

“*Pamamonya Ipapo*”: Is Soul Also Among the Prophets?—Trivialization or Redefinition of Heroism in Zimbabwe?

BENJAMIN MUDZANIRE AND MICKSON MAZURUSE

Abstract

Within the shifting and highly politicized accreditation of heroes in Zimbabwe, never has the investiture of hero status sparked as much public debate as has the posthumous honor of Zimdancehall artiste, Soul Jah Love. Traditionally applied to political luminaries, the conferment of hero status on arts icons is not novel in Zimbabwe; at least, the accreditation of seasoned artistes like Oliver Mtukudzi, Simon Chimbetu and Dickson Chinx Chingaira furnishes the proof. And now, Soul is also among the “prophets”! A young artiste, with a relatively lean musical career, and of a controversial moral clout, finds himself read in the same scope with the country’s elite liberation heroes—*pamamonya ipapo* (among the giants)! Soul Jah Love divided public opinion when he was alive just as he did on his death (Antonio 2021). This makes the bestowal of such an honor fiercely contentious. One questions the intelligence that comes up with such decisions and the integrity of the stencil used. Is it on merit? Is it political allegiance or even expediency? Are reality definers consistent in their award of such honors? Is this a redefinition or trivialization of heroic contribution? However, a patient navigation of the lyrical contours and the complexity of social and political messages embedded in Soul Jah Love’s music spurs a second thought for the artiste, the music, and for the award. A flawed genius, a case of golden messages stashed in cursed vessels—music’s version of Dambudzo Marechera? Few may have considered the referential weight of his music and the relevance of his style to his generation of audience and fellow musicians. Consequently, this paper discusses the dynamics of investiture of liberation hero emblem and the political currents that might have been considered in “liberalizing” the liberation stencil to accord Soul Jah Love access to the sacred space. Soul Jah Love’s song “*Pamamonya ipapo*” (among the giants) can be contrasted with the biblical allusion “Is Saul also among the prophets?” to project a sense of surprise at Saul’s prophetic debut in the company of a band of ‘seasoned’ prophets (1 Samuel 10:11, 12 N.I.V.).

Heroism: A Conceptual and Contextual Reflection

As a prelude to a full debate on the eligibility of Soul Jah Love, henceforth SJJL, it is not only prudent but obligatory to give a short but focused background to the concept and context of heroism in Zimbabwe. Such an overview gives this debate a thorough footing upon which a balanced discussion can be premised.

Heroism: A Conceptual Review

A compelling discourse on a contentious issue like the one under discussion requires a focused review of various conceptions and taxonomies of the concept. Such a task has the essence of informing the justifications for, and disputation of the investiture of the award on the hero in context. Within the contemporary spate of literature on the concept, there is no consensus on the definition of heroism.

According to Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou¹, “the term hero derives from the Greek word *heros*, meaning protector or defender. Historical views of heroism emphasize the importance of nobility of purpose or principles underlying a heroic act (see Zimbardo, 2007).” Frisk adds another dimension to the conception of heroism, that of their evolution in distinguished service within society.² Zimbardo and Frisk, therefore, see heroes as people of dignified and unique social contribution. Schwartz defines heroes as “individuals who demonstrate practical wisdom, showing the desire to do good for others and the capacity to do the right thing in a particular situation,”³ which is probably a localized conception of heroism applicable to ordinary moral protrusions.

The concept revolves around the issue of charisma and transformative energy which revolutionizes men from within and shapes material and social conditions according to the revolutionary will but, as Weber notes, is also “transient and prone to coagulating ‘as permanent structures and traditions replace the belief and revelation of the heroism of charismatic personalities.’”⁴ Carlyle avers that heroes are great men who have shaped themselves in world history.⁵ Conversely, Spencer sees heroes as a mutual outcome of individual and societal effort.⁶ In that sense, the hero is not distinctly self-made, neither is he objectively one but is society produced, hence subjectively constructed and construed. Because of the subjective nature of the concept, Cooley is probably correct to propose that heroes are “a product of constructive imagination.”⁷ They emerge out of ordinary societies and are made by societies rather than self-invented. This motivates Spencer’s notion of sociological precondition of great men, which suggests that before great men can remake society, their society must make them—along with society’s institutions, language, knowledge, manners and its countless arts and appliances.⁸ A hero is, thus, an outcome of an enormous aggregate of forces. Self-will power and social input cooperate to mold the hero into the legend he later becomes. Carlyle assumed that the shape of the hero “will depend on the time and the environment he finds himself in.”⁹ Extending the former’s view, Weber sees charismatic leaders tending to rise to power “in moments of distress—whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious or political.”¹⁰ Generally, heroes tend to reflect societal values and provide standards of conduct.¹¹ In the context of this paper, one is compelled to ask: is Soul Jah Love a man-made hero or a self-made one? Is he a moral leader contributing to any social cause in a distinctive manner? The various conceptions of heroism will help appreciate or dispute the hero-worthiness of the man in context or, at least, understand the context of his evolution.

¹ Elaine L. Kinsella, Timothy D. Ritchie, and Eric R. Igou, “Zeroing on Heroes: A Prototype Analysis of Hero Features,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 1 (2015):114–27, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038463>.

² Kristian Frisk, “What Makes a Hero? Theorising the Social Structuring of a Hero,” *Sociology* 53, no. 1 (2018):87–103, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518764568>.

³ Barry Schwartz, “Our Loss of Wisdom,” filmed in February 2009, TED video, https://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_our_loss_of_wisdom, as quoted in Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou, “Zeroing on Heroes.”

⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1116, as quoted in Frisk, “What Makes a Hero?”

⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Electric Book Co., 2001[1841]), as quoted in Frisk, “What Makes a Hero?”

⁶ Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology*, (London: HS King, 2008 [1873]), 25, as quoted in Frisk, “What Makes a Hero?,” 88.

⁷ Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Scribner, 1902), 346, as quoted in Frisk, “What Makes a Hero?”

⁸ Spencer, *The Study of Sociology*, 25, as quoted in Frisk, “What Makes a Hero?”

⁹ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 134, as quoted in Frisk, “What Makes a Hero?”

¹⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 112, as quoted in Frisk, “What Makes a Hero?”

¹¹ Katie Pretzinger, “The American Hero: Yesterday and Today.” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 4, no. 1 (1976): 36–40; Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero Worship* (New York: Scribner, 1941), as cited in Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou, “Zeroing on Heroes.”

From the definitions and conceptions of heroism outlined above, one can glean various typologies and taxonomies of heroism. Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo suggest three broad categories of heroes, that is martial, civil heroes, and social heroes.¹² Martial heroes constitute the police officers, fire-fighters and paramedics, who are bound to a code of conduct where they are trained to protect and rescue others from danger. On one hand, civil heroes are defined as non-duty bound heroes who also risk themselves for others, but there is no military code or training to help them deal with the unfolding scenarios. Of social heroes, whistleblowers, scientific heroes, martyrs, and Good Samaritans are examples. Where is Soul Jah Love in these categories of heroes?

Heroism: A Contextual Reflection

The idea of celebrating and honoring illustrious persons is not unique to the Zimbabwean cultural-political space. Throughout the ages, and in many spaces of the world, brave, selfless, and life-transforming men and women have arisen to bequeath an indelible legacy to humanity. Society has always affirmed and recognized such acts by creating physical or symbolic reminders of their heroic deeds. Street names, schools, hospitals, statues, and heroes' acres have served as memorial sites for men and women of landmark achievements.

The concept of heroism in Zimbabwe is enshrined in the Zimbabwean Constitution under the National Heroes Act, Chapter 10:16, and mainly emerges from, but is not restricted to, one's contribution to the liberation struggle. The Act reads:

Where the President considers that any deceased person who was a citizen of Zimbabwe has deserved well of his country on account of his outstanding, distinctive and distinguished service to Zimbabwe, he may, by notice in Gazette, designate such a person a national, provincial or district hero of Zimbabwe.¹³

These are men and women who have subordinated their self-interest to the collective interests of their people. Also recognized are liberation war leaders who served in various civilian ranks, particularly in developing the support networks, raising resources, recruiting fighters, and engaging in negotiations with foes and friends.¹⁴ This conception of heroism is clearly derived from a political and martial understanding of heroism.

While the power to pronounce is ultimately and unilaterally vested in the president, the vetting process is a preserve of the ruling party. From the onset, that makes the whole issue contentious. Some who have served society with distinction have been considered unsuitable for recognition, while others with very little political or social capital have found their way into the zone of honor through “correct” political affiliation.

Mpofu notes that the definition and usages of heroes and Heroes' Acre have mutated over the years to suit Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front's (ZANU-PF) shifting political agendas.¹⁵

¹² Zeno E. Franco, Kathy Blau, and Philip G. Zimbardo, “Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation between Heroic Action and Altruism,” *Review of General Psychology* 15, no. 2 (2011): 99–113.

¹³ The National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, “The Heroes Acre: Introduction,” 2021, <http://www.nmmz.co.zw/national-heroes-acre/introduction>.

¹⁴ Fay Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga: Memories from the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe* (African Books Collective, 2006), quoted in Tyanai Masiya and Godfrey Maringira, “The Use of Heroism in the Zimbabwe African Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) Intra-party Factional Dynamics,” *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 39, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v39i2.278>.

¹⁵ Shepherd Mpofu, “Making Heroes, (Un)making the Nation? ZANU-PF's Imaginations of the Heroes and Construction of Identity in Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2015,” *African Identities*, 15, no. 1 (2017): 62–78.

During the previous administration of Robert Mugabe (1980–2017), the national hero status or liberation hero status was largely reserved for war veterans.¹⁶ The Second Republic is slowly expanding on the definition of hero status as opposed to the previous inclination to war veterans only. Already, some founding nationalist figures, such as Ndabaningi Sithole and James Chikerema, “forgotten” by The First Republic, have been revalued and accorded national hero status in spite of their alternative opinion to the prevailing political and philosophical convictions of the reality definers.

Gradation of Heroes and Heroes’ Acres in Zimbabwe

The gradation of heroes’ space and rank is supposed to accord with the height, level, and degree of service, mainly within the political and social spheres. The highest contribution earns one the recognition as a national hero, followed by the liberation hero and the district hero status. The procedure is that the grass roots request that their son or daughter be accorded such an honor depending on their overall distinctive and distinguished social or political contribution. National hero is the highest honor that can be conferred on any individual, and this grants the recipient the privilege to be buried at the National Heroes Acre. This also comes with benefits for the family of the national hero.¹⁷ Provincial hero, also known as liberation hero, is the second-highest honor that can be bestowed on an individual. It entitles the person burial at a provincial Heroes Acre and comes with benefits for their family.¹⁸ It can be read as a consolation space for those who would not have made it into the upper rung. It has less luster compared to the national hero. District hero is the third rung of recognition, which celebrates one’s contribution at that level. The visibility and area of impact is at the district level.

The last two levels are less contentious than the national hero. They become talking points only when people who deserve to be at the national shrine find themselves demoted to these levels or when conspicuously dubious characters end up here. In this paper, we focus on the provincial or liberation conceptualization of heroism, not necessarily the physical space in which these heroes are inhumed, but rather the volume of social service deserving the honor. We examine the eligibility of Soul Jah Love to the honor that rhymes with that space.

Who Is Soul Jah Love?

This debate cannot commence before revealing the person whose heroism is contested here as well as the problem-plagued life he endured. Born on the 22nd of November, 1989, with a twin brother John, Soul Musaka’s mother, Elizabeth Sithembeni Musaka died on September 12, 1992, when he was only three. He was adopted by his aunt, who sadly died four years later. He moved in with his grandmother, who died a few years later when he was in grade 5. Henceforth, he reportedly stayed with his father and stepmother in Waterfalls.¹⁹ His twin brother, John, died at the young age of 15 from an undisclosed ailment, and a year later, in 2005, his father died. Soul suffered from diabetes from the age of seven and was also diagnosed with cancer. In 2016, he was involved in an accident but escaped with minor injuries.

¹⁶ Tsvakwi, “Soul Jah Love Hero Status.”

¹⁷ Tim E. Ndoro, “Zimdancehall Star Soul Jah Love’s Liberation Hero Status Explained,” *Iharare.com*, February 18, 2021, <https://iharare.com/soul-jah-loves-liberation-hero-status-explained/>.

¹⁸ Ndoro, “Zimdancehall Star.”

¹⁹ Brian Moyondizvo, “Here Are 5 Things You Probably Didn’t Know About ‘Chibaba’ Soul Jah Love,” *Iharare.com*, February 17, 2021, <https://iharare.com/soul-jah-love-5-important-things-you-need-to-know-about-him/>.

His was a relatively short life punctuated with controversy, drama, misfortune, drugs, love, and boundless talent, and as Antonio notes, he divided public opinion when he was alive just like he did on his death.²⁰ His recognition as a liberation hero was as controversial and debatable as the life he lived.

Liberation Hero: Eligibility Contestation

The term *hero* has become radically ambiguous in contemporary life, and so it is in the Zimbabwean context.²¹ It is as controversial as it is environmental. In Zimbabwe, it is constantly mutating in response to the ever-changing political mood such that ordinary people and politicians have come to question some decisions declaring certain individuals heroes. And the investiture of Soul Jah Love as a liberation hero is not spared of controversy. A nation that has been used to associating heroes with the liberation struggle is divided on the eligibility of non-political and morally questionable individuals. Another opinion that focuses on the artiste and his mandate to society may see in him a loyal purveyor of sociopolitical realities in his social country. With seemingly negative energy, he managed to handle critical issues confronting society. Given these two conflicting views, this paper approaches the debate along the lines of *why not* and *why* to proffer suggestions that could be considered to refute or nod to the hero-worthiness of SJL.

Why Not?

That at times the Zimbabwe government recognizes social icons who make a salutary non-political contribution to society is an issue closed to dispute; rather, what raises public alarm and surprise is the quality of contribution and controversy of some candidates for such honors as well as the inconsistency enshrouding the process. Legendary musician Oliver Mtukudzi, one of Africa’s most visible and hardly disputable iconic musicians, made history when he became the first musician to be declared a national hero by President Emmerson Mnangagwa. War veteran and music icon Chinx Chingaira was declared a liberation hero despite huge calls for him to be declared a national hero. Sungura genius Simon Chimbetu was conferred the liberation hero status with little debate. And up comes Soul Jah Love, whose controversial lifestyle and short musical journey hardly locates him on the same level with Chinx and Chimbetu! This may sound like trivialization of heroism in Zimbabwe. This happening at a moment history and society have not forgotten the contribution of other significant but ignored heroes—but reality definers have—makes Soul Jah Love’s investiture a bit alarming. Below are the leading arguments against the award.

ZANU PF’s Selective Amnesia

What raises much debate on the hero-worthiness of SJL may not be his lifestyle but the lack of consistency and objectivity in the award of such an honor. The award has been fraught with irregularities and particularly the issue of ZANU PF’s glaring selective amnesia. Society still thinks deserving artistes and political players were left out. Arguably, more deserving people with impeccable credentials and influence

²⁰ Winstone Antonio, “Love, Mischief, Controversy Followed Soul to the Grave,” *News Day Zimbabwe*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.newsday.co.zw/slider/article/36648/love-mischief-controversy-followed-soul-to-the-grave>.

²¹ Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), cited in Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou, “Zeroing on Heroes,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198146766.001.0001>.

in national and social politics could have been considered, but they lie nowhere near the sacred space. From the political fraternity, founding liberation movement leaders like Ndabaningi Sithole (only recognized twenty-three years after his death in 2000), James Chikerema (recognized seventeen years after his death in 2006), democratic movement stalwarts like Morgan Tsvangirai, philanthropists like Jairos Jiri, artistes like Leonard Musorowenyoka Dembo, Solomon Skuza, and Paul Matavire, just to mention a few, were never considered for such awards. Tsvakwi also makes the same observation:

The late Solomon Skuza, a war veteran who was leader of the Fallen Heroes was not granted such status. Sungura legend Leonard Dembo who died in 1996 also had people lobbying for him to be granted hero's status. A few years back, there was talk to place a plaque of the artiste in Zimbabwe's hall of fame with some suggesting that he be awarded a posthumous honorary doctorate. None of this materialized.²²

These glaring inconsistencies provoke debates on the suitability of candidates for such awards. What also irks other observers is the realization that Soul Jah Love is lumped into the same class with "luminaries" like Chinx Chingaira, whom many believe should have been considered for higher honors. Mpofu avers that, "instead of being a faithful witness to the past (Dwyer, 2004), the national shrine has historically been deceptive as it is a space nationalists have encoded with messages that facilitate selective and politically expedient forms of remembering and forgetting."²³ As if to justify this opinion, other distinguished personalities have not been recognized with befitting luster. Renowned sungura artiste Simon Chimbetu and long-serving First Republic government ministers Aenius Chigwedere and Dr. Samuel Mumbengegwi, inter alia, will be remembered as provincial heroes together with Soul Jah Love. This triggers the rhetorical allusion "is Soul also among the prophets?"—not to say these are incontestable heroic cases but to show how contrastable these are to Soul Jah Love. Here, we use the biblical allusion of Saul's discovery among the prophets to express alarm at Soul's inclusion among the political "giants" (*mamonya*). Biblical Saul, the son of Kish, like Soul the son of Sithembeni, among credentialed persons, provokes public surprise by bursting into the prophetic in the company of seasoned prophets.²⁴

However, the fact that other artistes were not recognized only calls for objectivity and consistency but should not detain reality definers from prescribing hero statuses to deserving later cases who may not have made it in the preceding dispensation. It further gives substance to the environmentalist conception of heroes. They belong to a particular moment, time, context, and philosophical frame. Commenting on the shift from strictly political to more liberal and inclusive ascription, ZANU PF spokesperson Simon Khaya Moyo remarked that that the conferment of the liberation hero status has over the years changed in form and context, as it is "no longer limited to those who played a part in the liberation war only, but also those who actively advocated for the emancipation and liberation of people in post-independence."²⁵

That shift, more than political grandstanding, should be applauded as a point of recognition for the liberative and transformative power of art, in this case, the sung word. In his reflection on Marcuse's philosophy of art and aesthetics, Ding observed that;

²² Joel Tsvakwi, "Soul Jah Love Hero Status Fulfills a Long-Held Dream for Artistes," *The Chronicle*, March 6, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/soul-jah-love-hero-status-fulfills-a-long-held-dream-for-artistes/>.

²³ Mpofu, "Making Heroes."

²⁴ 1 Samuel 10:11, 12.

²⁵ Joseph Madzimure, "Soul Jah Luv Deserved Hero Status—Zanu PF," *The Herald*, February 20, 2021, <https://www.herald.co.zw/soul-jah-luv-deserved-hero-status-zanu-pf/>.

Artistic form, artistic autonomy and the liberation of mankind are the integral parts that form art and they constitute all the elements that are needed in the art world. For as long art exists, it will keep its commitment to truth, happiness and liberation.²⁶

The activism of aesthetics is referred to here. Art plays a very critical role in criticism and negation. It is that contribution that needs to be closely analyzed in Soul Jah Love’s music which could have been considered in awarding the artiste the honor.

Drugs and Personal Hamartia

While heroes are generally regarded as superhuman—men of uncommon grandeur and moral standing, Soul Jah Love has been roundly criticized for his unexemplary moral constitution. He disappointed, missed appointments, and faltered on many occasions due to drugs. Felistus Murata (Mai Titi), a peer artiste, reveals that the drug abuse adversely affected his health and musical career. He missed many shows and lost sponsors and promoters because of his drug abuse.²⁷ In corroboration, arts analyst Mushinga observes that:

Controversy continued to follow him like a shadow as he failed to show up for shows several times a year. He was arrested in Mutare over failure to perform after being paid. In South Africa, he failed to perform again and there were calls for his head. Every year there were a handful of promoters crying foul over his lack of professionalism... He had a rowdy group of youth around him all the time offering him the very things he knew he had to run away from—meth, marijuana, broncleer, *mutoriro*, to name a few of the drugs he abused.²⁸

Even with that errant lifestyle he was declared a liberation hero, yet he contravenes one of the basic expectations of heroes, that of moral modeling. Heroes are generally regarded as moral exemplars modeling the values and virtues of society. Instead of providing a social and mental script for how one could deal with life challenges, he faltered on the epistemic function of heroes as suggested by Allison and Goethals.²⁹ Heroes are moral exemplars, and although it may not be realistic to imitate heroes that show moral fortitude, the encounter may trigger a moment of reflection where the individual questions their moral decision-making and behaviors, avoiding moral complacency.³⁰ In the context of this study, a man of not-so-sober habits and of a weak moral fortitude suddenly finds himself among decorated and distinguished members of society provokes public debate and inquiry as to how he made it to the top. His song *Gum-kum* (2012), which suggested men’s private organs, was rather obscene and not friendly to play before respected persons. What is more, he was generally abusive of the only woman he ever married, Bounty Lisa. He broke up with her, reconciled with her, and ruthlessly battered her several times until she lost her patience with him and left him for another man.³¹ He was infinitely controversial. From a moralist perspective, there is very little to celebrate in the heroism of Soul Jah Love. There is no positive moral take-away from his lifestyle. He may have swayed gullible youths in the direction of moral complacency, drug abuse, and syndicalist tendencies.

²⁶ Guoqi Ding, “Art’s Commitment to Liberation in Marcuse’s Philosophy,” *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 7 (2015): 30.

²⁷ Audrey L. Ncube, “‘He Used Drugs to Ease His Pain’—Comedienne Mai Titi Speaks on Why Soul Jah Love Used Drugs,” *Iharare.com*, February 18, 2021, <https://iharare.com/comedienne-mai-titi-speaks-on-why-soul-jah-love-used-drugs/>.

²⁸ Charles Mushinga, “Soul Jah Love, Genius of Our Time,” *H-Metro*, February 18, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210219103315/https://www.hmetro.co.zw/soul-jah-love-genius-of-our-time/>.

²⁹ Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals, *Heroic Leadership: An Influence Taxonomy of 100 Exceptional Individuals* (New York: Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203100882>.

³⁰ Flescher, 2003 in Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou, “Zeroing on Heroes.”

³¹ Mushinga, “Soul Jah Love, Genius.”

The kind of debauchery witnessed at his funeral wake, where rowdy drunken youths disobeyed the COVID-19 lockdown regulations and fought running battles with the police, was morally untenable and can only be associated with the burying of a tout or a countercultural hero.

Political Expediency

The issue of political expediency on the part of the ruling elite can never be dismissed when suggesting considerations used in the heroism of SJL. Here, political science and political marketing could have been the undeclared operational designs meant to sway voters into liking the ZANU PF brand. Modern political science recommends celebrity endorsement of political products as an effective bait for targeted groups. The move resonates with the appointment of charismatic preacher, Uebert Angel, to the position of Presidential Envoy and Ambassador-at-Large to Europe and the Americas, two years before the 2023 elections. It is genuinely imagined that close association with eminent persons has chances of furthering brand preference. Associating with a celebrity has tremendous dividends for sprucing the image of any institution, party and government included. Within the corporate and political circles, the world is awakening to the marketing sense of involving celebrities in popularizing and associating their brands. Celebrities have been known to offer both their popularity and fame to social causes, brands or political and election campaigns.³² Celebrity endorsement capitalizes on the public recognition bestowed on celebrities to market a product.³³ Such endorsement is valuable due to its perceived potential to grab consumer attention. According to celebrity Soul Jah Love the posthumous award could be deemed politically sensible, given his immense popularity and potential aroma. Besides, Soul Jah Love has been a crowd puller at ZANU PF rallies since the days of the First Republic. Veer, Ilda, and Brett suggest that celebrity endorsements may increase interest in the endorsed party, allowing for higher voter turnouts.³⁴ Soul Jah Love's history of association with the ruling party and party events is without question; one may question his sincerity as a true party cadre but not his presence in the party. He was featured at many ZANU PF rallies, whether as a crowd-pulling bait or as one of them. His embarrassment at a faction-ridden ZANU PF rally in Mutare in 2017 may not have necessarily announced his association with the party but his association with the incoming faction of E. D. Mnangagwa as well. From "Soul Jah Love *hachisi chinhu*" (Soul Jah Love is nothing) to being accorded hero status three years later rhymes with the bastardized image and eventual crescendo of E.D Mnangagwa's fortunes: from a fugitive deputy president to a substantive president around the same time.

More than being a celebrity, there is the thinking that he was a bona fide ZANU PF cadre with an unquestionable loyalty to the party. In what could be viewed as Soul Jah Love's foray into politics and what could be read as fascination and involvement with ZANU PF hard hat politics and factionalism, he wrote a song in honor of Robert Mugabe in 2014. "In January 2015, it was reported that he released a track, 'Gamatox,' blasting the ousted ZANU PF Secretary for Administration, Didymus Mutasa at the same time praising Grace Mugabe."³⁵ That way, he claims a place and a faction in ZANU PF faction-ridden politics. It

³² Añulika Agina and Akpevwe Ekwevugbe, "Celebrity Endorsement of Political Aspirants and Its Effects on College Students in Lagos," *Journal of African Media Studies* 9, no. 3 (2017): 487, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jams.9.3.487.1>.

³³ B. Zafer Erdogan, Michael J. Baker, and Stephen Tagg, "Selecting Celebrity Endorsers: The Practitioner's Perspective," *Journal of Advertising Research* 41, no 3 (2001): 39–48; Carolyn A. Lin, "Cultural Differences in Message Strategies: A Comparison between American and Japanese Commercials," *Journal of Advertising Research* 33, no. 4 (1993): 40–48, <https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-41-3-39-48>.

³⁴ Ekant Veer, Ilda Becirovic, and Brett A. S. Martin, "If Kate Voted Conservative, Would You? The Role of Celebrity Endorsements in Political Party Advertising," *European Journal of Marketing* 44, no. 3/4 (2010): 436–50.

³⁵ Pindula, "Soul Jah Love," Accessed February 15, 2024. https://www.pindula.co.zw/Soul_Jah_Love/.

is not surprising to see him as a regular attendee of ZANU PF rallies, whether as crowd-pulling decoy or as a bona fide party member.

Youthification of Electoral Demographics

The increasingly juvenile electoral demographics in Zimbabwe could have earned youthful prodigy, SJL a place among the giants (*pamamonya*). With the gradual exit of the old guard from the political scene, their place is gradually being filled by the youths who now constitute the majority of potential voters. Zimbabwe has a population of 16 million, with approximately 77.9% of this population being youths aged 34 years and younger.³⁶ Given that situation, there is a presumption that the largest demographic participating in the electoral process ought to be the youths. Against this scenario, the new dispensation’s general inclination towards the youths, who incidentally constitute the majority of Soul Jah Love’s fans, could have generously caused him to land the award. Hopewell Chin’ono is probably correct to suggest that “ZANU PF declared Soul Jah Love a provincial hero to tap into public sentiment.”³⁷ It would appear the accolade was a contrived move to win voters. One observes that since the new dispensation assumed power, the salient shift has been to see more and more youths join the party and government. Such a shift has had a bearing on conceptions of heroism within the party. While elders in the ruling party could have had their own heroes, the youths, on the other hand, have their own. Youths are not swayed by distant liberation war memories but by their own heroic models shaped and evolved in the postcolonial social struggles. The youthful slant meant a new memory, a broadening and liberalization of the concept of heroism. The thesis that the government cowed to youth pressure in arriving at the decision to award him the honor is, therefore, appropriate. ZANU PF however, through their spokesperson Simon Khaya Moyo, view the granting of liberation hero status as acknowledgement of the work of young people in the furtherance of the national ideology through music.³⁸ The statement is without substantiation that one may see the award as a campaign ruse. It potentially wooed youths to ZANU PF in the 2023 election. The ZANU PF government could have located a rare but propitious moment to entice the youthful generation.

Why?

Constructing a plausible defense for investiture of heroism calls for a strenuous scrutiny of the artiste, his expressive abilities, and his works which remain under-celebrated for their social contributions because of SJL’s opaque expressive style and lifestyle. His unique expressive style, which may appear to some merely experimental, shambolic, and senseless, was probably his response to his condition. We thus need a patient navigation of his discography to sift and recover the implied messages otherwise easily lost to the “bad boy” tag associated with Soul Jah Love. Even the global music icon and national hero Oliver Mtukudzi observed the witty portion of Soul Jah Love when he said, “*Ndinofarira Soul Jah Love, mumwe anotaura zvine musoro zvekuti dhu, kungoti pamwe zvinozovharwa nehunhu hwake*” (I love Soul Jah Love, he speaks a lot of sense, only that at times his bogus character tends to mar his good work) (Shonhai, 2021). Soul Jah Love,

³⁶ WeLead Trust, “Why Youth Participation in Elections and Governance Issues Is Declining,” *kubatana.net*, March 15, 2021, <https://kubatana.net/2021/03/15/why-youth-participation-in-elections-and-governance-issues-is-declining/>.

³⁷ “Soul Jah Love’s dodgy hero status divides opinion,” *Bulawayo24*, February 19, 2021, <https://bulawayo24.com/news/local/199681>.

³⁸ Madzimore, “Soul Jah Luv Deserved.”

an artiste, who can be viewed as a countercultural hero and often misunderstood, merits our careful consideration. We strive to show that the artiste may have been forced to adopt a particular pattern of lifestyle and expression beyond traditional morality but still managed to express socially relevant issues through negative exploration of positively defined themes. His artistic expression sounds like graffiti but he manages to put across sensible matter through “not-so-conventional methods and positive character protrusion.”³⁹ The depth and amount of social capital in SJL’s music demands a delicate, ear-to-the-ground approach to titrate the residue that oozes from his music. His hero status was said to be in recognition of his contribution to political, social, and economic consciousness as reflected in his music.⁴⁰ The contribution will be examined as this paper unfolds.

Soul Jah Love: A Rebel with a Cause

Although he was born in a middle-class family in a suburban home, his nomadic tendency and identification with ghetto life and people popularized the *chigunduru* (homelessness/vagrancy) theory about his life. He dumped the vacuous class trappings of middle-class life to become a homeless tramp and live in disreputable conditions. That way, he created the ghetto “yute/youth” narrative and went on to become a self-ordained advocate and mouthpiece of the underprivileged class. He stormed into showbiz from Mbare, a poor ghetto that many in the past were shy to be associated with. He even composed the song “*Zvakatangira muGhetto*” (It started in the ghetto) to celebrate the high-density suburb as the incubation hub of his music. Mutoti observes that the “conditions he explicated in his music synchronized easily with struggles faced by many ‘ghetto’ youths of his generation across the country.”⁴¹ Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou outline one the functions of heroes as uplifting the lives of people,⁴² and he did that through advocacy. SJL was not ashamed of who he was and where he came from. These struggles were not imaginary but real-life issues that he confronted together with subaltern peers. These struggles may appear trivial to an outsider, yet they meant a whole universe to them. Imagine, spending one’s meager monetary resources on smoking and failing to buy cooking fat the following day. That may sound like misdirected priorities, but in his world, he could have attended to the most pressing demand in the world of competing needs. He touched on real-life issues that resonated with daily struggles of ghetto youth. In one interview on radio, he intimated “You know, I’m a human being. Sometimes *ndinenge ndamuka kumba, pamwe mari yese ndabhema Everest, pamwe kudheni hakuna mafuta, iwewe wakuuya kuti ‘Chibaba picture, picture . . . apa inini ndukutogaya kuti muface uyu akuziva here kuti kuden hakuna mafuta,*” (Sometimes I would have woken up having spent money on Everest (cigarettes), sometimes there is no cooking oil at home and you come and request to have a photo shoot . . . and I begin to wonder, does this guy know that there is no cooking oil at home).⁴³ Such is the dilemma of celebrities who, inside, are struggling, ordinary people, yet they put up appearances and move on. Mushawevato observes that “In its diversity, Soul Jah Love’s music was anchored on the daily

³⁹ Theresa Zolner, “Concepts of Graffiti: Much More Than Just Art,” paper presentation at T.A.G. S.-3: *The Anti-Graffiti Symposium*, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, September 13, 2007.

⁴⁰ Antonio, “Love, Mischief, Controversy.”

⁴¹ Taurai Mutoti, “Soul Jah Love, Dambudzo Marechera: Drawing Parallels and Their Contribution to Zim Culture and Cultural Diplomacy,” *Bulawayo24*, February 18, 2021, <https://m.bulawayo24.com/index-id-opinion-sc-columnist-byo-199623.html>.

⁴² Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou, “Zeroing on Heroes.”

⁴³ Mushinga, “Soul Jah Love, Genius.”

struggles and victories of the ordinary ghetto youths.”⁴⁴ Plaxedes Wenyika admired “the underdog triumph and fighting spirit that always came through in his songs.”⁴⁵

The willpower to subvert victimhood, oppression, and exploitation of the underprivileged qualifies him to sleep with fellow liberation heroes in sacred memorials spaces. He may not have been worried about living a good life after all, for conditions in his neighborhood, Mbare, could have molded a beast out of him. They could have engendered in him the radical tendency to question established social platitudes, as well as what it means to live a good life. From a shamanistic view, like Armstrong (2010:8) notes “life is not only accessible through participation in a community in a normative sense, but requires the courage to distance oneself, and to suffer through a state of relearning about life, in isolation.” We all live our lives as direct apprentices, feeling the harsh realities of our circumstances.

A Relentless Fighter

Soul Jah Love’s perseverance, resilience, and how he fought many battles that many did not understand but still remained undefeated probably explains why he was accorded a heroic cloak.⁴⁶ Behind the celebrity face of Soul was inhumed a troubled soul. A man acquainted with grief, he internally endured pain, sickness, loss, and frustration, and these would manifest in the uncelebrated flipside of the celebrity. Orphaned at a tender age, he had to endure the remainder of his relatively short life through periodic bouts of a recurring ailment, which he eventually succumbed to. He lost his twin brother early in life. These are some of the challenges he faced as he fought to discharge his artistic mandate to society. Mushinga observes:

He had a life-long battle with diabetes and had to inject himself every day, collapsing on several occasions and failing to perform as a result. He had a bad temper that saw him having many ugly episodes in public and several nasty incidents with the love of his life, Bounty Lisa, who he battered ruthlessly until she left him.⁴⁷

In this whole struggle, the audience blamed it on drugs and alcohol, yet sociological deviance theories use social context and social pressures to explain deviance. The absence of the mother figure in his life had an effect on his character and social protrusion. Probably he could have been a better man, free from those temper tantrums and out of character episodes. This is where the title “*Dai Hupenyu Hwaitengwa*” (If life could be bought) comes from. He wished his mother were alive, probably her socialization could have contained his antisocial energy. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sigmund Freud believed that children who are improperly socialized could develop personality disturbances that cause them to direct antisocial impulses either inward or outward.⁴⁸ Yet those that impute blame on SJL probably do not know the kind of struggles he had to endure. He even lamented the prejudicial criticism which lumped him into a drug character. “*Face yangu inoita kunge yakangonyorwa madrugs*” (My face looks like it’s written drugs all over), (Mushinga 2021) he once remarked. In an interview on radio, he once intimated:

⁴⁴ Prince Mushawevato, “Soul Jah Love: A Rebel with a Cause,” *The Sunday Mail*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/soul-jah-love-a-rebel-with-a-cause>.

⁴⁵ Melissa Mpofu, “Soul Jah Love’s Music Was Relatable, It Spoke to Us,” *The Chronicle*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/soul-jah-loves-music-was-relatable-it-spoke-to-us-zimbos-mourn-mwana-wasthembeni/>.

⁴⁶ Ncube, “He Used Drugs to Ease His Pain.”

⁴⁷ Mushinga, “Soul Jah Love, Genius.”

⁴⁸ Ashley Crossman, “How Psychology Defines and Explains Deviant Behavior,” *ThoughtCo*, May 27, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/psychological-explanations-of-deviant-behavior-3026268>.

People don't understand me, but if I sing, they can hear and appreciate my pain through my voice. Despite that I have bad luck, I'm diabetic as well, my life, I could be sick, but I strengthen myself so that I get through what I will be doing. But if I fail to turn up for a show, because I would have fallen because of diabetes, I cannot say it because people will just say he is high on drugs, because no one really understands my life. But everyone who draws closer to me will know many things (about me)⁴⁹

In 'Ndichafa riini' (When shall I die?) he asks God when He will take his life as he was tired of suffering and being a burden to people around him.⁵⁰ That song is sung not only in a victimhood mood but in the mindset not to let his challenges be a bother to those near him. But still those who knew his struggles could empathize with him and positively construct a heroic narrative about his unrelenting resolve. They could see a victor rather than a victim. Like Allison and Goethals observe, "people experience positivity when they feel a part of their hero's exceptional accomplishments."⁵¹ Probably they took the message that no matter the situation, mediocrity is not a consolation. Heroes are hurdle overcomers.

Notwithstanding his personal flaws, Soul Jah Love exuded immense charismatic authority. His audience still loved him unconditionally, in spite of all the moral flaws. They were prepared to forgive him countless times and never left his side, even in his darkest of moments.⁵² Cooley stresses the cohesive dimension of hero worship, claiming that heroic figures produce in large groups a sense of comradeship and solidarity.⁵³ His fans and fellow artistes sympathized with his social and psychological dilemmas. Murata believes that because of the struggles and battles he had to fight, Soul Jah Love found solace in drugs and used them to ease and numb his pain. He simultaneously managed to navigate between personal socio-psychological wars and fulfilling social obligations to humanity. He had his social problems yet managed to deliver the artiste's mandate to society.

Brand Leader and Award Winner

Heroes are trendsetters. "Soul Jah Love pioneered the production and promotion of Zimdancehall music from the high-density suburb of Mbare to national prominence," said Nicholas Moyo.⁵⁴ Discounting personal weaknesses, SJL is a listenable voice in the Zimbabwean music industry who engraved his legacy in the annals of history through his creative ingenuity. He is not just one of the youth-filled Zimdancehall singers but a brand leader in his own right. His output is as robust as his influence. He added something special and enduring to Zimbabwean art. His uncanny ability to tinker with language and fashion new terms and refreshing meanings constitutes a work of genius worth celebrating and recognizing. He was a man of immense authority, so that every statement or word he uttered became a chorus in the streets. He imaginatively experimented with new expressive forms to sculpt a personalized music idiom. He became synonymous with signature chants like *chibabababa*, *chimudhara*, *chigunduru*, *hauite hauite*, which appear in most of his songs. He would break down established boundaries of meaning rather than be contained by them. He managed to subvert conventional linguistic platitudes through these personalized anti-language

⁴⁹ Mushinga, "Soul Jah Love, Genius."

⁵⁰ Antonio, "Love, Mischief, Controversy."

⁵¹ Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals, *Heroes: What They Do and Why We Need Them?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵² Mushawevato, Prince, "Soul Jah Love: A Rebel With A Cause" *The Sunday Mail*, 21, February, 2021.

⁵³ Cooley, *Human Nature*, 346, as quoted in Frisk, "What Makes a Hero?," 91.

⁵⁴ Tafadzwa Zimoyo, "Artistes Unite in Mourning 'Chibaba,'" *The Herald*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.herald.co.zw/artistes-unite-in-mourning-chibaba/>.

phrases. Such a modernist approach to art is celebrated as a mark of inventiveness. He created a register intelligible to his audience. He confidently and braggingly celebrated his ingenuity and style, and his style gave him a loyal following. Though some may see him as exaggeratedly self-aware, we see this as a self-propping mechanism meant to scare away the debilitating effects of his social problems.

As evidence of his impact and acceptance as a music force of his time, he managed to land a number of awards on the scene that distinguished him as a brand leader of repute. In his relatively short musical span, he won awards and in the process popularized the Zimdancehall brand, a distinct allomorph of Jamaican dancehall music. He stormed on to the Zimdancehall scene in 2012 with the song “*Ndini uya uya*” (I am that one), which not only announced his phenomenal entry into Zimdancehall music but his rediscovered stature from that guy whom society despised, “accused of all crimes, suspected to have died, scolded by everyone, labelled a failure, always sick, the one they had thrown into the street. . . .”⁵⁵ A year later in 2013, he would be recognized as the best upcoming artiste, voted third best male Zimdancehall artiste and in the same year be recognized for best Zimdancehall collaboration with Cello Culture on *Minana* (miracles) in which he veiledly castigated the miracles movement that gripped and divided secular and Christian faith in Zimbabwe and beyond. In that regard, he should be applauded for adding a voice to a raging debate. Artistes should stand for the truth and lend hard-edged criticism to topical issues in society as espoused by Mazuruse.⁵⁶ In that way, the artiste awakens society to critical issues confronting them.

In 2014, in a contest code named “Sting,” which featured Calaz and Soul Jah Love, SJL edged the former to pronounce himself as the King of Zimdancehall music and celebrated the award by releasing a song, “*Ndakamukwapaidza*” (I beat him).⁵⁷ He would return in 2014 to claim two awards in one year for the best collaboration with Shinsoman on “*Hativasiye vane nyota*” (We will not leave them thirsty) and best social message in the song “*Nhamo*” (Poverty).⁵⁸ The award was given to the best collaborated song based on the quality and popularity of the song released. Again, this shows how fine and popular an artiste Soul was to deserve a heroic accolade, for he was a hero in the eyes of his loyal following. The song “*Kuponda nhamo*” was the artiste’s celebration of his relative achievements and what would be temporary relief from poverty, for ironically, the house he built was destroyed by the Harare City Council, and he sang “*Pazai*” (Destroy) in an emotional response resembling a crushed soul.⁵⁹ The response to this destruction is a song that can be perceived as a vocalized response on behalf of the silent but hurt people whose efforts and desire for shelter had been shattered, courtesy of the high-handed reaction by Harare city fathers to the so-called illegal settlements. One recalls the Operation *Murambatsvina* (clean-up campaign) and its destruction of shelter for people desperately in need of it.⁶⁰ This was so serious a violation and politicization of human habitat that the United Nations had to send an envoy to investigate human rights abuse. The evictions were

⁵⁵ Mushinga, “Soul Jah Love, Genius.”

⁵⁶ Mickson Mazuruse, “The Theme of Protest in the Post-Independence Shona Novel,” Master’s diss., University of South Africa, 2010.

⁵⁷ Mushinga, “Soul Jah Love, Genius.”

⁵⁸ Pindula, “Soul Jah Love.”

⁵⁹ Mushinga, “Soul Jah Love, Genius.”

⁶⁰ Madebwe, Crescentia, Madebwe, Victor, Togo, M, Pazvakawambwa. L 2005. “Zimbabwe’s Operation Murambatsvina (Operation Clean Up/Restore Order): The Epitome of Forced Evictions, Broken Lives And Lost Livelihood: Paper presented at the Social Science Research Seminar Series at the Batanai Campus on 26 November, 2005; Everisto Benyera and Chidochashe Nyere, “An Exploration of the Impact of Zimbabwe’s 2005 Operation Murambatsvina on Women and Children,” *Gender and Behaviour* 13, no. 1 (2015): 6522–34.

carried out with “indifference to human suffering,” observed UN envoy Anna Tibaijuka.⁶¹ This was ultra vires national and international human rights law provisions guiding evictions, resulting in a humanitarian crisis.⁶² And for Soul Jah Love to compose “*Paza*” (Destroy) was to add a voice to accost the inhuman alienation of property rights. That way, he fought in the same corner with over 700,000 people who were evicted from their destroyed properties. He was not a mere victim of forced evictions but one that stood up against them as well. He distinguished himself as a fearless articulator of issues confronting the voiceless, which makes him a hero.

Self-Staging

Soul Jah Love used his troubled life platform to bring to the fore existential challenges that assail humanity. That way, the artiste managed to touch lives, as his music was realistic and derived from live and livable experiences. Like his artistic counterpart, Marechera, he is not just fictionalizing art; he sings from his life, and Mutoti is surgically on point to draw parallels between the two:

Besides the two dying young and living their life at the fringes of almost being condemned as social misfits fueled by alcohol, marijuana and drugs, the two cobbled music and words out of their life experiences. Soul Jah Love in the blockbuster “*Ndini Uya Uya*” spoke of personal misery and growing as an orphan, he chronicled how he overcame being looked down upon. Mbare, Zimbabwe's oldest high density suburb was at the center of his life experiences and imagination. However, conditions he explicated in his music synchronized easily with struggles faced by many “Ghetto” youths of his generation across the country. This setting was what Marechera also experienced and penned down, but focused on the pre-independence Rusape, a town east of Harare. He vividly wrote about the life of the downtrodden, poor and attendant obscenities they face, which he sought to express as the nude truth.⁶³

Their villainy is characterized by their predilection to drugs and, at times, their countercultural social protrusion, but equally intriguing is their readiness to use their immediate lives as launch pads for their works. They produce spectacular art out of their misery. They both lost parents, and this is reflected in their art. For Soul Jah Love, he sang and rued if he could buy his mother's life back in the song “*Dai Hupenyu Hwaitengwa*” (If life could be purchased). Mushawevato observes, “His lyrics will be fondly remembered by the mothers of this nation for celebrating motherhood.”⁶⁴ His “*Mwana waSithembeni*” (Son of Sithembeni) refrain in “*Pamamonya ipapo*” commends his mother's effort in giving birth to a star and celebrates his own achievement. Associating stardom with the mother's effort is an intricate tribute to motherhood itself. This came at a time when the world was waking up to realize the value of women. He, thus, adds a voice to a social revolution to revivify women in society, and that way, the liberation hero tag is a deserved accolade for him.

SJL was not ashamed of using his condition and circumstances to openly discuss issues that society prefers to slide under the carpet or ordinarily impute blame on women. He sang about his apparent inability to father children, saying that when God desires, he will have kids one day.⁶⁵ Barrenness is not publicly

⁶¹ “Zimbabwe's Evictions Carried Out with ‘Indifference to Human Suffering,’ UN Envoy Says,” *UN News*, July 22, 2005, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2005/07/146012>.

⁶² “Zimbabwe's Evictions Carried Out.”

⁶³ Mutoti, “Soul Jah Love, Dambudzo Marechera.”

⁶⁴ Mushawevato, “Soul Jah Love: A Rebel.”

⁶⁵ Mushinga, “Soul Jah Love, Genius.”

discussed within African culture. It is considered a curse and should be avoided at all costs. Baloyi avers that “barrenness is not only unacceptable, but also a disgrace and abnormal state.”⁶⁶ But here, Soul Jah Love did not recklessly throw infertility issues for discussion and leave them at that level; he went on to instill hope. He believed that children are a gift from God and one day, God would provide. A good artiste is one who does not stir issues and leave society in closed commotion but suggests exit options for the audience (of course, not in a patronizing tone).

Soul Jah Love’s spiritual beliefs resonate with the diversity of his audience’s. Even within his graffiti music, he managed to handle revered subjects and probably produced the same effect with that seemingly negative energy. The song “*Makomborero*” (Blessings) celebrates the divinity of God and the exploits of His intervention in people’s humble projects. He extols the influence of God in people’s lives and boldly asserts: “*Denga rikavhura hapana anovhara*” (If heaven opens, no one will close). The public identified with his songs because they captured their day-to-day lives in melody. Allison and Goethals are convinced that heroes boost, energize, and inspire their adherents.⁶⁷ They arouse positive emotions, such as awe, gratitude, or admiration. The relationship between the hero and society lies in the hero’s ability as a single man to shape his history, attitude, and philosophy.

The song “*Pamamonya ipapo*,” popularly known as “Mwana waSithembeni,” can be judged a self-prophecy, a celebration of one who has made it in spite of the hurdles confronting him. More than a celebration, the song becomes a forensic self-prophecy of his posthumous recognition as a liberation hero. *Monya* is an anti-language term for a huge and muscular person. The plural being *mamonya* and the locative derivation is *pamamonya*, which translates to “shoulder to shoulder with the giants.” Soul Jah Love, son of a little-known Sithembeni, an ordinary woman, finds himself seated among influential people. A YouTube audience response to this song by one commenter nods to this view: “After listening to this song I understand that he meant he was a nothing but he made meaning, no matter how he looks like, he is still singing among other big artistes, hence *ndovadyira bhonzo pamamonya*” (I eat a bone in the midst of giants).⁶⁸ Metaphorically, it means dining with giants or fighting off at the feeding trough. In the context of the song, the insinuation is that he rises from the Mbare obscurity to challenge the space meant for giants in the music industry. Like a true hero, he raises the hope of ordinary people in similar circumstances to embrace hope and shrug off victimhood against the negative forces of life. The song emboldens people’s resolve in situations that tend to belittle their stature. It is about boldness and aggression to fight the odds. Klapp observes that heroes organize and simplify collective responses by enlisting interest in causes and creating mass followings, heightening a sense of “we,” and strengthening morale by focusing collective efforts and complexities on one individual.⁶⁹ This unique aspect of his life qualifies SJL to be a people’s hero, as it helps them coalesce a common vision and energy.

Cultural Diplomacy

The fact that Soul Jah Love significantly contributed to the development, popularization, and

⁶⁶ Magezi E. Baloyi, “Gendered Character of Barrenness in an African Context: An African Pastoral Study,” *In die Skriflig* 51, no. 1 (2017), 1–7.

⁶⁷ Allison and Goethals, *Heroic Leadership*.

⁶⁸ Soul Jah Love, “Pamamonya Ipapo (Official Music Video),” October 24, 2018, YouTube video, 3:52, <https://youtu.be/SaOdAo3WuwQ>.

⁶⁹ Orrin E. Klapp, “Heroes, Villains and Fools, as Agents of Social Change,” *American Sociological Review* 19, no. 1 (1954): 56–62.

exportation of Zimdancehall as a Zim-bred cultural product allows him to be celebrated as a cultural diplomat. Mutoti notes that “in terms of cultural diplomacy, Zimdancehall became an authentic cultural product which Zimbabwe could showcase to the world. It facilitated Zimbabwe’s participation in global inter-cultural dialogue, one of the key facets of cultural diplomacy.”⁷⁰ Many Jamaican dancehall artists who came into the country would visit Mbare as their first port of call. “The Jamaican dancehall artists like Capleton, Sizzla Kalonje, Culture T, Binnie Man among others who visited this country marvelled at talent and versatility in the likes of Soul Jah Love and many other Zimdancehall artistes.”⁷¹ He transformed parochial readings of Mbare as the heart of vice to a nerve center of production of Zimdancehall for the global market. To help put across the diplomatic essence of Zimdancehall, Mutoti makes a cusped and delicate parallelism of the music and national diplomacy when he suggests that “Soul Jah Love’s musical products, like that of many musicians and artistes in Zimbabwe, interact with many nationalities the same way officials in government conduct public diplomacy!”⁷² This opens people’s ears to understand Zimbabweans better, in terms of its endowments, its youths, their pain, fears, and aspirations.

Fans and Peer Testimonials

Funeral or last respects comments, more than being mere rituals (*zinatsawafa*/ glorification of the dead), reflect the impact of one’s life on the ones they leave behind. They reflect one’s footprint on humanity. A true hero is boldly engraved in the memory of his adherents and followers. Soul Jah Love is one such artiste whose impact reverberated across his followers. His music was relatable and appealing, as fans and peers can testify. Life and posthumous testimonials by fans and peer artistes reveal an artiste whose products found relevant locus in their hearts. And the balance between posthumous and life testimonials helps dowse the view that his veneration at death is consistent with Shona funerary rites of *zinatsawafa* (glorification of the dead). The Shona people generally agree that after death the deceased person becomes absolved of all wrongdoing. In this way, the deceased is celebrated just like those who die with good earthly reputations.⁷³ Soul Jah Love was not just one of those beneficiaries of the *wafa wanaka* (the dead are faultless) Shona cultural philosophy, for even in life, he remained enamored in the hearts of the people. He was a sought-after brand—he would on three different occasions snub a collaboration with multi-award winning artiste Jah Prayzah. In his eulogy, Jah Prayzah humbly submits to such immense talent and rues the missed opportunity to associate with SJL in a duet.⁷⁴

I remember you asked me if we could do a song 3 different times and on all occasions, my answer was the same: “Who in his right mind would not want to do a song with Soul Jah Love”. You stood me up at the studio on all 3 occasions and somehow I don’t know how I still find that funny. Rest in Peace my brother, seems like the years were too short but the music you gave us is enough to last a life time. This was just how talented you were. Your name should be mentioned well up there amongst the greats as one of the most talented artists Zimbabwe ever had.

⁷⁰ Mutoti, “Soul Jah Love, Dambudzo Marechera.”

⁷¹ Mutoti, “Soul Jah Love, Dambudzo Marechera.”

⁷² Mutoti, “Soul Jah Love, Dambudzo Marechera.”

⁷³ Richard Muranda, “Reflecting on Death through Song Among the Shona People of Zimbabwe,” *DANDE Journal of Social Science and Communication* 2, no. 2 (2021):117.

⁷⁴ Moyondizvo, “Here Are 5 Things.”

This may reflect negatively about Soul Jah Love’s lack of seriousness on important occasions, but the mere admission by one of Southern Africa’s visible artistes attests to the robust talent and influence that captivated the attention of simple and great men. His peers saw in him a unique and effortless brand leader. He was a robustly talented artiste who popularized Zimdancehall in the country and beyond its borders. For Jah Prayzah to say “your name should be mentioned well up there amongst the greats as one of the most talented artistes Zimbabwe ever had” is to enthrone a heroic emblem on his head. If he is to be mentioned among the great, then it may justify why the government saw in him a great man worthy of gracing the provincial heroes’ space.

Contrary to the forced attendances usually associated with burial of national heroes, in the case of Soul Jah Love, ordinary people attended voluntarily. Antonio observes that “usually the burial of heroes has become synonymous with forced closure of markets and bussing of people to the national shrines by ZANU PF. But the script changed when the people’s hero was being buried.”⁷⁵ Some even went out of their way, walking distances of more than forty kilometers from Chitungwiza, Epworth, and Mabvuku to Warren Hills Provincial Heroes’ Acre.⁷⁶ In an interview, one fan identified as Mose (33), who walked from Chitungwiza to bid farewell, said, “Soul Jah Love is a true hero. *Vakagona* (They did well) . . . thank you for honoring Soul Jah Love. Imagine I had to walk from Chitungwiza to Warren Hills. We are a team of eight ghetto youths. He used to entertain us.”⁷⁷ In Africa, where stress is prevalent but rarely considered a cause of mortality, entertainment is often overlooked as an important aspect of vitality. For that reason, those who entertain are generally less celebrated and recognized among “serious” professionals, let alone their products as curative agents of stress-related problems. They are considered among the lunatic fringe whose pursuit of music as a calling is not only underappreciated but at times is bastardized.

Zimbabwean corporates added weight to the suitability of Soul Jah Love as a hero. Their condolences esteem him as a high-impact character. Of course, one may argue that big corporations, like political institutions, will not miss a marketing opportunity to associate themselves with influential brands. Even when they do it for commercial reasons, the fact that they do so to eminent persons is evidence enough of the stature of the character receiving the award. Funeral parlors Doves and Nyaradzo rekindled their rivalry as they fought for his body. According to Antonio, this only happens when an important person is buried, as happened at the burial of Oliver Mtukudzi in 2019.⁷⁸ Renowned eatery Chicken Inn posted: “The golden legend with crispy hits we luv, Celebrating the life of the people’s champion, #RIP Chibaba.” On the other hand, Ecobank responded, “Your voice will live on, RIP Soul Musaka.” Alcoholic beverage giant Chibuku’s page had: “Forever Super, *zvarwadza vasara*, Rest in peace, Chibaba.” This can be dismissed as a marketing stunt, but one can still see that corporations could not miss such towering visibility.

Some snapshots of audience responses to the passing on Soul Jah Love point to the impact his life and music had on them. A walk through these responses shows how relatable Soul Jah Love’s music was to his audience. He leaves traceable footprints on people’s imaginations, which all rise to show that his heroism is not made up but deserved. Below are some of the YouTube snippets of fans testimonials:

“Music was your way of expression and it helped us all go through our fates whilst nodding our heads to your powerful lyrical content.”

⁷⁵ Antonio, “Love, Mischief, Controversy.”

⁷⁶ Tafadzwa Zimoyo, “Huge Sendoff for Soul Jah Love,” *The Herald*, February 20, 2021, <https://www.herald.co.zw/just-in-huge-send-off-for-soul-jah-love/>.

⁷⁷ Zimoyo, “Huge Sendoff.”

⁷⁸ Antonio, “Love, Mischief, Controversy.”

“Makuruwani (the big one/elder), Ngwendeza (the fearsome), Chibaba (the father), King of Zimdancehall. I salute you. Rest easy and thank you for everything, you indeed left footprints”

“You made people feel taller, courageous and stronger even for a split second with a simple statement like kuvadyira bonzo nekuonda wakamira pamamonya ipapo (eating a bone in the midst of big men, in spite of your lean frame)). R.I.P” Saul -Rumbi Chiutsu

“I hope Stembeni welcomes you with a big hug and you sit on her lap and tell her everything. I hope you finally feel the warmth that you always longed for. You were the best. Your legacy will live on. You were not ashamed of who you were and where you were from. Heaven has gained so much in you.” Emma Mayah Rumbidzai

“Today’s mood calls for this legendary song. Pamamonya ipapo. That’s the attitude you need in life. Chibaba gets it. It shall be well Sauro. Tinopinda pamamonya ipapo (we will fight for space among the giants) because that’s where it’s at. For the brave and the bold.” Marita Culita

These comments serve as evidentiary tissue to the hero-worthiness of Soul Jah Love, not necessarily as viewed by the conferring authority but as seen from the people on whom he deposited a memorable seed. He was, indeed, their ‘big one’—chibaba (the father), ngwendeza (the fearsome) and the king of Zimdancehall. To Soul Jah Love, death was not meant to be a pain inflicting ogre but one that brought rest to a troubled soul. Those who were patient to listen to his music discovered a gem buried in a soiled personality and lifestyle and, here, they testify to his greatness. They accommodated his shortcomings for they knew what he was going through but, all the same, managed to serve and deliver on the artistic altar.

Conclusion

Taking note of the foregoing, it is, therefore, not strange that Soul Jah Love enjoys the heroic company of Simon Chimbetu and others. He remains a complex puzzle to society. He lived his life reacting to his social and pathological conditions, yet managed to give something to society while in his personal chains. While some may see him as a tragic hero or an outright villain, he left something enduring for the arts. While ZANU PF could have had their own confidential, undeclared, and opportunistic considerations, Soul Jah Love is a hero in the eyes of his loyal constituency. His music was relatable to their circumstances as much as it spoke about his life. He self-staged to give realism to his work and reduce the gulf between art and reality. People who never directly listened to his music may feel that they were immune to his influence, yet a close reading of his music shows wide referentiality of his music. He had a short but packed musical career, which saw him release songs in rapid succession and songs that discussed topical issues in life. Issues of lack, poverty, infertility, sickness, death, spirituality, conflict, and competition for survival assail society from time to time, and no one can say, with aggressive certainty, they are immune to these. Soul Jah Love’s music is an interactional stage where critical issues are dissected or simply provoked for societal regurgitation. Those who maintain insular readings of heroism may caricature his heroism as opportunism or view reality definers as bending to public sentiment. A moralist contestation of his heroism trashes his opaque character outlook and dismisses him for that, yet a careful scan of his music, hewn from his personal misery, affords society dependable life notes.

Suggestions for Future Awards

The debate is not triggered by the desire to dispute the awards but to argue for a systematic and auditable frame applicable to persons of non-political contribution. A non-partisan body could be established and mandated to determine and confer to deserving members such an honor. Mandating the politburo, the charge to preside over the process is not only partisan but also not inclusive. It monopolizes and entrenches the historical, social, and heroic memory in one political block. The notion of a “nation,” from which is derived “national,” should never be a monopolized prescription of a political party or its privileged organ; it is a shared view among the people who own or belong to and define it. There is a need to come up with national guidelines and well-defined criteria that go beyond partisan considerations. Heroes at whatever level will simply fall into a category that accords with one’s heroic contribution. These guidelines should also delineate parameters for political and social heroes. This will hopefully minimize tensions associated with investiture of these awards on people of a different contribution.

Retrospective honoring of heroes who did amazing things for the country, as suggested by Jeys Marabini, is sustained.⁷⁹ He suggests that the places where some of these heroes were interred need to be spruced up in line with the hero status conferred on them. These spaces would significantly contribute to domestic tourism, as they would attract visitors remembering fallen heroes.

The other view that artistes should be supported while they are still alive and serving society is a more welcome suggestion for the arts than conferring them hero status after their deaths. Most artistes ply their trade in very difficult circumstances, yet government and the corporate world are quick to lend posthumous honor. Soul Jah Love lived a life that demanded support and rehabilitation, yet big institutions and the fan community simply enjoyed his creative ingenuity and grieved without any tangible support.

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⁷⁹ Tsvakwi, “Soul Jah Love Hero Status.”

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