SIX ARTICLES ON MUSIC CENSORSHIP IN ZIMBABWE

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Musicians & Censorship

by Albert Nyathi
Musician and secretary general of Zimbabwe Union of Musicians

Is enough being done to educate musicians on what the Censorship Board or Act requires? How has this affected members of the Musicians Union of Zimbabwe?

1. General Introduction

What might we say censorship is, ladies and gentlemen? There are various phrases that I got from various people as I was attempting to come up with a clear cut and solid definition of the term. It was not easy. Some people were even afraid to talk freely, instead preferring to whisper the term CENSORSHIP to me. I discovered people were hesitant to mention the word. It made me curious. The following are two of the many phrases that I got to describe censorship:

- Government backed suppression of information.
- The process of blocking public exposure to undesirable material.

And the Collins Dictionary says of censorship:

- If someone in authority censors a book, play or film, they officially examine and cut out any parts that are considered to be immoral or inappropriate. Censorship is the censoring of books, plays, films or reports, especially by government officials, because they are considered immoral or secret in some way.

In our context as artists our own definition would probably be as follows:

- Censorship is the restriction of the creative mind, putting limits to limitlessness. It is an attempt to restrict the mind from exploring the very essence of nature, of the mind, of humanity. It is an attempt to contain the creative minds and control them.

Society has set rules, regulations, and what it considers to be morals and standards to observed and adhered to by the community. If you fail to conform to such expectations, you are considered a misfit in that community. Some may even consider you to be the mad one. Artists have often fallen victim to this kind of scenario. Therefore we start from that point of view. It then depends on who is defining this term. It is like a dog and a cat or like a cat and a rat or like a rat and a nut or indeed a leopard and a dog. Their definitions of what is prey will always differ or their definition of each other always differs.
2. Introduction to the Censorship and Entertainment Control Act

This Board falls under the Ministry of Home Affairs. It was established on the 1st of December, 1967 in the then Rhodesia. It has been revised and amended a number of times. The current act was revised and amended in 1996.

It is an “ACT to regulate and control the public exhibition of films, the importation, production, dissemination and possession of undesirable or prohibited video and film material, publications, pictures, statues and records and the giving of public entertainment; to regulate theatres and like places of public entertainment in the interests of safety; and to provide for matters incidental to the foregoing”.

The Board is made up of 9 members and they seat at least twice a week. There is currently a small secretariat made up of 3 people. They have provincial committees made up of, among other institutions, the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Republic Police, Ministry of Legal & Parliamentary Affairs, Ministry of Information and Publicity, City Councils, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. All these are to a large extent voluntary as the Board has staff and offices only in the capital city. However, the Board, by and large relies very much on the services of the Z.R.P.

3. The Gist of the Matter

The question I am attempting to answer is whether or not enough is being done to educate musicians on what the censorship Board or Act requires and how all this has affected musicians in the country. I will out rightly say that from my research, most musicians have not been aware of even the existence of such an ACT, let alone its requirements. Only recently a few prominent musicians have received telephone calls from staff at the Censorship Board, including the presenter of this paper, to come around and register with them. That is year 2004. I personally knew the Board to be interested in issues to do with foreign entertainers coming to Zimbabwe including films. I knew the existence of such a Board because I used to work with the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe. Even then, the Board used to worry itself with foreign musicians coming to perform in Zimbabwe.

Most musicians I spoke to, do not have an idea of what this whole thing is all about, except for a few prominent ones like Leonard Zhakata whose music was rumoured to have been banned.

Staff at the Censorship Board indicated to me that they have never banned music by a Zimbabwean. They said that maybe the broadcasters use their discretion not to play some tracks that they feel are “indecent, obscene, offensive or harmful to public moral.” When I talked to a senior broadcaster about this, she said that they “do not force a DJ to play music that he/she is not interested to play.”

There has been rumours claiming that broadcasters have a tendency not to play some tracks from specific artists. Some people claim that tracks like Warrior, Mirira Nguva and Struggle from Leonard Zhakata’s album Hodho, never get airplay. The same goes with Thomas Mapfumo’s Chaputika.
Because the Censorship and Entertainment Control Board has very limited staff or resources, musicians in Zimbabwe have no knowledge on what the requirements are. According to this ACT, every musician, should be registered with the Board and be issued with certificate C. There are three categories in terms of registration. Certificate “A” covers entertainment for all age groups without any restriction. Certificate “B” carries some restrictions. It is more like regulatory signs if you were to liken it to traffic regulations. Certificate C covers bands discos, dance etc.

No performer or musician is allowed to perform without registration. The Board, through the police, can stop a show, arrest the musician or DJ, and confiscate equipment. The artist, in addition to being charged for performing without a licence, the musician or DJ will have to pay storage charges for the music equipment so confiscated.

When I pointed out to the official that, I thought they should not be harsh he said, they have never really been, but that some musicians were being arrogant and rude.

The Registration is current Z$6,000 per annum. However, indications are that fairly soon, the fees are likely to go up and I am not sure about what percentage. Now the question is who is responsible for disseminating information to members of the music fraternity about the requirement of this ACT? Is it the music union/s or is it the Board of Censors? I think that the Board should at least publicly make known its intentions to prosecute unregistered musicians / performers, than merely pouncing on them. Although they usually say something to the effect that ignorance has no defence against the law, some of these laws must be made available and known to the and by the targeted groups of people. I feel that if the Censorship Board intends to prosecute unregistered musicians, they need to go on a vigorous campaign first. The other question is, why do musicians have to register the Censorship and Entertainment Control Board, when in fact they also have to register with the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe. Is there no unnecessary duplication of activity?

4. Conclusion

In the face of all this, is it not time that musicians come together more purposefully for their own benefits to consolidate the union/s responsible for the welfare of the same musicians. The other question is, is it the duty of music unions to educate their members about the requirements of the ACT?

Musicians have not yet fully been affected by the requirements of the ACT. As I see it, a time will come especially if the Board insists on compulsory registration, that musicians will find it necessary to come together, to consolidate unionism. However, I have to live everyone with question marks than answers as I do not have answers myself.

I Will Not Speak!!!! C. Hove

Albert Nyathi
Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings’ Policies on Censorship of Music

by Musavenga Nyasha
former Radio Zimbabwe presenter

Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings holds a monopoly on broadcasting in the country. Therefore its policies concerning censorship of music have a major impact on the development of the music industry and indeed the nation as a whole. The holding company therefore has a duty to be responsible and progressive in its attitude towards this issue.

Even during the days of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), the guiding principles concerning music censorship seem to have stayed the same. Basically, the business units of Radio Zimbabwe, National FM, Power FM, Spot FM and ZTV purport to uphold the nation’s values whilst educating and entertaining the nation. The units are also guided by the commercial aspect of the material they broadcast.

The views of the Censorship Board were always accommodated in the programme content at ZBC.

Another guiding principle that was always impressed upon the presenters and producers at ZBC was that the corporation was said to support the government in power. No one ever seemed to try to explain the difference, if one existed, between the ruling party and the government.

Other factors came into play once in a while like contractual wrangles between ZBC and recording companies for instance. Self censorship is also an important factor.

Here’s a look at the various principles and issues and how they affected the musicians in Zimbabwe.

Censorship Board

There is no clear – cut working relationship with the board, but it is generally accepted that whenever the board deems some music undesirable ZBH, in keeping with the country’s laws, the business units under the company will not play that music. However, it is a fair assumption to say that the producers working fair these units are somewhat ignorant as to specifically which songs were banned by the Censorship Board. Most people do know, however that the Marvin Gaye song, was sold in Zimbabwe as “Healing” and not “Sexual Healing” due to the orders of the board.

Upholding the nation’s values

There have never been any consultations between the various radio and television stations in the country as to what is considered undesirable. Decisions are made by the station’s individual supervisors and CEO’s. Public opinion has also played its part in the banning of music from the airwaves, not to mention the perceived wishes of people in power such as the ministers of information and the President Mugabe himself.
Songs that have been considered undesirable on the local scene have included those from the likes of Andy Brown, Franco Hodobo, and Robson Banda.

Andy Brown’s song “Hande Babe” was said to have popularize a saying that was undesirable and demeaning to women.

Franco Hodobo had a song banned by the conservative Radio Zimbabwe. The song was thought to be too explicit. It talked about French – kissing and passionate fondling.

Robson Banda’s side 2 of the single “Tisakanganwe Chinyakare” was banned because it was said to promote tribalism.

Commercial Content
Whenever a song seemed to contain some material that seemed to promote some product or other, it was banned from the airwaves.

The Real Sounds’ album “7 Miles High” caused some problems because of its inclusion of the name of that particular hotel 7 Miles.

There were even discussions on songs that mentioned certain materials like georgette and viscose. Radio Two was the most strict station when it came to commercial content. Perhaps this was so because it was the most commercial of ZBC’s stations.

Support of the government in power
The issue of supporting the government in power, I am told was a big deal after 1980 when it came to liberation music from former ZAPU choirs. I only started working for ZBC in 1989 so I am told that that most of this music was actually destroyed. After the unity accord frantic efforts were then made to find this material from whoever had managed to keep it.

The coming of the MDC brought a lot of problems to ZBC. During the run – up to elections, parliamentary and presidential, presenters were discouraged from playing music that was critical in any way to the government.

Specific songs were hardly mentioned except for example when Radio Two had become Radio Zimbabwe and Thomas Mapfumo released his “Chimurenga Rebel”. It was said that by giving the album such a title, Thomas was clearly an enemy of the Third Chimurenga so the album could not be played on the station.

Leonard Zhakata’s album “Hodho” was another album that had some songs banned for being anti – government. However after some press coverage of this issue, ZBH chiefs denied ever banning any music and, internally they were said to have started resisting the temptation to ban music but enough hints and comments are made to make it clear to presenters what is expected of them.

Of all the policies and principles guiding the censorship of music and Zimbabwe, it is the political issue that poses the biggest threat to the development of musical expression in the country. Musicians are supposed to mirror society. They are supposed to speak for the voiceless. They have a major role in being the people’s conscience and of reminding politicians of their duty to society.
Tracing the Footsteps, Censorship and Music in Zimbabwe

by Nyasha Nyakunu
journalist and researcher MISA-Zimbabwe

A number of academics have postulated the significance of music in Zimbabwe’s turbulent political history, with special reference to its role in the experiences of Zimbabwe’s struggle for independence. In the aftermath of independence and the twenty-five years that have passed between 1980 and now, Zimbabwe’s music has taken on various roles in the political and social psyche of the country. These roles have been limited by both the political culture that the ruling Zanu Pf party has sought to entrench within Zimbabwe’s liberation war experience as a living testimony to notions of identity and citizenship as well as the restrictive media laws that have been a consistent feature of Zimbabwe’s political landscape. In the midst of the controls that the Zimbabwean government has attempted to exert, there has been the stubborn rise of alternative music that seeks to speak to the everyday experiences of the ordinary citizens minus the rhetoric of blind, liberation war legacy rhetoric. It is this music that this article seeks to place into perspective as well as analyze within the context of the struggle for freedom of expression in the country.

In Zimbabwe and similarly to countries that emerge from a ‘revolutionary war’, there was the euphoria of acceptance and hope, with a significant majority of citizens accepting a culture of acceptance of the cultural output of the victorious liberation war political party or movement. In the process the nitty-gritty’s of censorship and ultimate intention to construct an unimpeachable hegemony by the ruling party was lost to the citizens and so was alternative music. The artist was cocooned into singing praises of the revolution both for his/her bread and butter as well as to avoid the disastrous label of being against the ‘struggle’. A telling example of this, though not a musician was the brilliant author, Dambudzo Marechera whose novella “Black Sunlight” was shelved by the Censorship Board for reasons that are still unpalatable to write here.

Significant changes to this culture of acceptance of propaganda as art was to be effected not by the people clamoring for a change but from artists that, in an Orwellian sense began to read between the lines of the revolution. It began with a relative impolitic narrations of everyday suffering of Zimbabweans in the latter half of the 1980’s with songs being sung essentially about everyday social problems such as those of rented accommodation and with the assistance of government corruption moved on to issues concerning financial scandals within the ruling party. One of the most significant pioneers of protest music in post independent Zimbabwe became Solomon Skhuza whose song Love and Scandals talked directly to the issue of the Willowvale Motor vehicle Scandal was played on radio and television with ease, assumingly because is main theme was about betrayal in romance (the lyrics speak of a person whose girlfriend left him for someone else who owned a Toyota Cressida, which was at the heart of the scandal at that time). Whilst there is no apparent evidence as to whether the people at the censorship board could not understand the significant irony of the song, it is clear that the song was a milestone in circumventing blunt censorship.
The rapper Leonard Zhakata also evaded the censorship matter with a beautiful song titled ‘Mugove’ whose lyrics ask God to provide for the narrator as he/she is suffering from the rich whilst he/she has nothing. The song hit the roof in terms of sales and made the artist a superstar overnight and escaped censorship because it did not seem obviously political but it spoke to the everyday sufferings of the Zimbabwean people especially with the government’s policy of the economic structural adjustment programme (ESAP). Moreover, music was increasingly becoming the subtle avenue of protest against a government that was increasingly turning obviously authoritarian. Zhakata sang with the true irony of an artist who had escaped the ‘revolutionary net’ of the ruling party and its hegemonic project.

Thomas Mapfumo however was not as fortunate. Given his legendary standing with Zimbabwean music fans, Mapfumo’s’ songs were bound to strike a serious shiver down the spines of those that were in control of the government and the state television, radio and newspapers. His song Jojo was banned outright from the airwaves because it was deemed to be sympathetic to the opposition Zimbabwe Unity Movement and it spoke to an attempted assassination attempt on a ZUM prominent personality indirectly. It was a clear case if where the ruling party saw an obvious political threat to its power, it would not tolerate any music that would hint at the need for fairness on the political playing field. Thomas Mapfumo was to remain a victim of his pro-people music to the extent that his contemporary albums have never been played on state radio or television since the emergence of a strong civil society as well as the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. This is not to say Mapfumo has become an obvious supporter of the MDC, but for Zanu Pf as well as the censorship board it controls, Mapfumo speaks unpalatable truths about the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe. The same too can be said of Leonard Zhakata who has since been receiving less and less airtime because his music remains that of a stubborn artist who insists on defending his artistic genius in the field he feels most comfortable in, that of explaining the ills of our society.

In the midst of the protest music and its brave purveyors, there are those that have retained comfort in composing music that deals largely with religion and other social issues that the government is comfortable with. Most of these artists, both long-standing figures and newer ones on Zimbabwe’s music scene have been daring enough to put their ‘artistic’ talents at the disposal of the ruling Zanu Pf party, thus violating the significant principle of artistic independence. Whilst it remains in the interests of freedom of expression for these artists to compose whatever they wish, it also remains even more important that they understand the repressive and propaganda context in which they are complicit in participating.

Music in Zimbabwe has however never been more beholden to the government as it is now. The political polarization and renewal of the Zanu Pf liberation war project has put Zimbabwean music and culture backwards significantly. Where the country should be celebrating the diversity and independence of its artists, their music as well as a cultural environment laden with freedom of expression, the opposite is sadly true. There is no freedom of expression in the country and very few of the musicians seem to realize this. Be that as it may, the voices of Thomas Mapfumo, Leonard Zhakata, Lovemore Majaivana and Solomon Skuza serve as telling ones to those that make it a habit of singing on behalf of a dictatorship.
Censorship of Locally Recorded Music in Zimbabwe

by Emmanuel Vori
Gramma Records Marketing Director

Censorship, both voluntary and forced has been part of the local recording industry in Zimbabwe from its early beginnings in the mid seventies and is still part of the industry even up to the present day.

There are two common types of censorship. The one is political and the other is based on morals.

Politically there has been censorship before and after independence. During the pre – independence era, most bands / musicians performed and recorded music which either encouraged youths and indeed the population at large to join the liberation struggle or that which gave moral support to those already engaged in the struggle. This was meant to boost the morale of the fighters so that there would be no turning back until final victory.

This development did not go down well with the authorities. Their first move was to deny exposure of such songs by banning them from the airwaves, both on radio and television. This was made easy because they controlled that media. In the absence of independent radio, these songs were never played. However they did not stop them from being sold on the market.

Musicians, working with local record companies went ahead and recorded more such songs and made them available to the public. The popular format then was vinyl. Record companies had an obligation to offer to the public what the musicians had composed without “diluting” those compositions. The choice of whether or not a particular song would be recorded or not, from the record company’s point of view, depended on its appeal to the masses and of course its sales potential. There were however, some cases were the producers advised artists to “tone down” their lyrical content if it was perceived to be hitting too hard on the targeted group which in almost all cases was the sitting government and its puppets.

While almost all artists were affected by this censorship, those affected the most were people like Thomas Mapfumo, Zacks Manatsa, Tineyi Chikupo, and Oliver Mtukudzi among others whose music was perceived to incite the general populace to take up arms against the colonial masters.

In one of his songs Tumira Vana Kuhondo translated “sending children to war” Thomas warned the colonial masters that they would lose their loved young men and women as the majority were going continue fighting and killing them until final victory. On one of his many such compositions, Zuvaguru, Thomas sang about the big day when the truth would be there for all to see ie. victory was certain and the majority were going to celebrate the arrival of independence. These and other songs led to his arrest and brief detention at Chikurubi Maximum Prison where he was later released without being charged. This made Thomas more determined to record and
release more hard hitting songs which calumniated in the recording of a full length album entitled Hondo meaning WAR. Needless to say that none of the songs from that album were ever played on national radio. As an artist, Thomas never allowed his compositions to be voluntarily censored in the studios. He felt very strongly about his works. His record label obliged because Thomas was very popular and almost all his recordings sold very well.

Independence ushered in a new era of political censorship. In the mid eighties musicians, who always seem to be the “voice of the voiceless”, the masses, spoke up against the political leadership for its failure to fulfil promises made during the pre-independence era. They saw corruption creeping in and going on unchecked, neglect of the masses, deteriorating health services and many other social ills. Like before, they spoke through recorded music. Record labels took the risk of releasing such songs. Once again Thomas was in the forefront of this campaign. When requested by his record label to change some of the lyrics on his most critical song “Corruption” Thomas refused flatly and opted instead to go independent and have total control of his compositions. He went on to record and release Corruption on a 12 inch. Interestingly, he sang it in English so that his targeted audience would not be in doubt of the message he was sending to both the officials and the nation and the world at large. He lamented the fact that society was corrupt specially those in positions of power and this had filtered down to the masses causing untold suffering to the man on the street. Since then Thomas has remained independent. Because he had exposed many heavyweights, Thomas feared for his life and went into self imposed exile in the USA.

Lovemore Majaivana in his song Umoya Wami lamented about the lack of development in Matebeleland which had driven its young men and women to other areas in search of fortune yet they would rather work and live in their beloved province. He pleaded with Joshua Nkomo to re-visit the Unity - Accord as it had not and continued not to benefit his own people – the Ndebeles.

Solomon Skuza on JSCI sang about what was later referred to as the Willowgate scandal which exposed a lot of high ranking officials in a car buying scandal – only they and their mates had access to new locally assembled cars which they bought and on sold to desperate car seekers at exorbitant prices.

Leonard Zhakata on one of his many protest songs sang about how justice seemed to favour the chosen few. How there seemed to be different laws for different groups of people and how those same laws seemed to favour those aligned to the ruling party and their associates.

Oliver Mtukudzi sang about one having to accept that they are indeed old and tired. That was interpreted by the powers that be to mean that the President and most of his colleagues were old and should go.

In all of the above cases, the record labels did not interfere with the lyrical content though naturally they were worried about what Government’s reaction would be. These works were never played on radio and television.
The other form of censorship in Zimbabwe is based on morals. In the absence of a censor board, record labels have acted as guardians of society’s moral values. Whilst sex and violence, drugs (as in hip hop / rap) is said to drive sales of music that would, for now, not be acceptable in our society which is by all standards, very conservative. To this end, songs that are deemed to contain offensive / obscene language are not recorded at all. In most cases artists have had to change such lyrics to an acceptable standard. One such case was the late Paul Matavire’s Tanga Wandida. In the song Paul was talking about how it has become like the norm for men to ask for sexual favours before they could do things for women like offering them employment, making available scarce commodities etc. Another notable example was the Four Brothers’ Vimbai. The artist was describing the physical beauty of his loved one to the point it got very explicit and had to be changed to at least be acceptable in keeping with our traditional values.

With international music, record labels seem to allow anything to be recorded and made available for sale as long as it is “stickered” i.e. Parental Advisory – Explicit Lyrics. Whilst local record companies have no control over such material, they have adopted a strict stickering policy of such music i.e. if it is not stickered already so that whoever buys that music buys with the full knowledge that it contains explicit lyrics.

In Zimbabwe total freedom of expression, both politically and socially, is not likely to happen anytime soon. It will be many years before our artists and indeed the nation as a whole can speak freely about how they see things and express themselves freely without fear of the law of the land.
Personal Experience

by Leonard Zhakata
Musician

I grew up in my rural village of Rusape where as a child I was exposed to the liberation war that pitted the colonial Ian Douglas Smith regime and the Black liberation fighters. I was one of the smallest war collaborators and my experience during that time forms part of the music that I sing today.

I would like to reiterate that I am not a politically oriented musician, I do not support any political party and as such do not sing for any politician. My music is about Zimbabweans and for them.

I was surprised the first time that I heard that certain of my songs had been banned from the airwaves because they were perceived to be politically incorrect. I did not waste any time when I learnt about this. I went to the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings (ZBH) to enquire about this new development. At ZBH I held a meeting with the then Chief Executive Officer, Munyaradzi Hwengwere who professed ignorance at the said ban. Hwengwere told me that Disc Jockeys (DJs) at radio stations had the liberty to play whatever songs they preferred and that it was not ZBH’s policy to blacklist particular songs. It was disheartening to learn that the highest authority at ZBH could not help me, and that the banning of my particular songs were to the discretion of presenters. But I had doubts over Hwengwere’s explanation.

If I can point out that the last five years have been my worst in as far as my artistic career is concerned. Since when I released the album Hodho, which has several blacklisted songs, I have had negative articles in the state media who have gone all the way to show that I am a spent force. The independent print media has tried to give me coverage, but now with the absence of the Daily News which was shut down in 2003, my print coverage has been limited.

ZBH’s banning some of my songs saying they were politically incorrect, has led to some quarters thinking I am sympathetic to the opposition political parties. The result is that I have lost a number of my fans who do not want anything to do with politics. I have had to cancel a number of live shows in areas dominated by the ruling party as they threatened my person.

My story is one of growing up in the rural areas, then surrounded by war. I learnt to survive the hard way early. I have a lot of stories to tell from my childhood to where I am today. My music is a recording of events as they occur. I sing about my environs and people are free to interpret my songs the way they feel. It is unfortunate that with the current political, social and economic problems affecting the country, every song that I have released has been reviewed to suit a particular existing condition. If I sing about holding on to power, people think I am singing about the current President. But there are many people holding on to power – in companies etc. If I sing about change, people think I want the ruling party to be replaced.
The real sad thing is that our sole broadcaster, ZBH has also fallen into this mischief. The station has misinterpreted several of my songs and classified them as politically incorrect. I have several new music videos which I have prepared and given to ZBH for arial promotion but they have never been played. In making follow ups to my music videos, I have received conflicting statements on why they are not being played.

But I have high hopes that art stays longer and that with time my music will be played. I am eagerly awaiting that time when the airwaves will be free to play my music and hopefully that of other musicians who have been affected by this informal censorship.

The Zimbabwe censorship board has not come up with any spelt guidelines as to what we should sing or not. What they have done is to let broadcasters decide what they want played and what they do not want played. This has left the ZBH with a monopoly to blacklist songs it sees as politically incorrect.

My situation and that of other musicians has been made worse by the fact that we do not have independent radio and television stations that can offer alternatives. This situation has affected the smooth promotion of my products through the electronic media.

I still continue to work hard and promote my music through live shows around the country. What I have said to myself since my music began been censored is that I would continue to record music in the format I have been all along. I will not change my style, I will not tone down my lyrics and I will continue to sing about issues affecting the people of Zimbabwe.

I sing for Zimbabweans, and rightly so I sing in my native Shona language. I do not sing in English, and in singing in my native language I endeavour to be as elaborate as possible in my messages.

People who replace my lyrics with those that suit them are worsening my predicament with ZBH and government, but it is my hope that one day the broadcaster will accept my music for what it is – entertainment.

It is my hope that my music will remain provocative and create debate among the Zimbabwean society. As a musician I have the duty to serve my people, to sing about what I see around me, to sing about one man’s injustices to another, to rebuke those who manipulate others by virtue of being in powerful and authoritative positions.

Governments the world over censor music, and my case is not a unique one. But as my music is being censored there are fans who have remained loyal to my compositions and they have supported me through and through.

A lot has happened in the past and I have had no chance to come out in the open to give my side of story, luckily I have this time around. The next time, I will be talking about my once banned music receiving airplay on radio and television. Like the late great reggae star Bob Marley sang: “Time Will Tell”.


Zimbabwe: A Case of Music Censorship  
Before and After  
Independence  

By Omen Muza  
Researcher and art critic

Why Censor Music?
People in power the world over know the power of music – otherwise they would not be scared stiff of it. Jane Spender of International PEN was recently quoted as saying “The censorship of music is a token of music’s power and the freedom it offers.” According to Marie Korpe, music can and has been censored by states, religions, educational systems, retailers and lobbying groups, usually in violation of international conventions of human rights.

Legislation
That the governments of Rhodesia and Zimbabwe have censored and continue to censor music and other forms of artistic expression is thoroughly pernicious but hardly surprising, what I find absolutely mind boggling is that they have successively evoked exactly the same piece of legislation to do so. Is music the common enemy? To this day, the Censorship and Entertainment Control Act (Chapter 10:04), whose date of commencement is 1 December 1967, survives in almost its original form despite revision in 1996. The administration of this Act is assigned to the Ministry of Home Affairs, whose mere mention evokes images of the Police. “The Minister shall appoint a board, to be known as the Board of Censors, to perform the functions entrusted to it under this Act. The Board shall consist of not less than nine members who shall be appointed for a period of not more than three years.” The functions of Board of Censors, more commonly know as the Censorship Board, are as follows:

a) to examine any article or public entertainment submitted to it;

b) to make such inquiries as it may consider necessary in regard to any publication, picture, statue, record or public entertainment which is alleged to be or which the Board has reason to believe is of a nature contemplated in section seventeen;

c) to advise the Minister in regard to any matter arising out of the application of any provision of this Act which the Minister may refer to the Board;

d) to perform any other function assigned to it by this Act or any other enactment.

Note the sweeping powers granted to the Board by words such as “alleged to be” and “has reason to believe”. Anyone can incite the Board to lunge at a piece of music or any other work of art!!!
Despite the existence of this legislative framework, what we have seen on the ground is a clear subversion of justice whereby the authority to determine the content of our airwaves has been usurped by one individual or a group of individuals (it could be an overzealous government minister, a ZBC boss, a fearful DJ, a record company executive or a combination of these) without due regard to the legislative process as outlined in the Act. This suits the authorities perfectly in that they avoid the controversy that comes with the formal process of banning music. For example when Leonard Zhakata enquired why most of the songs from his album Hodho were struck off radio play lists, officials at ZBC professed ignorance of the ban. Yet only two love songs were played on radio, the rest remained effectively banned.

As the melodrama in the local music industry unfolds, the Censorship Board remains conveniently tucked in the background, ready to occasionally pounce on some unsuspecting artist when called upon to do so. Otherwise they have displayed their utter lack of interest in working: on 9 September 2004 they snubbed a discussion on censorship of artistic work that took place in Harare; at the time of writing this report, they had spent a year without responding to a legal petition written by Rooftop Promotions’ lawyers in response to the banning of *Super Patriots and Morons*, a play considered to be critical of government’s policies. The grand plan appears to be to frustrate and wear down the patience and perhaps resources of the poor artist who cannot possibly afford to wait for such long periods of time particularly when faced with the urgent question of survival!! The message is clear: Next time steer clear of controversy and according to Banning Eyre do “not stray from approved messages.”

**Self – Censorship**

The reaction to music viewed as “politically incorrect” is therefore utterly predictable – no airplay on state-controlled radio stations. (ZBH is still an ungainly monopoly that must be saved from itself.) No mention in state-controlled newspapers. This has spawned massive self-censorship which at best is a very loud sort of silence and at worst the kind of sorry sycophancy that we have seen from the band of merrymakers literary in the employ of government. If you want your music to be heard, sing about how successful the land reform exercise has been, bash Tony Blair and all the imperialist gay gangsters in the most lurid language imaginable – airplay is guaranteed, you play at all the state functions and nationals events (read galabashes) and you could even get funding for that studio of yours whose idea has been gathering dust on the shelves of your poverty. Some artists are just so overwhelmed by the desire not to ruffle any feathers that they will simply not think about making any music that is relevant to their condition. And music that is relevant to our condition has to necessarily question the social and political ills of our time, not some of the time – all the time!!

**Propaganda**

When government introduced the 75% local content policy in 2001, many, including musicians hailed it as a positive development aimed at improving their lives. Soon this was increased to 100% - a wholesale ban of foreign music- and suspiciously, “whole” cabinet ministers began to take sustained interest in mundane issues like the recording of music albums, jingles and videos. It became apparent that the ultimate
aim was not only to deprive Zimbabweans of an alternative voice but also to determine what they listen to and when – which is practically all the time. Maxwell Sibanda recently wrote that the *Rambai Makashinga* jingle was played approximately 288 times in one day on all four radio stations and flighted on television approximately 72 times a day. Government has not only encouraged the recording of thinly veiled propaganda masquerading as entertainment but also sponsored it actively. Resultantly, music that talks about human rights abuses, corruption and abuse of power has been replaced with shallow music supposedly promoting revolutionary ideas, sheepishly played ad nauseam by scared DJs.

**Then and Now**

Due to the outlined legislative onslaught, some people will credit Government with some measure of discretion in its quest to suppress dissenting musical voices, which cannot be said of the Smith regime – while The Green Arrows were performing a revolutionary song titled *Madzangara Dzimu* in 1978, security forces broke into the concert venue, beat up the band members, arrested and imprisoned them for 2 nights. This had already happened to them earlier in 1975 while they were performing at Jamaica Inn. Ironically, it was The Green Arrows’ involvement in political campaigns that dealt the group its final blow. Thomas Mapfumo spent 3 months without trial at Chikurubi Prison and was only released when he agreed to play at a political rally for Bishop Muzorewa. These are some of the few documented incidents of music censorship in Rhodesia.

**Whither Now?**

In my opinion, the tragedy of the music industry in Zimbabwe is that there is no sustained and coordinated effort in terms of tackling the issue of censorship. This must begin with education. It is absolutely important for musicians, record company executives, producers, retailers and arts administrators to understand the Censorship and Entertainment Control Act that governs them. A bad law is better than no law at all. Daves Guzha recently summed it up when he said, “We need workshops on censorship so that we know our parameters.” To merely make music or any other form of art is not in itself enough, there should be more interest in whether it is actually getting to its targeted audience and if not let’s find out why? The National Arts Council must collaborate with the Musicians Union of Zimbabwe (MUZI) and implement programmes to educate musicians. Musicians must share their experiences of harassments and speak with one voice. They must overcome their fear of speaking out about what’s eating them and seek some relevance in the scheme of things.

Seminars such as these should be held more consistently because they keep the issue of censorship of music in focus. Another issue of concern is that there is almost no database or index of cases of music censorship in pre- and post-independence Zimbabwe. Appendix 1 outlining some of the cases of censorship of music in Zimbabwe was compiled from a wide variety of sources, most of them foreign. Foreigners are currently more interest in the censorship of our music than we ourselves are. Freemuse (Free Musical Expression) is an international organisation that concerns itself with the censorship of music and has documented some of Zimbabwe’s cases of music censorship. Marie Korpe, a Swedish journalist, is the
Executive Director of the organisation and in October 2004, she published a book titled Shoot the Singer! Music Censorship Today. Freemuse is attempting to establish a global network of informants to help build up a complete picture of censorship around the world. Let’s play our part!

The Censorship Board must make itself more accessible for public discussions such as the one they snubbed on 9 September 2004. It is hoped that more interaction will remove the mutual feelings of suspicion that currently characterises their relationship with the arts community.

Sources:


Complete Control: Music and propaganda in Zimbabwe, Maxwell Sibanda

FREEMUSE, Freedom of Musical Expression website http://freemuse.org/

Sleeve notes for a compilation album titled The Green Arrows © Analog Africa/ZMC

The Standard, 10 April 2005

The Zimbabwe IndependentXtra

APPENDIX 1: Some instances of music censorship in pre-and post independence Zimbabwe

- **1977-1978**, *Nyoka Yendara* was one of *The Green Arrows*’ “all-time favourite (songs) and a good example of the mood of the time, and probably one of the masterpieces in the art of ambiguous language used to transport a covert message to the masses. Unfortunately, one of the guys working at the studio, and who happened to be fluent in Shona, translated the song to the Censorship Board. The song was swiftly banned from the air!!!”

- “Another impressive revolution (ary) song, *Madzangara Dzimu*, astonishingly slipped through the censor’s fingers. Unfortunately, security forces entered a concert venue where *The Green Arrows* were performing the track. The band members were arrested, beaten and imprisoned for 2 nights. This had already happened to them in 1975 while performing a critical song at Jamaica Inn!”

- **Thomas Mapfumo** had much worse luck. He was arrested by the Smith regime and spent 3 months without a trial at a Chikurubi prison.

- **1984-1985**, At the height of the differences between the ruling ZANU (PF) and PF ZAPU, ZBC directors, most of them ex-combatants are reported to have driven to the Radio 2 studios library and confiscated all recorded music the youth wing choir (LMG) of PF ZAPU and destroyed it.

- **December 2000**, Phillip Schadendorf, a lighting engineer is charged with inciting hostility against President Robert Mugabe after aiming a spotlight on his portraits during the performance of Wasakara, Oliver Mtukudzi’s song that urges people to accept old age with grace. He was charged with violating the Law and Order Maintenance Act.
• May 2003, Leonard Zhakata’s album titled Hodho (Shot Gun) is banned after only a few days on the airways. Only two love songs from the album received airplay thereafter.

• Early 2004, Thomas Mapfumo reportedly experiences difficulties in booking studio time to record a new album and subsequently the master recordings disappear mysteriously.

• April 2004, Leonard Zhakata is questioned for about 30 minutes by police officers at Harare Central Police Station, regarding the inclusion of his song Ngoma Yenharo on Red Hot Riot – Rocking The Regime into Retirement, a compilation album produced by Zvakwana, a civic pressure group.

• April 2004, Raymond Majongwe alleges that he has been receiving telephone calls from state security agents, telling him to remove his music from the British –based SW Radio Africa. He also claims that he has stalked by shadowy characters since the release of his album The Daily News.

• November 2004, Thomas Mapfumo releases a live album called Chaputika including a previously unreleased song called Masoja NeMapurisa. It has been reported that gangs of unidentified people raided flea markets confiscating and destroying the CDs. The album producer’s father was attacked and his car burnt in a Harare suburb. Thomas decided not to return to Zimbabwe for his traditional year-end concerts.

• November 2004, Alishias “Maskiri” Musimbe says that his latest album Blue Movie has been banned from the airwaves because of what State radio bosses considered offensive content.

APPENDIX 2: What has been said about music censorship?

“Censorship is based on fear.”
Johnny Clegg

“We need workshops on censorship so that we know our parameters.”
Daves Guzha.

“All this sends a clear message to young musicians, who now understand that if they want to pursue a career in music, they must not stray from approved messages.” Banning Eyre.

“True censorship is something that we are not really aware of on a day-to-day basis; it’s something that’s inherent in the system. There’s an ever-increasing element of that censorship going on everywhere.”
Damon Albarn, Blur.

“Governments have tried again and again to censor my music and my ideas…. Governments all over the world will go to great lengths to silence the people.”
Thomas Mapfumo.

“For all too long the plight of those musicians who are denied their right to perform (and of their audiences to enjoy) their music and their messages has been ignored. We have hardly considered that the performing of music and song could endanger the life and freedom of the performer.”
Morten Kjaerum, Director, Danish Institute of Human Rights.

“In a democracy, art and politics are in fierce competition for the people’s hearts. Both compete to project, as accurately as possible, the people’s dreams and aspirations. Politicians and artists quarrel occasionally, but still respect each other’s right to exist.”
Zimbabwe Standard reader.

“As a musician, I have been appalled that the government has used its monopoly of the airwaves to restrict airplay of artists who they see as non-supportive of its policies. People who do not promote government’s image are often seen as being enemies of the government and attempts are made to
silence them or undermine their careers. This is a gross abuse of human rights, so many of which have been violated in order to secure government’s grasp on power.”

Oliver Mtukudzi

“It’s very easy to censor the press, for instance, because newspapers need big offices, and they need reporters. Music can be produced outside the country, it can be smuggled in, it can be distributed, and it can be copied ad infinitum. Even if the censor could gather up all the CDs and cassettes and burn them, the songs would still be in people’s heads - which makes it so much more powerful”

Andy Morgan, journalist and co-organiser of Mali’s Festival in the Desert.

“ Yes, it happened, but please let the matter rest because it’s too risky to talk about it. I will jeopardise my livelihood if ever I comment because these people will stop at nothing and I will never sing again if they ever hear about it. Zvinotipinza pa-tight tikada zvokushambadzira mumapepanhau. Regerai arohwa aende kunomhangara ”

Cephas Mashakada, commenting on the assault of his band members and revellers after a show at Brooklyn Club.