*Zimbabwe’s independence celebration in 1980 is a landmark event in modern African history. It is remembered, among other things, for being the biggest of Bob Marley’s few performances in Africa, and one of his last performances ever. Banning Eyre’s book “Lion Songs: Thomas Mapfumo and the Music that Made Zimbabwe” recounts the event from the perspective of the singer closest to Marley’s stature in the history of Zimbabwe, Thomas Mapfumo.*

*During the 1970s war, Mapfumo had made himself a legend with slyly political songs sung in an African tongue (Shona), and referencing sacred traditional music that had been systematically stigmatized by Rhodesian officials. As it happened, independence came at the low point of Mapfumo’s four-decade career. A year earlier, he had been detained and interrogated by the regime, and released on the condition that he perform at a rally supporting the failed, interim regime of Archbishop Abel Muzorewa. Muzorewa’s now-forgotten interregnum was still fresh in the minds of newly elected president Robert Mugabe and his zanu party cohorts in April, 1980. They now viewed the cultural hero of the liberation struggle with ambivalence and suspicion. And all this complexity played out dramatically on Zimbabwe’s big day.*

As the independence celebration approached, expatriates were streaming back to Salisbury from their refuges in Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia, and England. They found a city in delirium. Where bombs and curfews had once rendered public places ghostly, brass bands and pop groups entertained merry crowds in parks and squares by day, and in hotels and beer halls by night. Those returning knew little about Thomas’s detention and the Muzorewa rally. In London, the poet Musa Zimunya and his friends had danced to Thomas’s records like “ecstatic initiates.” Returning now to a fellowship at the University of Zimbabwe, Musa immediately sought “spiritual contact”—a Mapfumo show at the downtown Elizabeth Hotel.

“In England,” Musa recalled,

I had seen B. B. King, Eric Clapton, and British jazz musicians, and I’d always admired how it was like you just had to push a button and the performance came right on cue. Only a few years before, Thomas had looked like a pretender, getting too old before he had achieved anything. And now to come back to find that he had his own combo—and boy, it was the *punchiest* thing I’d ever known. Everything is glowing in this instant. If I had taken a photograph, it would still be glowing. They were wearing all white and bell-bottoms, like the Commodores. They looked young, trim, clean, smart—like Thomas Mapfumo would want it to be.

Mugabe had unveiled the country’s new flag: red, green, and gold stripes with a core of black and a fish eagle—*hungwe*—emblazoned over a red star. He had sounded a message of peace and brotherhood and invited all to forgive and forget in a new Zimbabwe. The centerpiece of the transition was to be the ceremony at Rufaro Stadium on April 17, when the Union Jack would be lowered for the last time as an official flag in Africa. Robert Mugabe would be seen with his vanquished rival, Joshua Nkomo. Thomas Mapfumo, Oliver Mtukudzi, Zexie Manatsa, and other local acts would play alongside the king of Jamaican reggae, Bob Marley. Some forty thousand old Rhodesians and new Zimbabweans would come together, stalwarts of the old regime in black tie and guerrillas in camouflage and fatigues. England’s Prince Charles, India’s Indira Gandhi, and Australia’s Malcolm Fraser would attend, alongside leaders from young African nations—Alhaji Shehu Shagari of Nigeria, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Seretse Khama of Botswana, and, the darling of them all, Samora Machel of Mozambique, without whose help this day might never have come.

On the night before the Rufaro celebration, Thomas performed at the Queens Hotel: “8:00 pm till late,” the hand-pressed posters read. Thomas and his band, the Blacks Unlimited, had been writing new songs, including one called “Nyarai (Be Ashamed).” The title sounds scolding—and it is—but the music of “Nyarai” exudes chest-thumping joy, starting with a bright guitar riff from Jonah Sithole. The guitar’s timbre is taut and feisty, slightly damped to suggest the Shona’s sacred, metal-pronged *mbira*, a sound fraught with pent-up emotion. A single crack from the high tom-tom extends into a tumbling drum fill. A tambourine shimmers, and the ensemble kicks in with sizzling hi-hat, an eruption of bass, and an elastic second guitar line that dodges its way through Sithole’s lead. Thomas comes in booming, exultant in Shona:

We are celebrating the birth of Zimbabwe!

Zimbabwe is for us all. . . .

Congratulations, comrades . . . who fought the Chimurenga war

To liberate Zimbabwe. . . .

All ancestral spirits adore the liberators

Then, out of the blue, Thomas raises the specter of “rebels” who don’t want to be ruled by others. His pitch rising, he sings:

What sort of people are you?   
Why are you not ashamed when you have been defeated?

Be ashamed. Be ashamed

Be ashamed when you have been defeated

As he attacks this refrain, Thomas’s voice seems to race ahead, and the band wobbles masterfully, as if to keep pace, stretching time as the snare drum rolls, the bass lunges, and the brass section blares out a victory fanfare. Thomas ends shouting:

Viva Zimbabwe

Viva Africa

Viva Prime Minister Robert Gabriel Mugabe

On the morning of April 17, a dj for the newly named Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (zbc) played “Nyarai” back-to-back with Bob Marley’s song “Zimbabwe,” which celebrates the fighters’ willingness to “mash it up.” Marley’s song, like so many of Thomas’s, recognized that victory had come not through patience and nonviolence but through bloodshed: an estimated thirty thousand people had died during Zimbabwe’s seven-year conflict. For this dj, Thomas singing “Send the Children to War” was no different than Marley singing “Get Up, Stand Up.” The singers were equals and peers, musical comrades in a global struggle against the vestiges of British colonialism.

The outside world saw a different picture. Marley had become an international superstar, a symbol of Pan-Africanism, and leader of a cultural movement that was changing popular music worldwide. Thomas Mapfumo was virtually unknown outside Zimbabwe and its enclaves abroad. The two singers were almost the same age—Marley thirty-six and Mapfumo thirty-five—but whereas Thomas’s greatest achievements lay ahead, Marley was nearing his end. The aching, bandaged toe he had wishfully dismissed as a soccer injury was, in fact, cancerous. He had sealed his fate by rejecting a doctor’s advice that he have it cut off, declaring, “Rasta no abide amputation.” The king of reggae would give his last concert less than six months later and would die in just over a year.

Bob Marley and the Wailers flew into Harare the day before the independence ceremony, unannounced. Their flight coincided with the well-publicized arrival of Prince Charles, and while crowds massed to the prince and his entourage, Marley’s people slipped away scarcely noticed. Dera Tomkins, the daughter of a Boston church activist, was in Harare for the celebration and accompanied the Wailers’ entourage during the hectic days that followed. From the airport, she reported, their first stop was Rufaro Stadium, where a rehearsal was under way for the ceremony. Marley, with his wife, Rita, two of their sons, and the Wailers band, stood near the stage and watched a column of three hundred guerrilla fighters march into the stadium, singing. Marley teared up. It was his first time seeing an African revolutionary army, the sort he celebrated in his songs, parading before him in the flesh and filling the air with proud *chimurenga* songs—as the hits of the liberation struggle were known.

This was a spectacle, and a history, that fit Marley’s notions about Africa. He had visited the continent once before, and the experience had been disillusioning. As a Rastafarian, he believed that Haile Selassie, the former emperor of Ethiopia, was God—the literal Light of the World, the King of Kings incarnate. In Ethiopia in 1978, Marley had mingled with a population that viewed Selassie as a mere man, and a corrupt one at that. This earthly deity had been buried in an unmarked grave and denied public remembrance by the government that succeeded him. Marley’s most intimate biographer, Timothy White, writes that this experience had left the singer “severely shaken.” Marley had somewhat impulsively accepted an invitation to perform at the independence ceremony in Zimbabwe. After failing to persuade Chris Blackwell to fund the trip, he eventually paid for everything himself, bringing pa equipment and records and pins to give away as gifts. Marley wanted to interact with ordinary people as much as possible.

If Zimbabwe affirmed Marley’s Afrocentric political outlook, it likely dimmed his view of African hospitality. Drunken soldiers accompanied his entourage to have tea with Robert Mugabe, where the Jamaicans were unimpressed by a menu of cucumber sandwiches and lemonade. Marley nevertheless obliged the president’s family by sitting at the piano and performing “No Woman, No Cry.” The musicians dined at Job’s Nitespot, where they were served pork appetizers, swiftly removed once the hosts learned pork was taboo for Rastafarians. While Thomas was starting his independence eve show at the Queens Hotel just blocks away, Nitespot owner Job Kadengu—a secondhand car dealer turned zanu insider—hastily arranged to house Marley’s inner circle at a posh suburban home, twenty miles out of town. The arrangement was a tight fit that left the musicians cut off from the life of the city, and without ganja to smoke. Marley’s handlers kept him out of mischief. One history of white Rhodesia notes, “[Marley’s] ‘type’ was considered a threat to the country’s innocence and the Chief Superintendent intended to arrest him for the slightest hint of a transgression.”

The independence ceremony at Rufaro was organized by zanu, and, like the ceremonies of the nationalist struggle, it consisted mostly of music: church choirs, traditional ensembles, military bands, a troop of “Hindoo dancers” and their accompanists, chimurenga choirs, guitar bands, and, of course, popular singers like Comrade Chinx, Zexie Manatsa, Oliver Mtukudzi, and Thomas Mapfumo.

Thomas and his musicians arrived at 8:00 pm, as instructed, but there was no schedule to follow. The organizers called performers to the stage as they saw fit, and the Blacks Unlimited waited. Oliver Mtukudzi earned the prime slot, just before Marley’s performance and the official ceremony. Mtukudzi had emerged as a star now, a soulful troubadour whose confident tenor voice had helped soothe a nation at war. But prestigious as this placement was, no local singer could hold a candle to Bob Marley.

Thomas had been in awe of “Brother Bob” since 1977, when he had walked into a record bar and bought a copy of *Exodus*. Sinatra’s swing, Elvis’s swagger, and Wilson Pickett’s soul had all worked their spells on Thomas, as had the Congo’s rumba, the Afro-rock of Osibisa, and melodious jazz from Stan Getz in New York and Dollar Brand in Cape Town. But Marley cut to the bone. For a people battling to reclaim stolen land and identity, no foreign music had ever sounded this good.

We know where we’re going, and we know where we’ve been

We live in Babylon, we’re going to the promised land

From the moment Marley shouted the words “Viva Zimbabwe!” through the biggest pa system Harare had ever heard, the atmosphere turned electric. He eased in with a feel-good number, “Positive Vibration,” and then dug deep with “Dem Belly Full”—“A hungry man is an angry man!” As the band lit into “Roots Rock Reggae,” it became clear that the sound was reaching far beyond the lucky thousands inside the stadium.

Marley’s performance had been publicized only a day earlier. Some in the surrounding neighborhoods were probably caught unaware when they heard his singular voice bellowing from Rufaro. People who had been unable to secure passes had been collecting outside the grounds. Now, ignited by the music, hundreds, maybe thousands, began approaching the gates, ignoring police warnings as they scrambled to enter the stadium. After years of quashing public demonstrations, the police responded instinctively, firing round after round of tear gas to drive back the advancing mob. The wind lofted noxious fumes into the stadium, and soon there was the spectacle of cabinet ministers, members of Parliament, and foreign dignitaries coughing, weeping, and burying their faces in handkerchiefs. Down on the field, Dera Tomkins grabbed a zanu cloth banner and wrapped her head in it to quell the burning in her eyes. Marley seemed the last to notice, closing his eyes as if in trance, and forging on until at last he was overwhelmed and left the stage. “Think,” recalled the Wailers’ Aston “Family Man” Barrett, “from where I was born, I have to come all the way to Africa to experience tear gas.”

After forty minutes the gas fumes cleared and the band returned briefly to the stage, minus the singing I-Threes who had retreated to Job’s house with Marley’s sons. Marley sang “War” and the inevitable “Zimbabwe,” but his heart had gone out of the performance. Blending English, Portuguese, and even a word of Shona, Marley put on a brave face, saluted the crowd, and exited. In the aftermath of near disaster, more heads of state entered the stadium to witness the exchange of flags, and the crowd reacted to each new arrival, cheering especially loudly for the African presidents. Formations of the Rhodesian army and the various guerrilla factions marched in together. Historian Thomas Parkenham recalled watching the guerrillas in jungle fatigues running “laps of honor like sportsmen . . . a strangely innocent way to end a seven-year ‘bush war.’” Roars of adulation broke out when Prime Minister Robert Mugabe rolled into the stadium in a white Mercedes with motorcycle escorts and cadres of bodyguards, ten of them running “American style” next to his car. A band played “God Bless Africa,” as Mugabe slowly circled the stadium field.

Prince Charles stood at the rostrum minutes before midnight, and the Rhodesian Signal Corps band broke into the royal salute as the Union Jack descended. A blue spotlight shone on the new flag of Zimbabwe that rose to replace it, and the sight of that colorful banner triggered pandemonium in the stands. With each blast of the ceremonial twenty-one-gun salute that followed, the shouting, ululating, singing, and dancing intensified, spreading to the crowd outside the stadium and throughout the city, and swelling again as the sonic boom of a single low-flying jet plane shattered the air like cannon fire. Robert Mugabe lit the Independence Flame, which would be carried to nearby Salisbury Kopje to burn eternally.

Most of those present in Rufaro were young enough to experience this moment as the successful end of their long liberation struggle—cause for celebration, to be sure. But the oldest witnesses, black and white, must have experienced an even greater awe. It had been less than ninety years since the first twenty-one-gun salute had echoed off these low hills. On September 13, 1890, when Lieutenant Tyndale-Biscoe had hoisted the Union Jack up the tallest tree he could find, guns had heralded the start of an altogether different history—hopeful in its own way, but doomed. The very oldest Shona within earshot of Rufaro in 1980 had been children when these so-called “Pioneers” arrived. They had seen everything: occupation, oppression, forced labor, propaganda, Christianity, protest, war, and now, what seemed a final victory. “Nyarara Kuchema (Do Not Cry),” Thomas counseled in a song prepared for the occasion, “Things will be okay.” The lyric acknowledges pain within the nation’s triumph, for everyone who had survived this struggle had wounds to heal.

Mugabe took his oath of office sometime after midnight. He too seemed to grasp the need for healing as he tried to put aside the darkness of war with gentle, generous words. “If yesterday,” declared Mugabe, “I fought you as an enemy, today you have become a friend with the same national interest, loyalty, rights and duties as myself. If yesterday you hated me, today you cannot avoid the love that binds you to me and me to you.” Mugabe had genuine affection for Lord and Lady Soames, and he let the whites closest to him know he would need their help in order to govern. “I don’t know anything about governing a country,” one recalled him saying, “and none of my people do either.”

After the ceremony, a joyful chaos reigned. Bob Marley and the Wailers were strangely abandoned. Job and the other hosts hurried off to private parties and balls. Some flocked to Job’s Nitespot on the rumor that Marley and his band would be there. In fact, the Jamaicans had been left to the mercy of Thomas’s then manager, Thompson Kachingwe, not the best chauffeur, as he knew neither the directions to the band house nor how to operate the manual transmission truck in which the musicians were traveling. As the Jamaicans entered the traffic jam that was Harare, local bands began entertaining a dwindling cohort of ragtag revelers in Rufaro Stadium.

Thomas was steaming. “They kept saying, ‘You are going to play very soon,’” he recalled. “Can you imagine? We went in there at eight o’clock. We thought each time we were going to hear our name being called out, but they kept us waiting until every head of state and every important Jack and Jill had gone home. We were being treated like a group of kids who wouldn’t fight for the struggle.” Only as the African sky began to brighten at the horizon were Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited at last called to perform the final set of the independence celebration at Rufaro. “Well, we were not above it,” Thomas recalled with bemused pride: “We were not angered, because we played for the guerrillas, the real people who fought for our freedom, and the *mujibas*, the youth who gave moral support to the freedom fighters.” That’s the image that would linger for Thomas: morning sun, music, and dust rising from the feet of “poor people and fighters dancing with their aks. To us, that was victory.”

The Blacks Unlimited unveiled a new song that day, “Kwaedza mu Zimbabwe (It Has Dawned in Zimbabwe),” a boisterous romp that once again names the new prime minister—“Comrade Mugabe, Father, we thank you”—and singles out zanu as champions of the liberation struggle. As the band struck up the tune, Thomas unleashed a throaty rooster crow, evoking zanu’s totem animal and heralding the first morning in Zimbabwe.