

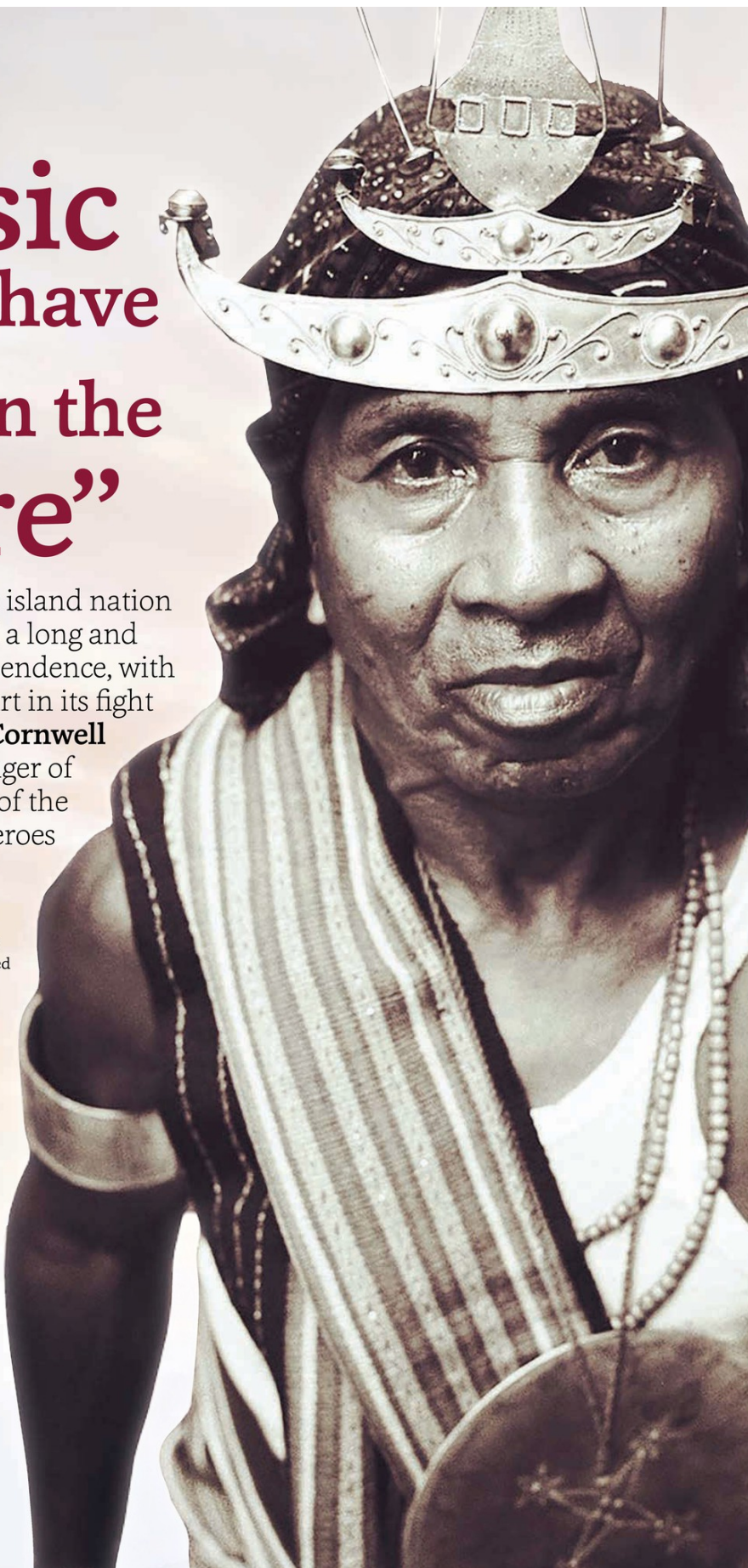
“Music helps us have faith in the future”

The tiny South-East Asian island nation of Timor-Leste has had a long and arduous journey to independence, with songs playing a crucial part in its fight against occupation. **Jane Cornwell** speaks to Berliku, lead singer of Maubere Timor and one of the country's independence heroes

“I was always singing songs,” says Domingos Pinto Gabriel, also known as Berliku. “I’d be singing from the time I woke, which annoyed some people in our camp in the hills because our enemies were never far away.” Berliku is the frontman of the band Maubere Timor, and a former guerrilla fighter who spent 15 years in the caves, mountains and rural areas around Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, fighting the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) with rifles, smarts and songs smuggled out on cassette tape. His commander Xanana Gusmão – a poet who went on to become the first president of Timor-Leste – gave him the nickname Berliku Lian Timur, ‘Voice of Timor-Leste’, after a local bird that only sings in the mornings.

Berliku, 64, is a hero in Timor-Leste (formerly East Timor), the South-East Asian nation that takes up half of the coral-reefed island of Timor, which is bordered by Indonesia to the west and is one of Australia's closest neighbours (Dili is 650km from Darwin). Having twice cheated death in battle, Berliku was eventually captured (and intermittently tortured) by Indonesian forces,

Alli McKeech



spending a further 16 years in isolation. His family, presuming him dead, built him a tomb.

Along the way the song 'Maubere Timor', with its Tetum lyrics by Gusmão and melody and rhythm by Berliku, became an anthem within Timor-Leste and its diaspora (*maubere* loosely translates as 'indigenous,' and is an umbrella term for the nation's many ethnic groups).

As Victor Jara is to Chile or the murdered musician-activist Arnold Ap (lead singer of Mambesak, killed by Indonesian military forces in 1984) is to West Papua, the story of Berliku is inseparable from that of his tiny, beleaguered country. Timor-Leste had just shrugged off four centuries of colonial rule by Portugal when it was occupied by its neighbour Indonesia, whose subsequent 24-year regime spanned massacres including the shooting of at least 250 pro-independence demonstrators in Dili's Santa Cruz cemetery on November 12 1991 (a horror that happened to be filmed by a British journalist, which invited international media attention). Over 200,000 East Timorese were killed during the brutal occupation.

Music was essential to the long, arduous resistance. Not Timor-Leste's traditional music, which is composed using drums, bells, mouth instruments and the *lakadou* (bamboo zither), nor the *koremotan* ('celebration of departure') party songs that are performed a year after a person's death. The music that informed the struggle was protest music, composed on the fly and sung – both in Portuguese and Tetum – from the heart.

As the world turned its back on Timor-Leste – "Suharto [then Indonesian president] succeeded

in isolating Timor; we felt abandoned" – Berliku, a political commissar, was entrusted to write music and poems between the lulls in fighting. He sang songs to be slotted in between recorded speeches by Gusmão and walked across Timor-Leste to sing for guerrillas and local communities. He subverted popular Indonesian tunes by adding lyrics in Tetum; '*Funu to'o tinan walu 8 ona*', he sang. 'War has been eight years now.'

"We recorded the songs on portable tape recorders inside the caves we lived in," recalls Berliku, who was taught to play guitar by the Catholic Salesian priests at his teacher's college and took inspiration from popular Brazilian singer-songwriters Teixeira and Roberto Carlos. "We'd pass the tapes to the clandestine network, whose couriers and cells would distribute copies across Timor-Leste and the outside world."

"At first Xanana wanted me to write *fado*-style songs," Berliku continues. "But then we started writing lyrics that spoke of preparing for war, of the importance of keeping strong. Xanana's lyrics were



mostly metaphorical, coded. I wanted my messages to be clear, so that people would know to keep fighting, to join us."

Berliku was 19 and a member of the resistance army FALINTIL (Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste), the military wing of the pro-independence political party Fretilin, when Indonesia invaded. He gave up his studies and went bush. "We had no choice but to fight," says the diminutive veteran, who four years into battle was caught up in a bombing that killed seven of his fellow guerrillas. Berliku lay undiscovered for days until he was found and treated with wild tobacco leaves ("You press out the liquid onto the wounds," he explains).

They fought in the hills and in the open. They kept moving, hiding, eating wild plants, their bodies and immune systems adjusting, their nerves steeled to the threat of sudden attack. "The Indonesians outnumbered us, and had grenades and explosives. Sometimes we stepped back – we kept our spirits up with music. But we never gave up."

Not even in 1988, when he was shot multiple times in an attack that again, almost killed him: "My friends dragged me across a river that carried the blood away so that the Indonesians could not find us. It took me two months to recover. I lost use in my right arm. Since then I have been unable to play guitar."

Still he kept singing, writing songs that celebrated the leadership of Gusmão ('Kay Rana Xanana Gusmão'), the tenacity of the guerrillas ('Gerrilleiru') and invited the Timorese people to build a new country ('Timor Ita Rain'). Songs that number among the 12 tracks on *Maubere Timor*'s 2017 self-titled album, which was recorded in Melbourne at the home of producer David Bridie, musician, composer and head of the Wantok Musik label and foundation.

"These songs were originally performed around a campfire so I made things as acoustic as possible," says Bridie. "They're ▶

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