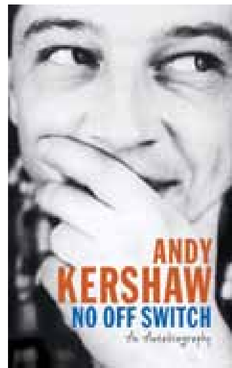

BOOK Andy Kershaw's eagerly-awaited autobiography, *No Off Switch*, is published this month. It includes memorable accounts of programming the Clash and the Rolling Stones at Leeds University; *The Old Grey Whistle Test* and Live Aid; John Peel and Radio 1; travels in Haiti, Rwanda and North Korea and his breakdown and recovery in the last few years. Exclusively for *Songlines*, this is an edited version of his chapter on travelling with the Bhundu Boys' Biggie Tembo to Zimbabwe in 1988

JAK KILBY

"YOU HAVE A EUROPEAN SKIN BUT AN AFRICAN HEART"

Opposite: Biggie Tembo (left), frontman of the Bhundu Boys, at the Town and Country Club, London in October 1987
Below: Biggie with Andy's Grandma Norah in Rochdale for Christmas in 1989; Andy and Biggie at the Victoria Falls in 1988

Biggie Tembo and I were propping up the bar of the Mean Fiddler, at the time London's premier live roots music venue, located unhelpfully in Harlesden. Biggie's band, The Bhundu Boys, had just finished another delirious gig. A lava flow of fans was pouring out of the venue, to stand smiling, chattering and steaming in the taxi queues. Typically, for Bhundus disciples, they seemed, by the end of the evening, to have been hosed down.

"Comrade, comrade, I really don't understand," Biggie was saying. It was 1987 and Zimbabweans were still in post-independence euphoria and on an indefinite honeymoon with their liberator from the apartheid-in-all-but-name of Ian Smith's Rhodesia. Robert Mugabe had not yet fully revealed the extent of his madness and his avowed Marxism had lent to Zimbabweans' everyday conversation smatterings of communist nomenclature. Personally, as a leftie myself, although of the militantly woolly-minded variety, I quite liked comrade as a form of address, it being classless, genderless, chummy (but respectfully so) and assuming, however optimistically, a universal solidarity. It is certainly preferable to the modern infestation – Australian in origin, I suspect, but now the *lingua franca* of white van men everywhere – of an assumption on the part of strangers that they can call you 'mate'.

Where were we? Oh, yes. At the Mean Fiddler with Biggie... "Don't understand what?" I asked him. "Ah, all this fuss, comrade, here in Britain, about the Bhundu Boys." "Well, I do, Biggie," I said. "It's because you've got an absolutely wonderful band." I'll never forget his answer. And his lumpy syntax. "Maybe, comrade. But in Zimbabwe, there are 300 groups which are much more better than us."

I looked at my friend. He had his sheepish face on, always a sign that he was being honest. "You are joking, aren't you, Biggie?" If true, this was serious stuff. "Oh, no," he said. "They are everywhere. When I next go back home, you should come and see."

I'D NOT BEEN IN Zimbabwe for a full day before I realised that Biggie's Mean Fiddler assessment wasn't much of an exaggeration. On the first of our many trips into the townships around Harare, notably Highfield, live music was being played everywhere. It was pouring out of bars and beer gardens and, on a Saturday, even the nightclubs were open in the daytime and advertising afternoon residencies by Zimbabwe's top bands. Street musicians were commonplace – I recorded blind, strolling gospel groups – and from every record bar sparkled the guitar melodies of the latest local hits.

These were not dedicated record shops but grocery stores which, among the cans of corned beef, condensed milk, sacks of sugar and maize meal, also stocked bundles of gritty 45s, on one of the two local labels, Gramma or ZMC, and dusty LPs the sleeves of which, as soon as they were released, looked faded and ten years old – instant classics. I brought as many as I could carry back to the UK and pretty smartly the Radio 1 airwaves were ringing every Thursday night with the casual inventiveness of hitherto unknown Zimbabwean gods of the electric guitar.

In the beer gardens, vast open-air compounds laid out with tables and chairs and a stage at one end, it was possible to see, at the weekends, world-class bands then unknown outside of Zimbabwe.

ONE AFTERNOON, I SPOTTED an advertisement for a John Chibadura gig which was to take place the following Saturday in Mbare township's beer garden. The poster announced a 9am start. Surely, a mistake, I thought. It must mean 9pm. I drove by there anyway, around ten on the Saturday morning, just in case. Bugger me – the band was indeed already in full swing, coaxing astonishing music out of cheap electric guitars, shattered amps and cobbled-together drum kits with cracked cymbals. I returned later with Biggie. We stayed all day. And all night. By tea time, I'd volunteered as a roadie, changing and tuning the hotshot guitarist's strings. By 10pm, I was turning cartwheels across the width of the stage, to the amusement of the »

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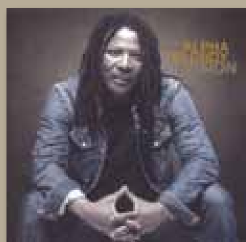

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crowd and band, neither of which was accustomed to seeing a white guy react to their music with abandon, nor moved to make such an undignified plonker of himself in public.

"Ah, Comrade Kershaw," Biggie was squealing after this spectacle, "you have a European skin but an African heart."

WITH HINDSIGHT, BUT NOT at much distance, it became clear that the equivalent to my first couple of Zimbabwean adventures would have been to have stumbled unwittingly into something called roots reggae in Jamaica in the early-1970s and returned to the UK foaming at the mouth with reports of the indigenous wonders, then unknown in Europe, that were Bob Marley & the Wailers, Burning Spear, Culture, Black Uhuru and Prince Far I. The only difference was that this southern African phenomenon had received little previous outside attention. Zimbabwean *jit*, unlike Jamaican roots reggae, had not had the benefit of a forerunner to trailblaze international success, even in a novelty record capacity.

Although thriving in splendid isolation, until the Bhundus breakthrough, Zimbabwean guitar pop in the 1980s was, like that Jamaican creativity of the previous decade, at the peak of its powers. Its development from *chimurenga* rebel music of the 1972-79 liberation war, and the transfer of that style's *mbira* (thumb piano) accompaniment to the electric guitar, had been relatively recent and rapid. It was all still very fresh and terribly exciting, even for local musicians and audiences.

The environment in which that blossom burst open, and did so *because* of that climate, was one still of post-independence optimism, reconciliation and euphoria. Despite the horrors of the 1983 Matabeleland massacres, the convenient death of one of Robert Mugabe's more imaginative and popular potential rivals, Josiah Tongagara, and the detention and torture of his own air force top-brass, which ought to have alerted his cheerleaders of the time (I admit I was one) to what lay ahead, the overriding spirit within the country was incredibly positive both among blacks – who'd won the war, against all predictions – and the more liberal or phlegmatic whites who'd chosen not to scarper, as many did, to the remaining fools' paradise of South Africa. The soundtrack to that transformation was music that was the product of a particular history in a particular period. I count myself extremely lucky to have found myself accidentally in the thick of it, in what turned out to be its golden age, with, as my guide, Comrade Tembo, one of its chief protagonists and my great friend.

It wasn't to last forever. Robert Mugabe became increasingly paranoid and authoritarian, and his cynical and strategic encouragement of racial hostilities – largely absent before he whipped them up for political advantage – brought about economic collapse and almost total unemployment. With it, that first dazzling eruption of a new music from a new country was snuffed out. Without money even for food, Zimbabweans did not have spare cash for the frivolities of buying records and packing beer gardens to drink and dance to live bands. AIDS also took a terrible toll. By the turn of the millennium, there was hardly a Zimbabwean musician friend of mine still alive.

Win

We have three copies of Andy's autobiography *No Off Switch* to give away. To enter, simply answer the following question:
What was the name of the column Andy used to write for *Songlines*?

See p7 for *Songlines* competition rules and address. Closing date September 16 2011

THE DEMISE OF THE Bhundu Boys and the eventual tragedy of Biggie was a parable of the stupidity and greed of a predatory corporate music industry meeting the gullibility and ambition of the naive. The Bhundus' appeal, beyond the circle of African music aficionados, was noted by the major labels and the boys signed with WEA. At the personal request of Madonna, who'd not previously shown any interest in Africa, and 20 years before she started helping herself to Malawian toddlers, the Bhundus opened for her at three Wembley Stadium shows in front of 240,000 people.

The first two Bhundus albums, released in the UK on Discafrique, and assembled from the recordings the band had made in producer Steve Roskilly's Shed Studios in Harare, are as close to perfection as music can get. So, WEA, smug and contemptuous of if-it-ain't-broke don't-fix-it realities decided to draft in, for the Bhundus first major label release, *True Jit*, Robin Millar, the producer of Sade. Naturally. The assumption was that anything made in Africa had to be inferior and could be improved upon in Europe. Yet there was absolutely nothing in

> ***True Jit* was the embodiment of the vision of someone who didn't like African music for how African music should sound: as non-African as possible**

Millar's productions for Sade which suggested there were benefits he, and WEA's budget, could bring to the Bhundu Boys. Producer and record company should have paid heed to what Steve Roskilly told me in the *Andy & Biggie* in Zimbabwe documentary, a lesson he'd been taught early on by another Zimbabwean producer: "If you listen to this through white ears, you're never going to have hits."

True Jit was a disaster. It won the Bhundus no new fans and alienated many of their core supporters. I shudder to recall it now: a soothing bland-out, bleating with skittish keyboards and stripped of all the spontaneity, simplicity and vivacity that made the Bhundus great. *True Jit* was the embodiment of the vision of someone who didn't like African music for how African music should sound: as non-African as possible. That the Bhundus went along with it indicated the extent to which they had been mesmerised by promises of riches untold if only they'd swap their kingdom for a handful of shiny glass beads.

The album's failure was the beginning of the end. Biggie was ousted in an internal power struggle in 1990. He told me that the other members were envious of his individual popularity and his gifts as the band's communicator. Stunned by the dismissal, for a while Biggie struggled on gamely. There was a misguided attempt at stand-up comedy and collaborations with useless British groups who were eager to capitalise on the affection in which he was held. All failed.

His behaviour became increasingly erratic and he was drinking excessively. Alcohol was something for which he never had much capacity. He'd appear in London unannounced and I'd put him up. He talked of being possessed by demons and for a while fell back on religion. He was, by the autumn of 1994 when last I saw him, severely depressed and off the rails. Everything he had achieved, against all the expectations of a poor, rural African kid, he felt had been snatched from under him. Back in Zimbabwe, he was no longer keeping in touch. I had no idea how he was nor what was going on. I should have gone down there and I didn't.

On 29 July 1995, Biggie broke out of a strait jacket in a psychiatric hospital in Harare and hanged himself. ●

REVIEW *No Off Switch is out now and reviewed in this issue, p87*

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