

Spirit Leveller

Zimbabwe's Chiwoniso mixes the roots of mbira music with the R&B and rock she heard while growing up in the USA. Rose Skelton traces her learning curve.

Tuesday night, outside a central London club, and Cumbancha's Jacob Edgar is enthusiastically expounding on the merits of pop. He just loves it, he says, and looking through the Virginia-based label's back catalogue, this love of popular music shines through, along with a rare and valuable mix of adventurous musical choices and solid talent. The unforgettable Andy Palacio and his Garifuna Collective, the smooth tones of Malian Habib Koité, the danceable Afro-Peruvian beats from Novalima: they've all managed to deliver sounds, which might have previously been foreign to many people, to a wide audience without losing the essence of it or, worse, scaring them off. It's not something that many people have succeeded in doing.

Cumbancha's latest success, hailing from a musical background in Zimbabwe, is the lovably effervescent Chiwoniso. Part soul-*mbira*, part pop-princess, she's right up Cumbancha's street, with good song-writing tackling heavy social issues close to the experiences of the young singer, tender, vivacious melodies played out on the metal-pronged, hand-held mbira. But she's also very pop, with a feisty voice and forthcoming character. After the gig, I manage to pin her down long enough to talk about her music, and her vast and colourful musical education.

"We had this 800-album collection in the house," she says, drawing on a roll-up in the street outside, "everything from the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Mozart, Bach, Stevie Wonder, Gladys Knight & the Pips, Hugh Masekela. One of the first albums I ever bought was DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, I went and saw Janet Jackson on her Rhythm Nation tour, my father took me to a James Brown concert when I was really young, and the Jackson Five were very big in the house. I grew up in this house where there were all these different sounds that were going on all the time, and my parents weren't shy, they would just share it. They said, 'You guys, take it in'. They didn't try and direct us on any sort of path; for them it was more important that we found where we wanted to go."

Her father was an ethnomusicologist, studying at the University of Washington, and also an mbira player; her mother was a singer. By the age of four, Chiwoniso, who grew up in the States while her father was studying, was performing in public with her parents and siblings. "It's just an instrument that I came to understand," she says

of the mbira, an instrument traditionally used in healing ceremonies amongst the Shona people of Zimbabwe. "There are many different elements to me as an artist; I love to dance, I know how the body can reveal something. I love to speak and to share and to listen, so I know how you can use the voice in different ways and it can say different things. The mbira just became another tool to express things."

She's not the first to use mbira in her music; there is a long tradition of Zimbabwean musicians taking the instrument – made from wood and flat metal prongs in a gourd covered with metal bottle tops – and incorporating it into pop, rock and soul music. Rebel singer and fellow Zimbabwean Thomas Mapfumo uses mbira

throughout his music, and Stella Chiweshe is known as the mbira queen for her gravelly-voiced music. The mbira is to southern Africa what the 21-stringed kora is to west Africa – able to cross boundaries, musical genres, traditions and eras with its universally understandable sound. But Chiwoniso has taken it to a wider audience than others have managed to do in the past, probably because of her varied musical upbringing and subsequent love of soul, R&B, reggae and rock. She's also got that funky young spirit and determination to be heard that draws a natural comparison with Dobet Gnahore (another Cumbancha artist), the Ivorian musical dynamo whose feisty songs simply demand to be listened to.



Photo: Judith Burrows



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Storytelling is a large part of mbira music and watching Chiwoniso on stage, that aspect of the tradition comes across clearly, emerging through the witty introductions and friendly chat with the audience. If she's not telling stories about things which have happened in her own life, then she's telling people about the things she's seen going on in her own country.

"How do I go home to my village," she sings on the lively song *Matsotsi*, "if I have no money for the bus fare? Dear mother, they kill me in this land of thieves, Father, I am dying here in this land of thieves." She's talking about the situation of workers in Zimbabwe who leave their families to find work and can't afford to get home again to visit them. *Kurima*, sung tenderly in a mixture of Shona and English, talks about the issue of land use and ownership. "Take up your spades and plant," she implores, "working to uplift our lives." In *Rebel Woman*, the title track of her recent album, she sings a tribute to the women who fought during Zimbabwe's war for independence. "Remember that you fought for your people, I know the freedom's been hard won... But as you weep rebel woman, remember you were strong."

"Pretty much everything I am singing is something I've experienced or something that I've very closely felt or seen," she says about her choice of song subjects. "If a child comes up and asks me for money, I'll sing about that." In the album's upbeat, horn-filled *Irobukairo*, complete with the singing guitar riffs of Zimbabwean Louis Mhlanga (who cut his teeth recording with Hugh Masekela and King Sunny Adé), Chiwoniso warns of the negative energies and spirits that can break up a happy home: "That bad animal, that bad spirit" that causes husbands and wives to become a waste of time. It makes me wonder how much of her music harks back to the spiritual roots of the *bira* ceremonies that her instrument comes from.

"I've always tended to be aware of everything, but I am also very aware of myself. I'm not the kind of person to go around saying, 'You're wicked because you did that', it's more like, 'This is something which is going on and I sing in that manner'. Hmmm," she ponders, "negative energies. It's very easy to point at other people. But I am aware of my own weaknesses and things I do that are negative towards myself."

The songs, traditionally used to contact the spirits during all-night *bira* ceremonies, can act as a healing mechanism, chasing away harmful spirits and curing illness, as well as bring the sun or rain needed for a successful crop. After death the music is used to welcome the spirit back to the world of the ancestors. For Chiwoniso, the act of singing is a way of healing herself from the difficult experiences she's had.

"Yes, in a big way," she says. "I didn't think that's what this was before but I started to understand that's what it's about. There are things that have affected me deeply in my life and I've found myself singing about it. But at the time when it was happening, I didn't realise it. I'm not the kind of person to run randomly to a counsellor or take sleeping pills [though she admits she has a healthy love of wine!]. I don't like to dwell on things for too long but at the same time there are things that happen that are really deep and it's really hard. It's true that I have a tendency to write songs about it and sing it out. There have been times when I've cried on stage, when I'd start a song and I'm halfway through it and I can't sing it any more because I'm all choked up. So yeah, it's a kind of therapy."

Both on stage and on *Rebel Woman*, Chiwoniso sings in a mixture of Shona and English. The combination works well for mixed-audience storytelling purposes, and sits comfortably with her American-Zimbabwean roots. Recently, after spending her life between both the United States and Zimbabwe, Chiwoniso decided to move with her two daughters to California.

"I am of cross-culture and cross-pollination, like a flower!" she says when I find the words to ask in a way that I hope doesn't sound judgemental about her decision to leave Zimbabwe and move to the US. "It was something I was ducking and diving from for the last four or five years, friends who were saying, 'When are you going to leave Zimbabwe?' I wasn't going to be the Zimbo who's going to leave, I didn't want to leave."

As a place to live and bring up two small children, Zimbabwe isn't the easiest, with a cholera epidemic that has in the last six months claimed more than 3,000 lives and inflation reaching the 'five sextillion per cent' mark in February of this year. Musically, Chiwoniso is outspoken about the political and social situation in her country, and so moving from there to an easier, or less dangerous, life in the States would be easy for some to judge, if she didn't seem quite so torn about it. "It's a good thing," she says of the move, wavering a little as she says it. "I'm still trying to figure out the depth of what it is."



Photo: Judith Burrows

But she's turning it to her own advantage with refreshing positivity, and using the situation to take her music to new places, by trying out different things with a range of people. "There's this whole new beginning of working with new artists, so I get nervous, because I hope they're going to feel where I'm coming from, that they're going to understand what I'm thinking." In 2007, Chiwoniso did a tour of the United States that she says she was really nervous about. "It wound up being one of the most eye-opening, soul-opening experiences that I've ever been through, where it was really about trust and laughter and just figuring things out. Having gone through all of that, I feel there is a magic in music, that there is a magic in being able to move and reach out to certain people and saying, 'Hey, I feel you' and them reaching back and saying, 'Yeah, I feel you too!' I'm going through a huge learning process right now because of the move I made to the States."

In 2007, Chiwoniso took part in a song to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for Amnesty International. Set in the General Assembly Hall of the UN headquarters in New York, she danced and sang with Angelique Kidjo, Natalie Merchant, Yerba Buena and Emmanuel Jal, amongst many others. She also did a show with American singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson, wants to work with Tracy Chapman, and wants to build more strings into her music. "It's a whole different vibe now, I want to work with heavy beats, like dance beats," she says, having been talking it over with some musician friends in Germany. "We were talking about how to do this sound on a whole different level that hasn't been done, so in my head I'm thinking all these things and it's so possible to do that, being in the space that I am now in California."

I venture that those possibilities weren't available to her in Zimbabwe. "No no no no no," she says emphatically. "In Africa there is that possibility. In Zimbabwe, when I sit down with mbira players I feel like I'm learning, like a child." She starts to remember great recording sessions she has had in Africa, from Baaba Maal in Senegal to Hugh Masekela and Manu Dibango. "Yeah, people like that who got the time and are like, 'let's hang out' and you wind up spending seven or eight hours in the studio and going deep deep deep."

Via the internet, she manages to stay connected to the musicians in Africa who she wants to keep working with, sharing her music with them through MP3s and seeing what comes back. "Moving from Zimbabwe had nothing to do with the music at all," she assures me. "It's not about going from one place to another that makes it better, it's going from one place to another opening a different understanding. It's not moving from Africa because it's not possible, it's moving because of wanting to do something different." It'll be fascinating to see what she comes up with.

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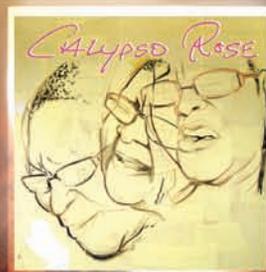
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