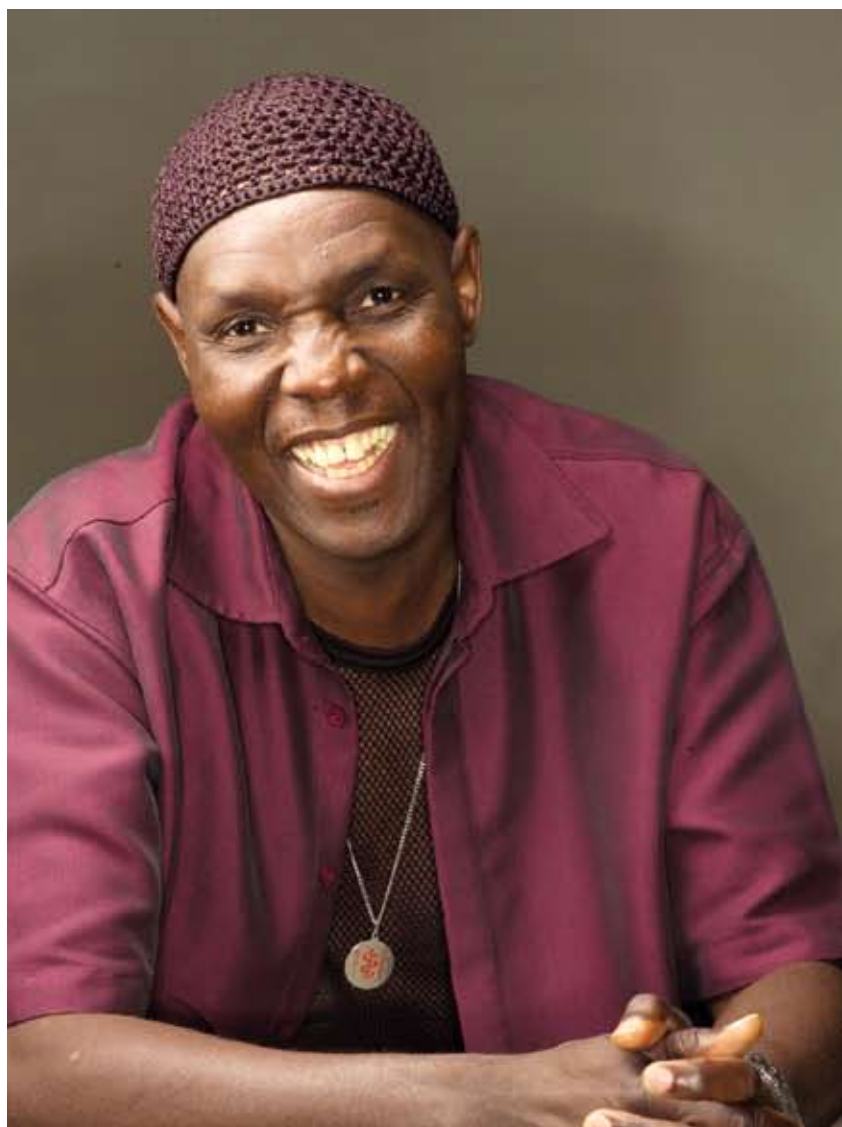


From young novice to mature pro: Mtukudzi is one of Africa's most recognised musicians who's even graced the front cover of *Time*



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OLIVER MTUKUDZI

Banning Eyre looks back on the career of one of Zimbabwe's musical giants

Oliver Mtukudzi is one of the most beloved and prolific singer-songwriters to emerge from southern Africa in the 20th century. In his native Zimbabwe, only Thomas Mapfumo shares the same ranking in the musical pantheon. Media wags have long played up a presumed competition between Mtukudzi with his 'Tuku' music style and Mapfumo with his more political *chimurenga* sound. This has made occasional joint appearances by the two artists electrifying for Zimbabweans, but in fact, the two singers are friends and colleagues. Both came of age during Zimbabwe's 1970s liberation struggle and both are champions of modernising the many indigenous traditional music styles of their country in contemporary songs. Just the same, the two artists have chosen very different paths of late. While Mapfumo's outspoken criticism of the Zimbabwean government has led him into exile in the US, Mtukudzi continues to live and operate in Zimbabwe, walking a careful line between consoling his many fans in their suffering, and avoiding open conflict with the regime of Robert Mugabe.

Mtukudzi was born in Harare in 1952, the eldest of six children, and the son of musical parents who actually met at a choir competition. Mtukudzi once said, "My first attempt to sing was my birth cry," and from there his musical childhood advanced to fashioning a three-string guitar to accompany his constant singing. He moved on to a real guitar in secondary school and soon he and his brother, Robert, were performing as a duo during breaks at shows by the popular band Harare Mambo. The young Mtukudzi favoured covers of American songs by the likes of Wilson Pickett and Otis Redding. In the mid-70s, with the liberation war burning hot, he made his earliest recordings of his own songs, working with legendary South African producer West Nkosi of the Gallo record label. South African *mbaqanga* and jive – often called *tsava-tsava* in Zimbabwe – exerted a big influence early on. Mtukudzi even borrowed the trademark 'cough' of 70s South African superstar Jacob 'Mpharanyana' Radebe, a flourish he still reprises from time to time.

A song called 'Dzandimomotera' (Troubles Have Clung to Me) gave Mtukudzi his breakthrough. He toured with a band called The Wagon Wheels, and for a brief time in 1977, Thomas Mapfumo joined the group as well, shortly before forming his own group, The Blacks Unlimited. Mtukudzi credits Mapfumo with inspiring him to

move away from imitating foreign music and create songs based on Zimbabwe's own folklore. This was an idea with both musical and commercial appeal in the context of the struggle, which was as much about winning land and power. From there, Mtukudzi began working with The Black Spirits and developing his Tuku music sound.



"My first attempt to sing was my birth cry"

"My music is a fusion of different rhythms," said Mtukudzi. "In Zimbabwe, we have many rhythms – *katekwe*, *mbukumba*, *mbira* and *dandanda* to call the spirits, and *jit* for the youths outside, while the elders are doing the serious work." In addition to all that, Mtukudzi never lost track of his Christian roots. His early albums always included at least one gospel number. His uplifting 1994 prayer song 'Hear Me Lord' is a classic, later covered by Bonnie Raitt.

After independence, Mtukudzi worked briefly with The Ocean City Band and later the Zig Zag Band, but by the end of the decade he was leading a solid line-up of The Black Spirits. They made music for two films during the 90s, *Jit* (1990) and

Neria (1993). In 1996, the band was rocked by the deaths of three longtime members, including Mtukudzi's brother Robert, all to AIDS. Mtukudzi responded by recording a rough but beautiful solo album, *Ndega Zvangu* (All Alone), and participating in a side project with a group called Mahube, a collective of superb musicians from various southern African countries.

Up to that point, Mtukudzi had remained a well-kept secret on the international stage, while other Zimbabwe acts, notably Mapfumo and the Bhundu Boys, seemed to get all the breaks. That changed in 1997 when Mtukudzi and a revived line-up of The Black Spirits were signed by Putumayo Records and participated in the touring Africa Fête festival, brainchild of Island Records founder, Chris Blackwell. Since then, Mtukudzi and his band have toured the world extensively and rarely gone a year without releasing at least one new album. His raspy, soulful voice and sweetly exuberant grooves have gone down well with audiences, particularly those who might shy away from more aggressive or exotic Afro-pop styles.

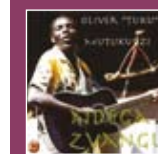
As a lyricist, Mtukudzi's gift is his ability to personalise big social themes. When he sings about Zimbabwe's AIDS crisis, he goes past statistics and warnings to talk about real situations: a woman carrying an infected child, a man wondering whether his wife might be infected. "I take it from the root," Mtukudzi has noted, "those little things happening in every family. Families make up a community, and communities make up the nation." Mtukudzi presents himself as a national *sawihra*, a kind of family advisor. As Zimbabwe's economic and political plight has steadily worsened, he has shied away from direct commentary, although his fans are forever finding hidden messages in his lyrics, as in the case of his 2000 song 'Wasakara' (You Are Worn Out). Mtukudzi says the song was about older men who prey upon young girls, but many took it as a call for ageing president, Mugabe, to step aside. "When I write a song," Mtukudzi once said, "I don't mean a particular person. I sing for the people. I point out wrongdoings of people, and if it comes and it affects you, that's not my problem. I'm just saying the truth." ●

TOUR Oliver Mtukudzi and The Black Spirits are touring the UK in March as part of African Soul Rebels. See *On The Road* for full tour dates

BEST... ...ALBUMS



Ziwere Mukobenhavn (Shava, 1993)
The best available recording of The Black Spirits prior to the deaths of key members in 1996. Tuku is in robust voice, and the band is kicking and lively. Features the original version of 'Hear Me Lord'. Extensive sleeve notes a plus.



Ndega Zvangu (Shava, 1997)
Tuku's only solo album captures a personal, intimate side of the man that is deeply moving. 'Andinzwi', a song that asks 'What is a hero?' offers particularly interesting national introspection on the eve of Zimbabwe's dive into economic ruin.



Tuku Music (Earthsongs, 1998)
The best sounding Tuku record up to this point, and re-released by Putumayo in 1999. Philane Dube's guitar work is choice throughout. Includes the classic AIDS song 'Todi', a staple in concert performances to this day.

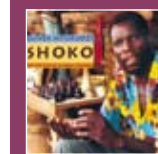


Nhava (Heads Up International, 2005)
The band sounds somehow reinvigorated on this the best of the post-Putumayo releases. Great performances and unusual variety to the songs from the snapping *jit* beat of 'Dzokai' to the dark ruminations of 'Pindirai', to the gospel sweetness of 'Tiregereraiwo'. Reviewed in #31.



Shanda (Sheer Sound, 2002)
Soundtrack to bio-documentary film. Features the contemporary Black Spirits playing songs from throughout Tuku's career before live audiences in Zimbabwe. Better than any compilation I've heard. Reviewed in #17.

...AVOIDED



Shoko (Shava, 1990)
Just over 36 minutes in total length – not good value. Also the recording and performances are very much outdone by *Ziwere Mukobenhavn* three years later.

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IF YOU LIKE OLIVER MTUKUDZI, THEN TRY... CHIWONISO



Rebel Woman (Cumbancha, 2008)
As the daughter of Zimbabwean ethnomusicologist

Dumisani Maraire, Chiwoniso grew up in the US, but made her career back in Zimbabwe. This album (reviewed in #55) shows that she has listened well to elders like Tuku and Mapfumo, learned from them, and then made the music her own. One of the great new voices of Africa and a shining light in Zimbabwe's present darkness.

