



CHIWINISO

mother COURAGE

STORY MICHAEL STONE

Art is often an agent for change. Sometimes it's political change, sometimes it's social change, and sometimes it's personal change. Not surprisingly, the boundaries between these distinctions are blurry for most of us, and can be particularly so for artists who embrace the transformative potential of their craft. This is rarely more the case than with Chiwoniso Maraire.

"I'm a child of three cultures—African-American, South African, and Zimbabwean," she says. "I love all those aspects, and I'm fortunate to have experienced all these cultures. The big issue is how we all can live in this world—how we treat one another in a world driven by ego, ignorance, and the unilateral exercise of power. People tell me, 'Be careful, and don't get involved in politics.' But mine is not a partisan perspective."

On her second album *Rebel Woman* (Cumbancha), Chiwoniso unearths Zimbabwe's deeper history, addressing key social issues and the failed promise of the country's independence. It reflects two years' work with producer, musician and longtime collaborator

Keith Farquharson, and blends new material with some older work—including the title track, which beat out 15,000 entries from 80 countries to take second place in the 2006 International Songwriting Competition's world music category.

"The artist's role is to offer social commentary," she points out. "There's a Shona saying: 'Know where you're coming from, because where you are going is into darkness.' As an African-American, I can say that a lot of our history has been hidden from us. People must know who they are, for knowledge is strength. History inspires me to share what I've learned, to reflect on what we've been missing. So much of our so-called history is still written in the colonial and European vein. We need to make a conscious effort to repudiate misin-

formation about the past, and music can help a lot by passing on the oral history of our culture."

The daughter of noted Zimbabwean ethnomusicologist Abraham Dumisani "Dumi" Maraire, Chiwoniso (Chi, as she is known to her friends and fans) grew up in a musical household in Olympia, Washington. She took up the mbira at age four, and her first recording with her parents, *Tichazomuona*, was released when she was nine.

Moving to Zimbabwe with her family at age 16, the young Chi found common cause with her peers—international musicians in Harare whose cosmopolitan outlook, strong on social commentary, was finger in the eye to a Mugabe regime that was averse to criticism. Urban Zimbabwean music's fusion of rap, reggae, jazz, blues, and traditional folkloric sounds has since become immensely popular; Maraire and her friends believe that music is a very deep vehicle of communication—one where artists have a responsibility to keep speaking.

Since the 1990s, Chiwoniso has acted upon her convictions, first taking part in the recording of *Make Me a Channel of Your Peace: The Nobel Peace Prize, 100 Years*, with Susana Baca, Mari Boine, Kris Kristofferson, and Sinéad O'Connor. She also went to Dakar to perform on the United Nations Development Program's Africa 2015 song project "Les Tams-Tams de l'Afrique," working alongside such iconic artists as Salif Keita, Habib Koité, Manu Dibango, Ishmael Lo, Baaba Maal, and Youssou N'Dour. Her contribution was "Girlchild"—a song about a woman's right to an education (an issue that still gets little traction in Zimbabwe).

Chiwoniso has worked with a variety of organizations to

address women's and children's rights—particularly the Women CARE project, which uses storytelling and art to reach kids. CARE Norway also produced an Africa-focused album that teamed her with three African and four Nordic female artists to address issues of social inequality through music. She is also involved with MUSTLE Africa, which addresses literacy among street youth, orphans, and other vulnerable children.

Chiwoniso gets her passion for working with children from her mother, who stressed the importance of being aware of other people's situations. The family was never affluent, but it was understood that there were children who were less fortunate, which led young Chi to ask some basic questions: Why is there inequality in the world when there is enough for everyone? Why are so many people suffering?

"When I was growing up, I thought I would be a social worker or a pediatrician," she recalls. "I never thought about being a singer, despite my family's music-making and my performing with them. But my gift is the voice I was given, and to speak on behalf of others who are prevented from speaking. My music speaks to social issues and the world we are making for the future."

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, I THOUGHT I WOULD BE A SOCIAL WORKER OR A PEDIATRICIAN. I NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT BEING A SINGER.

The strong-willed song "Rebel Woman" was inspired by a poem she read about women in Zimbabwe's struggle for independence. "The song is about the physical conditions of fighting, and the price people pay," she explains. "The poem's imagery stirred profound feelings in me." Outside of Zimbabwe, it isn't widely known that the country has experienced two revolutions: the First Chimurenga (the Shona word for "struggle") was the two-year (1896-7) Ndebele-Shona revolt against British colonial rule, and was led by a female prophet named Mbuya Nehanda. The second was the independence movement of the 1970s, which included women in Chiwoniso's own family. "Rebel Woman," with its stripped-down hand claps and guitar-mbira melody, closes the album with a simple, pensive narrative that gradually morphs into a searing, unsentimental elegy. The effect is haunting and gut-wrenching—a blow to the head and the heart.

The mood carries over into the single English phrase, "We have only one world to give to the children," which Chi sings in "Only One World." The song's lyrics warn against teaching children racism, separatism, and class distinction—a world that too many of them already know.

"First of all, I'm a single parent with two children," she explains. "Only by taking this seriously do we become true guardians of our children. I am not naïve enough to think that things can be changed overnight—for child soldiers in the Congo, or for child laborers in India—but I absolutely believe that with real effort, if people step in, these situations can change dramatically. Beautiful human beings or deeply disturbed human beings: which do you want? It's really a very simple matter." *

music & CENSORSHIP IN ZIMBABWE

Since the British colonial era, music has played a powerful role in Zimbabwe's political life, as most famously illustrated in the Smith regime's jailing of Thomas Mapfumo. "The Lion of Zimbabwe," whose chimurenga ("struggle") music encouraged young people to cross the Mozambique border to train as guerrilla liberation fighters, tapped a deep cultural sensibility, essentially recreating the traditional mbira sound on the guitar, which spoke compellingly to young people. Mapfumo's early artistic endorsement of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) reinforced the independence struggle, but in recent years, he has criticized ZANU-PF for failing to deliver on its promises, and some Zimbabwe Broadcasting Company (ZBC) radio



jocks have stopped playing his music.

Even Oliver Mtukudzi, who has steadfastly denied political motivation, drew unwelcome government attention

with "Wasakara," a song he characterizes as dedicated to encouraging people to accept the natural aging process. Widely interpreted as a veiled call for President Robert Mugabe (now in his 70s) to resign, the song became a rallying cry for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), although Mtukudzi protested non-partisanship.

Zimbabwean artists have long reported being intimidated for music implicitly or explicitly critical of government policy. Some have gone into exile, as did singer Viomak, while foreign artists like South African DJ-producer DJ Cleo have been barred from Zimbabwe for statements allegedly critical of President Mugabe. In May 2006, noted singer Hosiah Chipanga withdrew from the May Day workers' celebration after anonymous death threats.

The government has cut off broadcast interviews with high-profile artists critical of the regime, and at least two 2007 "Radio Dialogue" shows in Bulawayo were shut down midstream. In fall 2007, ZBC ordered DJs to reduce airplay of urban grooves artists whose double-entendre lyrics have been widely interpreted as critical of the government. In January 2008, rapper Maskiri was reportedly told to change his forthcoming album title or be denied ZBC airplay, while intelligence forces blocked a voter-education concert, even as other artists continued to criticize state radio and TV censorship from the stage.