



Zimbabwe's Chiwoniso Reflects on Freedom, Equality and Love with Her Powerful New Album

Cumbancha to release *Rebel Woman* worldwide in September

US/Canada Release Date: September 2, 2008

Europe and ROW Release Date: September 29, 2008

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JUNE 2008 - "I am like a mirror," declares Zimbabwe's popular music star **Chiwoniso Maraire**. "I basically sing about what I see happening in the world. If someone comes up to me in the street to ask for money I'll sing about that. If people are jumping borders because their economic situation is too difficult, I'll sing about that. If the police are beating people up and intimidating them, I'll sing about that."

In recent months, Zimbabwe's political and economic turmoil has thrust the turbulent African nation into international headlines. Based in the capital city of Harare, Chiwoniso lives in the eye of the storm, observing firsthand as her beloved homeland struggles to overcome the enduring legacies of colonialism, war, social inequality and political oppression. A devoted advocate of free speech, human rights and social justice, Chiwoniso's music gives voice to the voiceless and speaks to the problems and joys of the world around her.

On ***Rebel Woman***, Chiwoniso's first internationally released album in over ten years, her soulful and deeply personal songs offer messages of hope, inspiration and resistance, and serve notice that this gifted singer and songwriter merits recognition as one of Africa's greatest young talents.

While Zimbabwe's ancient musical traditions serve as the foundation of Chiwoniso's music, she is the child of a globalized world and her songs reflect her diverse, multicultural influences. Her late father, Dumisani Maraire was a respected scholar and musician, who moved the family to the United States in the 1970s while pursuing a degree in Ethnomusicology at the University of Washington in Seattle. Chiwoniso was born in Olympia, Washington in 1976, and although she spent the first seven years of her life away from Zimbabwe, the music of her family's homeland was a constant presence.

"I was born into a very musical family, both my parents were musicians," Chiwoniso points out. "My father was an amazing mbira player, my mother was a beautiful singer, so I was surrounded by this music from the day I was conceived, really, because they used to teach classes in the house as well. But at the same time they loved to listen to other people, so I grew up exposed to James Brown, Michael Jackson, Roberta Flack, Aretha Franklin, The Rolling Stones, Bach, Mozart, you name it, it was being played." In this dynamic home environment Chiwoniso was playing mbira by the age of four. Her first studio recording was at the age of nine with her parents, an album called 'Tichazomuwona' (We Shall See You), dedicated to her late uncle, Dr Nkosana Aurthur Maraire. By the age of 11 Chiwoniso was performing with her father and siblings, Tawona and Ziyana, in their family mbira group "Mhuri yaMaraire' (The Maraire Family). She was also a musician in her father's explosive marimba group 'Minanzi III' (Musical Sounds 3).

While Chiwoniso's musical influences range from soul and R&B to reggae and rock, the entrancing sounds of the **mbira** serve as a central underpinning for the songs on *Rebel Woman*. Originating in the ancient **Shona** civilization of southern Africa, the mbira is a musical instrument made of metal tines attached to a wooden board. The player plucks the tines with their thumbs to create captivating interlocking melodies, which have accompanied ceremonies and celebrations for countless generations. While variations of the mbira exist across Africa, it is an essential element of Zimbabwean music tradition and has a deep historical, cultural and spiritual symbolism.

In 1990, Chiwoniso's family made their second move back to Zimbabwe, and she quickly became a popular figure in the local music scene thanks to her role as lead vocalist for **A Peace of Ebony**, the country's first hip-hop band. Along with the group's founders, Herbert Schwamborne and Tony Chihota, and fellow members George Phiri and Tendai Viki, A Peace of Ebony created a new sound mixing rap and Zimbabwean ethnic-influenced melodies. This was when Chiwoniso and Keith Farquharson first met. In 1997, she released her first



solo album, **Ancient Voices**, which was warmly received and even earned her the prestigious **Radio France International "Best New Artist" award**. While she was developing her solo career, Chiwoniso also toured and recorded with the powerful Zimbabwean group Andy Brown and The Storm.

In 1996 and 1999 Chiwoniso gave birth to her daughters Chengeto and Chiedza. Her decision to focus on raising her children saw her choose to step out of the active international scene for some years. Instead she did recordings for world-awareness groups including CARE, UNDP, The Nobel Peace and worked with other artists who were striking out in new directions musically. The groups included **Women's Voice**, brought together by Malika Makouff-Rasmussen, and **The Collaboration**, a band that drew together some of the leading Zimbabwean artists, including **Adam Chisvo**, **Busi Ncube**, **Charlie Summerfield**, **William Hillman**, **Roger Mbambo** and **Peter Mashasha**.

With her feet back on the ground and revitalized creative energy, Chiwoniso has spent the last three years working with producer **Keith Farquharson** on *Rebel Woman*. Recorded in Zimbabwe, South Africa, England and Vermont (where Cumbancha and its partner company **Charles Eller Studios** are based), the album features some of Southern Africa's most respected musicians and an intriguing collection of guests. **Louis Mhlanga**, who has also recorded with Nigeria's **King Sunny Ade**, South African icon **Hugh Masekela** and others provides the album's tasty guitar licks. Zimbabwean Drummer **Sam Mataure**, a veteran of **Oliver Mtukudzi's** band, lays down his trademark rock solid rhythms, while saxophonist/flautist **Steve Dyer** guides a crack horn section. Meanwhile, members of Cumbancha's extended family, such as **Idan Raichel Project** percussionist **Rony Irwyn**, Belizean producer/guitarist **Ivan Duran** and keyboardist **Charles Eller** lent their services for cameo appearances.

The result is an appealing collection of songs that range from the soothing, unadorned mbira and voices of "Pamuromo" to the rousing, celebratory dance beats of "Gomo." The album opens with the raw electric guitar riffs of "Vanorapa", a song about the healing power of the elders whose lyrical theme is matched by its deep groove. Chiwoniso believes firmly in the power of traditional Shona spirituality and the ability of the elders to heal people even after they have died and entered the realm of the spirits. "Sometimes a person can die because there may be issues in their life when they were alive that weren't taken care of and that's when you have spirits roaming that need to be healed," she points out. Chiwoniso wrote the song based on one her late father used to perform with **Mananzi III**, adding to its emotional depth.

On "Matsotsi" (The Land of Thieves), Chiwoniso sings of the economic struggles of the workingman. Many people leave their families to find work, and they are only able to return home to visit their loved ones every month or so. In today's tough economic times, it's harder for people to even earn enough money to make the trip back home. "How do I go home if I don't have money?" Chiwoniso implores. The mood shifts on "Gomo", an upbeat tribute to the mountain regions where Chiwoniso's family originated. "We play with hosho (a type of shaker), we play with drums, we play with mbira. We are the children of the mountains," she shouts out, encouraging you to enter the trance-like state of a traditional Zimbabwean ceremony.

Because of her American upbringing, Chiwoniso is equally comfortable writing and singing in English, which she demonstrates to full effect on the South African flavored "Listen to the Breeze". The lyrics, which tell of a wise elder who imparts words of wisdom, came to her in a dream during a recording session in England. On "Only One World," Chiwoniso expresses her devotion to her children and how important it is for parents to make decisions that take future generations into account. "The children have got to be protected. If we make selfish decisions as adults, those are our decisions, but the children are affected by everything we do." Chiwoniso has long been an advocate for children's rights, and has been involved with an organization called **MUSTLE Africa** that helps teach literacy to the homeless, orphans and other underprivileged children.

The album's title track, "Rebel Woman," takes inspiration from a poem about the role of women in Zimbabwe's war for independence. "The song is about the physical conditions of fighting, and the price people pay," she explains, but it is also a tribute to strong women who suffer because they do not follow the restrictions society tries to place on them. "The truth is that when you're a strong woman you might lose our husband, your home, because the way the systems are structured you're not allowed to be strong as a woman, unless you follow the rules. This is a song about changing those rules."

The song serves as a moving epilogue to a masterful album and confirms that Chiwoniso will continue to speak out on issues important to her, regardless of the consequences. Recognizing that artists play a special role in society, she believes they must not be afraid to speak out against injustice. "We have a responsibility. We are not bankers, we are not doctors, we are not nurses. We have another part that we play in society that must be done. So, regardless of whatever world system is going to come in and say: 'Cut what you are saying,' going to send riot cops in to your shows, going to come and arrest you and say 'We are going to try and put you in jail...' – it doesn't matter. We have a responsibility."