

The morning after the sham election which re-elected Robert Mugabe, Chiwoniso Maraire is on her way to a gig in Leicester. As Zimbabwe's leading young female singer, she's probably rather glad that she's not at home in Harare, given the reports of violence and intimidation of Mugabe's opponents. "I love Africa as a continent and I love Zimbabwe – and in a way our problems were always going to happen," she says. "When you're used to being ruled by other people, there is often an inner struggle which follows colonialism. But we're still a young country. I think things could look very different in another five years."

She's in Britain to promote her new album, *Rebel Woman*. The title-track was inspired by a poem about the role played by women in Zimbabwe's independence struggle. When I suggest it might also apply to her own stance today, she laughs. "I suppose I am seen as a rebel," she says. "I was brought up to speak my mind. Even my children say 'why can't you be like other mothers?' The song is about strong women who refuse to be confined by the restrictions that society places upon them. But I believe all artists have a responsibility to support free speech, human rights and social justice. Even if the system is going to send the riot cops to your shows and arrest you and throw you in jail, it doesn't matter. You have to speak out."

Born in the US in 1976 where her father, the late composer and ethnomusicologist Dumisani Maraire taught such traditional Zimbabwean instruments as *marimba* and *mbira* (and who coincidentally wrote two tracks on Kronos' *Pieces of Africa* album), she is too young to remember much about the independence war that inspired *Rebel Woman*. But she has trenchant views about Zimbabwe's post-colonial history and she's not afraid to express them. She talks animatedly about the "corruption" that has blighted her country and the contentious issue of land redistribution. "Our rulers gave the best land to themselves and there was no forward thinking," she notes. "It's all very well giving someone a plot of land but they've got to know how to work it and be committed to doing it. If that plot used to feed 60 people, you have to be able to sustain that. If you can't, you end up in the kind of mess we're in." That might sound like basic common sense when you're in Leicester, but in the current climate back in Harare, it's classified as dangerous talk.

While so many African musicians have left the continent to make a home and a career in Europe and the US, Chiwoniso has journeyed in the opposite direction. After spending the first 14 years of her life in the US, she

returned to Harare with her parents in 1990 and she admits it was a difficult transition. "When you're a teenager and you're leaving friends and school and everything behind, it's not easy," she recalls. "The language wasn't a problem because my parents had been very careful to make sure I spoke Shona as well as English. But I had a problem with the culture."

That problem, however, was not that she missed American television and music. In fact, ironically it was quite the reverse: "In Seattle where we lived there was a strong traditional Zimbabwean culture around my parents and their community. I grew up with mbira music and understanding the importance of our traditions. It was a core element of my childhood. When I got to Zimbabwe, I found that very few people seemed to care about it."

In the US she had learned to play the mbira at the age of four. By 11 she was performing with Dumisani & Minanzi, her father's marimba band and the lack of interest in traditional music shocked her on her return to Zimbabwe. "I remember my father saying 'do you see what is missing? Do you think you can fill the gap?'" she recalls. "I wasn't sure I could but I could see what he meant."

At the same time she had also grown up in the US listening to pop, rock, soul and hip-hop. In 1991 she met Herbert Schwamborne and Tony Chihota, who were making waves as a young rap duo called A Peace of Ebony.

"I believe all artists have a responsibility to support free speech, human rights and social justice"

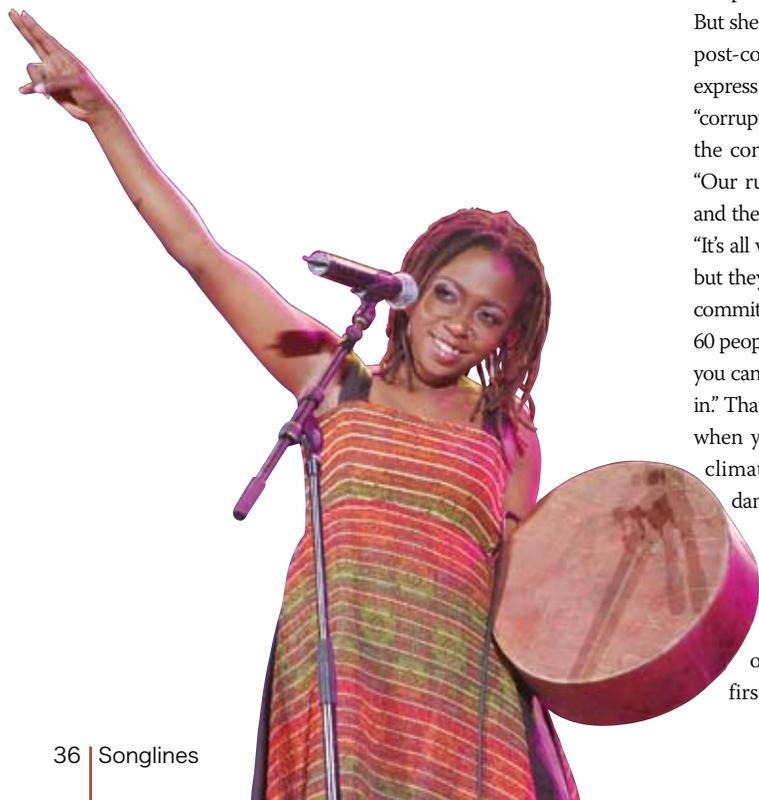
They asked her to join and as a trio, POE went on to redefine southern African rap, rhyming in both English and Shona and integrating synthesized sounds and the natural timbre of the mbira and marimba.

In 1994 POE won a Radio France International contest as 'Best New Group Out Of Southern Africa.' They broke up soon afterwards and Chiwoniso joined the multiracial Zimbabwean group The Storm, led by Andy Brown, whom she also married. Around the same time, the Paris-based Lusafrika label invited her to record a solo album. Backed by members of The Storm, the result was 1995's *Ancient Voices*, a fine hybrid record which combined contemporary styles with Zimbabwean roots.

"The mbira has two functions in our music," she explains. "It's for entertainment but it also has a deep spiritual importance in Shona culture. It opens up channels of communication with our ancestors and the spirits. In the *bira* ceremony, when we

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

Zimbabwean musician Chiwoniso talks to Nigel Williamson about her new album and the plight of her homeland following the much talked-about elections



COUNTDOWN TO CHAOS

ZIMBABWE'S BACK STORY Following a bloody war of independence, Robert Mugabe is installed as Zimbabwe's first president in 1980. Years of political stability follow and – as one of the world's leading producers of tobacco – the economy booms. But as Mugabe's popularity wanes, he seeks to consolidate his powerbase.

1999

Movement for Democratic Change formed (MDC). Morgan Tsvangirai, a trade unionist, elected as their leader the following year.

2000

First invasions of white-owned farms led by War Veterans Association and Chenjerai 'Hitler' Hunzvi.

2003

Tsvangirai arrested twice in June and charged with treason. Acquitted in 2004.

2005

Mugabe's Zanu-PF party wins a two-thirds majority in parliamentary elections. Many observers claim the elections are rigged.

2006

Inflation running at around 1,000%. Government begins its policy of deleting noughts to attempt halting spiralling costs.

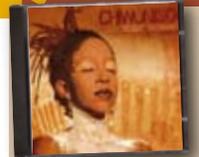
2008

MDC wins first round of general election in March. Election committee stalls over publishing results. Tsvangirai pulls out of second round in June amid intimidation – Mugabe sworn in for another term. In August, possibility of Tsvangirai-Mugabe power sharing muted. Inflation – the highest in the world – running at over two million per cent.

SOURCES: BBC, newzimbabwe.com, therandtoday.com



BOB STEFFER



Win

We have five copies of *Rebel Woman* to give away. To enter, simply answer the following question: What was the name of the rap group Chiwoniso used to sing in?

See p5 for *Songlines* competition rules and address. Closing date October 31 2008

Chiwoniso pictured recently and, opposite page, saluting the crowd at the Africa Day concert in Johannesburg on May 25 this year

communicate with the spirits, there are other instruments like *ngoma* (conga drum) and *hosho* (calabash), but the mbira is the most important. I was shocked when I returned to live in Zimbabwe to find it had stopped being central to the culture.”

That has since changed, she says, in part due to the efforts of a new generation of young musicians keen to embrace their traditional roots and who have found a pride in African culture, which colonialism sought to deny. “I had to return to Zimbabwe to reconnect with my roots and with the mbira. If I was going to put the instrument at the heart of my music, I couldn't do that properly in Seattle. I've funkified its sound to make it relevant to a modern audience but I needed to be in Africa to do it.”

Since the release of *Ancient Voices*, her career has progressed unevenly. She left The Storm, divorced Brown and spent her time raising two children as a single parent. A second solo album, *Timeless*, backed by an all-

acoustic band Vibe Culture, appeared in Zimbabwe in 2004 but failed to secure an international release.

Teaming up with producer Keith Farquharson, (who also worked with A Peace of Ebony and produced *Ancient Voices*), she began recording *Rebel Woman* in 2005. A three-year recording odyssey followed, taking in sessions in Zimbabwe, South Africa, the US and Europe. “It took so long because we had certain musicians we wanted to work with and they were scattered around the world,” she explains. South Africa's Louis Mhlanga provides the albums guitar licks. Zimbabwean drummer Sam Mataure, a veteran of Oliver Mtukudzi's band, lays down the rock solid rhythms and saxophonist-flautist Steve Dyer guides the horn section. Other guests include Cumbancha label mates such as The Idan Raichel Project percussionist Rony Irwyn and Belize's Garifuna champion Ivan Duran, although Chiwoniso's own mbira playing remains at the record's core.

Several songs, such as ‘Kurima’ which tackles the land issue, and ‘Matsoti’ (Land of Peace) which contrasts the plight of Zimbabwe's poor with the riches of a crooked elite, address the current political situation in Zimbabwe. But what the future holds – both personally and for her country – Chiwoniso is far from sure. “I've always been a traveller and given what's going on I might have to move again,” she admits. “I love the country but there are very few gigs in Zimbabwe and the economic situation means there's no money, so life is hard for musicians. But there's a new generation of Zimbabweans at home and abroad committed to change. It's going to take time but you have to believe there's a better future ahead.” ●

***Rebel Woman* is reviewed this issue. In mid-August Chiwoniso decided to move back to the US due to the deteriorating climate in Zimbabwe**

You can hear a track from Chiwoniso's latest album, *Rebel Woman*, on this issue's podcast