



## Oliver Mtukudzi

*Profile*

Oliver “Tuku” Mtukudzi is arguably the most powerful creative force to emerge from Zimbabwe in the last three decades. Carefully balancing compelling rhythms and accessible melodies with insightful lyrics, Tuku has built a vast body of work that is politically and socially relevant, yet entertaining and accessible to a worldwide audience. Throughout a career that spans more than 45 recordings and virtually every corner of the globe, he has remained committed to the live music scene of his homeland, where he and his band, The Black Spirits, continually play to enthusiastic audiences in even the most remote regions.

Worldwide response to Mtukudzi’s music has been glowing. *Parade* called him “one of the few genuine innovators of the Zimbabwean music scene,” while *Prize Beat* in his native country proclaimed that his music “has been instrumental in strengthening our freedom, socially, politically and economically.” American blues/country/roots artist Bonnie Raitt has referred to him as a cross between soul shouter Otis Redding and reggae legend Toots Hibbert.

Mtukudzi made his debut on the Heads Up label with the worldwide release of *Nhava* on April 26, 2005. “Nhava” is the Zimbabwean word for “carrying bag.” Mtukudzi says the album is a satchel filled with nuggets of advice, encouragement and wisdom for travelers on the journey of life as they make their way through an often perilous world.

Born on September 22, 1952, Mtukudzi learned the importance of social and economic responsibility early in life as the oldest of seven children whose father died prematurely. He got his first taste of pop music success with the 1975 release of his debut single “Stop Before Go.” Two years later, he joined the Wagon Wheels, a group that featured Thomas Mapfumo. “Dzandimomotera,” his first single with the band, quickly went gold, but Tuku left the band shortly thereafter to pursue a solo career, taking several members of the Wagon Wheels with him and forming the Black Spirits. Their 1979 debut album, *Dzandimomotera*, also went gold on the fast track.

With Zimbabwe declaring independence in 1980, Tuku and the Black Spirits released *Africa*, one of the most important albums of its time. With the album’s two hit singles, “Zimbabwe” and “Mazongonyedze,” the spirit of the fledgling nation was suddenly personified in a single powerful voice. For the next seventeen years, Mtukudzi would maintain a rigorous recording schedule that yielded two albums every year – a feat that cemented his reputation as a prolific songwriter, a highly skilled producer/arranger and a formidable lead singer. A quarter century after his earliest successes with the Black

Spirits, he continues to showcase all of these talents and more in live performances that have captivated audiences not just in his homeland but worldwide.

Mtukudzi has become such a force in the musical landscape of South Africa that his name has become synonymous with his style, and “Tuku music” has evolved into something quite distinct from any other Zimbabwean music. Clearly, his cultural influences are evident – the traditional forms of the mbira, the South African mbaqanga style, and the popular Zimbabwean music style called jiti, are all evident in his sound – but these have been distilled into an aesthetic that is now very much his own.

Mtukudzi ascended to a new level of worldwide exposure with the 1998 release of *Tuku Music*, an album distributed by various labels in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Europe, UK, North America, Australia and Asia. The album spurred a string of dates in the U.S. and Canada with Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabate and Baaba Maal, as part of the Africa Fete tour. He followed up with *Paipevo*, which reached the top of the Zimbabwe music charts within a week of its release in November 1999.

Mtukudzi joined the Heads Up label in 2005 with the release of *Nhava*. “Every song on this album has something to teach about life, something to remind you and encourage you about what is important in life,” he said at the time of *Nhava*’s release. “All of these ideas are universal. They are the same for every human being, regardless of their culture or their environment.”

He follows up in the summer of 2007 with the August 28 release of *Tsimba Itsoka*. The title, a Zimbabwean phrase that translates to “No foot, no footprint,” is the underpinning for every entry in the twelve-song set. “The quality of life is measured by the kinds of steps you take as you walk through it,” says Mtukudzi. “The footprint is a representation of who we are, where we are and where we’re going. If you happen to see a footprint in the road, it means someone has been there before you, and there’s something to be learned from that person’s life and that person’s story. *Tsimba Itsoka*. There is no footprint without the foot.”

In addition to compiling a vast musical catalog over the past three decades, Mtukudzi has branched out into other areas of creative expression, including film and theater. He participated in several documentaries on Zimbabwean music during the ‘80s, including the BBC’s *Under the African Skies* and *The Soul of the Mbira*. In 1990, he played the leading role in *Jit*, the first film featuring an all-Zimbabwean cast, and a year later played a prominent role in *Neria*, a drama dealing with the complex issue of women’s rights in a chauvinist culture (he also composed and arranged the *Neria* soundtrack). He also wrote and directed the musical production *Was My Child (Plight of the Street Children)* in the mid ‘90s. In the past few years, he has contributed music to more than twenty AIDS-related documentaries that have screened worldwide.

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