

Zimbabwe Keeps Protest Music Muffled

Some Hear a Message in a Subtle Song

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BULAWAYO, Zimbabwe -- The crowd at the Large City Hall here had become a sweaty, tipsy, swaying throng by the time Oliver Mtukudzi played his most controversial song, "Wasakara." As he sang in his native Shona, "Admit it, you are wrinkled. . . . You are worn out," several members of the crowd pointed upward.

There, above the stage, hung a framed portrait of a man wearing a dark suit, with the narrow wisp of a mustache running from his lip to his nose. The picture -- the same one found in hotel lobbies, car rental agencies and government offices throughout Zimbabwe -- was of 80-year-old Robert Mugabe, the only ruler this southern African nation has known.

Such gestures are among the few public protests Zimbabweans still make after years of repression under Mugabe.

During the fight against white-minority rule in Rhodesia, which culminated in the creation of independent Zimbabwe in 1980, musicians such as Mtukudzi and Thomas Mapfumo provided the soundtrack. But more than two decades later, Mugabe's government keeps far tighter control over political expression -- including music -- than Rhodesia ever did.

Zimbabwean musicians say they rarely can get protest songs recorded. When they do, the songs are almost never played on radio stations, all of which are owned by the government.

Mtukudzi's music gets airplay, but he has repeatedly disavowed the widespread interpretation of "Wasakara," which translates to English as "You are worn out." He says his songs are based on timeless themes and are not about particular people or events. "Wasakara," he says, is about growing old and the wisdom that comes from experience.

But he doesn't begrudge his fans for interpreting a song however they choose. He plays "Wasakara" at almost every public performance.

"All my songs work yesterday, today and tomorrow," Mtukudzi said in an interview. "My definition of a good song is a song that the next person is able to use."

Mapfumo is far more outspoken, but does most of his talking from the United States, where he moved in 2000 because, he said, it was no longer safe for him or his family in Zimbabwe. He returns for performances each Christmas, but his political songs are rarely played on the radio -- a problem he didn't face when the Rhodesian government owned the stations.

"It was easier in those days," Mapfumo said in a telephone interview from his home in Oregon. "Today we have a black government and . . . it's even worse. It's very irritating. You are trying to tell the people the truth, what is happening in their country, and somebody is trying to shut you down."

The muting of protest music comes as Zimbabwe's economy is shrinking, hunger is widespread, the rate of HIV infection is among the world's highest and opposition leaders are frequently harassed by the government.

The airwaves, meanwhile, are filled with endless hours of propaganda songs extolling the virtues of Mugabe and his ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front.

In one song receiving heavy play, pro-government singer Tambaoga complains about British Prime Minister Tony Blair's supposed attempts to reestablish Zimbabwe as a colony, a favorite theme in Mugabe's speeches. The twist is that the word "blair" in Zimbabwe also refers to the crude pit latrines common in rural areas across the country.

Tambaoga switches out of Shona to sing the punch line in English: "The only Blair that I know is a toilet."

The line provokes amused smiles from many Zimbabweans, even those who dislike Mugabe. But Mapfumo says the song is just another example of the one-sided nature of political debate in Zimbabwe.

"Everything is just propaganda. They are trying to fool the people," Mapfumo said. "You cannot call somebody a toilet. . . . I don't think that is right."

His most famous protest song is "Mamvemve," a Shona word that translates as "tatters."

"The country you used to cry for is now in tatters," Mapfumo sings. "Let's get out of here. The country you used to cry for is now run by crooks."

As the government has restricted political messages in music, protest songs have gone underground. The recordings are sold by musicians, then passed around by hand and copied.

Raymond Majongwe, a protest singer, said he had sold a total of 10,000 copies of his four albums, all recorded in South Africa because no Zimbabwean company would produce them. He has tried to deliver them to stores and radio stations, but none would take them, he said.

To get a copy of Majongwe's music, fans go to his office at the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, of which he is secretary general. He charges the equivalent of \$1 for a tape and \$2.50 for a CD.

In October 2002, he was arrested twice and beaten and tortured by police, who applied electric shocks to his genitals, he said. More recently, in March, Majongwe was targeted in what he said was an assassination attempt.

Majongwe, who attributes the government's animosity to both his roles, union leader and protest singer, said he had never tried to hold a public concert because of his fear that police would intervene violently. The situation would be even worse, Majongwe said, if he didn't practice what he called "self-censorship" by never mentioning Mugabe or his ruling party by name in a song.

He said that Mtukudzi has made a similar calculation in disavowing the political interpretations of "Wasakara." "He's also a clever politician," Majongwe said. "It's only a fool who will go against the wind. He'd be crushed."

Despite Mtukudzi's caution, police in 2000 interrupted one of his concerts. As he played "Wasakara," a lighting technician aimed a spotlight on the picture of Mugabe near the stage. Police arrested the technician and kept him in a squalid cell for four days, according to reports.

Two years later, during hotly contested national elections marked by extensive political violence and reports of vote-rigging, Mtukudzi released another album, "Vhunze Moto," which in Shona means "burning ember."

Several of the songs revived debate about whether he was slipping subtle political messages into his lyrics. The album cover pictured a bright yellow flame covering a map of Zimbabwe.

Mtukudzi again said the controversy resulted from coincidences and misinterpretations. He also has made clear that he has no desire to follow Mapfumo into exile, despite the difficult times in his country.

"Zimbabwe is home," Mtukudzi said. "What can I do?"