

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 Mhembe 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.