

Music is my life
Tuesday, December 1, 2009

Since 1975 when he started recording Oliver Mtukudzi has produced 57 albums. His music has evolved from the exclusive use of modern electrical instruments to African traditional instruments like the mbira and marimba although his acoustic guitar still carries the Tuku Music trademark.

Mtukudzi's music has always been characterized by innuendos. He believes the power of art is the ability to communicate figuratively and still be understood universally.

But the overriding theme in all his music is self-discipline – an outstanding human quality in Mtukudzi himself. There is a relationship and never conflict between Mtukudzi and his music. Music is his life and daily life experiences make his music. Tuku's philosophy is that as long as mankind exists, there is always something to talk about. And if there is something to talk about there is always something to sing about. Because of his consistency in tackling socio-economic and political issues he endeared himself to Zimbabweans who regard him not only as an entertainer but mentor and role model.



Zimbabwean artists, more so musicians, have for long been accused of incorrigibility and a laissez-faire attitude towards Hiv and Aids while the pandemic was wiping out entire musical bands. Mtukudzi was among the first artists who came out strong making public commitment to support initiatives to combat Hiv and Aids. Mtukudzi's own sibling, Robert, a musician who played alongside his brother died of Aids. While artists were generally still cocooned in self-denial of the debilitating disease, Mtukudzi publicly disclosed his brother's cause of death and implored the nation to fight the Hiv and Aids stigma which he believed was the reason for self-denial among the infected and the affected.

His music and short films combine story-telling, entertainment and education. When he sings about polygamy, which is a sub-culture in African society, he advises against the risks of Hiv and Aids. When he sings about teenage wayward behaviour and the use of drugs he also advises against the risks of Hiv and Aids. Even feature films, among them the award winning Neria

(1991), (where he acted one of the lead roles), which is about inheritance controversies, communicates some of the values without which dysfunctional families stand the risk of Hiv and Aids.

Was My Child and Jit including his latest film Ndichirimudiki (2008) can be categorized as education – a combination of education and entertainment. The plots centre on daily life experiences. Mtukudzi has worked with children, whose parents have died from Aids, to produce a CD on Hiv and Aids that seeks to enhance Hiv and Aids awareness. His distinguished work has been acknowledged through countless awards in Zimbabwe and abroad. The Zimbabwe government honoured him as a Music Ambassador whilst the University of Zimbabwe and the Women's University in Africa conferred him with honorary degrees in the Arts.

Mtukudzi founded and operates an arts academy in Norton near Harare called Pakare Paye Arts Centre. The centre has taken talented school leavers off the streets to be developed in music, drama, film, story telling, poetry, et cetera. The centre hosts a variety of events among major festivals. Mtukudzi (57) is married to Daisy. His children Selmar and Sam took after their father's career in music and have become notable names in Zimbabwe's arts sector. Mtukudzi, who is affectionately known by his legion of fans as Tuku, short for Mtukudzi, was born in the capital's ghetto neighborhood of Highfield in a musical family. His father and mother, sisters and a brother were singers. The legacy of music in the Mtukudzi family has been handed over from one generation to another.



Oliver Mtukudzi: The music...the man...the story

Saturday, 07 November 2009 06:38

All his life when he recorded his debut single in 1975 to this day - 57 albums on - Oliver Mtukudzi has written and performed some of the most heart rending music against hatred and violence. He has composed music appealing for restraint, for tolerance...music about self-discipline and peace amongst the people of the world. His music has continued to touch people in many different ways, guiding and stirring past generations in the same manner the compositions will impact on the future. In this abridgement of Oliver Mtukudzi: The music...the man...the story, SHEPHERD MUTAMBA attempts an insight into the work and philosophy of one of music's own legends.



ABOVE: Oliver Mtukudzi and the Black Spirits

In the beginning

Oliver's musical career started at the age of 23 with the 1975 release of his debut single, *Stop After Orange*. He only went professional two years later in 1977 teaming up with Thomas Mapfumo at the famous Wagon Wheels Band and recording *Dzandimomotera* which was inspired directly by Zimbabwe's 1970s war of liberation. The song depicted the black man's life struggles under the minority white settler regime.

In 1979 Oliver left Wagon Wheels to launch a solo career and forming his own band The Black Spirits – a group of rag-tag young stylish ghetto boys who were to become a sure force on the music scene, progressing into a household name in the ensuing years.

Oliver recalls: "When we left the Wagon Wheels, we thought we would continue using the same name (Wagon Wheels) but the management we had left behind put together another band which they called by the same name. Naturally we thought the continued use of the name would confuse people and we came up with our own name, The Black Spirits."

In terms of lyrical composition, in the period leading to Zimbabwe's 1980 independence, Oliver's music was a mix of the revolutionary jam songs with undertones targeting the repressive Rhodesian regime. Yet he also composed the day-to-day social context music about life and the essence of ubuntu (humanity).

Music against oppression

“Before independence it was the fight against the Rhodesian regime. My music then spoke against oppression and the repressive regime and how we were suffering at the hands of the regime. I left school and for three years I couldn't find a job yet I was one of the few guys among my peers with a fine secondary education. But I couldn't get a job because I was black. My music then helped people identify themselves...who we were and what we wanted to be.”

In all his music in pre-independence Oliver never took on the Rhodesian regime head-on preferring the power of metaphor to communicate meaning.

“I wasn't afraid of anyone. The beauty of the Shona language (the majority vernacular language in Zimbabwe) is that it is endowed with all those rich idioms and metaphor...and the beauty of art is that you can use the power of language to craft particular meaning without necessarily giving it away. So, I used the beauty of Shona to communicate in my own way and people got the message.

“At independence I did praise songs just like most of the artists during that era because it was justifiably celebration time. I did songs like Zimbabwe that was celebratory music...songs like Gore reMasimba eVanhu (Year of the People's Power). I was celebrating the demise of the regime and the advent of black majority rule. But over and above celebrating I was also singing about self-discipline and restraint in that new era be it at social or political level.”

To this day Oliver incorporates the aspect of self-discipline and tolerance in his repertoires. He is emotional about the socio-cultural norms and principles that govern the Shona traditional way of life particularly the respect for the next person.

The West Nkosi experience

As his music made waves in the 1970s his popularity rose. His writing prowess and style of singing attracted big names among African producers among them West Nkosi – a respected South African who came to Zimbabwe in search of music.

Was Oliver's music to lose its originality after Nkosi's South African influence?

“I don't think the influence of South Africa was there. It's just that I introduced the keyboard in my music. And South Africans then were using the keyboard a lot in their music. So when I introduced the keyboard people said West Nkosi was influencing me.

“One thing about our music and South African music is that the music is the same, really. If it

weren't for a handful of people who created these geographical boundaries we would be the same people in many respects. West Nkosi came to produce me because he was looking for new sound and if he was to influence my music he was going to get the same sound that he was running away from in South Africa. He wanted fresh music so he got me, Zexie Manatsa, Susan Mapfumo...all of us."

Success did not come easy for Oliver who also hit hard times along the way, splitting with his band but moving on with other backing groups notably the KweKwe based Zig Zag Band in Zimbabwe's Midlands province, 213 kilometers south of Harare, where Oliver relocated and also lived for many years.

Institution of The Black Spirits

Despite splitting with The Black Spirits, reuniting but losing other members in the process, over fundamental business etiquette, Oliver has always spoken well about the institution of The Black Spirits and the many members who have been part of the band over the last 35 years.

"It is quite obvious that every member of The Black Spirits, past and current, is unique in his and her own way and I truly believe God does not duplicate talent. All the guys I have played with had their own individual contribution to my music.

I cannot be said to have mentored all those I have played with in The Black Spirits because we are talking about talent here and not education. The education part only came when and where I would advise them on how the song would go but I am and was always open to their contributions when arranging music. I actually learnt a lot from all the band members."

The list below comprises artists who have performed with Oliver in The Black Spirits between 1979 and 2009:

- Never Mpofu (bass)
- Sam Mataure (drums)
- Erik 'Picky' Kasamba (percussion)
- Charles Chipanga (marimba)
- Onai Mutizwa (mbira)
- Namatai Mudariki (hosho)
- Vimbai Zimuto (mbira)
- Sam Mtukudzi - session (acoustic & sax)
- Bartholomew Chirenda - late (guitar)
- James Austin (drums)
- Joseph Alpheus (bass)
- Robert Mtukudzi - late (keyboards)
- Kenny Munemo (vocals)
- George Pada - late (saxophone)
- Basil Phiri - late (saxophone)
- Max Chimusoro (guitar)
- Felix John (guitar)

- Lazarus 'J. Bunga' Matchazile (vocals)
- Mandla Mgabhi (percussion)
- Moses Mulla Nyaruka (guitar)
- Mwendu Chibindi – late (vocals & hosho)
- Nicholas Kunaka – late (percussion)
- Paul Hammer (fender, rhodes and piano)
- Phinda Mtya (vocals)
- Richard Matimba – late (keyboards)
- Samuel Mutowa (percussion)
- Steve Dyer (Soprano, saxophone & flute)
- Suthukazi Arosi (vocals)
- Themba Mkize (keyboard)
- Thale Makhene (percussion)
- Job Muteswa (drums)
- Albert Kapondoro - late (bass)
- Ashton Mutaviri (bass)
- Dudu Ngobani (vocals)
- Keith Farquharson (keyboards)
- Kere Mapfumo (vocals)
- Louis Mhlanga (guitar)
- Peter Mtowa – late (sound)
- Celia Ndlovu (vocals)
- Florence Tinarwo (vocals)
- George Phiri (vocals)
- Herbie Tsoaeli (bass)
- James Manyungwa (drums)
- Japan Sidoyi (Hammond)
- Clive Mutyasira (drums)
- Kenny Neshamba (percussion & congos)
- Merry Bell (vocals & hosho)
- Philani Dube - late (guitar)
- Clive Mono Mukundu (first acoustic)
- James Hambahamba (keyboard)

Tours and collaborations

Between recording and performing in the region Oliver made modesty inroads overseas particularly in the US and the UK attracting sizeable crowds at his shows. But his legion of fans was to grow and he now enjoys packed houses at nearly all his shows. Every year he tours the US and the UK for performances while southern African venues are regular destinations in his itinerary.

While performing regionally Oliver has used the opportunity to make friends and record duets with foreign artists notably among them the likes of Max Wild, Ringo Madlingozi, Steve Dyer and Yvonne Chaka Chaka and sharing the stage with the likes of Ray Lema, Lucky Dube, Manu Dibango, Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Maureen Lilanda, Taj Mahal, Toumani Diabate,

Baana Maal...the list is long. At home he has been involved in numerous duets with top divas among them Fungisai Zvakavapano and Bonnie Deuschle and James Chimombe. Oliver has remained a huge attraction at the top billing jazz festivals in South Africa and in Zimbabwe and has received numerous musical awards at the Zimbabwe Music Awards (ZIMA), National Arts and Merit Award (NAMA) and the regional KORA.

Mahube

Oliver is a founding member of Mahube, a regional band made up of artists from Southern Africa including artists among them Steve Dyer, Louis Mhlanga and Sam Mataure. Mahube has recorded albums and performed at regional and international festivals in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Germany, Swaziland, Mozambique and Zambia.

Tribute to Zexie Manatsa

After years of protracted lobbying by Oliver to have the music industry support his idea of artistes awarding outstanding individual fellow artistes for distinguished contributions to music, the Zimbabwe Music Awards (ZIMA) finally endorsed the Cheuka Shure/Bheka Emva award that was conceptualized by Oliver.

Cheuka Shure/Bheka Emva is now a permanent category in the annual ZIMA awards. For conceptualizing the award ZIMA gave Oliver the honors of awarding the maiden trophy (2006) to an artiste of his choice closest to his heart for shaping his career and nurturing him. As such, Oliver honored Zexie Manatsa, the legendary township music hero who made strings of hits in the 1970s.

Oliver told me in 2006 about the Cheuka Shure/Bheka Emva award:

“As artists we have our own role models in music...people who inspire us musically and support our creative work. Over the years we have been lobbying the industry, including musical awards, to consider proposals for musicians to honor fellow musicians.

“The proposals have unfortunately been falling on deaf ears until now when ZIMA has accepted my idea to provide the platform for musicians to honor fellow musicians. The idea is to acknowledge what other musicians (and in other cases non-musicians) have done in shaping or developing the musical careers of artistes.

“ZIMA accepted the whole idea including my proposal that Zexie Manatsa should receive the debutant award in recognition of his role in nurturing me during my formative years as a musician. I owe a great deal to Manatsa for exposing me to the music industry at performance level.

“Manatsa took me as his supporting act on tour in the country in the 1970s, the very first time for me to perform in regions like Matabeleland. I didn't have musical instruments and Manatsa provided them.

“Over the years Manatsa had his low moments in music when things did not work for him well.

But he did not allow his misfortune to affect his career. He persevered, rising from the ashes to move on with his career. There are musicians who have failed to rise from hard times and have allowed misfortune to kill their career. But not for Manatsa, for that inspirational perseverance it was justified to honor him.”

That same year of the launch of Cheuke Shure/Bheka Emva Oliver directed the opening performance of a musical at the awards whose line-up included Alick Macheso, Fungisayi Zvakavapano, Oliver himself, Dudu Manhenga, Philip Svosve, Albert Nyathi, Andrew Baird and Charles Summerfield.

Tuku Music: The turning point

The turning point in Oliver’s recording career was in 1999 when he released Tuku Music under Putumayo World Music in the USA and several other regions including the Far East. He went on to release under labels such as Blu in Europe, Connoisseur Collection in the UK and Sheer Sound in South Africa including the Zimbabwe Music Corporation.

At home the album pushed Oliver’s fortunes and ratings even higher, his shows packed like never before. Fans particularly liked songs such as Dzoka Uyamwe (Dande) – a sing-along tune about a lonely figure in a faraway land contemplating going back home. It became a chart buster and sales soared to record levels.

Past members of the Black Spirits believe Tuku Music was the landmark album. Erik “Picky” Kasamba, the longest serving member of the band who worked with Oliver for 25, years told me about the album: “It was the Tuku Music album that opened the world for me because the album was accepted worldwide. That was the album for me.”

Evolution of Tuku Music

As the years progressed so did Oliver’s music and markedly so. He introduced traditional musical instruments such as the mbira and marimba replacing keyboards and the guitar but retaining his trademark acoustic and bass.

“Since I started playing music I have always been influenced by traditional instruments unlike today’s youngsters who feel inferior associating with our own traditional instruments. So I said I should inspire the youngsters and show them the beauty of our traditional instruments and how the instruments can play any other kind of music. This change will inspire the younger generation of artists and make them proud of our traditional instruments. After all, the world out there is looking for more of our authentic traditional Zimbabwean music. Let’s give them the music.

“People were surprised I could play the same music with traditional instruments just as good as I did with electrical instruments and how the music still sounded the same and very fresh. But initially fans were a bit skeptical about the development...yet the change was simply facial on stage in terms of the composition of instruments but the music was basically still the same.”

Oliver's music has come to be known as Tuku Music.

“I was the last person to know that my music is called Tuku Music. I knew my music was simply African music but it was actually my fans who labeled it as such. And in my research with the fans they said my music was uniquely influenced by the mbira, there is jiti, there is tsavatsava, katekwe, there is dinhe...it might be a ballad but you can feel those elements. So they labeled it uniquely Tuku Music.”

Passion for film

With a passion for the silver screen Oliver has made short films including Ndichirimudiki (2008) which he directed and was shown at the Zimbabwe International Film Festival the same year. He has participated in numerous documentaries on Zimbabwean music including Was My Child - a musical production - but his success in film came in 1990 when he played the lead character in Jit, Zimbabwe's first feature film.

A year later in 1991 Oliver played another lead role in another feature film Neria one of the country's best feature films to date. He also composed and directed the music in the film including the sound track Neria that went on to be a classic in its own right.

Voice of voiceless

While Oliver has composed “political” music, although he himself does not call it such, preferring to call it educational music, he has steered away from partisan politics.

“I have done my job well as an artist. I represent Zimbabweans regardless of their political inclinations, regardless of religion. I represent them all. People of divergent political beliefs come to my shows and they sing and dance together in harmony. I don't have any special Zimbabwean that I stand for...I stand for all Zimbabweans. That is what I am, that is what my music is. I don't dabble in partisan politics because I serve everyone and all Zimbabweans.”

Oliver knows exactly what he wants. The clear thoughts in his compositions are testimony of the brilliance with which he knits together complex issues with the technique of a genius - all the reason for his official recognition by the Zimbabwe government as the country's music ambassador. But Oliver modestly accepted the honour. He believes every musician is an ambassador in his or her own right.

He went on to grace the cover of the international Time Magazine in April 2003, not an easy feat for any artist, the magazine describing Oliver as the “Voice of the Voiceless”.

His music speaks about building bridges, about solidarity, hope and healing. He has composed sad music which has often been misinterpreted joyful, happy compositions because of the complex style of writing which he sometimes employs in his compositions. But such is Oliver's power of artistic creativity and the gift to craft and use intricate metaphor in a manner and style unique only to him.

During the 1970s war of liberation, leading to independence from Britain in 1980, Oliver wrote about people's power, freedom and hope in songs such as Dzandimomotera - a troubled man's prayer for redemption and Mutavara about a man bidding farewell as he leaves home to take up arms.

Oliver used veiled language in his lyrics for two reasons: to attack white Rhodesian dominance and escape trouble which allowed him to live and fight another day. His almost routine metaphor then and even more significantly in post-independence could also be viewed as Oliver's mere show of ingenuity and total ease with all the sophistications of the rich shona language.

His compositions rightly celebrated majority rule at independence with hits like Zimbabwe and Africa which symbolized the people's determination for self-rule.

Oliver has adapted poetry in his repertoire notably Kanyanisa created by Chirikure Chirikure in the 1980s and published in 1994. The poetry is a broad based analysis that if you mess up someone they can mess you up in retaliation be it at family, social or political level.

The strong themes and language engaged by Oliver are driven by his desire to see the world conquer hate, fear and greed.

In an interview with Mai Palmberg in the book *Sound of Change – Social and Political Features of Music in Africa* (2004) published by Sida, Oliver commenting on the way the situation was panning out in Zimbabwe said: "I still don't understand why our government has chosen to sacrifice so much to retain the reins of power. The lack of tolerance toward dissenting voices is a great disappointment to me. Party politics will be the ruin of Africa especially when there are so many serious issues facing the country right now, like famine and Aids. Why we can't just combine all our energies to deal with these real-life issues is a mystery to me. Dialogue and instilling a discipline of non-violence are the only ways to remain victorious over the many challenges that are currently facing us as a nation. That is a message I would like to convey to all those who are perpetrating senseless acts of violence on fellow Zimbabweans, as they can never wash the blood off their hands."

Popular tracks underlining tolerance and non-violence include Tozeza Baba and Ngoromera, (Hatidi Hondo).

Wasakara from the 2000 album *Bvuma-Tolerance* could be singled out for the controversy that surrounded the release. It would also appear Wasakara ruffled some feathers in political circles. The song implores aged people to accept old age. Music critics and music fans interpreted the song to mean that "aged and tired" political leaders must go. But Oliver said Wasakara was simply about ageing. Period!

Oliver sees motherland ensnared in a web of wars pitting Africa against its own people. And so he continuously uses his music to preach peace and love.

"Zimbabweans and the people of Africa are facing a new war against their very own lives. The new war is called hopelessness and it is fueled by fear. There is fear of the unknown. Fear of

other people. Fear of losing. Fear of someone else being better. Fear of ourselves becoming worse. So, we fight and see enemies when we should be seeing friends. There is violence to replace our voice. That should not be. We don't have time, we must act now, life is at stake.

“Africa has fought so hard for our freedom, now must we fight ourselves in the streets and in the villages and create new wars?”

Arts centre that Oliver built

Oliver's dream was always to identify and develop artistic talent at community level and he realized this when he established Pakare Paye Arts Centre in Norton – 45 kilometres west of Harare. The centre provides young musicians resources to develop their talents under the tutelage of specialist artists including composers, sound and light engineers, producers, guitarists, drummers, stage and film actors. University students are attached to the center for practical experience. The centre's areas of specialization include storytelling, music, script-writing, dance, poetry and drama.

Pakare Paye Arts Centre is also a multi-purpose complex with a massive outdoor garden stage and an auditorium with state-of-the-art facilities, a restaurant and bar.

Music runs in family

The eldest in a family of seven, Oliver was born in a musical family where both his father and mother were notable singers. But with the death of his father Oliver found himself thrust in a position of immense responsibility looking after his siblings including Robert Mtukudzi who played keyboards in The Black Spirits.

Oliver's son Sam and daughter Selmor are both recorded artists playing in their own separate bands.

“I thank God for giving me time to have such a long history. I am humbled and most importantly I have been lucky to be able to share the stage with my children. Most of my peers of my time did not get that chance.”

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