and defenders of African traditional musical culture, but the fact that this play ran Off-Broadway, at the John Golden Theater, for 456 performances in 1966 and 1967 is remarkable. A year later, Dumisani Maraire would arrive to teach at the University of Washington in Seattle, sparking the growth of a grassroots movement to promote Shona music in the United States, but that would take years to reach fruition.

⁹ Turino argues that the notion of indigenous culture “dying out” in Rhodesia was and is overstated. Many city dwellers, and rural people raised in areas of heavy missionary activity, notably by the Seventh-Day Adventists, had effectively lost their culture. But this did not characterize the whole country. Nationalists like Robert Mugabe saw traditional culture as a way to tap into mass

since distanced themselves from ancestral ways. Now, for Turino, they became “culture brokers,” people empowered to decide which things from the past should be embraced and which rejected. Middle-class publications like *African Parade* and *Bantu Mirror* amplified this re-educated worldview, as in a 1959 review of a traditional dance concert in which “antics of ancient days” are transformed, and presumably legitimized, by the introduction of “modern stage craft” (Turino 2000: 149).¹⁰

The Kwanangoma College of Music was founded in Bulawayo in 1961 with the help of Andrew Tracey, who was sent there by his father Hugh Tracey. The idea of the school to preserve and teach both Western and indigenous music; students learned to be competent in a variety of ethnic arts, not to excel at any one in particular. There was no effort to catalog and preserve musical genres, let alone delve into their spiritual dimensions. Kwanangoma prided itself on innovation, for example, developing concert-tuned wooden-slatted marimbas and placing them in “schools, restaurants, nightclubs and tourist spots” around the country. Marimba ensembles entertained and taught, giving the appearance of “tradition,” even though marimbas had scarcely been played on the Zimbabwean plateau prior to the 1960s. Both the marimba and the smaller lamellophone known as *karimba* were chosen for their lack of connection to any specific ethnic group. This served a political goal, to reinforce a shared Zimbabwean identity (Turino 2000: 101–105).

At exactly this time, new regimes in West Africa were actively promoting their own revivals and fusions of indigenous music. Governments funded all sorts of bands and demanded that they create modern music rooted in local culture. In Guinea, Sekou Toure’s cultural initiatives produced some of the most resonant African popular music of the era, probably his greatest legacy. What was going on in Rhodesia paled by comparison. The most powerful music in Rhodesia, the sounds likely to raise hairs on the backs of young African necks, did not come from the Kwanangoma school, but from musicians educated in the oral tradition, sometimes living in urban ghettos like Mbare, and quite unsupported by the state. Sekou Toure was a political leader out to re-engineer his young nation’s social structure; Mapfumo was an artist, following his heart; but their actions had a similar result—to rekindle associations with ancient culture in the arena of popular music.

Mbare in the 1960s was a carnival of musical impulses. Aside from *mbira*, there was the popular *Jerusarema* dance, its Christian-sounding name a ruse to mislead missionaries. There were village drummers accompanying informal *jiti* songs. On Sundays, churchgoers belted out Africanized hymns, and as afternoon turned to evening, all manner of music played in beer halls, under shade trees, and in backyards

emotions. The African pageantry he had witnessed in Ghana had moved him as spectacle, and he wanted to harness similar feelings back home. But for the power brokers of the liberation struggle—white and black—African traditions were often an abstraction, often just tools used to manipulate hearts and minds. Concerning the latter point, see also Thram 2006.

¹⁰ The quotes come from M. E. Kumalo, “City Tribal Dancing Display,” *Parade*, February 1959.

throughout the township. At night, venues like Stoddard Hall reverberated with African jazz, and always, everywhere, radios blared rumba and rock 'n' roll.

Poet and scholar Musa Zimunya moved to Salisbury to attend high school in 1971. His mother was the half sister of Thomas's maternal grandfather, and this is how Musa came to visit the Mapfumo household in Mbare. "Thomas drank beer and smoked cigarettes," recalled Musa. "He was very shy. I remember he had sort of elusive eyes. You thought you were talking to him, and then he wasn't there. You weren't reaching him at all. He was always like that." Musa would later write about Thomas during this period, describing him as "a drifter": "As he wanders and drifts, Mapfumo begins to reflect on the music of his times and slowly becomes disenchanted with the unthinking culture of imitation of transient western pop styles with their emphasis on instant pleasure. He is horrified by the moral decadence of heavy rock music and its spiritually destructive ambience. The suicide death of Jimi Hendrix, the pop icon of the hippy era, was the final nail in the coffin" (Zimunya: 1996).¹¹

"He is right," Thomas agreed, years later. "When Jimi Hendrix died, well, I just felt that was the end of that type of music. From that time, I thought heavy metal was just no good. It was music for drug addicts. I started hating rock 'n' roll" (interview, 1997). It would be too much to credit the death of Jimi Hendrix with sparking Thomas's embrace of traditional music, but it certainly figures into the process. Thomas's fascination with rock and other foreign genres was intense, but relatively recent. His connection with Shona traditional music, forged in his first decade when he lived with grandparents, was more deeply felt, and more consequential to his art in the end.

Not long after Hendrix died, a musician named Daram Karanga approached Thomas with a proposition. "He said he had been to a copper mine," Thomas recalled, "Mhangura mine, and they wanted a band to be formed there. He was looking for musicians, so he came to me and we discussed. Mhangura is way out of town, out in the *shatini*, in the *bhundu!* I had to consider that I was leaving town to go and live in the bush." Thomas joined reluctantly. "I was not employed," he recalled. "And I was not going to be a menace to my mother and father. I had to move on like the man I was" (interview, 1997).

By all accounts this new band was talented and diverse enough to appeal to the ethnically mixed mining community. Karanga was from Zambia, guitarist/singer Elisha Josam from Malawi, and Joshua Dube, recruited from Mutanga to play guitar, had Mozambican ancestry on one side. The mine boss, Mr. Walker, required that the musicians work during the day and rehearse and perform at night. The story goes that when Thomas and Josam found work at the local chicken run, Walker exclaimed, "Hallelujah!" That sounded like a band name to the musicians, but Walker wasn't satisfied, and said, "Why don't you call yourselves Hallelujah Chicken Run Band?" (interview, 1988).

¹¹ Musa Zimunya, "Proposal to Honour Thomas Mapfumo with Honorary Degree," 1996. As we know, Hendrix's death was accidental, not suicide, but Musa's misperception of the event was a common one.

The Hallelujah Chicken Run Band was expected to perform hits of the day, and they did it well. “Elisha was in his own class,” recalled Thomas. “He could sing most of these American tunes by people like Marvin Gaye. The problem was he was a drunkard, and when he got drunk, he could start trouble. Sometimes, he would just stop playing in the middle of a song—pack up his guitar and amplifier and put it away in the storeroom.” As in the bands he had worked with in Salisbury, Thomas was reduced to imitating foreign singers and working behind an erratic front man. Beyond that, life at the mine was dull: “We used to spend the whole day playing cards and teaching children how to play golf” (interview, 1997). Now Thomas missed both his peaceful rural childhood and the teeming crush of Mbare.

One day at rehearsal, Dube began picking out a traditional Shona song on his guitar. It was a tune his father had played on *mbira*, and it had crept into the boy’s guitar repertoire. Itinerant guitar musicians had been performing fingerpicked renditions of *mbira* songs for years, perhaps as far back as the 1930s when South African workers first brought Western instruments to Rhodesia.¹² But these songs had mostly been ignored by urban dance bands of the 1960s. As Dube played, Thomas stood listening, transfixed. The piece Joshua was playing was “*Karigamombe*,” typically the first song taught to a young *mbira* player. It uses the most familiar harmonic pattern found in Shona *mbira* music, a succession of four phrases that cycle over and over. Thinking like a guitarist, Dube had mapped out chord changes for each of the four phrases:

C	F	Am
Dm	F	Am
C	Em	G
C	Em	Am

The “*Karigamombe*” progression has a puzzle-like symmetry.¹³ In Dube’s formulation, it begins on a C chord but doesn’t end there, hence its circular, unresolved feeling. No two phrases are the same, but all are similar. The first phrases *end* with the same two chords, and the last ones *begin* with the same two chords, so that one can hear the cycle either as two long phrases or four short ones. Of course, exactly where

¹² In a 2005 interview, Turino told me that Jacob Mhungu, an *mbira* and bow player, was doing guitar versions of village songs as early as 1951 for musical, not nationalist, reasons. John Nkomo’s recording, “*Haruna*” (1966), played with bottleneck guitar, is a version of the Shona song “*Karigamombe*,” originally a drum and vocal piece, though it is often performed on *mbira*. Nkomo’s may be the oldest recording of traditional Shona music played on guitar, but the practice surely predates it.

¹³ There are various ways to conceptualize this progression. Some *mbira* players might begin the progression on the G at the end of the third line, rendering it G-C-Em, Am-C-F, Am-Dm-F, Am-C-Em. Others might start on Dube’s second line, the one beginning with Dm. The symmetry remains in all cases, but the sense of the cycle’s beginning and ending changes, altering the listener’s perception of the piece considerably. For a comprehensive discussion of Shona *mbira* harmonic patterning see Tracey 1989 (summarizing his pioneering earlier writings on this topic), Berliner 1978, Kubik 1988, Brenner 1997 (with special reference to its historical evolution as well as to its ethnomathematical dimension including typical combinations of symmetries), Grupe 1998 and 2004, and Brenner 2013 (with special reference to Thomas Mapfumo’s use of it).

an *mbira* player begins and ends can vary, mystifying the Western ear, as if the song had been playing since the moment it was created and the player simply joined in for a time.

The rhythm of an *mbira* song is also unique.¹⁴ A phrase consists of twelve eighth-note beats. The *hosho* marks *four* elementary pulses in each phrase, but Dube's chord progression has just *three* chords per phrase. So the rattle is playing four groups of three pulses, while the harmony may fall into three groups of four pulses—the same twelve beats, but two different feelings. The rhythms of a 4/4 triplet shuffle and a 3/4 waltz meld and merge as the piece unfolds, and this ambiguous meter, combined with the melancholy restlessness of the harmony, creates a sound found nowhere else—the sound that caught the ears of Hugh Tracey, Alick Nkhata, American ethnomusicologists Paul Berliner and Tom Turino, and even Ian Smith, who once allowed that *mbira* music was “lovely.”¹⁵

“So I was playing this instrumental *mbira* song on guitar,” recalled Dube. “Thomas was there, and he said to me, ‘Look, I think we can do that song together. I can sing that song.’ I said, ‘Okay, come and sing’” (interview, 2001). The song would become the Hallelujah Chicken Run Band single “*Ngoma Yarira*” (The Drum Is Playing).¹⁶ [DVD track 1]. Elisha Josam etched out Dube's chord progression on guitar, and Robert Nkati followed the harmony on bass while Dube moved to a staccato lead guitar line. On drums, Thomas took up the *hosho* rhythm on hi-hat, and the lead vocal was a throaty cry reminiscent of an *mbira* singer at a ceremony. The adaptation felt good. *Everything* felt good, and that very night, late in 1972 or early 1973, the band debuted their new song for the miners. “They went mad,” said Dube. “And that's how Thomas started doing *mbira* music”¹⁷ (interview, 2001).

¹⁴ For an in-depth study of the rhythmic dimension of Shona *mbira* music see Grupe 2004.

¹⁵ From the author's 1998 interview with Smith.

¹⁶ This is the only Thomas Mapfumo single that credits a co-composer. The credit reads, “Thomas and Joshua.” Asked how this happened, Thomas said years later, “We never had a conversation about it,” suggesting that if there had been a conversation, Afro Soul might have credited the song differently. But Dube's role in creating this important and influential *mbira* adaptation is crucial to the larger narrative of *mbira* music's emergence in the realm of popular music.

¹⁷ Turino, through his extensive research in the Zimbabwe National Archives, finds one, roughly simultaneous, example of an electric guitar being played damped to imitate *mbira*. “*Kumutongo*,” a 1973 single by M.D. Rhythm Success (Gallo GB-3815) is an adaptation of the *mbira* song “*Kuzanga*,” although the composition is credited to Dominique Mandivha. The guitarist is not identified. Turino stresses that the innovations of the Hallelujah Chicken Run Band should be seen in the context of a succession of popular bands that were beginning to experiment with adapting Shona folklore, including *Jerusarema* dance percussion, and the 12/8 sound that would later be called “*jit*.” These bands, active in the late 1960s, would include the Harare Mambos, the All Saints Band, the Beatsters, the Zebrons, the Saint Pauls Band-Musami, M.D. Rhythm Success, and, importantly, the band Joshua had played with prior to joining Thomas, the Limpopo Jazz Band, under the direction of Malawian bandleader Jackson Phiri. These bands' recordings in no way undercut the Chicken Run Band's originality but simply put it in a context. What would ultimately distinguish Thomas would have less to do with his being the first to adapt traditional folklore, and more to do with his being the most committed to it, and the most effective.

Mbira joins the band

So begins the defining creative era for Thomas Mapfumo. First with the Acid Band, and then with his own band the Blacks Unlimited, founded in 1978, Thomas composes a body of songs widely known as “the *chimurenga* singles.” The name references Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle—the *chimurenga*—and many of the song lyrics are slyly political, implicitly articulating support for the guerrillas fighting to overthrow the Rhodesian regime. But these songs also deliver non-political message, notably about culture. By drawing directly on Shona language, lore, and traditional music, they entreat black Rhodesians to re-examine and re-evaluate the underpinnings of their society, including beliefs and practices that had been systematically stigmatized and marginalized by the regime, schools, and Western churches.

The poet Musa Zimunya notes that the sound and style of the *chimurenga* singles was in fact *more* important than their political lyrics. “Thomas could have put these same words in rumba,” Zimunya said, “and they wouldn’t have mattered one bit.”

Mbira idioms provide what many consider the most emotionally potent element in the *chimurenga* singles. Thomas sometimes adapted and reinvented traditional *mbira* songs to create new works, as in “*Pfumvu Pa Rezevha*” (Hardship in the Rural Areas) or “*Ndoziva Ripizano*” (Which Way Should I Choose?), both songs derived from much older *mbira* pieces. Or he might simply cover existing *mbira* compositions, as in the *mbira* standard “*Taireva*” (I Told You So), or “*Pidigori*,” a variant on “*Nhema Musasa*” that was created by the group *Mhuri Yekwa Chiboora* and became a sensational hit when rendered on electric guitars by the Blacks Unlimited.

Each of the guitarists who worked with the band had their own take on *mbira* guitar; they were literally inventing a tradition that continues to this day. One particularly strong example is the song “*Gwindingwe Rine Shumba*,” sometimes titled simply “*Shumba*,” [DVD track 2] on which guitarists Jonah Sithole and Leonard “Picket” Chiyangwa interweave single-note, flat picked lines to create a signature *mbira* effect, much imitated thereafter.

Because this cultural initiative within Thomas’s art did not relate directly to the political aspect of the liberation struggle, it continued apace after the war ended and Zimbabwe became independent in 1980. In fact, arguably, Thomas saw the need to valorize ancient culture even more clearly after independence, as the changing society’s fascination with foreign culture flourished in the form of state radio DJs with perfect English accents breathlessly hyping the latest music out of America and the UK. These subjects are explored in some detail in *Lion Songs*. But presently we move well into the independence era to the moment when Thomas chose to extend his embrace of *mbira* music by bringing actual *mbira* into the lineup of The Blacks Unlimited.

Thomas Turino wrote his book (2000) in the late ‘90s, a time when Thomas Mapfumo’s fame had gone worldwide, and in that context, he ascribed the artist’s headlong embrace of *mbira* in the late 1980s as having been commercially driven. It appeared to Turino as a calculated strategy to corner a share of the growing world music market. While there is surely an element of truth to this argument, I find it

inadequate as an analysis of this development. Thomas's infatuation with *mbira* is deep and personal. He began experimenting with using *mbira* in the band in 1984, before he had ever toured abroad. When the real breakthrough came a few years later, and he developed a system for making *mbira* an integral part of his electric pop band, he never looked back. His satisfaction with the result was profound. From that point on, all musicians in the Blacks Unlimited had to cater to the *mbira*; and the *mbira* would have to play repertoire the ancestors had never contemplated. This was a huge artistic achievement, one that continues to resonate around the world today.

Since independence, Chartwell Dutiro, an *mbira* player from a village near Bindura, had played saxophone in the Prison Band, a brass ensemble that had performed in protected villages during the dying days of Rhodesia, and on the streets of Harare at independence. Chartwell had completed a correspondence course with the Royal School of Music in England, learning to read and write musical notation and mastering the basics of theory, all while continuing to play *mbira* as he had since his boyhood in Bindura. In 1986, through a soldier friend, Chartwell managed to meet Blacks Unlimited guitarist Jonah Sithole, and then Thomas, who instantly sized him up as an asset and moved to add him to the band. Thomas unexpectedly produced an airplane ticket to Europe, which allowed Chartwell to waive his requirement to give the Prison Band three months' notice. Chartwell quit overnight, but leaving his government job also meant losing the housing that came with it. Thomas solved this problem as well, offering a bed in his own home, a gesture he had never made to any musician except the bass player, Charles. If Charles had been like a "brother," Chartwell now became something of a son, living with Thomas and his family for the next four years.

Chartwell moved deeply into the Blacks Unlimited fold. Jonah Sithole nurtured Chartwell, sharing insights about the music, such as when a guitarist must start with an upstroke or downstroke in order to lock his part into a song's rhythmic structure. In his calm, quiet way, Chartwell studied all aspects of the band's operation, including its business.

On the eve of his third European tour in 1986, Thomas took the band into the studio to record a twelve-inch "maxi-single." "Kariba" is a love song about a young man who travels town to town across Zimbabwe to reach his impossibly beautiful girlfriend on the shores of Lake Kariba. This northern reservoir was the fruit of a massive dam project along the Zambezi River in the 1950s. Building Lake Kariba had displaced thousands of Tonga people who would long grieve their loss and created a vacation destination beloved by generations of moneyed Rhodesians, Zambians, and Zimbabweans. The lyrics of "Kariba" evoke this idyllic resort, no doubt cherished by the Radio Three crowd, while its music veers back into Shona tradition with an ambling shangara beat and guttural vocal refrains. Charles plays a prominent keyboard hook, adding a new veneer to the band's roots sound. Perfectly calibrated, the song garnered strong press reviews to become a Blacks Unlimited classic. Still, Thomas complained, out-of-touch DJs mostly let the record "gather dust" while they filled the airwaves with Western fare, "some of which doesn't even qualify to be called music."

The Black Unlimited's burgeoning musical creativity owed much to the deepening bond between Thomas and Chartwell. Other *mbira* players had recorded and performed with the band, but Chartwell brought new purpose to the task, addressing troublesome issues of tuning and amplification that would pave the way for *mbira* to become central in the Mapfumo stage sound. Regarding tuning, *mbira* groups often use individualized variants on traditional tuning regimens, often involving notes not found in the tempered, Western scale. Playing *mbira* alongside guitars, keyboards, and horns meant standardizing each *mbira's* tuning to match some combination of notes found on a piano. Ultimately, Thomas would require his *mbira* players to play music far outside the instrument's old repertoire. This expansion of the *mbira's* potential use in popular music is a major legacy of the Blacks Unlimited, and one that would inspire many imitators within Zimbabwe and, eventually, around the world.

"Thomas changed my way of thinking about music," Chartwell recalled, recognizing the value of the opportunity Thomas had given him. "As a boy, I wanted to be out there playing with bands, but I never grew up in a township, like Harare. It's not like Thomas—he's one of the ghetto boys who grew up with Youth Clubs where they would go to a hall and play guitar and just hang out like jazz musicians. I had none of that experience" (interview, 1998). But Chartwell understood *mbira* music deeply, making him a crucial collaborator during this rich new phase in Thomas's musical development.

Mbira were not made to rock. They use idiosyncratic tuning systems, and their mode of amplification—the large, severed *deze* gourd—produces enough sound to fill a hut, not a concert hall. The Blacks Unlimited brought *mbira* to the stage with help from a craftsman named Chris Mhlanga, a manual laborer and musician who took up *mbira* in the 1960s and soon began constructing instruments in his Highfield workshop. After independence, students and instructors at the Zimbabwe College of Music became interested in traditional music, and Keith Goddard tapped Mhlanga to provide *mbira*. When Goddard learned the Blacks Unlimited needed instruments for the stage, he suggested Thomas and Chartwell pay Mhlanga a visit. "That was an astonishment to me," recalled Mhlanga. "But I knew it could happen somehow, because whenever people deal with the culture, they end up here" (interview, 1998).

Mhlanga carved *mbira* soundboards from an indigenous tree known locally as *mubvamaropa* (blood wood), "not too hard, not too soft." For each instrument, he forged twenty-two iron keys—slender at the base and flanged on the playing end—expertly gauging thickness, length, and width to produce the correct pitch and a clear tone for each. He affixed the pressure bar, 7¼ inches across, loosely at first, to the top of the soundboard with four eyebolts, then inserted the twenty-two keys in three arrays, the two lower-pitched ones interleaved to the left, and the high-pitched one ascending scale-wise to the right. He fine-tuned each note before clamping the pressure bar down to hold the keys firmly in place. He burnished the playing end of each key with sandpaper; the player's hands would do the rest. He drilled and sanded a hole on the lower right side for the player's smallest finger to stabilize the instrument, and attached a tin plate with bottle caps wired to its surface to create the *mbira's* signature buzz. And

now, for the Blacks Unlimited, he placed a contact pickup on the back, seeking the sweet spot where notes would sound more or less evenly when plugged into a guitar amplifier. Future *mbira* makers would refine the electronics, embedding one or more pickups and a jack into the actual wood. But the essential design of an electric *mbira* was born in Mhlanga's humble Highfield workshop in Harare.

Ultimately, the Blacks Unlimited would use *mbira* in three different keys.¹⁸ The players sat in a row at center stage, each with his own amplifier, usually a Roland JC10 Jazz Chorus, placed behind his chair. Although these amps produced plenty of sound, the players continued to wedge their instruments into *deze* gourds, presenting the look of a *bira* ceremony. "The sound had changed," recalled Thomas. "The guitar was no longer going to dominate. We actually had a rhythm section – those *mbiras*. When it's the guitarist's time to take his solo, he comes up a little bit, not very high like he used to do. And we are no longer muting the strings now. We are playing the real sound of the guitar, but well controlled so he is going to allow this rhythm section to flow" (interview, 1998).

Thomas had long ago sought spiritual permission to perform *mbira* songs on guitars. Now *mbira* themselves were taking their place alongside Western electronics, long viewed as anathema to traditional Shona life. "It's good. It's not so good," said *mbira* master Tute Chigamba. "Young people enjoy that, but for old people, it's a part of driving away our spirits again. Because the sound we hear from the guitars is so loud. *Mbira* sound is soft, and those spirits, they draw near" (interview, 1998). Chigamba worried about repertoire as well. With *mbira* improvising alongside guitars, traditional songs could morph and merge, confusing the spirits and muddling human memory of the past. Mhlanga understood these concerns, but they didn't worry him. Even as he fashioned *mbira* that could vie with the blare of an electric guitar, he knew that the realm of tradition was sacred. After all, it was he who pronounced: "You will *never* play in a *bira* ceremony with a guitar" (interview, 1998).

But within the Blacks Unlimited, *mbira* and guitar were now married. One 1991 single stands out from this period. The A-side, "*Magariro*," [DVD track 3], is an *mbira*-centered song created by the band, and featuring Thomas's lyrics asking a man what he is leaving to his children now that he has lost his culture: "You said appeasing the spirits was for rural folk. What do you do now the creator is angered?" The B-side of the single is a lovely arrangement of the traditional *mbira* song "*Bukatiende*" (Wake Up, Let's Go) [DVD track 4]. Both tracks feature elegant guitar work by Ephraim Karimaura and bass from Charles Makokowa.

For a period in the early 1990s in Zimbabwe, a bloom of new bands followed Thomas's lead by playing *mbira* alongside guitars in nightclubs and beer halls as well as

¹⁸ When I say an *mbira* is in a "key," I mean that its notes correspond to that key's major scale. All the Blacks Unlimited *mbiras* use what Western *mbira* players call the *Nyamaropa* tuning system, which defines the arrangement of pitches relative to each other. An *mbira* tuned this way can in fact play in two, or even three, different modes. For a detailed discussion of the *mbira* tuning and modal shift system as well as the highly problematic topic of tonal centricity see Brenner 1997 and Grupe 2004.

on recordings—Vadzimba, Ndemera-Ites, Legal Lions, Sweet Melodies, Pio Macheka and the Black Ites, Beauler Dyoko and the Black Souls, Jonah Sithole's reconstructed Deep Horizon, and Ephat Mujuru's Spirit of the People. Traditionalists might object, but these electric *mbira* bands were doing their best to reach young Zimbabweans who might never attend a ceremony or visit a traditional healer.

Thomas now confronted an ever more crowded field in Zimbabwe's music market. Sungura star Leonard Dembo, with eight albums, was the top seller – “what the music industry is all about these days,” one journalist wrote (Sibanda 1993). Gospel music was also ascendant, in grim lockstep with the mounting hardships of drought, disease, and growing economic stagnation. The Zimbabwean economy's cataclysmic collapse lay a decade or more ahead, but even at this stage, the difficulty of escaping poverty is a persistent theme in Thomas's songs. The new crop of electric *mbira* bands flourished creatively but sold few records. Forever tarred with the charge of imitating Thomas, they could never gain traction and establish *mbira* pop as a viable genre. Pio Macheka and the Black Ites came closest to success, but Macheka too faltered after a few albums. By the mid-1990s, his career in decline, the once-dreadlocked singer turned up bald, claiming he had been abducted along the roadside and forcibly shorn, supposedly by a gang of Mapfumo doormen. Thomas never dignified this story with a rebuttal, and it later came out that Macheka had cut his own locks to please the family of a woman he hoped to marry. His feint failed as a publicity stunt, but lived on as urban myth, still believed by many.

All this rough-and-tumble enhanced Thomas's graybeard grandeur. He had introduced his *Chimurenga* Music Company as a vehicle for promoting young artists he liked, and expressed hopes that some of these would eventually surpass him. But neither vision materialized. When no prominent *mbira* pop protégés emerged, some accused Thomas of undermining the new *mbira* bands. Thomas's public comments probably reinforced this impression. “Everyone is just following his nose,” he scolded. “You don't just become a footballer if you are not a footballer, so we must be very careful of people who mislead the nation trying to turn themselves into musicians. They won't last long because this road is full of gravel. It's a hard road. We are like guerrillas. If you are not strong, we will leave you on the way.” This was hardly nurturing. Nor was it the cause of any band's demise. The media and public never embraced the new *mbira* groups because their music ran counter to the rushing tide of Zimbabwean popular culture, ever more infatuated with foreign ideas and influences, despite victory in the liberation struggle. Thomas's success was an anomaly. Its persistence now had less to do with his use of *mbira*, or any other Zimbabwean traditional music, than with the sustained force of his songwriting, especially his trenchant lyrics.

On major holidays, many Harare residents make their amends with God and the ancestors by going *kumusha*, home to their “rural areas” where the bones of their forebears lie buried. It's a ritual of remembrance oddly separate from their city lives. Cosmopolitans who typically dress Western and display an almost studied ignorance of traditional culture suddenly find themselves clapping to greet one another, recalling Shona proverbs

and dancing to *mbira* music with their village relatives. People who would never attend a Mapfumo show in Highfield might well turn up at the Rainbow Inn in rural Murombedzi for Thomas's Christmas and Easter pungwes, packing the vast space before the stage, singeing their fingers as they flipped meat on the sizzling braai pits, and drinking cold beer and warm Chibuku, sometimes straight from its missile-like jugs.

Near dawn at Thomas's Easter show in 1998, during a roiling performance of "Mukadzi Wamukoma" (My Brother's Wife) the Rainbow Inn staff handed out roses. The song is an adaptation of the *mbira* piece "Nyamaropa," and it exemplifies the mature *mbira* sound of the Blacks Unlimited, where the three *mbira* interlock, the lead player improvising and moving through various parts while the sole guitarist sticks almost exclusively to a single repeating line. *Mbira*, not guitars, now dominated the band's sound. As the sun poked above the horizon, people held their flowers aloft, and a flock of white mourning doves flew from the branches of tall *musasa* trees. As if on cue, they circled and swooped over a huge crowd high on beer, braai, and *chimurenga* music. In that fleeting moment, country and city lives came together in a way that seemed possible only at a Thomas Mapfumo concert.

Zimbabwe was then heading into the chaos of the new millennium, with farm seizures, election violence, and the decimation of the national currency. Soon Thomas would be gone. Events in Zimbabwe would drive him into exile in the United States. There, deprived of the economic benefits of playing for the audiences that love him best, he would also find it harder to develop his international career. Despite all this, Thomas's impact both at home and abroad is undeniable and cannot be erased. *Mbira* music has an uncanny hold on those who come to understand and love it. Neither a fad, nor the product of "world music" hype, it will only continue to find new devotees. And it is hard to think of any single artist who has done more to ensure that than Thomas Mapfumo.

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