



LION SONGS

Thomas
Mapfumo
and the
Music
That Made
Zimbabwe

BANNING EYRE

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Frontispiece: Thomas Mapfumo performing in the United Kingdom in

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Cover: Thomas Mapfumo, New York City, 2012. Photo by Banning Eyre.

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TO SEAN,
who started me
on this path
and stuck with me
the whole way

A lot of historians write about this country completely forgetting a vital dimension of the African spirit. And that is music. That is song. When people are under stress—colonial stress, as laborers on the farms, in the mines, in the domestic industry, or as peasants suffering the brunt of oppression and forced resettlement—at every turn, Africans had recourse to one artistic medium. That is music. That is song. They sought to express their anxieties, their joys, their fears and hopes, their satire and mockery of the system. Even as they were going into war, they played music. And it is a glaring gap in the history of this country that no one has sought to establish the role of music in the lives of the common people.

MUSA ZIMUNYA

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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

1 / England Is the Chameleon, and I the Fly

I may die, but my bones will rise again.

MBUYA NEHANDA AT HER EXECUTION IN 1897

We are the bones.

THOMAS MAPFUMO IN 1988

The Zimbabwe plateau is a territory apart, a stone house aloof from its neighbors. Two big rivers surround it, the slow, silty Limpopo in the south, and the churning Zambezi up north, which plunges over the ledges of Victoria Falls and thunders into a series of bone-crushing rapids before flowing east into Mozambique. Along the plateau's eastern edge, the Chimanimani Mountains throw up a rugged wall one hundred miles short of the Indian Ocean. For centuries, this geography protected the Shona clans in their peaceful pastoral. While tsetse flies savaged herds in surrounding lowlands, the Shona thrived amid wind, sun, fertile grasslands, and robust livestock. Even in the mid-nineteenth century, when Ndebele interlopers surged up from the south, followed soon by the Rhodesians, and the plateau became a place of conflict and killing, Shona agrarians still herded and harvested, raising their children under the watchful gaze of their ancestors. The elders who saw Thomas Mapfumo through his boyhood in the Marandellas Tribal Trust Lands were among these—people of the past, both protected and constrained by their spirits.

Janet Chinhamo delivered her first child on July 2, 1945. The boy's father, Tapfumaneyi Mupariwa, was a Korekore Shona man from Guruve in the remote rugged valleys of Dande. An itinerant musician and "one-man band," Tapfumaneyi made a scant living driving tractors at farms in Mashonaland. He

was too poor to pay Janet's *lobola* (bride-price), so no marriage could occur. "When I was pregnant," recalled Janet, "Thomas's father paid a little lobola, but not enough. And then he went for good." At age seventeen, Thomas would seek out and befriend his real father, and come to think of himself too as a "Korekore man." Thomas would always revere his mother's people who raised him in Marandellas (now Marondera), but the Shona pray to the spirits of the paternal clan, so Thomas's true "rural area" would always lie in Dande. The elasticity of African life rendered these facts all but invisible to most people Thomas encountered in his youth. But long after he achieved stardom, fans would still whisper about his "illegitimate" birth, revealing in hushed tones a strand of mystery concealed within the fabric of his celebrity.

In the beginning, though, things are simpler. The first light ignites towers of boulders, huge faun-colored Easter eggs as much part of the azure sky as the apple green earth. It brightens dewdrops on curved blades of grass, racing to vaporize the water before the rough tongues of groggy cattle arrive. The herd boy's switch keeps everything in motion, the rising breeze, the hoof-fall of cows, the fleeting surreality of dawn's panorama. The boy sings a song he learned from his *ambuya* (grandmother), something about the great ancestor spirit Chaminuka, something about glory. There are words he can't understand—ancient phrases whose meanings have been lost—but he sings them anyway. A smoke flag flies above a thatched mud-and-pole roundhouse. Ambuya is cooking *sadza* (stiff cornmeal porridge). He claps his cupped hands together to greet her. The spirits are not seen, but they notice, and now he can reach out to ambuya and know she will smile and feed him, and the real work of the day will begin.

Janet herself grew up on a farm. It was owned by a white man she remembered only as "Mr. Brown." She first met Tapfumaneyi through his sister, a domestic worker at a white household in the Avondale district of Salisbury. In the 1940s, rural people were drawn to the cities by work, and African townships bloomed at the edges of white Salisbury (now Harare) and Bulawayo. Janet and Tapfumaneyi came together in the shuffle between farm and city. When she discovered she was pregnant, she went to see him in Seke, and he told her he could never satisfy the financial demands of her family. Janet returned alone to her post at Imbwa Farm in Kandege and gave birth there. She brought the baby to her parents, Hamundidi and Kufera Munhumumwe, in Marondera. She named the baby Michael, for no reason anyone could recall. Michael Munhumumwe (Thomas's childhood name) would remain with his mother's people for almost ten years, while she prepared a home and family of her own fifty miles away.

Nights are cold and days hot around harvest time. Then comes *chisi*—a strictly enforced day of rest. No one works the soil during *chisi*. The *n'anga* arrives with his furs and snuff, ready to fulfill his shamanic role. The *sekurus*—uncles—drink their millet beer and start telling funny stories, these hard men all of a sudden jokesters.¹ And at night the mbira sound for the elders, but the music is so loud at times that the youngest children can catch the melody and sense the depth, even gravity, it conveys. Older boys play the *ngoma* drums, and all the children dance. Moonlight is best. No workday is too long, no rain too cold nor sun too hot, no elder too mean—as long as everything ends with dancing and songs, laughter and moonlight, and the all-encompassing embrace of a big family.

Janet's people were peasant farmers in the “communal lands” that the Rhodesians had set aside for rural Africans. Marondera lies in Mashonaland East, about a hundred kilometers southeast of Salisbury, along the road that leads to Manicaland and the city of Mutare before crossing the mountains into Mozambique. Janet's parents produced eleven children, she being the eldest, followed soon by Jira. The youngest, Marshall Munhumumwe, would one day be a famous musician, like Thomas.² Three of Janet's siblings died as children when a hut caught fire in a heavy wind. Their bodies were burned and swept away amid smoke and ashes, an aching reminder of what spirits can do when riled to anger.

When they received young Michael, Hamundidi and Kufera lived on the farm of a white man named Simons. Soon afterward, they were granted village land of their own, and they moved the family there. This is the first place Thomas Mapfumo can remember, and it is a place of enchantment, full of animals, spirits, open spaces, and natural delights. On just a few acres of land, his grandparents grew maize, rapoko, groundnuts, wheat, and sweet potatoes and kept cattle, pigs, goats, and donkeys. They lived tight with the children in a traditional round hut, subjects now of a village headman rather than a white farmer. Hamundidi and Kufera would drift into old age this way, at a distance from the churning tumult of the liberation struggle. They would die a few years short of Zimbabwe's independence.

Michael was put to work as soon as he could wield a stick and mind goats and cows. His constant companion was his uncle Peter, almost the same age as him. “We used to take our cattle a long distance to grazing places,” Thomas recalled, starting well before sunrise, as “the cows would love to graze on that wet grass.” The boys would spend the day whistling after animals, foraging for wild fruits—*hacha* (wild cork fruit), *matamba* (monkey orange), and *mapfura* (marula)—and fishing in streams and ponds. For Thomas, it was “an exciting

life,” if austere. Once he recalled asking his grandfather permission to bathe. The old man replied, “You want to wash? Is it Christmas?”

At Thomas’s birth in 1945, Southern Rhodesia was as settled and peaceful as it would ever be. Whites had their farms and cities, Africans their reserves and townships. If anything seemed to threaten the Rhodesians’ ordered world, it was the meddling British, not Africans. Rhodesians believed deeply in their own permanence, even though nothing had ever been permanent on the Zimbabwe plateau.

Historians lament the scarcity of knowledge about ancient doings in this part of Africa. The people collectively called the Shona—more precisely, the Manica, Korekore, Kalanga, Zezuru, and others—originated in the Cameroon highlands more than three thousand years ago.³ They are part of the great Bantu river of humanity that flowed across most of Africa long before any white man set foot on the continent. Between 500 BC and AD 500, Bantu immigrants infiltrated Khoisan-speaking hunter-gatherer communities on the plateau, and their shared descendants became today’s Shona clans. The plateau was a place of bounty. Herds of elephants, laden with ivory tusks, roamed freely, and there were gold reefs one could mine with simple hand tools. The Bantu built fixed settlements, farmed the land, and forged iron tools and weapons. By AD 700, they were trading with Muslims on the East African coast. Shona archaeological sites have yielded beads of Syrian glass, Persian faience and carpet, and Chinese celadon and porcelain. The thirteenth-century Arab explorer Ibn Battuta found gold dust for sale in the port city of Sofala and reported that it had come from “Yufi in the land of the Limiyin . . . a month’s journey” inland.⁴ The place-names are mysterious, but the gold likely came from the Shona. Through Arab middlemen, Shona exchanged gold, ivory, copper, and leopard skins for goods and knowledge. Weaving methods gleaned from coastal Muslims allowed them to make cloth heavy enough to protect them from the greatest killer they faced on the plateau—the cold winds of June and July.

“Zimbabwe” means “house of stone,” a reference to the structures found in ruins throughout the country. The most extensive is Great Zimbabwe, with its circular, granite-walled enclosure and cone-shaped boulder tower. Great Zimbabwe was the only real city in this part of Africa in precolonial times, built by the Shona between 1250 and 1450, and probably home to some eighteen thousand people at its height.⁵ Its massive walls and mysterious tower apparently served beauty or religion, not defense. Decorated walls and stone pillars topped with bird figures carved from soapstone suggest a scene of ritual, but no firsthand description of any rite survives, tantalizing the imaginations

of poets and allowing prominent Rhodesian scholars to claim that Arabs or Phoenicians—anyone but Africans!—created Great Zimbabwe. Why the city was abruptly abandoned around 1500 remains a stubborn unknown.⁶

The face of human power begins to come into focus only with the reign of the Munhumutapas, a series of authoritarian kings who rose in the wake of Great Zimbabwe.⁷ The Munhumutapas refused to deal in slaves, an admirable choice that likely contributed to their sparse representation in recorded history. Shona oral accounts go back only to about 1700 and have been corrupted by successive rewritings, as historian David Beach notes, “omitting rulers, condensing and altering events and generally making them fit the political needs of the day, whether in 1763, 1862 or 1958.”⁸

The Portuguese dominated the plateau briefly, only to be forced out by the Changamire Rozvi state, the last great Shona polity and the strongest military force in southern Africa at the end of the seventeenth century. Over the next hundred years, Changamire too would fade as the gold fields of the southwest became depleted.⁹ Trade with Shona goldmines stopped entirely after 1800, and the elephant population was all but gone. War and dwindling wealth had devastated the northern plateau, leaving behind isolated communities plagued by disease and disunity. Beach writes of “a bewildering variety of Shona territories” at the dawn of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

In this weakened state, the Shona confronted a foe more disruptive than any they had known. The *mfecane*, or “crushing,” was a violent outpouring of people from the Nguni language group, who surged north as they fled the militant rampages of warrior king Shaka Zulu (1787–1828). The resulting effluence of bloodletting reached as far north as the equator and left an indelible legacy on the Zimbabwe plateau in the form of two new states—Gaza in the southeast and Ndebele in the southwest.¹¹

The Ndebele seized Shona land. They purveyed a culture of expansion and conquest quite alien to the Shona. This inspired fear but also a certain admiration. The Ndebele lifestyle—“distinctively clad and armed young men enjoying a life of raiding, increased access to young women and beef eating”—dazzled Shona men. The Shona had no hope of defeating such an enemy, especially after 1837, when the Ndebele king Mzilikazi arrived with his *impis* (armies).¹² Displaced from their land and menaced by raids, many Shona embraced Mzilikazi.

As internal divisions destabilized his regime, Mzilikazi famously beheaded disloyal chiefs, a ritual that gave the Ndebele capital its name: Kwa Bulawayo, “the killing place.” Rhodesian propaganda would later sensationalize Ndebele brutality, portraying the Shona as hapless victims of an unstoppable Ndebele

juggernaut. Schoolbooks would fraudulently suggest that only English benevolence had saved the Shona from complete destruction. In fact, the arrival of the English amplified mistrust between Shona and Ndebele, motivating each to betray the other's interests to gain advantage with a new enemy. Today's Shona and Ndebele inherit this thorny legacy of fact and myth, bitterness and awe, a legacy that complicated the liberation war and remains a dark undercurrent in the affairs of Zimbabwe.

The first English prospectors, missionaries, and adventurers began filtering onto the plateau around 1866. David Livingstone's magnificent description of Victoria Falls, and the potential riches of this untamed land, proved irresistible. It was late in the colonial game, but one more frontier remained. Shona towns and villages were now islands amid a sea of dangers. Great swaths of the plateau lay unused and unprotected.¹³ Anthony Thomas writes that the nineteenth-century Shona had no concept of "owning" land: "Land was where cattle grazed and wild animals were hunted. Like sunshine and rain, it had been provided for everyone."¹⁴ Land also held the bones of ancestors, and people had to return to certain places at certain times in order to appease family spirits. Restricted movement was thus a cruel fate for the Shona.

"I am the owner of this land," Thomas Mapfumo said once, speaking for his Shona forebears in their first encounters with Europeans. "They found me here, and I was generous enough to give them space to live also. 'Live with me like a brother.' But instead, they didn't see that. They had to enslave me, to make me work hard for my own life, for protection. For everything that I needed, I had to sweat." Thomas's generation of Zimbabweans grew up with this history, but for him, raised on a farm and working the land with his own hands, the truth of it cut deep.

The first Ndebele, a people born of war, built armies to fight the English. Mzilikazi, after all, had taken on Shaka Zulu himself. But when he died in 1868, Mzilikazi left his kingdom and impis to his less experienced son, Lobengula, whose fate it was to defend or lose all his father had established. Though the two men would never meet, Lobengula's true adversary in this struggle would be Cecil John Rhodes.

History offers up few men like Rhodes. The son of an English vicar, he was a sickly boy with a defective heart and big dreams. He went to South Africa in 1870 to convalesce with his older brother Herbert, who oversaw a diamond claim near Kimberly. Rhodes arrived a "shy, solemn, delicate-looking, fair-haired, gangling boy of eighteen." Eight years later, when Herbert died in an explosion, Cecil took over what would become the most profitable diamond empire in the world, De Beers. In those days, Rhodes divided his time between

the Kimberly mines and Oxford. He showed little interest in study—ironic, considering the scholarship that bears his name—and historians wonder why he bothered with university at all when adventure and fortune awaited him in Africa. One satisfies himself with the conclusion that Rhodes “never grew up.”¹⁵ Others look deeper, speculating about his secret homosexuality, likely; and his mercurial will to power in many forms, undeniable.¹⁶

There are flashes of humanity in Rhodes’s early story. He earned the respect of African workers on a cotton farm in Natal, insisting that they be paid in advance.¹⁷ He wrote admiringly of their customs and the value they placed in a man’s trust. He once intervened to prevent a chief from being forced off his farm by settlers. Later, wielding real power, Rhodes became hardened. He enacted racist regulations at the Kimberly mines and discriminatory laws in the Cape Colony, and he seized more than one million square miles of African land, riling critics with remarks like “I prefer land to niggers!”¹⁸

Rhodes had Machiavellian powers of persuasion—a combination of charm, character judgment, and a willingness to bribe or deceive anyone who stood in his way. At key moments, he was able to change the minds of businessmen, politicians, journalists, and African chiefs. Though his methods were devious, he largely escaped judgment, dying an English hero of mythic proportion in 1902.

Few could have foreseen this. Edward Fairfield of the Colonial Office asserted early on that Rhodes was “not to be regarded as a serious person.” He was “grotesque, impulsive, schoolboyish, humorous and almost clownish.”¹⁹ Rhodes, with his disheveled attire, squeaky voice, fidgety manner, and explosive falsetto laugh certainly lacked the iron hand, but he made up for his deficits in other ways, rising in power and stature from the moment he stepped onto African soil. Thomas Parkenham writes that at his height Rhodes lived four lives at once: “Bismarck of the diamond mines” at Kimberly, dean of the gold miners around Johannesburg, popular prime minister of the Cape Colony, and strategist with a master plan to establish an African empire, “from Cape to Cairo,” as the phrase went.²⁰

Rhodes knew the key to northward expansion lay in subverting Lobengula, who commanded some fifteen thousand warriors in Bulawayo. Ndebele fighters favored the short, stabbing spear called *assegai*, and they had shown ferocity and discipline in battle. However, Lobengula had seen what modern weaponry could do, and though he was willing to fight, he preferred to talk. Rhodes staked his bet on a delegation led by Charles Dunell Rudd, a mining expert, in 1888. Also on board was the explorer Frank Thompson, who as a boy had watched Ndebele raiders kill his father by forcing a ramrod down his

throat. Their mission was nothing less than to trick the king into giving up his kingdom.

Lobengula's principal advisers were his *indunas* (chiefs), but he also took council from a group of missionaries and European adventurers in his entourage. During the crucial palaver, one of these interlocutors elicited verbal assurances from the Rudd delegation that the land would remain Lobengula's, that only *ten* miners would come, and that they would obey the king's laws. Meanwhile, the actual words in the Rudd Concession granted "complete and exclusive charge over all metals and minerals situated in my kingdom . . . together with full power to do all things that they [the concessioners] may deem necessary to win and procure the same."²¹ The king knew he had been duped, saying afterward, "England is the chameleon and I [am] the fly."²²

Rhodes and his followers read the mining concession as a license to occupy not only Lobengula's territory but also the Shona lands, which they classified as an Ndebele dependency and, therefore, fair game under the agreement. The queen of England granted Rhodes his charter, and the British public celebrated his achievement as a match to "the great civilizing mission of King Leopold in the Congo."²³ If "civilizing" means the ability to pass craven deception and mass slaughter off as charity, the comparison is apt.

In June 1890, Rhodes conducted the decisive movement in his symphony of guile. He assembled 196 "Pioneers"—farmers and prospectors lured by promises of land and gold, men chosen by Rhodes to be "the complete nucleus of a civil population."²⁴ The column was guided by renowned big-game hunter Frederick Selous. It advanced more than one thousand miles in less than three months, skirting Lobengula's impis to the west and cutting a road that would soon feed a colony. Swift and stealthy, the Pioneers also outflanked the Portuguese, who had secured the vast colony of Mozambique and were about to move on the plateau themselves. Had Rhodes delayed mere months, Zimbabweans today would speak Portuguese instead of English.

Selous had scouted the site for the column's destination, Fort Salisbury, a hill "at the center of a great grassy plain . . . fertile and full of promise."²⁵ Many Pioneers believed this place to be the biblical land of Ophir, where King Solomon's mines had been abandoned, full of gold. On September 13, 1890, Lieutenant Tyndale-Biscoe hoisted the Union Jack up the tallest tree he could find, twenty-one shots sounded over empty fields, and the Pioneers, along with their African laborers, began building a settlement. On hearing this, Rhodes glowed with satisfaction, convinced that he had claimed "the richest gold-field in the world" without a fight.

Cowed by the Ndebele and estranged from their imperial past, the Shona

greeted the white interloper with naive trust, “as a brother,” in Thomas’s words. The Pioneers would suffer a season of record rainfalls, generating disease, hunger, shortages, and death during that first winter. Many would survive only through the graces of their Shona benefactors. Shona leaders probably imagined they were having it both ways, earning the trust of the British, who in turn kept the Ndebele at bay. Meanwhile, Lobengula clung to the fantasy that his people were living in a state adjacent to the British one. But as Pioneers began pegging out land claims, forcing Africans into settlements and then hard labor, white intentions gradually became clear. Forced labor was anathema to the Shona, “the most humiliating experience of all,” noted Zimbabwean writer Chenjerai Hove, who said that “only the downtrodden would *work* for somebody.”²⁶

Rhodes’s colonial administrator, Leander Starr Jameson, swiftly rallied the country’s first black militia and mounted a surprise attack on Lobengula’s impis, laid low with smallpox at the time and ripe for the taking. The humiliated Ndebele king killed himself with poison soon afterward, leaving his people with these bitter words: “You have said it is me that is killing you. Now here are your masters coming. . . . You will have to pull and shove wagons; but under me you never did this.”²⁷ Jameson’s men seized some ten thousand square miles of rich, red-soiled high veldt in Matebeleland and inaugurated the city of Bulawayo in 1894.

The Ndebele now joined the Shona in a state of shredded dignity, and their shared fight to stop the Rhodesians began in earnest. The First Chimurenga was sparked by reckless audacity on Jameson’s part. On December 29, 1895, he led the entire Rhodesian police force—510 troopers—into the Transvaal in a bold attack on the Boers that was to have culminated in the taking of Johannesburg. But word of the plan had leaked, and the column was surrounded, ambushed, and forced to surrender just outside the city. While Jameson and his party’s survivors languished in a Johannesburg jail, Rhodesia was left with just forty-eight policemen. An aggrieved African population saw its chance. The uprising started with the Ndebele, who began killing whites indiscriminately, intent on their complete elimination. Caught off guard and without resources, the colony was slow to react, but when it did, the first independence war of the late nineteenth-century “scramble for Africa” was under way.

An African victory was within reach in March 1896. Then, in April, six hundred mounted riflemen deployed out of Bulawayo, changing the game. Rhodes then led a column from Salisbury in mid-June. When the Shona defied expectations and joined the Ndebele fight, the column turned tail to reconnoiter with British and Portuguese forces coming in from the coast. Beach argues

that the Shona and Ndebele set their sights too low, seeking only to return to their former separate worlds rather than unite and form a state that might have held off the Europeans. Some Shona in the south actually helped the British quell the Ndebele. Divide and rule had worked once again.

The Shona leaned on their spirit mediums, valuing the leverage of watchful ancestors over military strategy.²⁸ It is easy to dismiss a war party's reliance on spirits contacted through ceremonies with mbira and beer, but the mediums brought a certain logic to the fight. Shona elders had been fooled by the Rudd Concession in part because it talked about mining and minerals, things that did not interest them. As Chenjerai Hove put it, "The Shona elders said, 'We want the soil. We want to farm. If [Rudd] wants to dig, let him dig.' However, when Cecil John Rhodes and his gang didn't find gold, they began to realize they must take the land. That's where trouble started, because the land is a shrine. You don't mess with it."

For the Shona, the First Chimurenga revolved around two supreme spirit mediums, Kaguvi and Nehanda. These were both religious and military leaders who focused the fighters' minds on the need to reclaim the land that held the bones of their ancestors. Mbira songs fortified Shona warriors, reinforcing their tangible link with aggrieved ancestral spirits. The mass killing that ensued on all sides—Shona, Ndebele, and Rhodesian, including civilians—was on a scale the region had not known in two hundred years. This uprising ended only when Kaguvi and Nehanda were captured and hanged in 1897.²⁹ Before she died, Nehanda uttered the phrase known to all Zimbabweans: "I may die, but my bones will rise again." Streets in Harare bear the names of Kaguvi and Nehanda today.

Rhodes continued to recruit settlers for his colony until his death in 1902. He promised them adventure, glory, and wealth. Frustrated by Shona and Ndebele intransigence, colonial administrators imported trainloads of more willing workers from Malawi to the north. "You could see Malawians sleeping in the street," said Chenjerai Hove. "My father would *die* to think of that—sleeping in the street!" But by the 1920s, a new generation of Shona and Ndebele were coming up, more amenable to the colony's labor practices. Two decades after their founder's passing, Rhodesians had concluded that their territory contained little gold and perhaps no diamonds at all. Settlers arriving from South Africa now expected to farm rather than mine. This meant displacing more and more Africans, year after year after year.

The Rhodesian state had long sought to create a malleable black elite, a central goal of its Department of Native Education, established in 1928.³⁰ The right upbringing would give "natives" a worldview tailored to make them

love British culture more than their own. It would provide a loyal, technically skilled workforce to drive the nation's economy. This nation-building instinct distinguished Southern Rhodesia from other British holdings in Africa, especially West Africa. In Ghana, Gambia, and Nigeria, for example, simmering ethnic conflicts and the prevalence of diseases like malaria made settlement dangerous and unattractive. Rhodesians were fashioning a homeland, and its longevity relied on molding African minds and spirits. Missionaries had made a start. State education and strict discipline would do the rest. This is the world into which Michael Munhumumwe—aka Thomas Mapfumo—was born in 1945.

Thomas was three months old when black railway workers carried out the first labor strike in Rhodesia. African trade unions were setting the stage for the nationalist struggle that would shape his life, though, for now, the boy remained with his grandparents on Tribal Trust Lands because his father had paid “a little lobola, but not enough.” Lobola—*roora* in Shona—was the payment a woman's father demanded from the family of a young man who sought to marry her. Whatever the currency—cash, cattle, or goods—lobola was always substantial, and a real obstacle to marriage. Rhodesian missionaries tended to lump this tradition together with other heathen practices to be eliminated through church indoctrination. But a few black churchmen defended lobola as both moral and healthy for society.³¹ In earlier times, it would likely have been unacceptable for Janet Chinhamo to become pregnant before securing the required payment.³² Had she done so, her suitor would have been the one laboring on the Munhumumwe farm, working to repay his debt. Instead, in a changing world, Tapfumaneyi “went for good,” leaving his son to assume the burden.

In their pre-Rhodesian pastoral, the Shona had lived famously long lives, so it is mysterious that their population remained so low, fewer than 900,000 on the plateau at the close of the nineteenth century. Beach thinks lobola largely accounts for this low figure; families of would-be Shona brides generally demanded more than most suitors could pay. A 1904 census of a Shona village found that nearly half of the adult men had remained single and childless, presumably because marriage was beyond their means. Ndebele families too demanded lobola, but with their larger herds—by one count, 170,000 to the Shona's 11,600—cattle wealth greased the wheels of population growth. Beach imagines “large herds leading to more bride-prices being paid, more brides, more children, more men, more raiders and thus even more cattle to swell the original herd.”³³

If Beach is right, population figures offer a stark gauge of Rhodesian ac-

culturation efforts as well, for the Shona population on the plateau increased *tenfold* between 1890, when the Pioneers arrived, and Zimbabwean independence in 1980. That meant more children attending schools and churches that estranged them from their past, more youths of working age hankering to leave the village for the city, more Christian converts teaching their children that their African ways were inferior and backward, and more children born in urban townships, dependent on the Rhodesian state and removed from their ancestral ways. The speed and severity of social breakdown for urbanized Africans in Rhodesia were breathtaking. Those with the most exposure to Rhodesian authority became strangers in their own land.

Despite this, even today, no matter what upheaval roils in towns and townships, village life on the Zimbabwean plateau shows remarkable tenacity. Throughout the twentieth century, there was—and still is—a good deal of movement and exchange between rural and urban domains, especially for adults. But for young Michael Munhumumwe, the relative separateness of his rural home proved a blessing.³⁴ Despite his social limbo, he had spent his first ten years among Shona people who did not attend Christian churches and had never set foot in a colonial schoolroom. His early boyhood shielded him from Rhodesia's harshest realities and nurtured in him a kernel of African identity that would become the core of his personality and art.

Thomas recalled Janet as a fine singer and dancer, “especially after a few drinks.” During bira ceremonies, where the mbira was mostly played, youngsters like Michael were forbidden entry. “We would go outside, form a circle, and start singing our own songs,” he recalled. “These people were natural composers. We used to have ngoma [drums], and two people would go inside the circle and start dancing. This is how I fell in love with the sound of drums.”³⁵

Hamundidi and Kufera Munhumumwe never discussed politics. There was no radio in their house. They were stern authority figures who instilled in their charges paramount respect for tradition and duty. Because his grandparents attended *mapira* (mbira ceremonies), Michael came to view the mbira with reverence.³⁶ This instrument, this slab of hard wood—the *gwariva*—with iron prongs clamped to it, could be jammed into a big gourd, a *deze*, and played to produce a sound that was lulling, mysterious, hypnotic—a sound with the power to summon ancestor spirits to enter living people and speak wisdom from beyond the grave. Though barred from attending ceremonies, young Michael was steeped in the culture of the bira. This seductive musical ritual, so central in his childhood household, made a link with the precolonial past, and because of this, the boy felt his ancient roots more strongly than many of his generation.

Inevitably, the cataclysms rankling Shona society came to intrude on Michael Munhumumwe's pastoral boyhood. Sometime in the early 1950s, Janet married a car mechanic named John Kashesha Mapfumo, and the couple moved into the Salisbury township of Mabvuku. They had children of their own and visited the homestead in Marondera regularly, but Michael remained on the farm, increasingly at odds with his elderly minders. "My grandparents loved me very much," he recalled, "but when they started forcing me to go to school, I began to rebel as I thought that going to school would upset my whole life. That was very childish thinking, I must say, but you know when you are a kid you don't see any purpose of going to school at all. I wanted to go back to my parents, but my mother insisted that I stay with my granny until I was ten years old."³⁷

In 1954, Michael began attending a Methodist church school in nearby Chihota. His grandparents felt social pressure to educate him, but as peasant farmers, they and their neighbors also needed children to work, especially during plowing and harvest times. The solution was to wake the children early enough that they could complete their chores before school. They were roused at 2:00 AM in order to herd, plow, and do other "dirty jobs" in the dark before returning to the house at 6:00 to wash and dress for school. This grueling regimen fueled Michael's rebellion, and after a year, Janet at last reclaimed her firstborn son.

He came to the city and, using the identification papers of one of Janet's young brothers, enrolled in school. The name on those papers was Thomas, and this is how Michael Munhumumwe became Thomas Mapfumo. Janet and John Mapfumo ran a strict, churchgoing household, far removed from cattle herds, harvests, and bira ceremonies. Despite the difficulties of adjustment, Thomas recalled his mother and stepfather with affection. John Mapfumo was "a good man, a straightforward man, a man who loved every one of us children." Thomas's daughter Chiedza recalled that their entire family also came to adore John, "an amazing man . . . very affectionate and very loving." Thomas soon came to think of John as "my true father, the man who looked after me, sent me to school and taught me good manners, to work hard and live with other kids." At the time, John earned just ten pounds a month, barely enough to feed, clothe, and educate five children.

John was a handsome fellow who remained lean and fit into old age. The son of a Shona mother and a white European father, he passionately rejected any distinction between the races. "It's in the Bible," he said. "Look it up." Born in 1922, a self-described "rascal" as a boy, John recalled his youthful years as a horse trainer and aspiring jockey. "Race horse, not summer horse," he said.

“This one doesn’t pull a carriage. It was kept only for racing and making money out of it. That was my job.” John never amounted to much as a jockey, and he later switched from training horses to repairing cars, the only jobs he held in his life. His church work meant most to him, and he proudly recollected how Thomas and his half sister Tabeth had been star singers in the Christian Marching Church choir.

When Thomas turned to rock ’n’ roll as a teenager, John was chagrined. “Because,” he recalled, “while I could never criticize the European, Tommy was [not like them]. European guys making music, they could control themselves nicely, but not an African. I said he’s going to be full of himself. I didn’t like it.” John spoke of loose women, drinking, and drugs, all the familiar reasons not to let your son become a rock ’n’ roll musician. The profession was synonymous with what the Shona called a *rombe*, a worthless degenerate.

Janet also discouraged her son’s musical ventures, though both parents later came around. “In Mabvuku,” she recalled, “that’s when Thomas started making guitars out of empty tins. He drilled a hole in it and started making sounds. Then he was playing drums in church. At first, I was angry with him because he was playing these guitars. I was saying, ‘This is not a good thing. You are doing bad stuff. Stop it.’ Later on, I discovered that my son was talented in music. Then I was happy. Mmmmm. I was very happy before the liberation war. My son was a rock ’n’ roll star.” Janet also recalled the fear she later felt, during the war, when Thomas began to compose and sing political songs. “I thought my son is going to die,” she said. “My son is going to be in exile.” She said she tried to discourage him, but he didn’t listen. He was “off with his music.”

The poet Musa Zimunya, a close friend of Thomas’s over the years, believed that Janet was “always, always very influential in Thomas’s life, his spiritual guide, and a terror to anyone who would interfere with his business.” Thomas, somewhat more mildly, also portrayed his mother as a teacher and mentor. “When it comes to cultural things,” he recalled, “she is very much in the forefront, always out there consulting traditional healers about the well-being of the family.” Janet understood that Thomas, unlike her other children, had a Shona African father. Tapfumanyei was no longer a part of her life, but he would remain important to her eldest son’s spiritual well-being. The Mapfumos’ Christian household would always have to accommodate this stubborn fact of Shona religion, where the paternal line is everything.

As an old woman, Janet would return to the life she had known as a child, in a homestead amid rocky outcroppings and maize fields, thirty minutes’ walk from the nearest road. Even before John died in 1999, Janet had taken

up with a widowed farmer. The city had always been a place of necessity for her, somewhere to work, find a husband, and raise children. Once these things were done, she yearned for the land. Like Thomas, she remained forever marked by her rural beginnings, though for him, return could never be so easy. It would come mostly through acts of imagination and the transcendent communion of music.

2 / Singing Shona

The Beatles, international finance groups, and colonial freedom agitators are all agents of a Communist plot to achieve world domination.

HARVEY WARD, DIRECTOR GENERAL,
RHODESIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

Southern Rhodesia took pride in its African townships, grids of tidy cement-block houses built along well-ordered streets. Salisbury townships like Mbare, Highfield, and Mabvuku were conceived as discrete African neighborhoods within the larger metropolis. But by the time Thomas came to Mabvuku in 1954, rural migrants looking for work inundated such places, and conditions were deteriorating. Thomas was surprised to find “a lot of people suffering” in the city. On his grandparents’ land, everyone had been fed, and he had felt “free.” Now he lived among people scurrying for cars and buses to travel busy roadways to schools, shopping centers, churches, and beer halls under the vigilant eyes of policemen and soldiers—all bewildering fascinations to a ten-year-old boy who had never seen a house with electric lighting or listened to a radio.

John and Janet were leaders in the Christian Marching Church, a breakaway faction from the Soldiers of God, and the Salvation Army before that. The church’s charismatic leader, Bishop Katsande, had twice hived off with his followers in search of “a pure black church, an African church.” The Christian Marching Church accommodated African beliefs within its Christian cosmology. Its members sang hymns and read the Bible during services, while at

home or in their rural areas, some still placated their ancestors in ceremonies with mbira and millet beer.

Thomas had a new family. He had met his four half siblings—Tabeth, Edith, William, and Lancelot—during their visits to the farm. Now he was among them. The three brothers all described life in the Mapfumo household using the same summary adjective: “strict.” William recalled that there was no time to go around the neighborhood and play with other children. “We were always going to church,” he said. “In the morning, we would go to Sunday school. Nobody was allowed to drink tea beforehand. Tea was something very special in our house.” Thomas had arrived rough-edged and farm-raised, not above a fistfight or other “things that you regret at the end of the day.” John and Janet were determined to reshape him into a godly boy who obeyed his elders.

“Brother Thomas had always some arguments with the parents,” recalled William. “One time, we were asked to go and buy some firewood, me and him. So we passed by a certain house where we saw a banjo near the doorstep. He asked me to take that banjo, so I picked it and we took it home. Then the owners followed us and reported to our father, ‘Your sons have taken my banjo.’ By that time, Brother Thomas was singing and playing the banjo while we were doing the backing vocals. I still remember the song we were playing, ‘Ndaona Gudo [I Have Seen a Baboon].’” The baboon is a notorious trickster, often a bully in Shona folktales, but also confident and resourceful, raiding crops and picking up scorpions to munch along its way. Thomas would one day be known by the praise name Mukanya—literally “One Who Swaggers”—referring to the largest, most dominant male baboon. The name Mukanya denotes a subgroup of Thomas’s paternal family totem, Soko, a general term for monkey. But already, this particular Soko—the baboon with its strutting bravado and cunning—was inspiring the boy’s character.

Thomas was around twelve when he made his own “banjo”—an oil tin, a stick, and some wires was all it took—and began composing songs with his brothers in the bathroom outside the family home. For Lancelot, the youngest, this was proof enough of musical genius, though William recalled, “It was just a pastime. We didn’t know he was going to take a long journey into music.” John and Janet worried about the company their children kept and, during school holidays, took all six of them to the farm in Marondera. If the boys stayed in town they might fall in with “gangsters.” Soon they would have still bigger worries.

In the early 1950s, England had reluctantly sanctioned the formation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland—today’s Zimbabwe, Zambia,

and Malawi combined. The Federation briefly opened a window of hope that conditions might improve for Southern Rhodesian blacks. But as London had feared, Salisbury hard-liners dominated the new Federation Parliament, defeating a motion to end racial discrimination in public places and squelching efforts to reform labor and land laws.¹ Instead of easing, life for Africans worsened.

Schoolbooks the young Mapfumos would have read hawked the cheerfully blinkered propaganda of white rulers. African children studied English, French, and Latin, not Shona or Ndebele. The history they learned began with missionaries and dwelled lovingly on Rhodes, who stood beside Vasco da Gama and Columbus, pillars of courageous virtue. “I am sure you have all heard of that great man Cecil Rhodes!” reads a schoolbook called *How We Made Rhodesia*.² Older doings on “the dark continent” intruded only in sorry contrast to the sagas of European visionaries. Images of naked villagers, “savages,” made the African past look naive and chaotic, ripe for “civilizing” by Rhodes and his benevolent minions. “The African loves laughter,” read a 1969 tourist guide published by the Ministry of Information. “His needs are few and simple and when he has satisfied them, he is inclined to sit back. . . . How then should we deal with this man? We should remember his background and treat him with patience and courtesy. Loss of temper when things go wrong helps no one.”³

Rhodesia oppressed with a velvet touch, and music was one of its tools. The Federation introduced centralized radio broadcasting in 1948 as a way to shape thought and opinion.⁴ A government pamphlet of the era argued that education might take two or three generations to produce a “comparatively civilized African people,” whereas broadcasting could “reach the masses” and speed African “enlightenment.”⁵ The Central African Broadcasting Service (CABS) out of Lusaka began creating Shona programs in 1954. When CABS was replaced by the Federation Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) four years later, operations moved to Salisbury.

“I personally remember the new exciting songs coming up in the fifties,” recalled Musa Zimunya. “They were songs about the white folks, about the Federation. One says, ‘Mother and Father, look what we are doing now. We are leaning on each other with the whites.’ Meaning to say that we are *one* with the whites, with the Federation. That’s what they were selling.” The music’s traditional *jiti* beat was the hook for Musa, but the idea of living well, like white folks, also appealed. “One of the most desperate problems for colonized peoples is the desire to be accepted by the colonizer,” he said. “So when we

learned English, we learned it *well* so that they would recognize us as human beings. Others who spoke only Shona were just monkeys.”⁶ Lest anyone wonder what happened when Africans took charge, there was the Belgian Congo not far away. Musa recalled mobile cinemas bringing black Rhodesians terrifying images from the Congo war of the early 1960s: “headless men, soldiers with bayonets” and “bloated bodies infested with flies.”

Urban youths were inundated with propaganda at schools, churches, and social groups. But only radio could reach the African “masses,” so it had to be especially alluring. To that end, Federation broadcasters deployed a war chest of popular music emanating from South Africa, the Congo, England, and the United States. Sitting by the family radio, Thomas became familiar with Miriam Makeba, the Manhattan Brothers, the City Jazz 9, and the Swingsters from South Africa; Franco, Rochereau, Grand Kalle, and Johnny Bokelo from Congo; then Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Otis Redding, Fats Domino, Bill Haley and the Comets, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and later the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Chicago Transit Authority, Blood Sweat and Tears, Jethro Tull, and, of course, Jimi Hendrix. “I thought all this music was just fantastic,” said Thomas, recalling long hours spent listening and singing along.

Thomas also attended live concerts at Municipality Hall in Mbare, starting in the late 1950s when Rhodesia’s version of “township jazz” was at its peak in Salisbury. Groups in South Africa had been retrofitting popular American jazz songs with African lyrics for decades. Mimicry had led to innovation, and now a distinctly African jazz sound was emerging, rooted in the American tradition but increasingly a genre—or set of genres—with its own identity.⁷ The South African variety was originally dubbed *marabi*, or just *rabi*, and championed by Johannesburg acts like the Merry Blackbirds, the Jazz Revelers, and the Pitch Black Follies. Rhodesia’s Ndebele population in Bulawayo, ever attuned to their ancestral home in the south, began producing local jazz acts in the 1930s, and by the time this music reached the Salisbury townships, competition was keen among groups like Bantu Actors, De Black Evening Follies, Dorothy Masuka, the Golden Rhythm Crooners, Cool Fours, Capital City Dixies, City Quads, and Epworth Theatrical Strutters.

Jazz conveyed unspoken subversion because it emulated America, where blacks were seen as free and self-respecting. The lyrics did not have to be political, although songs did occasionally run afoul of the Rhodesian censors. The City Quads’ “When Will the Day of Freedom Come?,” a reworking of an American spiritual, was banned from radio for its suspected double meaning. For the most part, Rhodesian jazz was an exuberant mishmash of vaudeville,