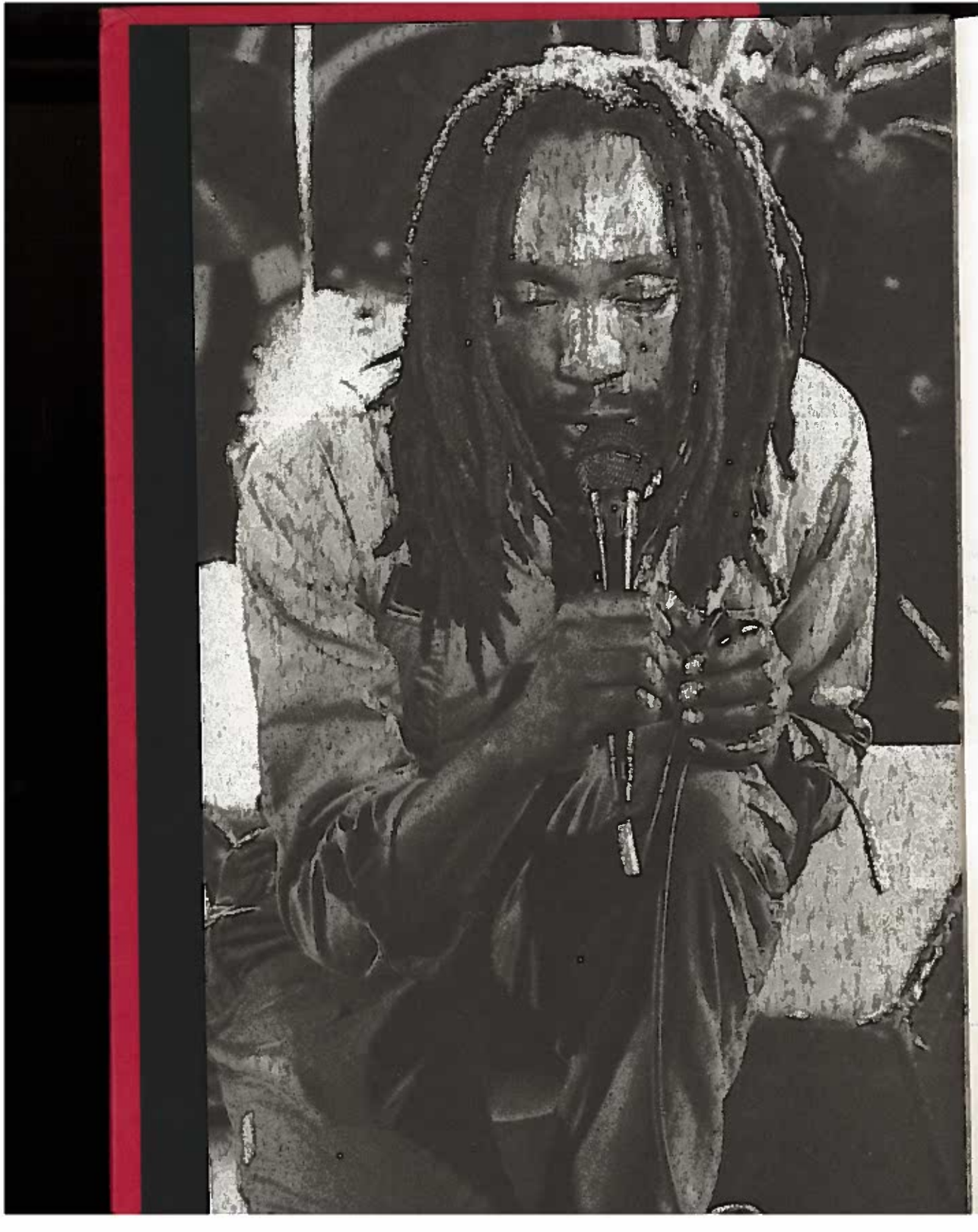

LION SONGS

Thomas Mapfumo and the Music That Made Zimbabwe

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PREAMBLE Chimurenga Nights

When are you leaving?
A PATRON AT THE SEVEN MILES HOTEL

The Rixi cab driver wanted 130 Zimbabwe dollars, just over ten bucks US. That seemed high for a trip from downtown Harare to the Seven Miles Hotel, but if the meter was rigged, there was nothing to do about it. As I paid and got out, two women, laughing and arguing in tipsy Shona, edged in to take my place in the beetle-like Renault 4, which pulled out of the crowded parking lot and headed back to town. In the midnight warmth, patrons moved in and out of the hotel's worn, wooden entryway, and the air reverberated with the pulse of a live band. Metallic thrumming from electrified mbira rebounded off walls and washed over low rooftops as notes plinked in isolation and clustered like iron raindrops.[1] These handheld African instruments made of wooden slabs and iron tongues spoke power. Mbira could heal sickness. In ceremonies, they could rouse spirits of the dead to possess the living. Here, fed through guitar amplifiers, they clanged like hammers on anvils, infusing the air with a righteous din. Blasts of bass guitar drove a lashing rhythm, rooted in heartbeat kick drum and restlessly chattering hi-hat. An electric guitar crested through with a bright cry, then submerged again. A low-pitched voice boomed within the storm. Whispering thunder. Only one band in the world sounded like this: Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited.

It had been more than a quarter century since that baritone voice had first rocked the nation. Every black Zimbabwean knew it, and most adored it. Beyond the iconic sound, Thomas Mapfumo's words had succored a people wracked by a century of invasion, theft, cultural sabotage, brutality and des-

potism. During the bloody struggle for independence in the 1970s, Mapfumo's sinewy songs had told Zimbabweans who they were—farmers, fighters, and artists, rightful inheritors of a stolen African pastoral.

To me, the hundreds gathered at Seven Miles that night seemed more like congregants than fans. Yes, they were drinking and dancing in a secular beer hall, but the music, especially the mbira songs, evoked a sacred realm. People don't become possessed by spirits at Thomas Mapfumo shows, and that distinction is important in a world where Shona religion is still widely practiced in its traditional form. Still, with his explicit references to the sacred mbira repertoire and the philosophical cast of his lyrics, Mapfumo and his band provided a singular brand of psychic sustenance to people whose lives were increasingly filled with challenges and suffering. Some at the Seven Miles that night were poor, choosing to nourish their souls rather than their bellies. Some had left loved ones hungry at home. All faced danger amid the criminality of the townships, and few would sleep before sunrise. Those who could manage it would return again soon, for the Blacks Unlimited faithful gathered often—four or five nights a week—mostly in crowded suburbs and "growth points" outlying the metropolis of nearly three million that was Harare in November 1997.

No guest had stayed at the Seven Miles Hotel in years. This bungalow-style, English garden inn had become a nightclub with an inside bar and pool table and a walled garden in back. Seven Miles was the new headquarters for Thomas Mapfumo and his band, the place they rehearsed in four days a week and performed at twice monthly. Thomas's Sekuru Jira presided at the gate, his leathery, masklike face suitably menacing when needed.[2] With a flicker of recognition, Jira brushed a patron aside to let me pass without paying the Z$50 cover. I slid down the dim hallway lined with prostitutes and drunks. The music grew louder as I approached the garden, and I quickened my pace, avoiding strangers until I could find friends.

I had returned to Zimbabwe at a tense moment. Earlier that year, liberation war veterans had interrupted President Robert Mugabe's Heroes Day speech, taunting him for his failure to redistribute land from whites to blacks. Veterans, sometimes hand in hand with local chiefs and spirit mediums, had begun quietly seizing white-owned farms. They had extorted money from a government with a guilty conscience, and the resulting payout to their families was triggering a decline in the Zimbabwean dollar that would have consequences for all, and would continue ruinously for more than a decade. Dormant caches of bitterness and racism were resurfacing. You could feel it on Harare's streets. There were fewer whites than there had been five years earlier,

and they seemed newly wary. A car had nearly run me down that afternoon; a black onlooker had hissed at the black driver, winning his attention, then giving him a grim thumbs-up.

But the tensions of the city faded as I entered the garden at Seven Miles. I had spent the years of Zimbabwe's independence (1980–97) immersed in African music, wedging my way into African crowds to get close to performers in Mali, Senegal, South Africa, the two Congos—anywhere the music had taken me. I had navigated a river of African songs, one in which the swiftest currents and deepest eddies belonged to Thomas. His songs had pulled me in completely. I wanted to sing and dance to them, to play them on guitar, to immerse myself thoroughly in their swirling waters. I also wanted to understand their history, and how they had made history in this gorgeous, troubled land. I had returned to Zimbabwe for a third time, and over the next six months, I would live the nocturnal life of Thomas Mapfumo, his entrancing musicians, and entranced fans.

Obscure on the unlit stage, the Blacks Unlimited were lost in their work. Brothers Bezil and Ngoni Makombe and Chaka Mhembere sat side by side gazing down as their calloused thumbs and forefingers caressed the slender keys of their mbira, hidden inside huge, halved calabashes and plugged into guitar amplifiers. Barely five feet tall, Allan Mwale, on bass, looked older and more ragged than his years, but he thumped out his lines with titanic force. Samson Mukanga, the lanky, rail-thin drummer, was the first to spot me and flash a smile. Then Thomas tossed his four-foot dreadlocks aside, caught my eye, and waved coyly. Leaning a bit precariously to the side and holding his microphone upright, he nudged the lead guitarist, Joshua Dube, who, without missing a note, came beaming to the edge of the stage and offered a quick bow.

Three dancing, singing "girls" were new, as was the keyboard player, a second guitarist, and two of the three horn players. In fact, of the seventeen musicians and dancers at Seven Miles that night, only two had stood on stage with Thomas when I had first met the band in 1988. Exhaustion, rebellion, and disease—AIDS in some cases—accounted for the turnover. Yet Mapfumo's mystic *chimurenga* sound held true. Therein lay a hard truth. However gifted they might be, the players of the Blacks Unlimited could sicken, die, run away, or simply vanish into Harare's township ghettos. As long as Thomas remained, Zimbabweans would gather for the catharsis of his all-night vigils, and the chimurenga movement—the title of Thomas's twentieth album, out that fall—would continue.

This book tells the stories of an artist and a nation, with music as the thread that binds them together. For in the end, there is no way to under-

stand Thomas Mapfumo without understanding Zimbabwe, and no better way to know Zimbabwe than through an examination of the life and work of Thomas Mapfumo.

But this is no simple task. Even his name is a conundrum. His mother called him Michael, and as Michael, he adopted his maternal grandfather's surname, Munhumumwe. His father's kin were the Mupariwas of the Makore clan, and he has sometimes said that one of these should be his rightful surname, though he has never used either. His passport says Chikawa, a name that comes from his mother's maternal clan. Mapfumo is his stepfather's surname, and it means "spears" in Shona. Thomas was an uncle's name, which the boy adopted when he enrolled in school at age nine as Thomas Mapfumo. Over the years, Zimbabweans have bestowed their own names: Mukanya, after his totem, the monkey; also Tafirenyika, meaning "we die for our country," an honorific garnered during the liberation war. Zimbabwe's journalists may call him the Chimurenga Guru, or Hurricane Hugo after a storm he survived on tour in America, or, more recently, Gandanga, "the guerrilla," or Mudhara, "the old man." I simply call him Thomas, as I always have.

The broad framework of the man's story is a set of facts all can agree upon. Thomas was born in 1945 in Southern Rhodesia. He began writing and recording music in 1962 and has never stopped. He earned national prominence during the liberation war with piquant, subversive songs that turned dreamers into fighters who, in turn, brought down one of colonial Africa's fiercest white regimes. Had he died at independence in 1980, at the age of just thirty-five, Thomas would already have earned a place of pride in Zimbabwe's artistic pantheon. Instead, over the next twenty years, he created a second legacy as one of the boldest and most tireless critics of Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF regime. Harassed by the very government he once helped to empower, Thomas moved his family into exile in Eugene, Oregon, in 2000. At first, Thomas returned to Zimbabwe for highly anticipated year-end concerts, but since 2004 he has not gone home, reaching his most loyal fans only through pointed public remarks, concerts attended by Zimbabweans in places like London and Johannesburg, and recordings made in exile.

Beyond these clear markers lie debates, for this is a tale of beginnings, not resolutions. In these pages, Thomas's version of events is paramount—what he hears, what he sees, what he feels and decides. But dissenters and critics also have their say, as they must in such a contentious and unsettled history.

Even the term Thomas has long applied to his oeuvre, "chimurenga music," stirs controversy and confusion. Thomas and many who have written about him translate *chimurenga* as "struggle." The precise meaning is deeper.

Murenga Sororenzou was a Shona warrior and a revered ancestor spirit—some would say the "Shona high spirit."[3] The word *chimurenga* literally means "Murenga's thing," sometimes rendered as "Murenga's war." It is a venerated term, applied first to the Shona uprising of the 1890s, and then to the liberation war of the 1970s, the Second Chimurenga. The "chimurenga songs" sung by freedom fighters of the 1970s were devised as the property of all Zimbabweans, so for a single man to apply this mantle to his own work strikes some as arrogant. But as often as that charge has been leveled, it has never dissuaded Thomas Mapfumo from wearing his chimurenga crown.

Thomas stood at center stage at Seven Miles, hunched forward, dreads framing his face, his microphone held aloft as if it were a sacred object. Serene and unglamorous, he delivered his lines straight, more like a mystic saint than a preacher or an entertainer. The crowd—thick, sweat-soaked, and pressed tight against the stage—sang along with ritualistic fervor. They were Jamaicans in the presence of Marley, Pakistani Sufis awash in the ecstatic incantations of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Elvis fans reveling in Memphis in the summer of 1962—people for whom music had become the essence of being.

In preparation for the rains, the hotel had strapped dusty, blue-and-white canvas to the rafters over the stage and the concrete dance floor, where two hundred people, mostly men in their twenties and thirties, danced with heads tossed back, eyes closed, arms up. Brown bottles of beer—Castle and Lion Lager—dangled from tightly clenched fingertips. Foreheads glittered with sweat in the light cast by a hovering string of bare bulbs. Spilled beer, fresh sweat, cigarette smoke, and cheap perfume mingled in the air. In the past, Mapfumo shows had always attracted a handful of *murungus* (whites), usually tourists. Now I was the only one, and the object of attention. At the bar, busy hands scoured my trouser pockets. "Buy me a beer," demanded a man in a muscle shirt. I said I would and laid a Z$10 bill on the bar. In the instant I looked for the bartender, my bill was gone.

On the dance floor, a man with beery breath pressed his face close to mine and snarled, "Are you enjoying?" The approach was aggressive but friendly—the curiosity of a confident host to an uninvited visitor. Before the stranger could say more, a familiar sequence of jazzy chords in clipped rhythm rang from the stage—the signal for a break. Soon Thomas's musicians surrounded me. Allan bought me a beer, Sam shook my hand vigorously, and Ngoni launched into comical reminiscences about adventures in the United States. "Do you still remember how we paid less at Payless?" There was laughter, a staple of life with the Blacks Unlimited.

Bezil, Ngoni's young brother and the most gifted of the three mbira players,

took my hand and pulled me aside. "I must speak with you," he purred. Bezil was a handsome man of twenty-two with soft features and moonlike eyes, now clouded with alcohol. After five years in the band, he had traded his farm-boy shyness for the slouch of a dandy. He wore a gray suit jacket purchased at a thrift shop in Seattle. His fluty voice broke with excitement as he commanded me, "You must meet my friend, Evans. He has a car. A BMW. It can be *yours*. And you must stay at his place." Bezil corralled me toward a stocky thirtysomething man with a drooping eye, a hard look, and a torn combat jacket. Despite his ragged appearance, Evans in fact programmed mainframe computers at Zimbank, one of Harare's largest banks. There were others like Evans in this crowd, urban professionals living out parallel lives as would-be warriors, hunters, perhaps even spirit mediums, in the magical space only Mapfumo could provide.

A gin and tonic in hand, guitarist Joshua Dube (doo-BAY) rescued me from a wordless stare-down with Evans.[4] In the past, Dube had been my guitar teacher, sharing his mastery at transposing mbira melodies onto the fretboard. Though his history with Thomas went back to Zimbabwe's liberation war, Dube had more than once left the Blacks Unlimited. Yet, here he was again, on stage with Thomas and playing with heart. "What can I do?" he deadpanned, half smiling. "That's how it is."

We were interrupted by a round-faced man with no left eye, just closed lashes skirting a sliver of red. He smiled benignly and said, "Thomas is calling for you." This was Anton, a battle-scarred onetime *tsotsi* (hooligan) and a key member of the Blacks Unlimited's formidable cadre of "doormen." These were a rough crew, Sekuru Jira's boys, charged with moving and assembling the sound system, collecting money at the door, breaking up fights, clearing the hall at the end of the show, and packing up for the next one. Once, at the Nyamutamba Hotel, there was pandemonium at the end of the night when the doormen announced that an entire roll of tickets had been stolen. Angry shouting echoed through the deserted hall. Jira got involved, then Thomas himself, both roaring with outrage. Dube just shook his head and smiled. If tickets disappeared, so could money. "All these doormen," said Dube. "They are tsotsis. They steal from Thomas. You can't avoid it. They're professionals."

Anton led me on a vaguely familiar route out of the garden, up the ramp into the hotel proper, through the pool table bar, and out along a concrete walkway to the bungalow where Thomas retreated between sets. We knocked, the door opened, and there was the Lion of Zimbabwe wearing a blue-and-white soccer jersey and sweatpants. He lay sprawled on an unmade bed minus his left shoe. His calloused left foot was plunked in the lap of a pretty

young girl—not much over twenty—who was dutifully massaging his big toe. Thomas leapt up and threw his arms around me. "How are you, my brother?" he bellowed. "Did you travel well?"

Thomas was on. He introduced me to officials from his soccer team, the Sporting Lions. I greeted his brother William, dressed Cotton Club style in a gray suit and fedora, nursing a Bols and Coke. "We are good here," said Thomas, adding after a pause, "except that we lost Jonah." Though just forty-five, Jonah Sithole (sih-TOH-lay), the original Blacks Unlimited lead guitarist, had passed away in August 1997. A depressing number of Zimbabwean musicians had been dying of late, but Sithole's absence loomed large. No other instrumentalist had ever received such personal recognition on the Harare scene. Among all Zimbabwe's fine guitarists, Sithole's sweet and sure lines had cut closest to the spiritually charged core of mbira music, and this had made him an icon. During twenty years together, Sithole had sometimes clashed with Thomas, even bitterly, over the direction of the band, the way songs were credited, and, as in all bands, money. But when it came to music, Thomas would be the first to tell you: no one could touch Sithole on guitar. Almost four months later, this loss still felt fresh.

When ten minutes passed with no sign of smoking preparations, I began to wonder whether Thomas had abandoned his ceremonial habit. Then Sekuru Jira appeared at the door carrying a floppy duffle bag. He produced from it six cigar-sized "cobs" of Malawian marijuana—*mbanje*, *fodya*, *ganja*—each wrapped neatly in dried corn husk and bound with a strip of raffia. Jira unraveled three bundles and began separating seeds and stems from deep brown leaves and flowers. He constructed three enormous spliffs, each five inches long and as thick as a man's thumb on the fat end. Jira lit one, passing it to Thomas, who puffed once, twice, and then passed it to me before turning to Jira for the second. The rich, woody aroma brought back memories of my earliest meetings with Thomas. A few puffs of "Malawian Gold" soon immersed me in pleasant, uncomplicated euphoria. Now Jira lit the third, drawing deeply to burn through a good half inch of it, then releasing thick coils of smoke that curtained his face, closed-eyed, rapturous, and stoic as a Shona stone sculpture. I looked at the room's faded yellow walls, the gathering clouds of smoke, the girl pressing her thumbs into the arch of Thomas's foot while his ropy dreadlocks draped over a pillow against the wall, and I felt a singular peace.

Thomas launched into banter, mixing Shona with English. He reported that Bob Coen, one of his managers from back in the 1980s, had resurfaced after a long absence. "Bob is making films for CNN now, in Somalia and Liberia. These

are war zones!" he exclaimed, impressed and amused. "I'm telling you—that Bob. He is very *adventurous*." We laughed at the understatement, and Thomas's guffaws resolved into rhythmic, hornlike wheezes. Rocking with choked hilarity, he extended his fingertips to touch mine, a Zimbabwean custom when friends share a joke.

"What are you drinking?" asked Thomas.

"Lion."

"Here," he said, handing me a Z$100 bill. "Buy your beers with that. Anton will take you out. It is time to go to the stage." Thomas reached for his bottle of Bloplus Cough Syrup and Anti-Fatigue Tonic. Two spoonfuls soothed his throat, and he was ready to go. A smoldering spliff remained in the ashtray. It would not go to waste.

Back in the garden, the scene was jumping as the Blacks Unlimited moved into the brass-section segment of their warm-up set. Dancers on the floor crouched and spun, raising elbows and striking poses as only Zimbabwean revelers do. Yet the mood remained heavy. Like the stage where the band played, this garden was full of ghosts—many of them AIDS ghosts. Thomas began with "Ngoma Yekwedu (Our Music)," not a traditional mbira song but one that tapped the mbira's uncanny blend of wistfulness and joy.[5] "I love this song," said a female friend of the band. "It says, '*When our music starts playing, everyone is going to come out. Everyone is dancing, even the dead.*' Thomas is singing about the ones who have gone, like Jonah Sithole."

Thomas closed his eyes and held the microphone in front of his face for a long time before singing. He was gathering himself for spiritual exertion, and it taxed him. As he began to sing, he moved to the front of the stage and pressed his right ear—his good one—close to the speaker. His voice sounded weary but strong, and tuned to perfection.

Strangers approached me, compelled to explain the songs. A man who had earlier pinched a notebook from my shirt pocket, then discarded it by the stage, returned without shame to say, "Thomas is singing, '*Money, money. Everybody wants money. Give us money. We need money.*'" A shirtless drunk came stomping over and made me hold his hand while we danced. Anton interrupted this absurd tango to say, "Joshua is calling you." I looked to the stage and saw Dube shaking his head vigorously as he played his guitar. "He says you are talking with tsotsis," Anton said serenely. A self-proclaimed "liberation war hero" came next. "I too am a citizen," he slurred, adding that he was "in intelligence." He took my hand and pressed it against the cold handcuffs in his trouser pocket, that I might savor his importance.

Though the hour grew late, the crowd never thinned. As always, the night ended in trance with the musicians suspended in mbira time for thirty minutes or more while dancers communed in a blissful union of beer and heritage. These celebrants drank "clear beer," but its effect was little different from that of the milky millet brew that has always been central to the *bira*, the Shona spirit possession ritual, wherein secrets of the past are revealed through contact with the spirits of the dead. The sacred ways of the Shona past echoed in this decidedly secular space. Here—amid crime, alcoholism, infidelity, and brazen escape from the darkening realities of life in "liberated" Zimbabwe—there was a kind of grace that is rare in popular music performances anywhere. At Blacks Unlimited shows, tsotsis, spiritualists, bureaucrats, intellectuals, dreamers, ideologues, prostitutes, and poets all communed. And, as routine as this communion seemed at the time, there was nothing quite like it in the world. "People never recognize what they have until they lose it," one fan told me. "When Mukanya is gone, they'll be crying for him."

With a languid tumble of drums, the final song trailed off around 3:30 AM—an early night. If the show were a *pungwe* (an all-nighter), a third set would have kept the faithful dancing past dawn.[6] Now the garden emptied fast. Thomas slipped away; the doormen set about ejecting drunks; and musicians scrambled for transport back to town. Bezil Makombe, the mbira player, ushered me into Evans's tangerine-colored BMW, and we headed off to Mbare, the ghetto, in search of beer.

So began my longest stay in Zimbabwe.[7] Soon I would be spending my days rehearsing with the band at Seven Miles, watching as Thomas developed new songs for a new era, sculpting his signature creations from the collective ideas of his singularly talented musicians. I would learn guitar with Dube and work the parts he taught me into the Makombe brothers' mbira songs at informal all-night parties at their mother's rural homestead in Seke, some twenty miles south of Harare. I would attend some seventy-five Blacks Unlimited shows all over Zimbabwe, joining the band on stage with my guitar for their warm-up sets, and even playing a few songs when Thomas sang.

I would become known to the band's Harare fans for my Shona guitar playing. A few even called me "Murehwa," after a town famous for its music and dance traditions. Many of those fans had arresting English-language names: Lonely, Last, Never, Loveless, Decent, Winsome, Whither, Gift, Kindness, Patience, Marvelous. Such names, common in Zimbabwe, reflect an old fascination with the West. In this uneasy time of rising anti-Westernism, I found their notes of moral clarity both charming and incongruous. For me, feeling my way anew through this changing land, the only real clarity lay in Thomas's music, and in the sacrifices so many had made to create and sustain it. Thomas

is a siren, and his song has lured not only fans but also musicians, managers, journalists, and adventurers. Those enraptured by his call have surrendered much—jobs, health, marriage, fortune; for some musicians, arguably, their lives.

One moment stands out amid all my interactions with Thomas. He is sitting on the back porch of a motel in Salmon Arm, British Columbia, on a hot summer afternoon during a season of wildfires in 1998. The smoke from his spliff mingles with smoke peeling off burning mountains to the east. He launches into an impolitic speech about the inherent inequality of women and men—*a woman must keep house for her husband; she must serve him; she must not wear short skirts and provoke unwanted attention.* It's a familiar rant. I don't argue, but somehow convey skepticism. "It was not me who decided that," Thomas parries as if challenged. "God made men and women this way." This is neither the first nor the last time our worldviews sheer off one another. But this time Thomas seizes the nettle. "We have different cultures, Banning. We can work together, but we can never be the same. And we must protect that difference." This book is both enriched and hobbled by "that difference." It is the work of an outsider with access, a lifelong fan searching for truth in a world—it must be acknowledged—he can never fully understand.

Thomas Mapfumo is one of the most brilliant African creators of the past century. He is also the embodiment of a tumultuous history rooted in a head-on collision of Western ambition and African culture. More than a hitmaker or a pop icon, Thomas has created a tapestry of civil trauma, gnarled with imperfections and gilded with genius. He has achieved greatness his way, without guidance or training, taking what pleases him from the idioms and musicians around him, and weaving all of this, along with his own incisive poetry, into the fabric of his "chimurenga" oeuvre. Buoyed by insight, vision, passion, and humor, Thomas's art unfolds the saga of his wounded nation. The unfolding continues, for Zimbabwe is young, though its story is already an epic of innocence, beauty, and pain.

And it all begins with the land.

RHODESIA

3 / When the Spirit Comes

> 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

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 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, *n'angas*,[1] and, once cured, returned home to a mother who had given her up for dead. Her mother performed a divination and soon 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." 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 elderly 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 in Murehwa 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. "Oh! You have been lying to me when you said you didn't play mbira before."

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." 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 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, even "slinging the bull," as one longtime student of mbira once put it.[2]

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.

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, that buzzing may seem yet another distraction, obscuring the actual music.[3] But the adept player clearly hears, through all of this, the individual parts and their interrelationships.

Mbira players 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 does not play mbira and 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."

"Thomas is clever enough," observed Chigamba, with a note of derision. "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."

Most mbira musicians I have interviewed praise Thomas's work. Typical was one who called him "the only man who has managed to play mbira with modern 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 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. "But I can tell you this," declared mbira player and maker Chris Mhlanga, "you will *never* play in a bira ceremony with a guitar."

Thomas and his coterie of musicians have succeeded in commingling a world of beer halls, rock 'n' roll bands, journalists, poets, and politicians with the more shrouded realm of bira ceremonies, spirit mediums, and ancestors. Over the years, a few mbira players have attempted to move in the other direction, lured from their spiritual enclave by the enticement of popular acclaim. Among the most resourceful of these was Thomas's contemporary Ephat Mujuru.

Ephat was born in 1950 in Mujuru village in Manicaland, not far from the border with Mozambique. He was raised by his grandfather, Muchatera, a spirit medium and superb mbira player. "He played very clearly," said Ephat of Muchatera, "slowly. He could play so much that when you would listen, you would go way back, far away. He could create in my imagination a place that I never saw." Ephat's absorption in his grandfather's mystical arts dominated his childhood. He dedicated himself to mbira and showed such talent that he played his first ceremony at age ten. Ephat's family even played at gatherings organized by Thomas Mapfumo's traditionally minded relatives. The two young musicians met very early on, though they never became close friends.

Ephat's life of music and spirituality collided with Rhodesian realities when he enrolled at Saint Peter's Catholic School in Rusape. White teachers looked down on village culture. Ephat recalled, "They would preach against anything like mbira, anything that sounded African. They would make sure that if people kept the traditions, their children suffered. One of the headmasters was very much against me because of what was happening in my village." Enraged by this attitude, his grandfather Muchatera rescued Ephat from the Catholics and sent him away to study in Salisbury. "It was 1962," recalled Ephat:

That was the big explosion, because that's when our first African nationalism started, and people wanted to know, "What has happened to our history?" People began to have the pride of their music. You would go to Mbare and be surprised to see so many people holding biras. There was a time that the government was trying to ban the mbira, because it was very powerful.[4] I remember we were playing at a particular place, and the police came and said, "No. No playing here." But we didn't stop. The more they said it, the more we played, because we were not afraid of anything. After that, they kind of ignored it, because even the police began to be interested. They could also take off their uniforms and come for the dancing. "You know, I am a policeman. But I like the music!"

Ephat left school at eighteen and took a clerking job in an accounting office where people were "very colonial." He recalled, "They recognized my talent, but tried to discourage me. Then they told me that there was a limitation of work." He lost his job and struggled in an alien urban world, full of "so much hate." Ephat sought refuge among mbira musicians. He traveled to Seke, a rural area south of Salisbury, to learn from a great player named Bandambira. He traveled to Masvingo, near Great Zimbabwe, to spend time with mbira player and builder Simon Mashoko. Ephat recalled playing with Mashoko in surrounding villages for people husking corn, and Mashoko instructing him in the art of singing mbira songs. Ephat became enraptured by the Shona language these older mbira singers used, a tongue full of oblique references and archaic phrases—what he called "deep Shona." Back in Salisbury, Ephat came under the tutelage of his uncle, Hakurotwi Mude, who was by then playing mbira and singing at ceremonies in Highfield and Mbare. In 1972, following the lead of "Uncle Mude,"[5] Ephat formed his first group, Mhuri Yekwa Mujuru, and began composing and arranging pieces on his own.

Around the time Thomas began to adapt Shona music in the Hallelujah Chicken Run Band, Ephat was invited to perform on national radio. He recalled performing an arcane song called "Guruuswa," which asks, "How can I cross the river?" A Shona poet, David Kabaji, asked to be part of the recording, and, as Ephat and his musicians began to play, the poet added improvised lines about starvation and suffering. He spoke about "our people" being "bombed in Chinhoyi," a clear reference to the seminal battle there in 1966. The song was soon banned from radio play, an early badge of honor for Ephat, who then invited this poet to record with him.

Much later, after the war and independence, Ephat was one of the country's most established and well-known mbira players. Working out of the Zimbabwe College of Music, he used to escort foreign visitors to hear mbira music at the Bandambira family compound in Seke. They would gather inside a large mud-and-pole hut, its floor just packed earth with a fire pit at the center. On tall wooden shelves, pots, plates, clay urns, and enamel bowls sat on display like artwork. The thatched roof had no opening at its peak, and smoke settled there, its resins seeping into the charred thatch. The musicians would arrange themselves in a tight group against the wall, three mbira players seated beside Bandambira's widow, who cradled a baby in her arms while boys to either side wielded large, loud hosho rattles.

This was how I first saw mbira music performed, and how I met Ephat. Intrigued, I accepted his offer of a deeper experience, one where we would "greet the spirit." In January 1988, Ephat escorted me and three other Westerners to his Uncle Mude's house in Highfield. The cement-block homes on Hakurotwi Mude's rutted dirt street stood close together. They were well made and tidy, though a little dilapidated by years of relative poverty. There was a good deal of peeling paint and the odd boarded-up window. Some of the yards were nappy with overgrown weeds. Mude's front room had been cleared of everything but a few wooden chairs, a bench, and a white Frigidaire, against which mbira players leaned as they played, seated on a straw mat. The concrete floor was swept clean. When we arrived, petitioners, as well as mbira and hosho players, were gathering. For all its humility, this modest room was becoming a sacred space, deep in the heart of the township.

Ephat's wife, Emely, arrived with children—a new baby, four-year-old Sylvester, and six-year-old Elizabeth, who wore a lavender dress with a white lace collar. Elizabeth rushed forward to hug her father and then began to dance, swinging one leg forward, and then the other, producing a dull slap each time her bare foot landed firmly on the concrete floor. Sylvester stood in the corner, hairless, holding his hands over his ears and pulling them away in rhythm, smiling at the effect. Emely emerged from the kitchen, dancing too, and ululating with a fluttering hand placed before her mouth, the baby swaddled to her back. Most of the fifteen or so people gathered were dressed in subdued colors—gray, brown, black, and dull green—but Emely wore a bright blue blouse and skirt, an orange kerchief around her head, and two necklaces of white beads. Her smiling and ululating seemed to electrify Ephat, who stood in the doorway, his eyes afire with anticipation.

Two boys hovered in the kitchen doorway playing hosho. Each held two hosho. Their left hands snapped forward to punch out what seemed the basic beat (1, 2, 3, 4), while their right hands rolled to the side in answer—*and-ah, and-ah, and-ah, and-ah.*[6] Beneath the hosho's cracking triplets, the three mbira

inside gourds produced a dense, metallic texture—ambient and audible but difficult for me to discern as any particular melody. With some ten dancers crowding together in that small space, the smell of sweat mingled with other vague odors: food cooked some hours ago, gas, and a large urn of "seven-days" millet beer, about to be served.

A stout man in a white shirt and gray slacks appeared in the kitchen doorway. Mude surveyed the scene. His grave face and bloodshot eyes seemed at odds with the mirth before him. He took his place next to the mbira players. Ephat told us, his guests, that photography and recording were okay, "except when the spirit comes."

The mbira players rotated, and Ephat joined them on the floor. Mude began to sing, quietly at first, humming along with the mbira. He called to the kitchen for beer, and a man carried in a large clay urn containing the essential brew. Seven-days beer is milky, frothy, tart, and fizzy from fermentation and is served at room temperature. A man with a ladle filled a large enameled tin cup, which was passed around the room. Some sipped, others guzzled. One man drained the full cup in a single gulp, then passed it back to the server. When beer spilled on the floor, Mude snapped his fingers and a small boy appeared with a tub of black dirt to sprinkle over the spill. The beer-serving man trampled the moist dirt, and the boy returned with a grass brush and pan to collect it.

The music intensified—mbira players reached for a white powder to ward off blistering on their thumbs and fingers. Without warning Mude opened his mouth and released a hornlike blast that overpowered even the hosho before undulating into soft unison with the lead mbira. Mude's singing continued that way, sometimes tearing forth in waves of broken, yodeling melody—the style called *huro*—then quieting down with gentle rhythmic *mahon'era*, vocal riffs so soft they were sometimes hard to make out over the music. A woman ululated, her tongue racing back and forth across her upper palate. Barefoot dancers slapped their heels into the concrete, thudding out familiar counterrhythms, traditional rhythmic phrases heard often in Shona music. Each successive song drew the participants closer together, and we edged toward collective ecstasy.

Mude's sporadic cries and melodious murmurs recalled Thomas's singing, and the dancers crowded into that small space moved in ways similar to the fans at Thomas's beer hall gigs—their chests forward, shoulders back, knees rising high in the air. Suddenly, a young woman began to jitter. She fell to her hands and knees and, with her whole body shaking, crawled slowly backward toward the kitchen doorway. The music crested. Mude stopped singing, his

clouded eyes fixed on the woman. The spirit had come, and what came next was unlike anything seen at a Blacks Unlimited show.

Everyone sat down. The hosho stopped, and the mbira dwindled to near silence. People began to clap in slow, soft unison, their cupped hands coming together like mirror images—greeting the spirit. Another clay urn filled with millet beer was brought in, and the white cup continued to circulate. Mude had drunk none of the beer, but now he had his shirt off, and he sat perfectly still, emitting low, guttural sounds, almost growling. One of the dancers put a black cloth over the medium's head, covering it and reaching down to the floor. His head hidden, Mude slapped his upper arm against his bare side, this sudden movement a sign of possession. A young man brought him a bowl of water, and Mude let the cloth slip away as he reached for it. He lifted the water to his lips, drank, then spat out suddenly, spraying people near him, including the trousers of a white-haired man. Was this a scold? A blessing? I couldn't tell, but I was riveted. One door leading to an adjacent room had mostly remained closed. Now a man emerged through it with a long wooden ladle for the water, and also a cloth sack, which he handed to the white-haired man, who now assisted Mude in his role as spirit medium. The white-haired man reached in and pulled out garments with which to dress the quivering woman, first a black ostrich-feather headdress, then a black-and-white robe, and finally a short wooden staff.

The woman slid forward toward Mude, who handed her a wooden snuff flask. She poured fine, brown *bute* (powdered tobacco) into the palm of her hand, took a pinch in her fingers, and snorted it, feeding her closed-eyed rapture. Mude ladled water from the bowl onto his bare back. There was no music now, just a potent silence, broken occasionally by soft pulsing hand claps. Mude began to converse with the woman—hushed monotone utterances separated by lengthy pauses. The woman reached into her gown for a leather scabbard and produced a twelve-inch carving knife. She caressed it, then placed its point against her chest and released a low, birdlike whistle. The knife did not penetrate, but she held it there for a long time before suddenly withdrawing it and laughing. The closed door opened, and a boy appeared with a small drum.

Mosquitoes moved in the dank, still air, but when one of the foreign visitors opened a bottle of insect repellant, Ephat flashed a startled glare. "The perfume!" he whispered. "Not now. The spirit is greeting you." Spirits, especially ancient ones, eschew Western things, and odors are especially offensive to them. Our presence was tolerated, but there were limits. Mude intoned words in a deep, quiet voice, his eyes still trained on the possessed woman, who

appeared to be sleeping. One mbira player leaned close to another, playing almost inaudibly, apparently teaching him a song. "This is the discussion," Ephat whispered. "Now, the spirit is saying that we should take off our shoes." There was a shuffling in the room as some thirty people obeyed, adding a new edge to the room's sweaty bouquet.

It was 2:00 AM, and the musicians had been silent for more than an hour. Now, as the mbira began gingerly to sound again, a man came forward and handed Mude a coin, which he tossed into an empty wooden bowl. The white-haired man removed the coin and replaced it with a two-dollar bill. A few others added to the pot. Emely stood up, the baby again swaddled to her back and sleeping. She took Elizabeth by the hand, and as the hosho players went into action, they began to dance. Soon the boy with his drum started playing, and as dancers filled the floor again, Mude sang, piercing the air with high notes. Ephat took over the drum, beating out Shona rhythmic patterns. There was no real groove to his playing; that was the work of the hosho rattles. Rather, his drumming was like speech, little rhythmic arguments, separated by pauses and mirrored in his expressions and gestures—wide eyes, a stiffened neck, a shake of the head, and gruff exclamations: "Heh, heeey!"

Standing in the kitchen doorway with arms swinging, Emely released a siren-like ululation, and the ceremony reached its pitch. The possessed woman exited to the kitchen followed by the white-haired man. She returned in her street clothes and began dancing, her lively fluid movement affirming her release from possession. Younger musicians came forward to play the mbira. Women approached Mude to ask for snuff. One hoarded hers in a small vial she stowed between her breasts. During the next song Mude gestured the dancers away, clearing the floor for himself. The spirit medium danced in a series of poses and sudden hops, jagged movements scarcely related to the music. His black shawl tied around his waist and a metal spear in his hand, he looked downward as he moved. Everybody watched, but no one reacted. The dance seemed not so much a performance as a sign that the ceremony had reached its end.

It was just past 3:00 AM when Ephat circulated among the musicians, handing each of them a two-dollar bill from the wooden bowl while everyone sat around drinking warm Coca-Cola. The drumming boy said, "Tonight we stop early. If it is a pungwe, we go from 6:00 PM to 8:00 AM.[7] Tonight, there were just two spirits. Sometimes there are so many. Sometimes, *everyone* gets possessed." This lad probably meant that all the mediums present got possessed, but the message was clear: we the foreign visitors had merely tasted the full experience of a bira ceremony. As the sky began to lighten, Mude's son drove

us back to the city in an old Peugeot 404 with a bumper sticker that read "I Survived Catholic School."

This was *dandaro*, a social gathering, not a full-fledged bira. A more serious ceremony might be held in response to a problem—sickness, drought, or unexplained death. On such an occasion, music would be chosen to attract the svikiro's particular spirit. And it is less likely, though not impossible, that any foreign visitors would be present.

A svikiro, or medium, is not the same as a n'anga, or traditional healer, though their worlds overlap. Some mediums are proficient in healing arts, and some healers can become possessed by spirits. All over Harare, hand-painted signs read "Surgery/Chiremba," a confluence of British English and Shona. A Shona dictionary translates *chiremba* as "doctor," but not exactly in the British sense. Within these clinics, tucked between tailor shops and beauty salons, medical nurses work side by side with n'angas, all certified by the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA). At the chiremba, the n'anga would begin with herbal remedies, but if he deems it necessary, he might arrange a bira with a svikiro, seven-days beer, mbira musicians, and all the accoutrements needed to enlist the help of a spirit.

There are various sorts of Shona spirits. The *vadzimu*, as in *mbira dza-vadzimu*, are family ancestors who have passed away and gained knowledge of the future and insight into the causes of illness.[8] "Ancestors make the perfect parents," one scholar wrote, adding, "Human life is greatly enhanced by the ending of it."[9] Then there are *mashave*, roving souls who can travel great distances and are useful in healing. A *shave* that a family relies upon generation after generation can be adopted by the clan, becoming a *mudzimu*, the singular of *vadzimu*. On the other hand, a mudzimu who is never called upon may abandon its earthly relatives to become a shave.[10] And of course, there are evil spirits, *ngozi* and *varoyi*, witches who can possess you at will and "ride you through the night."

The *mhondoro* are ancestors for an entire clan or chieftaincy; the word literally means lion, for when a chief dies, he is believed to turn into a lion cub and slip off into the bush. A claim of mediumship for a mhondoro spirit requires rigorous scrutiny before it is accepted by the community. A mhondoro corresponds to a spirit province representing the actual land that a chief conquered or controlled during his lifetime.[11] In theory, Mashonaland can be divided into many such provinces, each with a single medium for its mhondoro, although in recent times things have rarely worked out so neatly. Sometimes, no medium arises to claim a spirit. Sometimes, the community rejects a claim, especially when it involves a highly revered mhondoro, such as those associated

with Shona origins, or with fateful fights against the Ndebele, and later the Rhodesians. Topping the list of mhondoro are three names: Kaguvi, Nehanda, and Chaminuka. These figures are inseparable from this region's history, for they play a crucial role in the psychology of the 1890s Shona rebellion and the 1970s liberation war. Kaguvi and Nehanda have already been mentioned in this context. Chaminuka poses his own special set of complications.

British adventurer Frederick Selous—the man who guided Rhodes's Pioneers—provides an early written account of Chaminuka in his book *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa* (1881).[12] Selous describes the murder of Chaminuka's spirit medium, Pasipamire, at the hands of Ndebele warriors loyal to their last king, Lobengula. "I am too old to run," Selous has Pasipamire saying, "but bid my son, who is young and swift of foot, creep away in the bushes while there is yet time, and carry the news to my people." The medium dies, but the people of his village, Chitungwiza—the same Chitungwiza that sprawls with music, life, and poverty south of Harare today—escape harm.

The story of Pasipamire's death is one of the most enduring tales of the Shona past. The "radical missionary" Arthur Shearly Cripps called Chaminuka "the man whom God taught," in his 1928 account. Here, the first British scouts are making inroads on the Zimbabwe plateau, the Ndebele still terrorize Mashonaland, and Pasipamire is a godlike figure deemed the "owner of the land."[13] It takes a full Ndebele army to defeat him, and even then, spears cannot actually kill Pasipamire, Chaminuka's medium. The final deed must be performed by a prepubescent boy.[14]

Mediumship is complicated and, where mhondoro are involved, often controversial. "There is no medium for Nehanda alive today," Thomas said once, and his view is typical. The mbira player Tute Chigamba follows these matters closely, and in 1998 he began to hear about a supposed medium for Nehanda who had turned up in Chipinge. The proof hinged on the woman's knowledge about where Nehanda had buried a pot of water. "They went there together," Chigamba reported, "and the woman said, 'Okay, you dig there.' And then they dug there, and they found the pot with the water inside. She said, 'I left you this.' So people believe that. Well, it's what they do. They take advantage. There is one Ambuya Nehanda in Mazoe area, and there's one in Zambezi Valley." His skepticism was unmistakable.

In the early days of Rhodesia, Shona spirituality was terra incognita for whites in general, including scholars and intellectuals. When a woman surfaced in 1903 claiming to be the new medium for Chaminuka, the administration sent a spy to eavesdrop on her. While possessed by her spirit, the woman proclaimed, "I am Chaminuka. I know everything. I am all-powerful. I caused

the downfall of Barozwi and the Matabele and I will cause the white man to leave the country. Nothing is impossible to me." Jailed and interrogated, the woman committed suicide in detention.[15]

About twenty years later, the government sought to discredit a medium named Reresayi, the next to claim Chaminuka as her spirit. Reresayi was well-spoken and intelligent, and deemed dangerous because she professed to be "the government in charge of rain" and argued that people should pay tribute to *her* rather than to the thieving white government. Then, in 1934, a young man from Chiduku Reserve in Makoni also proclaimed himself the medium of Chaminuka. This claimant did not interfere with local tax collection as Reresayi had but instead engaged with white authority figures. In fact, he served as a crucial informant to influential authors—first, to a scholar of tropical diseases and herbal remedies, Michael Gelfand, then to Rhodesian historian Donald Abraham, and later on to the American ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner. Gelfand and Abraham, in particular, published groundbreaking works in advance of the liberation war. Historian Terence Ranger writes that much of the information in these books was incorrect, but Rhodesians had paid so little attention to African culture that these writings assumed outsized authority, providing all who read them with a radically oversimplified map of Shona culture and history.

The young medium from Makoni who spoke with Gelfand and Abraham, and thus whispered into the void of history, was Ephat's grandfather, Muchatera Mujuru. His words would echo loudly but, in the end would have unintentionally tragic consequences. Asked about this family connection with Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, Ephat became reticent. "There are things that even history should not know," he said. "There are things that should just be forgotten."

But Muchatera Mujuru has not been forgotten. Based largely on his information, Gelfand's 1959 book, according to Ranger, establishes Chaminuka as "the great messenger" between all Shona people and God, or Mwari. Complex regional and clan distinctions fall away in Gelfand's account, replaced by a friendly hierarchy wherein all Shona people are united under the watchful eye of a super ancestor spirit, Chaminuka. Ranger reports that Gelfand's book "was greeted with delight by most of those interested in the African past of Zimbabwe."[16] The book at last made Shona culture comprehensible to readers who had few other ways of approaching the subject, because they were either whites who had little contact with Africans or else Christianized Africans who had lost touch with their spiritual history. However flawed, Gelfand's picture of a monolithic Shona society, history, and cosmology suited an era

in which Africans were laying aside old differences as they prepared to take on the Rhodesians.[17]

The success of Gelfand's book in Rhodesia helped Muchatera bolster his claim on the mediumship of Chaminuka and cast himself as an invincible figure. Ranger argues that this was Muchatera's ultimate objective, for, despite what he had told Gelfand, authorities in Makoni had rejected his claim to be possessed by Chaminuka. Through Gelfand, Muchatera promoted not only the mhondoro Chaminuka but himself as well.

Muchatera's stock rose higher still in 1963 when a historian of even greater stature than Gelfand, Donald Abraham, delivered, and later published (1966), a lecture on mhondoro cults in Shona political history. With Muchatera as his main source, Abraham revisits the history of the Rozvi Empire, giving Chaminuka the starring role. Abraham elaborates on Gelfand's claim that Chaminuka's spirit had impregnated the mother of the first Rozvi king, Mutota. This disputed claim made Chaminuka the father not only of the Shona religion but also of Shona politics. Little surprise that Rhodesian government strategists in the emerging independence war would come to see Muchatera as a potential pressure point for influencing black Rhodesians.

A decade later, as the war raged, Muchatera, now an old man, bent the ear of one more white scholar, Paul Berliner, whose rich book *The Soul of Mbira* (1978), with accompanying Nonesuch Explorer recordings, introduced Shona music and culture to the world. Brought to Muchatera by his grandson Ephat, Berliner pursued the old medium as a source on mbira music, not history as such. But along the way, Muchatera told Berliner a magical origin story for the mbira itself, once again giving key credit to Chaminuka—now effectively the father of Shona culture as well as religion and politics. Berliner presents this origin account as one among many, and he implicitly questions its veracity. He writes tactfully that Muchatera's "following in eastern Zimbabwe believe him to be the medium for the ancient Shona spirit Chaminuka," hardly an endorsement.[18] Still, for Ranger, Muchatera had now proven himself a "virtuoso informant," using the vehicle of white scholars to enhance his own claim to be medium for the most powerful of all Shona spirits.[19]

Chaminuka and Pasipamire pervade the fiction, poetry, song lyrics, and political oratory of the liberation struggle. Neither Gelfand nor Abraham sympathized with the African nationalists, though they inadvertently helped them. Gelfand was naive enough to think that promoting traditional life—including the activities of spirit mediums—would ensure the loyalty of Africans, whom he perceived as "law-abiding, polite, kind and considerate."[20] Abraham further buoyed the nationalist cause by proclaiming the historical existence of a Shona

"state" whose "moral cement" had come from "Mwari [God] and his lieutenant Chaminuka."[21] Nationalists could now argue that they were restoring order, not upsetting it. By most accounts, no overarching Shona polity ever existed. Indeed, there is not even a word for "state" in the Shona lexicon.

Muchatera was a self-serving and fanciful historian, but Ranger concludes, "It is hard to deny him the title of the single greatest influence on the Shona cultural revival."[22] What is certain is that Shona culture was in revival. The vibrant, musical atmosphere Ephat Mujuru and Tute Chigamba experienced in Mbare in the early 1960s, and attributed to "our African nationalists," did indeed take place amid Chaminuka mania. Bira ceremonies and *dandanda* drumming and dance parties, the brewing of beer, and the dicta of spirit mediums were becoming means to "keep the spirits uprising, and give powers to the fighters."[23] No surprise, then, that military leaders on both sides worked hard to enlist the support of Shona spirit mediums, including Muchatera—as it turned out for him, an unfortunate by-product of his carefully orchestrated celebrity.

This battle for the loyalty of mediums was particularly intense in the far northern province of Dande, where Thomas Mapfumo's father was born, where Beauler Dyoko traveled to be healed by n'angas, and where bold guerrilla raids on white farms sparked all-out war in Rhodesia in 1972. Deep in Mashonaland, beyond the ragged northeast edge of the Zimbabwe plateau, Dande had survived the colonial ordeal buffered by its inhospitable climate and terrain. Now it became the scene of intense fighting between guerrillas and government forces. The region's deep valleys are hot and dry, covered with blade-sharp grasses and contorted trees. Anthropologist David Lan writes that most Zimbabweans regarded it as "a place of wild animals and backward people, drunkards and witches, left behind by modern times centuries ago."[24] What better place to hide and train a guerrilla army!

Traditionally, Dande's people lived in the valleys to be near rivers, but their minds were forever on the plateau above, where the ancestors came from and the climate was moist and mild. In the valleys, there were no cattle to support life. Salt, found along the riverbanks, was the main item of commerce from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Spirit mediums were preoccupied with manipulating the rain clouds that lingered at the rim of the plateau, for the surest measure of their power was the ability to make rain in the gnarled and dry lowlands.

Dande is home to the Korekore people, who claim the great Nehanda among their local mhondoro spirits. This is why ZANU guerrilla commander Mayor Urimbo traveled there in 1971 to meet a frail old woman believed to be Nehanda's medium. Urimbo described his fateful meeting to David Lan.

She was very old. She never bathed and ate only twice a week. Her food had to be ground with a mortar and pestle. She hated all European things. We told her: "We are the children of Zimbabwe, we want to liberate Zimbabwe." She was very much interested. She knew very much about war and the regulation of war. She said: "This forest is very, very difficult for you to penetrate," but she gave us directions. She told us what kind of food to eat, which routes to take, what part of the forest we were not allowed to stay in or sleep in, where we were not allowed to fight. She said we were forbidden to go with girls and she taught us how to interpret many signs in the forest, which would allow us to live safely and know when our enemy was near.[25]

Urimbo's fighters looked after Nehanda's medium, carrying her to Zambia on a stretcher when it became too dangerous for her to stay home. Leaders in ZANU also won the allegiance of other Dande mediums, who helped direct convoys of porters carrying weapons from the Mozambique border and empowered guerrillas to read nature's signs. Two eagles fighting meant bomber planes were coming. A tortoise in the path meant the route was safe. A snake was a warning to turn back. A pinch of bute (medium's snuff) brushed across a forehead could shield a man from bullets, and there are stories of mediums teaching guerrillas to vanish in thin air.[26]

Many guerrillas came from missionized Christian backgrounds, so it was by no means clear that they would win the support of mediums in this forbidding environment. These august figures in their black robes, rejecting Western clothing and technology, even soap, even Coca-Cola, were a force unto themselves. Unlike n'angas, healers who could charge money for their services, spirit mediums were of necessity poor so as to remain incorruptible. Mediums revered water and reviled blood. What sympathy would they have for warriors armed with guns and machetes? And if they were to choose sides in the war, which way would they go? In 1973, the Rhodesians conducted a national survey of spirit mediums and found some willing to condemn the guerrillas for the shedding of blood.[27] But most mediums ultimately backed the guerrillas. Lan writes that they were guided by one overriding truth: "The single most important duty of the spirit mediums is to protect the land. From the grave, from the depths of the forest, from the body of a lion or of their mediums, the *mhondoro* control in perpetuity the land they conquered during their lives. Under the rule of the whites their land had lost its fertility. Sacred places had been fenced off and ruled out of bounds. The guerrillas offered land as renewed fertility and as restored tradition. They offered a Zimbabwe returned to its original and rightful owners."[28]

Spirit mediums made onerous demands on the guerrillas, including that they refrain from sexual activity. To the extent this was followed it was a hardship, and it became part of a culture of discipline among them. Even Christian fighters came to respect the mediums and follow their advice. The influence of Dande's mediums became lore in the cities, adding fuel to the traditional revival.

This was the context in which Thomas Mapfumo's music would soon resonate widely. But even as Thomas was fashioning "Ngoma Yarira (The Drums Are Sounding)," his first militant song, rooted in mbira tradition, Shona spirituality was already finding its way into another kind of "chimurenga song," namely, propaganda music used by guerrillas to recruit supporters. In 1972, union man turned ZANU "political instructor" Dickson Chingaira—aka Comrade Chinx—began changing the lyrics of popular hymns, school sing-alongs, drinking songs, and recreational *jiti* and *shangara* numbers born of village parties, for political purposes. "I love Jesus" became "I want war."[29] Mbira music was also a source for Chinx. "Nhemamusasa," an mbira song about making a shelter from a tree, became "chimurenga" or even "sabiedhu," submachine gun. Familiar melodies made the songs easy to learn; militant lyrics made them exciting to sing. During the war, Chinx organized impromptu choruses to sing chimurenga songs on ZANU's Voice of Zimbabwe broadcasts out of Maputo, Mozambique. A Rhodesian air serviceman recalled coming across "Africans in the bush, sitting around a radio, singing."[30]

As much as the Rhodesians tried to co-opt African culture, they could not compete on this level. Addressing the nation in 1973, Ian Smith said of the "terrorist" guerrillas, "They found a few witchdoctors of doubtful character and of little substance, and succeeded in bribing them to their side. . . . I'm sure I do not have to inform you how easy it is to mislead these simple gullible people who still believe in witchcraft and the throwing of bones."[31]

Muchatera Mujuru had persuaded influential people that he was Chaminuka's medium and had made friends in high places, including the government, in the process. But his conflict with the chiefs in his hometown, Mutota, only intensified. Traditionally, Lan writes, "the chiefs of the past . . . select and install the chiefs of the present."[32] This happened through the vehicle of the spirit medium, through whom the chiefs of the past spoke to the living. The Rhodesians had interfered with this practice, sidelining the spiritual selection process and appointing chiefs they imagined they could control. This inevitably set up conflicts between traditional and political authority. If a local chief recognized a medium, especially for a great spirit like Chaminuka, he effectively surrendered power, and perhaps displeased his governmental bene-

factors. In 1962, a chief named Zambe publicly declared Muchatera's claim to be Chaminuka's medium bogus. Zambe summoned Muchatera to a private meeting at which he said, "You don't pay your respects to me. I am not interested in you and I do not accept you as a medium."[33]

Subsequently, Muchatera became known for socializing with the white district commissioner over tea. He was said to prefer buns over *sadza*, and to hang photographs of whites in his *banya*, his ceremonial dwelling. Key figures in ZAPU and ZANU concluded that Muchatera's loyalties lay with the white government. Guerrilla leaders claimed that the medium had even flown in a helicopter over Dande, dropping leaflets that read "I Chaminuka condemn the terrorists."[34]

In January 1977, a group of ZANU guerrillas marched into Muchatera's compound and shot him dead in broad daylight. They blew up his banya with a rocket and forced the people there to bury him without ceremony. Muchatera's murderers wanted no one to wonder whether security forces, or local chiefs, or even Ndebele carrying an old grudge against Chaminuka, might have been responsible. They arranged a meeting with the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission and explained that Muchatera had been killed because he was being used by the Rhodesian government. For Ephat, the guerrillas' targeting and killing of his grandfather—the man who had raised him and taught him to love mbira—was unbearable. *"There are things that even history should not know. There are things that should just be forgotten."*

4 / Songs for the Book of History

> I didn't know Mugabe. I didn't know what ZANU was. No one came to me and told me how to join the guerrilla war. It was out of these songs. [Mapfumo] was sort of telling us, "You belong somewhere. You people must work toward something. That makes you Zimbabwean. That makes you black."
>
> ELIAS MUDZURI

From its founding in 1891, the *Rhodesia Herald*—later just the *Herald*—was always a government mouthpiece. Flashes of journalistic independence aside, the paper's mission has been to serve rulers, whether Rhodes, Smith, or Mugabe. In 1971, *Herald* stories still referred to the "Rhodesian independence dispute," reflecting Smith's belief that he could negotiate an end to African nationalism. Smith unveiled his Anglo-Rhodesian Agreement that year, telling the *Herald*, "I am a very happy man." The settlement made minor concessions to nationalists in return for recognition by England. Black nationalists joined white hard-liners in dismissing it as a sellout, and when the accord failed four months later, Smith was bitter. He lashed out, punishing enemies on the left by imposing racial restrictions on public drinking, swimming, and university housing. Smith now faced a hard truth: preserving the country his forefathers had built would demand the blood of its sons and daughters. This was war, but winnable, as Smith's people saw it: "the best counter-insurgency force in the world" versus a bunch of "garden boys."[1]

In June 1972, a coalfield explosion at Hwange (then Wankie) killed 390 Africans and 36 whites.[2] The nation was still reeling from this tragedy when guerrillas armed with AK-47s mounted a dawn attack on the Altena farm near

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Mount Darwin, then slipped back to their bases in Mozambique, unaccosted. Rhodesian forces had swiftly crushed the demonstrations, strikes, and riots of the past. Altena signaled a new kind of resistance—bold, violent, well coordinated, and informed by intelligence.

The year 1973 brought robust rains, economic vigor, and the creation of "protected villages," razor-wired encampments intended to starve the guerrillas by denying them contact with civilians.[3] The collateral result—half a million disease-ridden captives—would one day be a national scandal. For now, *Rhodesia Herald* headlines touted Operation Hurricane, Smith's military campaign against the camps in Zambia and Mozambique. Casualties were chronicled in a routine way, intermingled with news about petty crime, road accidents, beauty pageants, soccer matches, and debates about the unsightliness of curbside garbage collection. For the most part, Rhodesian town dwellers, four-fifths of the white population, could still ignore the war that would soon upend their lives.

Few places in Rhodesia were farther removed from the action than the Mhangura copper mine where Thomas Mapfumo and the Hallelujah Chicken Run Band plied their trade that year. Front man Elisha Josam later complained that Thomas never seemed proud of the band and gave it short shrift in interviews. "He's probably right," Thomas agreed, mostly recalling the tedium of the band's routine at the mine. And yet, it was here, in this artificial world, that Thomas and Joshua Dube dipped into the sacred mbira realm and created "Ngoma Yarira," a landmark in Zimbabwean music history.

The song's significance was far from obvious at the time. The musicians knew its percussive guitar lines and African melodies excited the miners, but there was no reason to think this enthusiasm would translate to the country's urban centers. Even Thomas put more faith in the band's Afro-rock repertoire—a brassy, jazz-infused sound reflecting the influence of the contemporary Ghanaian band Osibisa. Thomas told *African Parade* he wanted to play the saxophone like Stan Getz and predicted, amusingly, "Fifty years from now, jazz will still be popular when pop is not."[4]

In Salisbury, the Teal Recording Company was beginning to press vinyl discs of local music. Along with South Africa's Gallo Records, Teal had kept a branch office in Bulawayo since the mid-1960s. Gallo's Rhodesian productions had ventured beyond township jazz acts and rock 'n' roll cover bands to include guitar outfits singing in Shona, starting with the Green Arrows and the Great Sounds. But Teal had focused more on the lucrative foreign music market, picking up licensing rights for RCA Victor just in time to ride the Elvis wave. This success inspired British tycoon Tiny Roland to buy up a controlling

share, making Teal part of Lonrho, one of the biggest mining conglomerates in southern Africa. As one Teal manager recalled, "Lonrho knew nothing about music," so, with cash on hand and little supervision, Teal's A&R (artists and repertoire) man, Tony Rivet, started looking for producers and artists to create records for Rhodesia's African market.

In the summer of 1974, Teal held a nationwide talent competition at the Skyline Motel, and Hallelujah Chicken Run Band competed alongside top acts like Harare Mambos, Safirio Madzikatire, Eye Q, and OK Success, most of whom played rumba variants. "We were very confident," recalled Thomas, "because we had something different to offer. It was their first time to hear Afro-rock being sung in Shona, and people went wild. We won the contest—the first prize." Crispen Matema, the best producer Rivet had recruited, was in the audience that day and knew instantly he had found an act for Teal's new Afro Soul imprint. He drove to Mhangura to meet the band and arrange a recording session. A Teal driver brought the musicians to Mbare at night, and the next morning they entered an eight-track studio called Advertising Promotion Limited, on the eleventh floor of Robinson House in downtown Salisbury. The studio allowed for no overdubbing, and there were few retakes. By Thomas's count, the band tracked seven singles that day, including "Ngoma Yarira," which was credited to "Thomas and Joshua [Dube]," a shared acknowledgment that would reoccur rarely in Thomas's canon.

Thomas was frankly surprised when this mbira adaptation outsold the other songs. "We were playing a lot of variety," he recalled, "but the people picked 'Ngoma Yarira.'" Listening today, you can hear the essential Mapfumo sound coming together in this crisp two-minute recording. Drums are scarcely audible, but the lilting, hosho-like, 12/8 sizzle of the hi-hat is there, and the two electric guitars—played damped, with a little flesh rolled over the end of the strings on the picking side—are backed by a leaping bass line that drives the rhythm with the tight mesh of mbira music. Dube's guitar line has more punch and clarity than the soft, round-toned mbira it imitates, but the source is unmistakable. The song's vocal alternates between a strong, raspy melody sung by Robert Nekati, and soft, wavering chants sung by Thomas—between them echoing the high huro and the low mahon'era vocals of a bira ceremony. This was not the first time a modern band had adapted Shona traditional music, but it was the time that mattered. "This actually made me change *my* mind," recalled Thomas. "From there, I really knew what the people wanted."

Teal sales rep Emmanuel Vori was just eighteen and fresh out of school when "Ngoma Yarira" came in the door. Vori vividly recalled the moment when Shona speakers at Teal first heard it. The title translates "The Drums Are

Sounding," and the song's sparse lyrics include the line "Boys, let me get killed." Vori said that for the "guys in the library" the sounding of drums coupled with a willingness to die could mean only one thing: "It's war. We are going to war. That's what the song is all about." Thomas confirmed that "Ngoma Yarira" was "a war song," but, intriguingly, his cocomposer, Joshua Dube, looked past the political message, construing the song simply as a reworking of an mbira standard—nothing more.[5] Dube provided the basis for the song's music, while Thomas composed the lyrics; this likely explains their divergent memories of the song. The B-side of "Ngoma Yarira," "Murembo (Elephant's Tusk)," also builds on a traditional Shona melody and has political overtones. Amid oblique references to a "hornless cow, . . . the entanglement of snakes in the veldt," and "the buzz of bees," comes the refrain "Vana vapera hondo yauya" (All the children have perished. The war has come).[6] Thomas has called this pair of songs the first "chimurenga single," explicitly linking its intent to the liberation struggle, and, he insisted, "people knew exactly what it was talking about."

"The war had arrived," recalled Musa Zimunya. "'Murembo' says, 'Look out, here comes trouble. Here comes conflict. Because of human misbehavior, we're always in conflict like snakes.' It was banned off the air in Rhodesia. They picked it right out."[7] During the war years, even the white managers at Teal—far from attuned to Shona idioms—suspected that the success of Thomas's songs had something to do with the conflict. One recalled Thomas's "gift for producing music that had two meanings." Public perceptions were shaped by race, culture, language, class, and, in the Cold War setting, education. Some blacks went to school in South Africa and returned with a pro-Western outlook; others studied in the Soviet Union and came back as quasi communists. In this balkanized world, it was hard to predict how a song would be heard. "Thomas's single would come out," the Teal manager recalled, "and the Rhodesian Broadcast Corporation would play it a few times, and then somebody would point out to them the way people in the townships were interpreting the song. Then they would ban it."[8]

Thomas knew he was tapping into incendiary emotions. "We lived in darkness," he recalled. "We were always at each other's throats. Each time I saw a white man, I saw him like an enemy, and he thought I was his enemy." In a *Parade* interview from 1975, Thomas dwells on the *sound* of the music.[9] To acknowledge any political agenda would have spoiled his game. Nevertheless, well-attuned listeners now began looking for messages in Thomas's songs and, soon, in those of other singers. The moment when the tide of Rhodesia's popular music culture began its gradual shift from passive imitation to engagement came in 1974 with "Ngoma Yarira" and "Murembo."

"We threw all that other music in the dustbin," recalled Thomas, who now boasted to *Parade* that his band's new African sound would outlast "Pop, Soul and Motown." This idea surely intrigued the magazine's cosmopolitan editors, but Thomas was out on a limb. Foreign music would rule Rhodesian airwaves and dance floors for years to come. The most important thing "Ngoma Yarira" had changed so far was Thomas himself. Had he lacked the passion and determination to take his idea to the wilderness and master it, this single would have been as Dube remembered it—just another traditional adaptation, albeit a successful one.

Effectively "owned" by the Mhangura mine in early 1975, the Hallelujah Chicken Run Band was performing up to thirty hours a week and earning ten Rhodesian dollars per hour, plus proceeds from day jobs—better money than most of the Africans at the mine. This inequity raised eyebrows among other entertainers at the mine. "The compound manager didn't like the band," recalled Dube. "Even the footballers were jealous."

"We had a book," recalled Thomas, "and if we played for so many hours, we would write down the number, and be paid for those hours. But we ended up not being paid. So I went to this store in Harare where we used to buy things on account, and got a lot of LPs and things. I sold those things because I was trying to recover my money. That was a stupid thing to do, and I got myself into trouble. The police were after me."[10]

Thomas was arrested in Salisbury and brought to court to face charges for abusing his mine account. Released on bail, he slipped away to the home of a girlfriend, a singer in Kadoma, and then an uncle's house in Bulawayo. The police caught up with him there, sitting outside with the uncle's family, listening to mbira music. After a few days at Gray's Inn Jail, Thomas was transferred back to Salisbury and the courtroom, and, with the help of a lawyer, he made a good case. The magistrate did not jail him but insisted he repay the mine R$900. Teal picked up the bill. According to Emmanuel Vori, the record company was eager to do it, as the arrangement freed Thomas from his contract with the mine. Thomas could now tour the country and promote his own records. But first he needed a new band, and that would take some doing.

Thomas's biological father had died after a sudden illness in 1973. The old man's brother Jeremiah had not known where to find Thomas, and by the time word reached Mhangura, Tapfumaneyi Mupariwa had already been buried. Thomas had endured this shock alone, part of the confusion and numbness of his life at the mine. Now, two years later, he returned to his mother and stepfather and spent a few weeks sitting around practicing his saxophone. Once again, Musa Zimunya, a distant relative, found him there. The University

of Rhodesia, where Musa was studying, had become a hotbed of nationalist activity. Whites had taken to calling it "the little Kremlin on the hill,"[11] and there were frequent demonstrations and police actions on campus. "I was a radical youth at the university," recalled Musa, then preparing to leave the country and study in London. "Somebody had picked up the information that they were going to raid us at the university. They said if you have relatives in town, go and put up with them for the weekend. So I put up at Thomas Mapfumo's place."

Musa felt a creative kinship with Thomas. "I could understand what he was doing," he recalled, "because I was trying to do the same thing with my poetry—interpret the situation. I knew that he was sympathetic, but Thomas then, he didn't have many words. He would follow things, but I don't think his political views were that organized. There was nothing in his shyness to suggest that he was militant." Musa still perceived Thomas as haunted by "despair and aimlessness," more personal than political. Thomas had fathered his first child in 1970, out of wedlock. Now, five years later, Musa recalled "a woman who came to the house with a baby" and a troublesome "row" within the family. "I remember," he said, "in all the discussions, even over this woman, Thomas was quiet, and it was left with the mother." Musa said Thomas was absorbed in the challenge of making an artistic statement, something that would differentiate him. "I remember he had his saxophone in his hand one day, and I said to him, 'Why are you learning the saxophone?' He said, 'Because everybody is so good with guitar. Everybody is trying to play like Jimi Hendrix. Nobody plays the saxophone.'"

Thomas started hanging out at Jamaica Inn, twenty kilometers out of town on the Mutare Road, an out-of-the-way bar where married guys took their girlfriends. The white manager, Mr. Wilson, was a fan of Thomas's who had once driven to Mhangura to try to convince him to leave the mine. Now that Thomas was free, Wilson wanted him to form a band. Jamaica Inn had a good track record with music. In 1974, the South African "saxophone-jive" star and Gallo Records producer West Nkosi had come to Salisbury scouting for talent and had discovered Zexie Manatsa and the Green Arrows there.[12] Now Nkosi was paving Zexie's path to stardom. The first single they produced together, "Chipo Chiroorwa," featured wah-wah guitar and sold more than twenty-five thousand copies to become Rhodesia's first gold record. With the Green Arrows off and running, Thomas cobbled together a nameless group to take their place at Jamaica Inn. But nothing serious happened until the day Jonah Sithole walked through the door.

Sithole was a soft-spoken young man with a friendly face and dark, penetrating eyes. His quiet intensity was something you felt instantly, and he played guitar with the force of a loaded truck rolling down a mountain road. "I admired Jonah straightaway," recalled Thomas. "His playing just touched me, and I said to myself, 'This man is good, good enough to play chimurenga music.'" Of course, in 1975, "chimurenga music" was not a known genre, at least not outside those clandestine pungwes where guerrillas led villagers in militant sing-alongs until sunrise. All that was a world away from the nightclubs where Thomas and Sithole now began their episodic courtship.

Sithole was born in 1952 and grew up next to the Shabani asbestos mine, not far from Great Zimbabwe. He picked up guitar from his older brother and, after being "chucked away from school" in Bulawayo, made his way north looking for opportunities in music, first in Kwekwe, where he palled around with Joshua Dube, then in Salisbury, where he distinguished himself as a rumba guitarist in the Lipopo Jazz Band. When that band's Congolese players were deported in 1974, Sithole floundered again. He halfheartedly joined Pepsi Combo, a pop and soul band out of Mutare, and that's when he stopped by Jamaica Inn and met Thomas. "We met just by chance," recalled Sithole. "I had my group. I was looking for work. Thomas was there with his saxophone. He had no group and we had no kit. So we teamed up."

They formed a band called Black Spirits—a name Oliver Mtukudzi would later adopt—and just two months later, they were wooed away by a better offer in town. The wooing came from Solomon Tawengwa, who would one day be elected mayor of Harare. At the time, Tawengwa had just opened a new hotel and bar in Highfield called Mushandira Pamwe, "working together." Thomas recalled Tawengwa as an ally of local musicians, and Mushandira Pamwe would be a fixture of the city's music scene for decades. The place was a box of a building with a central glass column around which stairs wound up to a large hall with a raised stage at the far end. Floods of beer, sweat, and blood would grace its vinyl dance floor over the years, leaving it worn and grimy by the 1990s. But in 1975, the place seemed modern, even glamorous, "in a class of its own," recalled William Mapfumo, Thomas's half brother. It had modern toilets and an elevator to the hotel rooms. Musa Zimunya remembered it as "beautiful—singularly the most exquisite showplace in town." Musa was awed by the red curtains surrounding the performers and the luminous power of stage lights, all conjuring an enchanted world of late-night music jams, drinking, and dancing, a world he longed for but had little access to as a university student. The last rides to the campus in Mount Pleasant left Highfield just after sunset, and if you missed them, you were stranded until morning.

The Black Spirits played three months at Mushandira Pamwe. Sithole deeply

admired Thomas's Afro-rock style, which reminded him of Fela Kuti's Nigerian Afrobeat sound, "really African." With guidance from Thomas, Sithole now began playing what he called "chimurenga guitar," lifting lines from mbira pieces and other traditional sources. Thomas remembers the Black Spirits as a cover band that mixed tunes by the Blue Notes and the O'Jays with the odd Shona song. The band never recorded. Sithole recalled, "Some old friends of Thomas's muscled in, so there was no peace anymore. I had to pack my bags with some other guys, and go back to Mutare."

Mutare is Zimbabwe's fourth-largest city, with around 170,000 people and located one hundred miles east of Harare, nestled among the mountains of Manicaland in a scenic, bowl-like valley. Once a haven for gold and diamond prospectors, Mutare now drew both Thomas and Sithole away from the hubbub of the capital. They would spend much of the next two years there, out of the limelight and free to experiment. Two months after Sithole abandoned the Black Spirits, Thomas showed up in Mutare with a group of musicians that included his uncle Marshall Munhumumwe on drums and guitarist Leonard "Pickett" Chiyangwa, who had grown up playing traditional Shona music.[13]

Thomas and his musicians found an abundance of tranquillity at the Nyamanindi Hotel in an outlying Mutare hamlet called Basilbridge. Owner George Nyamanindi wanted music but had little to offer in return. "It was real country life," Thomas recalled with a laugh. "We used to go and wash our clothes by the river, and get firewood from the forest to do our cooking. Sometimes, we would just wait for a bus coming from the city to bring some people to play for." The band soon moved to a nightclub in Zimunya, closer to Mutare. It turned out the owner there, Mr. Murape, was already in negotiation with Sithole. Sithole recalled:

> That's how we met for the second time. But this old man was a crook as well, you know? These exploiters! Within two months nothing was doing, so I told the guys, "Hey, I think we have got a program now to go and invade Harare and get some jobs." Thomas said no. He didn't think the time was right, and I said, "Well, what are we going to live on? This old man is skinning us alive." So I told them, "Okay guys, I'm going back to Harare." And I came back and played with the Great Sounds from 1975 into early '76.

"Jonah was always a problem," said Thomas, recalling the guitarist's fickleness during this period. Neither Thomas nor Sithole could name all the musicians who came and went from Murape's nightclub. Among them was a drummer named Danny, best remembered for his eventual death by electrocution while attempting to steal copper wire from high-voltage power lines

in Highfield. A particularly strong lineup Thomas and Sithole assembled in their Mutare laboratory became the first to use the name Blacks Unlimited. They had wanted to call the band Blackmen Unlimited, but Murape insisted on the shorter take.

The money was abysmal, seven Rhodesian dollars a week for Thomas and less for the others. Thomas and Sithole both dismissed this chaotic era as a preamble to the start of their real career together a year later. Nevertheless, the original formation of Blacks Unlimited did record four great singles.[14] These energetic, freewheeling numbers are mostly in minor keys and feature bluesy bent notes in Thomas's vocal. Thomas's dalliances in Afro-rock, American pop and soul, rumba, and Shona music all color the sound. On "Imhere," his voice breaks like Wilson Pickett's, just before the song shifts to a racing Shona beat. The best remembered of these songs is "Yarira ne Hosho (Play the Hosho),"[15] a take on the traditional song "Baya Wabaya," revved up with what Musa Zimunya termed a "jerky rock beat." "Yarira ne Hosho" outsold anything Thomas had recorded. But the real action went down at the band's live shows in Mutare.

Geoffrey Nyarota—destined to become one of Zimbabwe's best political journalists and editors—was a young teacher at Regina Shelley Mission School at the time. He lived in Nyazura, near the Mozambique border, and made weekend trips to Mutare to "spend Saturday evening listening to Thomas Mapfumo and his band." Nyarota had first heard Thomas sing at an aunt's wedding reception in Mbare in 1964. Just thirteen at the time, Nyarota had helped the Springfields set up, feeding an extension cord through the window of his aunt's "matchbox house" and plugging it into a light socket to power the amplifiers. The band had played hits of the day, with a young woman singing Millie Small's "My Boy Lollipop" and a gangly kid belting out the Beatles' "I Feel Fine." Twelve years later, that kid had acquired charisma. "I could see that Thomas was feeling successful," recalled Nyarota, "as if he was conscious that he was a big man. And he had a following. Guys used to drive all the way from Harare just to listen to him." Nyarota also noted Sithole's unusual guitar style. "You listened to that guitar," he said, "and what you heard was the sound of the mbira. This was a new genre of music, different from anything we had listened to."

Nyarota had been a devotee of the Lorenzo Marques Top 20 out of Mozambique (LM Radio), an international hit parade of Rolling Stones, Jethro Tull, Thin Lizzy, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, and Jimi Hendrix.[16] "When I was in primary school," recalled Nyarota, "if there was a program of mbira music on the radio, I would switch it off. That was music for *old* people." Nyarota was vaguely aware of the traditional music revival going on in Mbare in the 1960s,

but his ear was tuned to rock, soul, rumba, and *mbaqanga* music from South Africa. "These were the popular music styles of the day," he insisted. "Mbira was not. So for Thomas to go off on this tangent was very brave."

The Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), which was ZANU's military wing, had begun to move freely across the border to and from the camps in Mozambique. That country had undergone a sea change in 1974 when Portugal—worn down by fighting insurgencies in three African countries, under strong international pressure, and unsettled by a military coup back home—had abruptly granted independence and left. Samora Machel, Mozambique's new president, had closed the official border with Rhodesia and declared open support for ZANLA. White Rhodesians felt the sting of being denied access to Beira's beaches, wine, and prawns, but that was the least of it.[17] Mozambique was becoming the deadliest front in a deepening armed conflict.

"Up to 1976," recalled Nyarota, "the war was something that we heard about from a distance. It was in the northeastern districts of the country, Mutoko and Mount Darwin. But after '76, it moved to include Manicaland. Our school was seven kilometers from the border with Mozambique, and this was the route for loads of youngsters crossing the border from the interior, from as far away as Salisbury. Our school became a very popular port of call for ZANLA."

In Salisbury, William Mapfumo recalled people disappearing from the street, going to war. "You could see somebody you knew very well," he said, "and then you don't see him anymore. He's not dead. That's when we knew, 'Ah, he went to Mozambique. He made it.'" On the way, many making this journey stopped by the club in Zimunya and took succor in the sound of Thomas crying out with the wail of a bira ceremony, and Sithole summoning mbira melodies from his guitar.

Manicaland was on its way to becoming a "liberated zone," and for the first time, Geoffrey Nyarota believed victory was possible. The songs he heard in Mutare fed this feeling. Strangely, this literary man did not perceive political statements in Thomas's lyrics. For him, the *music* was the message. It was "preparing us for a future where our own identity would be paramount," recalled Nyarota. "Mapfumo was spearheading this process, bringing the village to the nightclub, and making mbira music, which had always been there in the back of our minds, a popular genre. He made *me* dance to this music, which I had never done."

Late in 1976, Nyarota was driving out of Nyazura when he encountered a group of ZANLA guerrillas heading into town. On his return, he heard shots and explosions. The downtown police station was under attack. On his twenty-sixth birthday, Nyarota was arrested. The police resented this young mission

schoolteacher with his fancy car and assumed he must have had a role in the police station assault. Nyarota was held for twenty-one days, beaten, and tortured, but he never revealed that he had in fact seen the guerrillas coming, a confession that would likely have cost him his life. Eight months later, ZANLA held a pungwe in the mission school's dining hall. Rhodesian soldiers heard the singing and attacked, leaving two ZANLA men and a number of children dead. The school was closed the next day, and Nyarota's teaching career ended. He returned to Salisbury to begin a new life as a trainee journalist, becoming the first black reporter to write for the *Rhodesia Herald*.

The Blacks Unlimited had been renting equipment from a Salisbury businessman whose wartime alias, or "chimurenga name," was, to Thomas's great amusement, James Bond. When Thomas hit town, he returned the gear, and among the young musicians he found rehearsing at Bond's place was Oliver Mtukudzi, a young singer with a gospel background and a forceful, husky voice. "Oliver Mtukudzi was *discovered* by James Bond," Thomas liked to say. Oliver was trying to break into the pop scene, working on a song in English that Thomas recalled as "Red for Stop, Green for Go." Thomas said, "After I listened to this guy, I said to him, 'Ah, man, you have got a beautiful voice, but the music you are trying to pursue is not your kind of music.' I was trying to sort of convince him. I had a Shona tune that I used to sing myself called 'Rova Ngoma Mutarava [Beat the Drum].' So I gave him the tune, and he recorded it. It did very well on the local scene."[18] Oliver gratefully confirmed that it was Thomas who had encouraged him to sing "in our own mother tongue." For a few months after that initial meeting, the two singers toured the country together backed by a group called Wagon Wheels. Thomas was now finished with singing covers, and he used the tour to present his own growing repertoire of songs in Shona. Oliver recalled, "Each time I would hear him doing those songs, I would say, 'This is us. This is what we are supposed to be.'"[19]

Guitarist Leonard "Pickett" Chiyangwa had joined a group called the Acid Band, playing at Machipisa—formerly Mutanga—Nightclub. Thomas used to drop in on them, and he observed the Acid Band gradually shifting from rumba to a more indigenous sound. Pickett had listened to itinerant street guitarists rendering traditional folk songs, including mbira songs, on guitar. Now he used that in a band setting. The Acid Band's leader and bass man, Charles Makokowa, had a natural feel for the distinctive, after-the-beat feel of mbira bass lines, and the second guitarist, James Chimombe, a future star in his own right, was working with Pickett to arrange interlocking guitar parts. These musicians were playing "the real thing" as Thomas heard it, and he proposed to Charles that they rehearse and record a few of his songs.

Thomas had a night gig with the Pied Pipers at Mushandira Pamwe, but he spent his afternoons with the Acid Band, the group that would record his next single for Crispen Matema's Afro Soul label. Thomas had written a song called "Pamuromo Chete (It's Only Talk)," a response to Ian Smith's signature declaration: "I don't believe in majority rule ever in Rhodesia . . . not in 1,000 years." Geoffrey Nyarota remembered this song well from Mutare, though, again, he said that if Thomas was talking back to Smith, "he never explained that to us." In those days Thomas rarely "explained" his songs to anyone, but even without the context, the lyrics to "Pamuromo Chete" are provocative. They evoke the plight of refugees who have run away from the war and been forced to dwell amid filth in urban marketplaces. The song "sold like hotcakes," said Thomas. It became his first gold record, topping the local charts and remaining in play there for more than ten weeks. After "Pamuromo Chete," the Acid Band was voted Best Band of 1977.[20]

Thomas was now the Acid Band's official lead singer, and they started touring the country and drawing big crowds. "The records had done the job," Thomas recalled. "We were now earning at least 1000 Rhodesian pounds per performance."[21]

Teal had established an efficient recording and distribution operation that would remain in business—later as Gramma Records—through war, independence, drought, scandal, economic collapse, and foreign competition. Sadly, the original company had no concept of archiving and record keeping, so the master tapes for much of its pre-independence music have been lost. Gramma could not provide definitive release dates for any singles prior to 1979, but between 1977 and about May 1978, Thomas Mapfumo and the Acid Band released ten or twelve singles and an album called *Hokoyo* (Watch Out). These recordings established Thomas as a mainstay of black culture in Rhodesia.

After "Pamuromo Chete" came "Pfumvu Pa Ruzevha (Hardship in the Reserves)," a "very hard song," in Thomas's estimate.[22] Its lyrics lay out a compendium of suffering experienced by rural people during the war:

They have a hard life in the rural areas
That's why I am now a pauper . . .

Did you know that granny is dead?
Did you know that mummy is dead?
Did you know that your brother is dead?
Did you know that there are no rains?
Did you know that our plot of land was taken? . . .

Have you seen the hardships in the rural areas?
The hardships at home?

"Pfumvu Pa Ruzevha" does not point fingers, although the line about land being "taken" had to worry attentive authorities. Some of Thomas's songs had been banned, though for the most part he could still fly under the censorship radar. Rhodesian culture minders may even have thought that the hardships he was enumerating could be blamed on the guerrillas. Thomas was sensitizing a distracted urban public to the dark events unfolding in the countryside, and once again, music counted as much as words. With the mournful lyricism of mbira, channeled through simple guitar work—strummed chords and Pickett's prickly lead melody—"Pfumvu Pa Ruzevha" lured urban people into a rural frame of mind, bringing them face-to-face with the anguish of relatives on the land.

Guerrilla fighters, some of whom now found themselves relying on spirit mediums for their very lives, were also vulnerable to the power of a song like "Pfumvu Pa Ruzevha." Even mbira musicians, who had never paid much heed to popular singers, now responded to this new alloy of spiritual and social reality. One mbira musician, Chris Mhlanga, said Thomas was "seriously arousing the spirit" with such songs, "much more than he thought he was doing," and another, Cosmas Magaya, said that hearing Thomas's songs was enough to inspire a person to "go and join the liberation struggle."

Thomas kept changing his public image. At the Skyline band contest in 1974 he had fronted the Hallelujah Chicken Run Band gripping a wooden staff, a loincloth around his waist and an elaborate metal necklace drooped over his bare chest. Geoffrey Nyarota recalled him sporting a "Carnaby Street look" a year later in Mutare—bell-bottom trousers, a colorful shirt, and platform shoes. But with the Acid Band, Thomas turned away from London chic and adopted the air of a spirit medium in a long black robe and wielding a ceremonial ax. This was effective artifice. Stella Chiweshe, like Mhlanga, said she believed Thomas had tapped into powers he himself did not understand. Her effort to assimilate Thomas within her own formulation of mbira spirituality is provocative, perhaps questionable, but fascinating:

I liked when he was wearing his robe. And his stick. I liked it very much. During those years when he was first singing, his voice was like food for the soul. When he was singing, his song was coming out at the same time as that action he was singing about, and then when it happens, the song is there. What people should know about Thomas Mapfumo is that he *is*

a spirit medium. You know, people who are mediums are not treated like any other people, because they are not straightforward themselves. When it comes to being with them, you don't always know who you are talking to.

Acid Band singles kept coming. There was "Tozvireva Kupiko (Where Shall We Tell Our Story?)," a lament about the way the world was turning a "deaf ear" to the plight of "our people." "Chiiko Chinotinetsa (What Is It That Troubles Us?)" called for unity in the face of adversity, and the flip side, "Chaive Chinyakare (It Was the Tradition)," mourned the decline of indigenous culture. "Ours was a sad story," recalled Thomas. "This country is a holy place, but our culture was stolen away from us. We were being taught how to live like an Englishman, talk like an Englishman, read like an Englishman." Another popular Acid Band single, "Chiruzevha Chapera (Rural Life Is Gone)," focused on the way the war itself was threatening traditional life on the land. Thomas believed the deadly droughts of 1976 and 1977 may have been caused by disruptions in spiritual life. "In this land there were no rains," said Thomas. "Maybe that was because so much blood was being shed. People were kept in keeps [pens], guarded like animals. People were running away from home, running away from the soldiers, coming into towns, so there was no more life in the communal lands."

Thomas projected a vivid personality through his performances. Mischievousness, humor, and moral outrage all come through as he croons in melodiously rich baritone on "Pamuromo Chete" and finesses the nuances of mbira vocal techniques on "Pfumvu Pa Ruzevha." Thomas worked at mbira singing, maneuvering to get his hands on the few available recordings, so he could study them. Hakurotwi Mude—Ephat Mujuru's spirit medium uncle—recalled:

> One day, Mapfumo was playing at this Chikwana shopping center in Chitungwiza. Thomas came to me, and I talked to him. I had an LP record and I left it with him to keep for me. When I came back, Thomas told me that it had been stolen. I was very disappointed because I think he must have kept it. I think he used my recording to start his imitation of my singing. At that time, he wasn't singing the way I sing. But from that time on, I could see that he had changed, and he was singing just like me.

Thomas did not recall this incident, but he acknowledged Mude's influence on his singing style. "Pfumo Rinobva Mudziva (The Spear That Originates in the River Pool)," with its mysterious warnings about river spirits, has Thomas crying out until his voice breaks, then settling into a hum that lingers in the back of his throat—pure huro and mahon'era, with the imprint of Mude's robust take on these vocal styles. Sometimes Thomas would reinterpret known mbira songs with new lyrics, as he had with "Ngoma Yarira," and as mbira composers themselves have always done. The most powerful Acid Band singles marshal these techniques to animate war scenarios. "Ndoziva Ripizano (Which Way Should I Choose?)" is a version of the mbira song "Bukatiende (Wake Up, Let's Go)," originally a rallying cry for hunters. Shifting the context from hunters to hunted, Thomas portrays the confusion of villagers preyed upon by guerrillas and soldiers, each demanding loyalty and punishing betrayal. Rural people caught between ZANLA, Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), Selous Scouts (named for the intrepid explorer Frederick Selous), Rhodesian army regulars, and other contingents surely understood the agonizing portent of Thomas's question.

The Rhodesians had trained the mostly black Selous Scouts to undermine the liberation fighters using devious maneuvers.[23] Scouts learned to sing chimurenga songs; they shucked uniforms off the corpses of dead guerrillas and infiltrated villages; they earned the trust of guerrillas and their young helpers, the *mujibas*; they gave away radios and record players equipped with homing devices. Scouts would brutally flog a presumed "sellout," then leave him behind as a spy. They could "flip" a captured guerrilla within twenty-four hours and use him to gain access to secret plans and places. When these methods failed, they could also kidnap, torture, and kill.[24]

The *Herald* reported government actions using sterile statistics but dwelled morbidly on "terrorist" violence and black-on-black barbarity. A *Herald* headline from 1975 reads "Terror Gang Enforce Cannibalism in Village: Wife Made to Eat Flesh of Her Husband." The front-page spread includes a grotesque photograph of the husband in a hospital bed, his face and hands bandaged.[25] Reports like this made news around the world, though it was impossible to know the truth behind them.

Any action—even singing—could be spun by either side. Thomas Turino writes, "One [war veteran] said that because Mapfumo's lyrics were ambiguous, they could be used by either side, and that he should have been more explicit if he didn't wish to be misused."[26] More typical, though, is the account of novelist Alexander Kanengoni, who had left home to join the comrades in Mozambique. Kanengoni recalled sitting around a table at the guerrilla camp and hearing Jonah Sithole's single "Sabhuku" (1977) for the first time: "There was silence, absolute silence as we listened to that song. It was magical. There was the electric guitar now playing the mbira. And the story is about the situation in the rural areas where the war was raging. There was no doubt in

my mind, and I suppose in everyone's mind, that a new direction had been set as far as our music was concerned."

"Sabhuku" played for Kanengoni as a dramatization of village life during the war. The *sabhuku* is the village headman, and in the song, he interrupts a beer party, warning people to finish up their drinks and get moving. Sithole explained his song as a cautionary tale about witchcraft, but for Kanengoni and his cohorts, witchery became a metaphor for government collusion, and the beer party was being interrupted by an armed attack. Thomas's songs, often more direct than "Sabhuku," also left room for interpretation, but Kanengoni said his comrades found them profoundly "meaningful," especially in the way they reinforced the "spiritual dimension of the war." It made all the difference that these artists couched their words in mbira melodies. "Thomas could have put these same words in rumba," Musa Zimunya observed, "and they wouldn't have mattered one bit."

Late in 1977, a squad of guerrillas invited Thomas and representatives of the Acid Band to visit their camp near Mount Wedza, a place where spirit mediums gathered, and guerrillas hid.[27] Thomas recalled:

> We had to be careful in the way we were going to meet these people. We were always being watched. We parked our car at one of the houses in the village; then we walked by foot, right into the forest. It was on a hill where we actually found these people waiting for us. They welcomed us, the top brass of that group. There was one tall guy who was wearing a black cowboy hat and everything black—he called himself Jimi Hendrix. There were others who were like watchdogs, posted out there. They were changing position each time, watching both sides. Well, we started talking about music and the war. After a while, some women came with food from the village—sadza, meat, crates of beer. [The guerrillas] told us about how they crossed over from Mozambique, and how they were now all over Rhodesia. They were confident that they were winning, and they thanked us for supporting them through our music. They actually wanted a guitar, and we had that guitar with us, so we gave them a lot of records and the guitar. We shook hands with them. Nobody ever knew that we met those people.

These guerrillas advised the band not to travel with vehicle convoys as they moved about the country, because these convoys would now be targets. The band had always assumed there was safety in numbers, so this advice was a tangible benefit from what was probably Thomas's riskiest action of the war. He and his party would have faced imprisonment, torture, even death had they been caught making contact with guerrillas. Finding treason in song

lyrics was, by contrast, a subtle matter, complicated by language, culture, and deliberate obfuscation by African interpreters. Emmanuel Vori said the Teal librarians understood the songs right away, but being "our guys," they tried to shield Thomas from scrutiny, sitting on songs as long as possible before passing them on to managers who would give them to the censor board. "Unfortunately," said Vori, "the librarians were at the bottom end of the ladder. They could not get the music on the radio. [Eventually], everything done by Thomas was censored."

The Acid Band did record straightforward traditional songs like "Shumba (The Lion)" and even the odd love song like "Tombi Wa Chena (Lady, You Are Looking Smart)." But mostly, Acid Band songs tantalize with suggestion and innuendo—"Zeve Zeve (A Whisper)," with its line "Don't speak out loud," also "Usatambe Nenyoka (Don't Play with a Snake)," "Tonga Nyaya Dzino Netsa (To Judge Troubling Issues)," "Mwana Asina Baba (Fatherless Child)," and "Teererai Mitemo (Listen to the Laws)," a taunt that the government was violating its own laws.[28] Thomas's fans now identified him with the struggle and gave him a title to prove it—Tafirenyika, meaning "we die for our country."

The song that unleashed the flood was "Tumirai Vana Kuhondo (Send the Children to War)." With rousing, beer-hall swagger, this traditional grinding song had become a call to arms. Geoffrey Nyarota—who had thus far missed the politics in Thomas's lyrics—finally understood. "It was explicit," said Nyarota. "You could call it incitement." The true picture is actually less clear. This song tells parents to send their children to war, but it does not specify a side. Even this late, some blacks still joined the Rhodesian army. Could Thomas be singing for *them*? That was the defense Tony Rivet used when Teal received yet another visit from government censors. "Thomas's music!" Rivet recalled: "Whew! If you knew what the words were like before—we had to change some of the words . . . so the songs would be acceptable to the government. I remember they came along to me one time and said, the *terrs* are getting all the tribes-people to sing the *gook* songs. The one they really didn't like was 'Tumirai Vana Kuhondo.' I told them it was a bloody RAR [Rhodesian Army Rifles] marching song, an old military marching song."[29]

Thomas denied ever changing his lyrics for anyone, but he backed Rivet up on the source of "Tumirai Vana Kuhondo." He said, "Government soldiers used to sing this song whilst marching. We were sort of mocking them, while encouraging our boys to come and have a good fighting year."[30] Twenty-seven years later, Nyarota still believed "Tumirai Vana Kuhondo" was "Thomas's composition." In reality, the original Rhodesian lyrics remained; all the Acid Band had changed was the musical accompaniment and the singer.

Thomas's chimurenga singles were being produced in a milieu where the business of music seemed to trump the passions of war. One might speculate that Rivet and his white colleagues in some way sympathized with the sentiments behind the music. After all, they'd been conscripted into the Rhodesian army, serving regular six-week tours of duty. Rivet used to show up at Acid Band recording sessions in his Rhodesian army uniform. However they felt inside, Teal's white managers took advantage of this chance to mingle with the enemy on neutral ground though, culturally, they were worlds apart. While Thomas and his musicians retired to township hovels and listened to mbira songs and Bob Marley, these folks returned to English-style homes where classical music and white pop played on stereos built into cabinets and side tables. Rhodesian military men delighted at Warren Zevon's mercenary burlesque set in the deep, dark Congo, "Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner":

His comrades fought beside him—Van Owen and the rest
But of all the Thompson gunners Roland was the best
So the CIA decided they wanted Roland dead
That son-of-a-bitch Van Owen blew off Roland's head
Roland the headless Thompson gunner

On weekends Rivet and his mates would gather around the *braai* (barbecue), drink heavily, and sing patriotic songs, especially "Rhodesians Never Die," a durable anthem composed and recorded in 1973 by Clem Tholet, Ian Smith's son-in-law:

We're all Rhodesians
And we'll fight through thick and thin
We'll keep our land a free land,
Stop the enemy coming in,
We'll keep them north of the Zambezi
Till that river's running dry,
And this mighty land will prosper
For Rhodesians never die.

Thomas now referred openly to his songs as "chimurenga music." "You had to give it a word," recalled a Teal manager, "and that was the local term for it. We didn't call it that. I mean there is no way we would have recorded something that was *obviously* chimurenga, like 'Let's go out and kill 20 white farmers.'" As long as the songs kept to a modest level of subterfuge, Rivet and his colleagues simply overlooked their "chimurenga impact."

During 1977 and 1978, government officials flat out demanded that Teal

censor its recordings and stop releasing chimurenga songs. "That's not our job," Teal managers protested. "You can ban the record with the greatest of pleasure, but we have to produce it in order for you to ban it. We can't do it any other way." Teal set up an on-site rehearsal room so musicians would not waste time in the studio. The company provided petty cash to each bandleader on the morning of a session, so players would not show up hungry. "I know it sounds pretty crackpot," the manager recalled, "but that's the way it worked. 'Here's the practice room. Here's your food. Now get on with it.'"

When records were banned, Teal arranged live concerts in the townships, providing instruments, PA systems, and security. Sometimes money went missing and equipment was damaged or stolen. Thomas sold enough records to be worth the trouble but, this manager recalled, "he was extraordinarily difficult to deal with. If he wanted the studio, we would book it for him, and we had to book it at four o'clock in the afternoon. There was no way he could sing if it was daylight. And we would have to make sure that there was plenty of *dagga*, or marijuana, and a couple of bottles of brandy for the band as well."

When records were ready for market, Teal dispatched mobile disco trucks manned by DJs spinning vinyl and sales reps moving product. These flash parties rolled through the townships spreading the word and doing business. "And of course," recalled Emmanuel Vori, "Thomas was always on the road performing live. It just spread like wildfire. The people knew what they wanted, and once the guys in the record bars ordered the records, they never stopped playing them."

Sometimes there was tension at live shows. On the morning after an Acid Band concert in Chiredzi, Thomas was arrested by black policemen. He was hauled into the station in town and charged with singing incitement. "I saw a lot of these former guerrillas," he recalled, "some with limbs missing, no legs, no hands. These people were brought to me as an example. If I insist on playing this music, I was going to end up like them."

Hokoyo is the only full album of songs Thomas recorded before independence, and one of the first by any local artist. The session once again went down in Crispen Matema's Robinson House studio. Twenty-seven-year-old Hilton Mambo, then Rhodesia's first black recording engineer, assisted. Mambo recalled:

Tommy was right there, man. He was not a miracle. No. He was in the right place at the right time—but he had the vision. He knew exactly what he was doing. He used to structure his lyrics so that even the black policemen wouldn't quite know what the hell he was talking about. "Hokoyo" was

like, "Watch out! We're coming. Hey. Be careful, man. We're getting there." That kind of thing. If you're a Shona-speaking person, you know what the brother is saying. But Tommy is like that. He has always been very socially conscious, aware of what's happening. Tommy grew up in the ghetto and he knows what we all went through—when a guy can't afford to buy a loaf of bread. He can go back and talk about the way we used to live in the olden days before the white man came, the stuff we were told by our grandmothers and grandfathers. It's a gift.

The lyrics to the song "Hokoyo" bristle with street punk bravado: "Look at the knife / I have the knife / and I have the ax / So watch out / Don't underestimate me." Riding over a sunny saxophone riff, Thomas's vocal comes across more playful than threatening, part of the song's sonic fig leaf. *Hokoyo* has the arc of a unified creation, with interconnecting themes of warning and prayer, and thoughtful variation among musical styles—mbira, Afro-rock, *jiti*, and strains of jazz and township pop emanating from South Africa. *Hokoyo* set a high creative bar for Thomas's would-be rivals.

Now in demand everywhere, the Acid Band needed to pull together an organization capable of arranging tours and operating as a business. Charles was the band's ostensible leader, and Crispen Matema its manager, but as the star singer and composer, Thomas wielded new influence, and now, for the first time, he turned to his family for help, recruiting his brother Lancelot to be the band treasurer. Lancelot worked in a leather shop in Mbare, making belts, handbags, and jackets. When "Brother Thomas" came to him saying the band was heading to Bulawayo and needed someone to collect money at the door, Lancelot recalled resisting. Thomas said, "No, man, that's peanuts you are getting. There is no money here. We should go together to Bulawayo."

In Bulawayo, Thomas met his future wife, Vena Sibanda Dangarembwa.[31] Vena was the daughter of a pharmacist, Dennis Dangarembwa and his wife, Molly. According to Vena, who was born in 1962, "My name was supposed to be Verna, but the people at the district office made a mistake, and they put Vena." Her parents, four sisters, and a brother—and everyone else since—have honored this bureaucratic typo.

Thomas remembered meeting Vena for the first time at the Happy Valley Hotel when he and Charles spotted two girls obviously in love with the music. They arranged to be introduced after the show. "Charlie had a Peugeot 404," recalled Thomas, "and these girls asked us to take them back home to Mzilikazi. Well, the two of us spoke, and I actually promised her that I was going to write her some letters when I got back to Salisbury. We communicated a lot and became very good friends." As wholesome as this sounds, Thomas was already married at the time to a woman named Agnes Kurwakumire. The two never had children, and soon after Thomas met Vena, he divorced Agnes.

"I loved Thomas's music," recalled Vena, although her memory of that first encounter differed slightly from his:

> I was very young then, doing my Form 3 [about age seventeen], and my brother invited me to go and see [Thomas] at the McDonald Hall in Mzilikazi. That's where he saw me, and he asked this other woman to come and talk to me. He wanted to see me, but I respected my brother so much that I didn't see him. I don't know how he managed to search for my parents' house, but as I was coming from school one day, my sister-in-law was outside and Thomas's car was parked by our gate. She was saying, "Hurry up, hurry up. Come and see Thomas!" because everyone else at home loved him. So I came rushing. I just spoke to him for a few minutes. Then we had a date. He said, "Come and see me tomorrow." We met and had a drink, then that's when I started knowing him.

During these years, Thomas and his musicians enjoyed a ritual of late-night drinking at Mushandira Pamwe. Everyone would bring his beer, Bols, gin, whiskey, or Chateau brandy and sit around a table, imbibing the night's earnings. Thomas favored "half brandy and milk," and by his own account, he could handle a lot of it. But one night, he recalled, "I got up from that table, I left Mushandira Pamwe, I sat in my car, and I just thought: What kind of a life are you trying to live?"

Thomas's friends didn't believe him the next day when he told them he was through with alcohol, but he never returned to that table. In the *Hokoyo* sessions that year, he recorded a version of the traditional song "Hwa Hwa (Beer)," based on a record by the mbira group Yekwa Chiboora. This song would remain a pillar in Thomas's repertoire, evolving through a series of arrangements. Decades later, he would introduce it from the stage, saying, "I have stopped drinking beer because one day when I was drunk, I beat up my mother-in-law." That line is straight out of the Yekwa Chiboora recording, though fans could easily mistake it for autobiography. A twinkle in his eye, Thomas generally left them to wonder. As to the coincidence of his alcohol epiphany and the first recording of "Hwa Hwa," Thomas was clear: "no connection." The true catalyst for his sobriety was perhaps his budding romance with Vena. "I remember telling him," Vena recalled, "that if he continued that kind of drinking, then I don't think we will get together."

By the time the Acid Band released *Hokoyo*, Jonah Sithole had returned

from Mutare with his own group, the Storm. Both bands were now successful enough to tour the country, and after a chance encounter with Sithole, Thomas got to thinking. He was impatient with lead guitarist Pickett, who was "not improving." Thomas set his sights on Sithole, who "never went wrong with his notes" and "was determined to play good music." Thomas proposed that they combine the best musicians from the two bands and form "a much stronger group." Sithole replied, "Well, we are used to working together. We can't seem to part. So we might as well make the best of it. I agreed, and we merged as the Blacks Unlimited. Ah, it was solid now."[32]

The decision to revert to the name Thomas and Sithole had used in Mutare signaled a reset for both musicians and, on the surface, a pact between equals. At first, Sithole handled the band's money and was responsible for paying musicians. The Acid Band's Charles Makokowa maintained his role as chief in the new band. "We all recognized him as the bandleader," said Thomas. But whatever title or responsibilities any musician held, the Blacks Unlimited would, in reality, be Thomas's band, the first and only band he would ever lead. Twenty years later nearly every member of that 1978 lineup would be dead. That band's recorded work would all be credited to "Thomas Mapfumo and Blacks Unlimited." From here on, said Thomas, "my name was written in the book of history." A rough road lay ahead, but Thomas's drifting days were over.

5 / Bishop and Pawn

> I heard that music from the sky . . . from a plane . . . Shona music through those horn speakers. They were playing Thomas Mapfumo's music, to sort of attract people. And then one of the commentators who was in the plane shouted out, "If you keep on fighting, you are fighting for nothing."
> LEONARD SIMBARASHE, POLITICAL DETAINEE, CHIKURUBI PRISON

> Our enemy was not the white man, but an oppressor and exploiter, whether he was black or white. . . . There were quite a number of blacks . . . sell-outs . . . who were killed by the people.
> TOM HAMA, ZANLA POLITICAL COMMISSIONER

The Blacks Unlimited picked up where the Acid Band left off, moving feet from the dance floor to the battlefield. By 1976, Teal's 45 rpm records were finding their way into the hands of guerrillas and shortwave radio broadcasters in Zambia and Mozambique, as well as expatriates in Tanzania and England. Thomas was now a player in the struggle, and his success was earning him new friends and enemies. He would later recall the war's denouement and the nationalists' victory lap as the most difficult period in his career, a time when his reputation was nearly destroyed. Ironically, Thomas's brush with disgrace was brought on by a man he had long admired, the country's first elected black leader, Methodist bishop Abel Tendekai Muzorewa.

Muzorewa was born in 1925 in Mutare, the eldest of nine children in a peasant family. His paternal ancestors, the Makonde clan, had fought the