

# Zimbabwe band uses music to call for freedom

## S•H•O•W•T•I•M•E

**Band:** Thomas Mapfumo and The Blacks Unlimited will perform at the W.O.W. Hall, 291 W. Eighth Ave., on April 15. Showtime is at 9 p.m. Advance tickets, selling for \$10, are available at the EMU Main Desk. Tickets at the door will sell for \$12.



"My music is born out of the struggle."

With that statement, Zimbabwe-born musician Thomas Mapfumo defined his firm stance on freedom and his passion for creating sardonic, caustic and inspirational music that has put him in the center of his country's revolution and at constant odds with the government.

It's not unusual for an artist to write and sing about social injustice and racial oppression, but how many artists actually help create an identity and define a nation at the same time?

Mapfumo was the first artist in his country to address such national issues. "When the war broke out," he recalled of the earlier days when his country was called Rhodesia, "my music helped bring the people back to their own identity. They started to follow my type of

music-Zimbabwe style music. Many people turned away from the Western style of music.

"I was getting popular with our people and the government didn't like what was going on."

When the English-speaking Rhodesian government translated Mapfumo's native Shona lyrics, they deemed them as militant and advocating political change. Meanwhile, The Rhodesian Broadcasting Company banned Mapfumo's music from the airwaves.

That, of course, only served to increase his popularity which eventually led to his being put in 90-day detention.

"They had a charge against me saying my music was influencing young people to leave the country, get trained, and come back fighting the government," Mapfumo said. "I said that my music was the music of the people of Zimbabwe and I wasn't going to do away with it because it was my own culture."

With the gag of censorship failing to hold him back, Mapfumo became a catalyst, and his music became the battle cry that, in 1980, ended colonial rule and founded the state of Zimbabwe.

At the time, Mapfumo recognized that the struggle for control of Zimbabwe was a spiritual as well as a political battle, and he realized that his country had no distinct "Zimbabwean" sound.

All the music Mapfumo and his peers were playing was foreign, ranging from western rock 'n' roll to South African rhythms to Jamaican reggae.

What sets Mapfumo's chimurenga (literally, the music of struggle) music apart from music of the other African countries is the Mbira (thumb piano). The Mbira is played mostly by people who come from the rural areas of Zimbabwe, and those who live in the communal lands.

Recognizing its danceable beat, Mapfumo modernized the sound by transferring the Mbira's gentle, mesmerizing sounds to the electric guitar and keyboard.

"Creating outlaw music that affects the social and political order is a romantic notion that's fueled many an activist pop performer," wrote *The Los Angeles Times* of Mapfumo.



By Ming Rodrigues  
Emerald Entertainment Reporter

Courtesy photo  
Thomas Mapfumo strives to play music that offers inspiration to his people.

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