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## **An herbal meditation with Bob Marley**

### **Abstract**

The Jamaican reggae beat has had a major impact on global popular music during the last fifteen years and carried along on that lurching, jerking rhythm is the message of the oppressed black masses of Jamaica which has touched the hearts and minds of millions of blacks and whites worldwide.

# An Herbal Meditation with Bob Marley

muzik of blood  
black reared  
pain rooted  
heart geared;

all tensed up  
in the bubble an the bounce  
an the leap an the weight-drop.

it is the beat of the heart,  
this pulsing of blood  
that is a bubbling bass,  
a bad bad beat  
pushin against the wall  
whey bar black blood.

an is a whole heappa  
passion a gather  
like a frightful form  
like a righteous harm  
giving off wild like is madness.

Linton Kwesi Johnson<sup>1</sup>

The Jamaican reggae beat has had a major impact on global popular music during the last fifteen years and carried along on that lurching, jerking rhythm is the message of the oppressed black masses of Jamaica which has touched the hearts and minds of millions of blacks and whites worldwide.

The significance of reggae in Jamaica extends beyond its importance as an export commodity. Reggae music has had a galvanizing effect on the poor and illiterate in the ghettos of Kingston. The Rastafarian millennial cult has effectively utilized reggae in the propagation of their

message of black awareness, faith in Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia (christened Ras Tafari) as the Second Coming of Christ, and the prospect of repatriation to Africa.

In Jamaican politics reggae songs carry incalculable clout. After ten years of rule by the conservative Jamaican Labour Party, led, curiously enough, by former record producer Edward Seaga, Michael Manley's democratic socialist People's National Party turned the tables in 1972 on the strength of Manley's association with the Rastafarian movement and through the popularity of two reggae singles, Max Romeo's 'Let the Power Fall' and Delroy Wilson's 'Better Must Come'.

For the 1976 election Wilson recorded 'Heavy Manners' and Manley enlisted the aid of Bob Marley and the Wailers who boosted the PNP with a suitably optimistic single, 'Smile Jamaica' and a live appearance at a mass rally and free concert. In a brutal climax to the election campaign conducted during a prolonged state of emergency, Marley's Island House on Hope Road was attacked three days before the concert by machine-gun toting hoods who put two bullets in Marley and five in his manager. The concert went on as scheduled, Manley increased his parliamentary majority, and Marley went into a voluntary exile which lasted until early 1979.

Bob Marley has almost single-handedly made reggae a force to be reckoned with in world music. And contact with reggae has heightened the consciousness of blacks and whites alike who would otherwise never have been able to find Jamaica on the map.

Marley is widely regarded as a Third World revolutionary artist with a no-compromise stance, although this view is not easily reconciled with the arcane dogma of the Rasta faith. While it is true that Rasta discards the pie-in-the-sky promise with which Christianity has traditionally placated the classes in a society which were denied power, wealth, security, opportunity and position in this life,

We're sick and tired of your ism-schism game  
to die and go to heaven in Jesus' name.<sup>2</sup>

it is also true that Rastafarians refuse to mobilize their considerable forces in any concrete political endeavour, claiming that politics and the affairs of the material world are beneath contempt, 'I am in this world, but I am not of this world', as Bob Marley put it when I spoke to him. But Rasta doctrine and reggae songs are also shot through with pacifying 'God will provide' and 'Keep the faith and humble yourself' sentiments

which are a crippling residue of the Old Testament teachings which form the basis of Rastafarianism. In Marley's powerful song about the failed assassination attempt he sees the assault as politically motivated, yet his reaction is essentially a religious one.

See them fighting for power  
But they know not the hour  
So they bribing with  
Their guns, spare-parts and money,  
Trying to belittle our integrity.  
They say what we know  
Is just what they teach us;  
We're so ignorant,  
Every time they can reach us.  
Through political strategy  
They keep us hungry.  
When you gotta get some food  
Your brother got to be your enemy.

Ambush in the night  
All guns aiming at me  
Ambush in the night  
They opened fire on me  
Ambush in the night  
*Protected by His Majesty*

Well, what we know  
Is not what they tell us.  
We're not ignorant, I mean it  
And they just could not touch us.  
*Through the powers of the Most High*  
*We keep on surfacing.*  
*Through the powers of the Most High*  
*We keep on surviving.*<sup>5</sup>

I talked to Bob Marley at 1:30 in the morning after a gruelling two-hour performance for a crowd of 5,000. I discovered very quickly that Marley as a Rastaman is ill-equipped to deal with the concrete concerns of daily life. My questions of a specific, political nature or on the hard facts of the notorious business practices in the reggae industry were evaded by recourse to cryptic, evangelical talking in tongues: Marley playing his favourite role, the Prophet, most ludicrously at the end of the interview in his message to the world.

But first I would like to preface the interview with a few remarks on the highly stylized Jamaica Talk which almost every street-wise Jamaican

commands. .

Language is almost inevitably a barrier to the proper appreciation of Third World texts, and this state of affairs is aggravated when the language involved is a 'deviant' pidgin or creole variety of English. Journalists Cathy McKnight and John Tobler typify the blinkered perspective employed when they assert in their book on Bob Marley that 'reggae lyrics are all too often incomprehensible to the average listener'.<sup>4</sup> If the average reggae listener is correctly identified as a black Jamaican living in the same environment as the performer, rather than a white middle-class Englishman, then the absurdity of this statement becomes obvious. The monolingual Englishman might as well claim that Borges is 'incomprehensible to the average reader' because he writes in Spanish.

Language as pure sound and conversation as a fine art are highly valued in Jamaica and the outsider must come to terms with the niceties and vagaries of Jamaica Talk. The necessity of a purely Jamaican mode of English and the joy and anguish of struggling with language are often commented on by Jamaicans.

Me hear sey de Jamaican Union ob Teachers hab one agiment bout de English langwidge as it peak out yah.

Dem say sence ah de only langwidge we peak we ought to peak it prapa. Me barn in English colony, so ah wha dem expect me fe peak but English; an me lub it to, specially de big wud dem. Some ob dem mos brok me jaw bone fe pronounce, an tek heaby consideration fe pell dem put ah letter.<sup>5</sup>

To explain Iself with writing upon paper. It is something special. You have to feel it. You see the word. You hear the sound. Not in agreement with de English language. Jah Ugliman. I cannot spell. I spell too well. Through the power of the Most High, I write as de voice inside.

Talking a nuh good English. Is not good English. It is not good English. Dem claim say it haad fe undastan simple because dem waan yu fe be a black Englishman an chat like dem. Waan rob yu of yu culcha. Well who cyaan undastan get fuk. I cannot spell to fool Iself.<sup>6</sup>

'Who cyaan undastan get fuk' (Fuck you if you can't understand) puts less fine a point on it than the traditional Jamaican sentiment, 'Who feels it, knows it' which neatly sums up the natural, taken-for-granted, non-analytic attitude of the Jamaican to life in general. These issues should be kept in mind, as you read Marley's words.

Bob Marley is no mere soap-box religious fanatic. He is indisputably the most widely-known and most influential Third World figure on the international scene. It was therefore fitting that Bob Marley and the Wailers were the special guests of Robert Mugabe at Zimbabwe's independence celebrations.

Zimbabwe was nice, y'know. It was a great experience, mahn, to really see and behold what happened at that special moment of time. We go all over the place, mahn, we play music, we was all over. Zimbabwe was like our home. We play two shows for a whole heap of people. Some of them didn' even know what was happening, because it was nothing that was advertised. The people just hear about it and come, which is very nice. Them was ready for the music, especially the revolutionary musics.

*You once said that your new, modern recording studio would open up the music, bring it to the people, and help the artists get their fair share. How are you doing that?*

Well, the studio's there, y'know. It's only that the way the business go in Jamaica — Jamaica is a small place. Over the years we wasn't a record company that we could really handle people stuff, but we could help within the music. If a man come and want a good studio to work in, y'know, a cheaper studio. We manufacture the record, too, and we distribute people record. But sometime it become too much of a business. I can't deal with it because I love the artistic part more than the business.

*But somebody has to take care of business.*

Well, yes, I hope so. (laughs)

*Reggae used to be a real rip-off business, people being cheated left, right, and centre. Are things improving?*

Oh, mahn, well, no, the robbery is getting more international now, I think when I check it out. The robbery is starting to leave Jamaica and get multi-national.

*How does that work?*

I don't even know myself, because I am in this world, but I am not of this

world, so of these things I know not.

*Do you believe that you're being robbed internationally?*

Oh, mahn, from I am here in Babylon, I have been robbed, robbed of my culture, robbed of my blood, sweat, and tears. Is only one thing them couldn't rob is your soul, 'cause that was there always, but when you come to robbery, mahn, let's not talk about robbery because 'Old pirates, yes, they rob I, sold I to the merchant ships'.<sup>7</sup> You remember that?

*I do remember that. But, tell me, you've been in this business nearly twenty years; are you still being robbed?*

Listen, mahn, how can you ever stop a robber? A robber is a robber, mahn. A robber can stick you up and take it. If the message get through to the people, I am not robbed. If the message don't get through, we've been robbed.

*Your reward is that the message gets through, even if somebody else gets all the money?*

Regardless how it hurt, the message is the most important thing. Somebody always get the money. Somebody ah get that piece of lead or that piece of silver and put it into that thing and stamp it with somebody face on it. But as soon as you start loving money, you start looking like the guy on it. If a man live with a woman for a long, long time, he start looking like the woman or the woman start looking like him, but there is something that make it happen. What I'm saying is if you love money too much you start looking like the man on the money. (laughs)

*You say you don't deal in politics, yet you wrote 'Smile Jamaica' and campaigned for Manley at the last election.*

Oh, mahn, I campaigned for Manley? I never campaigned for anyone.

*You were on stage with him once.*

On stage with him once?



*Just before the election.*

That was when?

76.

Aw, ohh, politicians have a way of putting themself in mysterious places, mahn. You be onstage, y'know, a guy can just come onstage, a politician, the people see you onstage. You can't really start a fight, you have to act like a human being and the people might figure, 'Oh, it's friends'. We *never* defend politics, we are Rastas, mahn. Politics is made to fight against Rasta, not for Rasta to be in politics and fight against himself.

*You don't think Rastas could use politics in Jamaica?*

I don't know. The politics they are talking about is corruption, that is not politics.

*What would be the right politics?*

ONE WORLD GOVERNMENT, RASTAFARI. That is where we're coming from. Them there little small thing fe kill people, that is devilism. This earth, this world is a big world, mahn. We're talking about world conflicts, world happenings. That is the most important thing, because all of these little things is happening in the countries, that is just coming from headquarters and tell them to do it. There's a head-quarter that operate those damned things.

*How does Rasta work for one world government?*

Because Rasta himself is the world government. We are the peoples forming the new world government, Christ government that shall rule earth and if you think that is lie, look at it like this; you see the Beast is forming, you see all the countries ready. As we hear *Revelations* telling, in this time there will be wars and rumours of wars, mother fighting against children. Now this is the time, and in that time you will hear about God, too, and then God will return during that time. So when we tell the man, 'See God deh', it's just like a man can say, 'See the nuclear plant'. Y'know what I mean? Because this is prophecy fulfilling. So when I say, 'There is God', and him can say, 'There is the nuclear plant'.

'There is Jerusalem', 'There is Ethiopia'. I mean, everything is real, God is real. God is not no spirit, mahn. (Laughs)

*How does Rasta fight back?*

Because Christ is coming and, no, what Rasta deal with is something heavier than fighting back. Most of the people who is fighting and killing off themselves, not one of them's a Rastafari. All the people who's suffering upon the earth, the majority of them, not one of them's a Rastafari. Now we are telling the suffering masses of the world that their redemption is Rastafari and if them don't deal with Rastafari, the suffering will never stop, because there is where the confusion come in, because the people don't deal with Rastafari. There is always a war and fighting and vex and rumours and pressure, even the little small amount of Rastas, so if them don' know Rasta, every day is Judgment. Every day is Judgment, trials and tribulations and crosses and obstacles. So when them move with Rastafari, because Christ promised to mankind that when he returned, he would return in a new name. So Him always speak the truth, yet plenty people never believe that Him speak the truth, but him always speak the truth, so when him come this time, him did not come as Jesus Christ. Him come as Rastafari, through the lineage of King Solomon and King David as the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Everything is real, y'know, but we are not vex with man. We Rasta are not vex with mankind, we have great sympathy upon them, knowing that they did not get this teaching in school. So now that we know the truth that's why God sent us out into the earth, to make every ears hear, because every man is doing his work and every man work is important 'cause whether it is a good work Rasta or whether it is a bad work Rasta, as long as it's a Rasta because Rasta itself is something so positive that no negativity can't manifest around it. So if somebody even say something bad about Rasta, the people don't remember the bad thing, 'cause Rastafari stand prominent.

*If you had a message for the world, what would it be?*

If I had a message for the world, mahn, I would tell the world, 'Don't panic, it's gonna happen'.

*What's gonna happen?*

(Laughs) Everybody know. I tell them, 'Don't panic. Don't panic, people. It's going to happen. Just hold tight'

*And leave them to worry about what's going to happen?*

The people know what is going to happen.

*Are you sure the people know?*

Of course. And remember, the voice of the people is the voice of God, so if you sit down and don't unite yourself together, then all you will be is just victims of this corrupted world.

This interview took place on 18 June 1980.

#### NOTES

- 1 . Part One of 'Bass Culture (For Big Youth)' from Linton Kwesi Johnson's volume of poetry, *Dread Beat and Blood* (London, 1977), p. 57.
- 2 . 'Get Up, Stand Up', Bob Marley and the Wailers LP *Burnin'*, 1973.
- 3 . 'Ambush in the Night', Bob Marley and the Wailers LP *Survival*, 1979.
- 4 . Cathy McKnight and John Tobler, *Bob Marley: the Roots of Reggae* (London, 1977), p. 33.
- 5 . Inez K. Sibley, *Quashie's Reflections in Jamaican Creole* (Kingston, 1968), p. 10.
- 6 . Carl Gayle, *Jah Ugliman* (Kingston, 1978), p. 4.
- 7 . 'Redemption Song', Bob Marley and the Wailers LP *Uprising*, 1980.



Bob Marley.