

## SPECIAL REPORT

ling and shooting in the Matabeleland and Mashonaland provinces.

The 1980 film (entitled *I Can Hear Zimbabwe Calling*) was followed by *Nkuleleko Means Freedom*, shot in 1982. Both films have been very useful in Zimbabwe in teacher-training programs, adult literacy classes, mobile cinema in rural areas, and education conferences. In America, the second film broke the mass media impasse for me when it was shown on the national PBS network in prime time.

Ironically, my new project (entitled *Transformation*) was inspired by an aversion to television. I had been away from Southern Africa since mid-1982 and was beginning to believe some of the negative reporting on Zimbabwe. It took a firm jolt to wake me up.

A surly CBC documentary (*The Drums Of War*) on *The Journal* made me determined to return to Zimbabwe and produce a television program with an honest and sensible thrust.

A producer from *The Journal* had viewed some of my Zimbabwe footage and told me it didn't have the "required jolts-per-minute." I had to agree.

PBS was more accessible and interested in new material. Funding was available, my credibility with the Zimbabwe government was strong, and a modest but vital international network of people now existed to help promote the new project and aid in its distribution.

Until late last year, the scope of the project still seemed manageable with film as the medium. It was the difficulty of several interesting possible side-projects that bothered me. Their futility, however, was determined by economics, not the quality of the subject or concept. In a manner of speaking, these projects all fell below the poverty line. One was a possible film on the fascinating stone ruins of a complex structure built by Africans in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries near Masvingo (formerly Fort Victoria). And there was also the possibility of going to Mozambique to film a profile of president Samora Machel and interviews with captured "bandidos" of the anti-government resistance movement.

But my film budget would certainly not allow this and even if I could raise a little extra money to shoot these topics, the cost of finalizing each of these individual films would be exorbitant.

The argument for video, however, meant that I could shoot everything I had planned and so make maximum use of my time in Zimbabwe. It was going to cost so much to get over there, stay there, move around and get back, that it seemed shameful to stop short of doing a thorough job.

But no matter how convincing the argument for video became, it was a herculean task emotionally to turn my back on film.

After I had painfully set aside the

# Video Odyssey

by Ron Hallis

New York City, three o'clock in the afternoon, June 29, 1984. I enter an elevator on East 44th Street and ride calmly to my destination - Projection Systems International. The salesman's office is decorated with antique cameras and projectors. Ninety minute later, I

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emerge with the new tools - video recorder, camera, and 35 hours of tape.

The next two days I spend in a hotel room waiting out the rains that had flooded the roads to JFK airport. My departure for Africa delayed, I use this interval to test the new equipment.

In the hotel-room, I watch television, I make television. I tape my bath filling, the maid making the bed and vacuuming the floor. As I pan across the dingy walls I'm smiling: soon I would leave the developed world.

My dialogue with film was over, or at

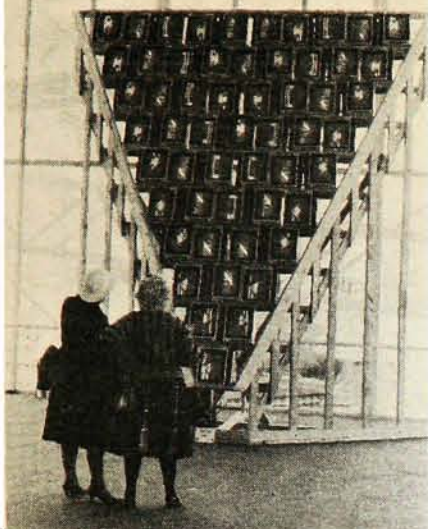
least "on hold." I had crossed to the video camp.

I was going to Zimbabwe to shoot a one-hour TV documentary for the American PBS network.

Unlike my first visit in 1980 which lasted twenty minutes when I was allowed to cross to the Zimbabwean side of the border from Mozambique to film several hundred refugees returning home, this time I would spend two months travel-



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problem of video's qualitative inferiority, my chief concern became reliability of the apparatus. I had not been free from technical problems shooting film in sub-tropical Africa. I had my share of lense fungus, flat batteries in the boondocks, crystal motor nervous breakdowns, heat and humidity hang-ups. On one occasion, an insect born to withstand hammer blows found its way into the claw mechanism of my Eclair

NPR and caused intermittent jamming while sections of its body were periodically served up from the gate.

As an antidote to my fears I thought of a kid I met in 1980 in a refugee camp in north-central Mozambique. He called himself Scania after the Swedish-built truck because he had "a strong motor inside." It was his self-appointed Chimurenga or revolutionary name.

Scania was 16 and his prize possession was a Lloyds radio-cassette that looked as if it had been dropped several times from a plane. The case was held together with recycled tape and powered by a dynamite-like bundle of flashlight cells that he was constantly rejuvenating over the fire like hot dogs.

One morning I passed his hut and found him sitting on a grass mat by the fire making solder-joints with the tip of a coat-hanger wire heated in the coals of the fire.

"What are you doing, Scania?"

"I'm putting the negative on the battery," he replied.

For most of the shooting of *Transformation* we based ourselves in the southwest of Zimbabwe, Matabeleland province, home of the minority Ndebele people and site of persistent attacks and banditry by so-called anti-government "dissidents." Gathering a minimum of significant information and differing views consumed several hours of tape — this would have been impossible on film, given the budget.

We were two weeks into the eight-week production and gliding at full momentum when I realized that we had shot as much tape as was originally budgeted for filmstock for the entire shoot.

I came to appreciate how video gave me the opportunity to record unexpected encounters and personalities during my travels through Matabeleland: a long conversation with an old peasant watering his oxen on an almost dry river-bed; a woman painting the walls of her hut who we found almost by chance as we drove to another destination. Material like this continued to build-up and played an important part

in the continual moulding of the project.

Another aspect of the gathering power of video came to the fore during the taping of an interview with a woman who had direct contact with "dissidents."

She was a 23-year-old nurse, daughter of a coal-miner and we were interviewing her three days after the infamous Lupote clinic attack. She, along with three of her colleagues, had been on duty when heavily-armed "dissidents" attacked and destroyed the clinic. She remained serene as she described her abduction and rape but began to cry quietly when she described how the "dissidents" forced her and her colleagues to set the clinic ablaze using diesel fuel siphoned from a nearby tank.

I do not think that we could've reached the same degree of intimacy using film — certainly not with the quantity of film that would have been available for this scene. Video is a better listener. The informality, quietness and the 20-minute roll was far-superior to 10 minutes of film, and were perfectly compatible with the tone of the situation.

The African approach to being filmed or photographed is rather formal. The process is more important than the end-result. The fact that somebody, somewhere, somehow will see the image is secondary. I have found myself often in the situation in which it would be insulting, or at least impolite and inappropriate, to turn the camera off, not turn it on, or not film something or somebody.

Video has a much wider aperture through which to receive and record this process, without forcing constrictions and time values that are foreign to the African sensibility.

To reach wonderful moments in a story, the whole must be told and experienced. Often stories of childhood precede stories of age and you find that the right concentration, lasting a few moments, requires a half-hour of warm-up.

My last few days in Zimbabwe, waiting for an elusive interview with Prime Minister Robert Mugabe (I was bumped by Yasser Arafat and Julius Nyerere), were spent with Stella Chiweshe, a spirit-medium and professional Mbira (traditional finger piano) player.

During one of our meetings Stella asked me if I ever dreamed of my camera the way she often dreams of her Mbira, which always appears in her dreams as a person, never a musical instrument.

I told Stella I had never dreamed of my camera in that way. My fears and preoccupations were incomprehensible to her or perhaps I was unable to articulate them properly.

"Some of what I tell you is for you, some for you and the camera, and some things about my Mbira I cannot tell you without angering the spirits. Then I do not know what they would do to me," she said.

But I was able to get across to her that my camera is an extension of mind, and eyes, prepared to stare long and hard at perplexing and simple things, searching for essence, for answers. As a filmmaker I was more concerned with building and building cheaply, given the expense of materials. As a videomaker, however, I am still concerned with building in a filmic sense, but with a fuller possession of the tools, and from materials that are cheap and abundant. Video, I explained, was like matches from which comes the power to create fire.

I think she understood.



● Zimbabwean author Joyce Sikakane on location at Lake Kariba