SOMETIME IN APRIL 1980, a chartered Boeing 707 plane landed at Salisbury’s airport from Gatwick, London. This, in itself, wasn’t unusual, for in the months preceding this charter, with the official end of the war, the airport experienced more air traffic. Even some people who had escaped the country as “border jumpers” — most prominent being Robert Mugabe, who arrived on 27 January 1980 in a plane load from Maputo, Mozambique, after five years in exile — were returning to Southern Rhodesia.

Lord Christopher Soames, Winston Churchill’s son-in-law and Southern Rhodesia’s last British governor, had also arrived in the weeks that followed the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979, which had restored the country to the Commonwealth, shredding Ian Smith’s 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence, before the elections which would bring majority rule.

On this particular Boeing 707 were lighting and sound equipment, technical crew and Mick Carter, a name which outside of reggae annals doesn’t mean a lot. Mick Carter was a tour promoter for Bob Marley and the Wailers and had arrived in Salisbury in the role of the herald, the prophet who would smooth the path of the coming king, reminiscent of the function John the Baptist played for Jesus Christ. “Prepare ye the way of the Lord,” Isaiah wailed, “make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

The journey into Salisbury, the capital of the formerly renegade state of Southern Rhodesia, which for years had been at war, was a flight into the unknown and Carter thought to arrive in religious garb, an Exodus tour jacket: “The people in customs hadn’t a clue what to do, how to deal with us. What got us and everyone through was a huge bag of Bob Marley T-shirts that I had sensibly persuaded Island to give me — no arm in arms, with arms, we’ll fight this little struggle,”

A couple of stanzas later, Bob Marley sings:

“Cause I don’t want my people to be contrary.

Even though about 50,000 mostly black people had died, the new nation under the leadership of guerrilla fighter Robert Mugabe was keen to move away from that past. Instead of vengeance and justice, as the thousands of whites who emigrated in the months leading to independence on 18 April 1980 expected, Robert Mugabe signalled national reconciliation: “[The wrongs of the past must now stand forgiven and forgotten…] It could never be a correct justification that because whites oppressed us yesterday when they had power blacks must oppress them today because they have power.”

BOB MARLEY GOT TO ZIMBABWE — the country he had helped sing into being — against the odds. The new government had no money to bring him to perform. But that was a small matter. Bob Marley would pay from his own pocket for the gig, as his gift to the people of Zimbabwe. But even if the new government did have the means to bring the Rastaman to Salisbury, Marley’s namesake was no fan of his music. Robert Mugabe preferred Beethoven, Bing Crosby, Jim Reeves and others, and was no fan of the hairstyle. “The men want to sing and don’t go to colleges. Some are dreadlocked,” he spat, later in the 1990s, in outrage at the popularity of dreadlocks, Robert Mugabe had urged Zimbabweans to imitate his hairstyle, not Marley’s. So, Mugabe had to be persuaded to invite the Rastaman, whose songs had been listened to with reverence on battery operated wirelesses in the guerrilla camps in Mozambique.

Zimbabwe’s love for Bob Marley was quite by happenstance. Fred Zindi, a scholar of educational psychology, music critic, and writer, was at the 1980 independence show. “We started off, in the 1970s, with Jimmy Cliff (whom Robert Mugabe preferred to Bob Marley), Desmond Dekker and Johnny Nash; those are the artists we knew here until Bob Marley came in 1980,” he told me at his office at the University of Zimbabwe, where he works as a Professor in the Faculty of Education.

Desmond Dekker? Why Desmond Dekker?

“He had a hit,” said Zindi, and then hummed the tune of “The Israelites”.

Since my return to Zimbabwe in 2014 after a decade in South Africa, I have been digging in crates, looking for records, trying to trace Zimbabwe’s sonic cartography through what has been discarded in flea markets, dusty SPAs, shops and what people are selling. Desmond Dekker is a rarity. Forty years after the Rhodesians’ affair with his music, there is almost no trace of his records. What you find is a lot Bob Marley Bob Marley Bob Marley in pristine condition; Bob Marley without sleeves and pockmarked with scratches; Bob Marley with sleeves and in reasonable condition.

“I met Bob Marley after the show and he said: you must teach them people to love my music, man. The people were standing like stooges,” Fred Zindi recalled. And then Bob Marley asked a company man to give Fred Zindi some records, about 50 of them, which he then gave to Mike Mhundwa, a DJ at Radio 3, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation.

In The Herald report a spokesperson for the Walters said: “[We] will be here until next Wednesday but may have to stay longer. It depends on how the people feel.” When someone speaks a truth without realising its full spectrum, the Shona say one is speaking as someone speaks a truth without realising its

This is when the template for Zimbabwe was set down. Tobias Arketa is the harbinger of Potato and the herald of Major E: Tobias Arketa is the ancestor of Winky D.

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Bob Marley left Zimbabwe a few days later and would be dead within a year, but his sound remains and can be said to be part of the Zimbabwean psyche and landscape.
THOMAS MAPFUMO, the co-founder of chimurenga music (with guitarist Jonah Sithole), is also the godfather of Zimbabwean reggae. In the person of Thomas Mapfumo it is to be found both the chimurenga and reggae music, the sonic with the closest connection to the mbira and the drum, Shona metaphysics and ritual, a way of being criminalised by both church and state since colonial conquest in 1890.

In a Moto interview in August 1990, Thomas Mapfumo was asked: “You are known widely as chimurenga king. How do you yourself define chimurenga – is it the rhythm or the message?”

“I don’t want to hair-split issues. We cannot separate the two (message and beat). Chimurenga music is that traditional beat of mbira, rattles and drums played at important gatherings for our ancestors. So I would not outrightly agree that I am the founder of the beat but rather just [someone] who inherited, improved and perfected it and managed to present it using modern electrical instruments and made it to be liked by more people in these high tech times,” was Mapfumo’s response. This was 1990, by which time Thomas Mapfumo had released albums including Mapendo (1983), Chimurenga for Justice (1985), Zimbabwe–Mozambique (1988); Varombo kuVarombo (1989); Chimunorwe (1989) and Chimurenga Masterpiece (1990).

Of interest to the story of reggae’s evolution in Zimbabwe is Chimurenga for Justice, a five-track album on which a mainstream Zimbabwean artist first attempted the sound. In that same year, Misty in Roots, a British Zimbabwean artist first attempted the sound. This was 1990, by which time Thomas Mapfumo had released albums including Mapendo (1983), Chimurenga for Justice (1985), Zimbabwe–Mozambique (1988); Varombo kuVarombo (1989); Chimunorwe (1989) and Chimurenga Masterpiece (1990).

One love you know.
To love the man Mr Thomas
I said I love Mr Thomas
They took Thomas Mapfumo, you know,
You know one day them police men, you know, during Smith regime,
Dem a put him in jail
Dem a put him in jail
Dem a put him in jail
Dem a put him in jail
What?
Why?
Why?
Why?

So let’s love one another
Let’s love one another
Let’s love one another
Let’s love one another

To love the man Mr Thomas
To love the man Mr Thomas
To love the man Mr Thomas
To love the man Mr Thomas

He is a true man African
He is a true man African
He is a true man African
He is a true man African

One love you know.

continued on pg. 5
This song, “Mugurangeda”, from Chimurenga for Justice, was also issued as a single with side two as a dub version. When, in 1988, Thomas Mapfumo released the hit reggae maxi single, “Corruption”, in which he decried the pervasive practice of poaching that took place. It also came with a dub version. Later, on Chimurenga 98, he collaborated with DJ Yuppe Banton on another song, “Set the People Free”. (Yuppe Banton is part of a clutch of DJs that includes Potato and Major E, who mostly charted in English in the faux Jamaican accents, and featured on popular songs from the 1990s.)

On these three songs – “Mugurangeda”, “Corruption”, and “Set the People Free” – Thomas Mapfumo was laying the foundation for the sonic revolution which took shape after 2000, by which time the chimurenga man himself was in Oregon, in a forlorn exile.

A few years ago, from across the Atlantic, Thomas Mapfumo picked a fight with Winky D, by most accounts the star of the Zimbabwean cosmos, which also includes DJs like Toki Vibez, Killer T, Soul Jah Love, Dada D King, Shaddy, Ninja Lipsy and many others. “I listen to a lot what the likes of Winky D are singing and making”, he complained, “like a lot of them are destroying Zimbabwean music,” he stated.

It’s easy to imagine some ardent traditionalists with their faces in a knot when Thomas Mapfumo first electrified the traditional war songs like “Buka tiende” and “Nyama musango”; or when he penned “Hanzvadzidzo”, a beacon for the struggle for liberation. That the mbira song had said to be laid down after the Shona first settled in (or from) Gurasva, the mystical place of origin for the Shona.

In the tune “Gombwe”, the title track of the 1980s eighth album which came out in early 1988, the Zimdancehall champion is beginning to explore Shona spirituality in ways that haven’t encountered in the music’s history. It’s reminiscent, in fact, of Thomas Mapfumo’s own trajectory. Mapfumo recalls the 1960s and 1970s Rhodesian music scene: “there was no consciousness among our artists; they were into copy music, very few of them wrote their own music at the time because that was a British colony. Everything the radio played was foreign and people had to go for foreign music, politics was very low at the time. People never thought of that. They never believed in themselves. They thought the white man was superior, he was untouchable, he was like God.”

In “Gombwe”, Winky D chants: “Mangoma ayo ndabwa nobva kunyika dzimu / Ano achtawamba navadzimu / Gefungwisa ndini rino / Abva avachevedza samiriro / Ndini gombwe rengamana paffa rihondo motapaza / (I have brought these tunes from the spirit world/ these tunes were being enjoyed by our dead ancestors / I thought to bring them here/ they made people cry as if at a funeral/ I am a spirit medium and I hold conferences with the dead ancestor about this sound).”

In some ways, Thomas Mapfumo and the Chimurenga Chants have been able to transcend the boundaries between the two worlds, between the music and the life of their times. Once, a chanteuse who updated the mbira sound for the R&B generation, belonging on the same sonic, spiritual and modernist continuum, geniuses with gords in hand, which they use to draw deep from the recesses of Shona metaphysics. When Winky D continues on his current trajectory, the master of the Jamaican-Zimbabwean DJ style might one day join this pantheon.

The radio, it’s no exaggeration to say, occupied a central place in the living room of most homes. It was reminiscent of the hua, the raised mound directly opposite the entrance to the hut used by many as the kitchen, where we knew to commune with the ancestors and pour libations and perform other sacraments. The ancestors responded through references dzimu, the root for the word spirit world; dzimudzongo, the inversion of that; and dzimudzongwa, the inversion of that, which is said to be so tall that you can barely see its head.
hand hovering over the “record” button, waiting to press “record” on the tune I liked and would love to replay whenever I wanted.

FOR OUR GENERATION, Dennis Wilson was one-person whose shows were recorded weekly, and endlessly replayed. Dennis Wilson was a Jamaican Briton who had found a job as technician at Posts & Telecommunication Corporation of Zimbabwe, the local telecommunications parastatal. He had started off playing at friends’ parties and had then been invited to play on Radio 3. Back in the United Kingdom, Wilson had been involved in the Downbeat Sound system in Fulham and taken part in the sound system clashes involving Duke Reid Sound, Coxsone, and others.

“People ask me, why Zimbabwe, and I ask them why not? I don’t know where my ancestors came from. Sometimes the way I feel about Zimbabwe it could be here,” Dennis Wilson told me in 2016.

Once, the DI went on a visit to the rural home of one of his friends, a descent into the old country resembling the land from which his ancestors had been kidnapped. There, an old man, referencing the old identities which cease the moment Dennis Wilson’s ancestors got off that boat, asked him about his totem. It had been a few centuries since Dennis Wilson left and he was at a loss. “What’s that?” Dennis Wilson asked back. They would have explained to him how the Shona tribes have an animal, or part of an animal – the heart, say – or a feature from nature (the river, as was the case with Morgan Tsvangirai) that they hold sacred and that they can’t eat, or with which they can’t be familiar.

When Wilson said he didn’t have a totem, the old man offered to adopt him, to embrace him in his own totemic expand. “Don’t worry,” the elder had said, “you can have mine!” “That made me feel so accepted. It meant so much to me,” Dennis recalls.

IN MBARE AND MABVUKU, highfields and Kambuzuma (where Winky D is from), and other ghettos in Harare, in Mutupajana, Umvevo and other ghettos in Chitungu, in Senga and Mhoba in Gweru, and in many other towns and cities, young listeners considered Dennis Wilson’s name as totemic and, twice every week, had a date with him.

When Linton Kwesi Johnson chanted that “Inglan is a bitch”, the youths, probably looking at the dusty roads, clogged sewers and cramped conditions they lived in, found the incantations true for them as well. When U-Roy enjoined the massive and crew to dance to “King Tubby skank”, it was in the ghetto community halls Ian Smith had built that the youth danced with the most frenzy. And the “late night blues”, Don Carlos voiced so funerally, were at their most real in the ghettos.

Harare’s spatial politics of ghetto and suburb, rich and poor, crowded and spacious, rugged and polished go back to the foundations of the city itself. Today, the division is marked by Samora Machel Avenue (previously, Jameson Avenue, named for Cecil John Rhodes’s right-hand man and lover, Dr Leander Starr Jameson). The city’s division was once signalled by two features: the Kopje, the small mountain in the south which the white settlers had originally chosen to settle in, in September 1890, and Causeway, in the north east, a nondescript piece of land near a stream which had been drained of water.

An observer quoted in Tsune Yoshikuni’s African Urban Experiences in Colonial Zimbabwe: A Social History of Harare before 1925, wrote: “[The two ends have ever since been playing the monotonous game of ‘pull devil, pull baker’] to the infinite loss of Salisbury itself... Causeway and Kopje have become political terms in their little way, and the thing is so notorious that a Bulawayan orator is said to have recently adjured his fellow citizens not to be as Salisbury, a house perpetually divided against itself.”

So today, via a sinuous route, Zimdancehall looms over all, this sound, which grew and found sustenance in the ghettos, was first voiced in English using borrowed Jamaican accords, which morphed into Shona chants, and now has become the primary tool of Zimbabwe’s reintegration. Urban grooves and hop – hop – the sound transmitted in the accords shaped in the private schools of the lush northern suburbs of Borrowdale, Greendale, and Mount Pleasant – will in the shadow cast by Zimdancehall.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back to the beginning.