



BOB MARLEY

ARTIST OF THE CENTURY

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A Prophet in His Own Country Jamaica and the Artist of the Century

By Matthew Smith

Bob Marley is indisputably the most important figure in 20th century popular music. Emerging from the ghettos of western Kingston, he has become an international force whose extraordinary legacy remains without peer. No other artist before or after him has achieved a higher status of political and spiritual significance. Nor has any other proved more inspirational to as wide a range of genres and generations. Across the globe his powerful image and music is instantly recognizable. For the people the world over whose hearts have been touched by his work he is a timeless icon whose messages of love, hope, justice and freedom continue to echo in greater volume with each passing year. In his life and work we find the embodiment of the glories and tragedies of the past hundred years. The plunder of the spiritual and material resources of the Third World in the name of global progress; the failed promises of the post-colonial order to eradicate centuries-old

racial and social divisions; the unrelenting struggle for change amid political chaos; and the defiant cry of the oppressed seeking recognition by using their only weapon, their creativity, are all given compelling narrative in Bob Marley's music. He is, without exaggeration, the artist of the century.

For the people of his native Jamaica he represents far more than that, for he was far more than an artist. Through his music and popularity he transcended all spheres of Jamaican social life. In his lifetime he became a political thinker, a Pan-African leader, a selfless provider for literally thousands of people, and a true revolutionary who placed his life on the line at the service of national unity. Arguably his most significant and obvious contribution to Jamaica was as cultural avatar. By bringing reggae music and the message of Rastafari to the world, he helped to expose the multilayered reality of Jamaican society, and forever transform the one-dimensional image of the country as a hedonistic island paradise.

Bob Marley always preferred to place himself at the center of a universal struggle against all forms of oppression in high and low places across the world. His Rastafarian world view privileged the fight against Babylonian injustice over nationalism. He always resisted having his music confined in parochial boundaries as he was keenly aware of the divisions that they created. He never felt comfortable being thought of as a musical ambassador of Jamaica, and as his success grew he accepted the role with much reluctance. In a 1975 interview he commented, "I'm Jamaican, but it doesn't matter where I am from. My music is not bottled for certain people. I am dealing with an international judgment."

It was the higher calling of God that motivated Marley, and it was to God only that Bob claimed allegiance. He never failed to offer all worldly praise for his talents to Jah, claiming that it was Him alone who was worthy of adulation. "I am personally a servant of His Imperial Majesty, doing only what Jah send I here to do," he would often say. His role as a Rasta messenger superseded all other aspects of his identity. On the brink of international stardom in 1973, Neville Willoughby in a now-famous interview asked Bob how he felt being a Jamaican and getting international respect to which he responded, "I-man don't see I-self as being Jamaican. I see I-self as being Rasta!"

Nonetheless Bob Marley was first and foremost a Jamaican. Jamaica remained at the center of Bob's life and work and he was always entrenched in the culture of the island. In his manner of speech, behavior, appearance and attitude he was unabashedly Jamaican. Excepting the 14 months he was in exile following the assassination attempt on his life in 1976, he lived and worked there even as his stardom rose. He never once lost sight of the importance of the Jamaican culture to his art. Jamaica was much more than Bob Marley's land of birth; it was a wellspring of inspiration from which he incessantly drew. In the religious culture of the folk he found a deep appreciation for the biblical and spiritual traditions that always formed the root of his music. In the eternal wisdom of the local proverbs and folklore he found parables applicable for every life situation. And it was Bob's experience with the social injustices and the myriad contradictions he found in his homeland that informed his perception of the world. In a 1978 interview he remarked, "To me Jamaica is a school. Everything that is happening in Jamaica is happening everywhere else." To another interviewer he once commented, "I travel the whole world but I never leave Jamaica yet."

Above all it was to the people of Jamaica that Bob Marley felt most connected. Despite his immense talents, of which he was always aware, he never distanced himself from them, choosing words such as "working-man," "sufferer" and "farmer" to refer to himself. As he once commented, "Affluent standards are not my way of life. I do not even think about those things. I live with 'the people'...I and no one person are friends yet I and the all the people are friends." Jamaicans had a special significance

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for Bob. He was constantly concerned with getting his music across to them. His local concerts were among his best and he often released singles in Jamaica that he never released internationally. When asked why this was so by a journalist in 1979 Bob replied, "I have to talk to my people special." He also recognized the importance of Jamaica in the shaping of his career. As he confessed to interviewer Basil Wilson, "...is the people in Jamaica make me what I am. Is them say 'go Bob.' All when I [am not singing my best], the people applaud. Them people down there is the greatest people in the world. Is them build I and I."

For their part, the majority of Jamaicans have always appreciated the vital role of Marley's music to an understanding of their history and culture. In a country of exceptional musical talent, the Wailers were regarded as the forerunners of reggae music and Marley a sage whose lyrics could be relied on for thoughtful commentary on life on The Rock. From the mid-'60s the Wailers had always occupied a privileged position on the local hit parade. In 1973 they won a major local award as best group of the year and whether opening for North American acts or headlining, their local shows throughout the '70s were always considered cultural events.

This respect, however, has never been without its dissenters. In the dog-eat-dog world of Jamaica, the old adage that "the only thing worse than failure is success," rang true for Bob Marley. Middle-and-upper class Jamaicans who have traditionally looked northward for their influences resented his Rastafarian lifestyle and embrace of the indigenous culture. In the middle and late '70s the conflicts and tensions that have divided Jamaican society since independence seemed to converge around Bob Marley. In many ways he represented the nexus between the dominant political and social divides. Each side demanded more and more of him, and each one claimed him as their own. Never before had so many expectations been placed on the shoulders of an artist. Even the left-wing political groups in Jamaican society were uneasy with the collision between the Afro-Saxon values that they held dear and Marley's unbowed espousal of Rastafari.

Yet none could resist his influence and importance. No other person could have brought rival politicians Michael Manley and Edward Seaga to publicly shake hands, as Bob did at the celebrated One Love Peace Concert in April 1978. So powerful was Bob's role, that in the run-up to the 1980 elections, both political parties had incorporated songs from his *Uprising* album into their campaigns. Bob unceasingly presented his music as a moral alternative to the tribalism that party politics created. "My job," he once said, "is to come between these politicians and become something else for the people." It is this power which Marley commanded in Jamaican society that made him both hero and target. It is indeed one of the sad ironies of his short-lived career that in 1976 he nearly lost his life while rehearsing for a concert named after the only song he ever composed solely for Jamaica ("Smile Jamaica"). What he never received from his countrymen during his lifetime has now been acknowledged in the years since his passing. His global fame has overwhelmed the recognition of the sportsmen and intellectuals whose international reputations preceded him. Though resistance to his international fame still lingers in certain quarters, Jamaicans in recent years have quite rightly felt a great deal of pride in his achievements.

Still, there continues to be a lack of understanding of Marley's importance to Jamaican social history. Even during his lifetime, his humility, simplicity of lifestyle and charity concealed a deeply complex persona whose creative process drew on everything in his environment. From the historical examples of Paul Bogle's courage, Marcus Garvey's prescience and Miss Lou's cultural acuity, to the street-level wisdom of his fellow brethren, Marley found inspiration. Ultimately it was the lessons he drew from the people and culture of Jamaica that he would teach the world.

In a conversation I had with Michael Manley shortly before his passing I asked him what was it about Bob Marley that made him so unique. Manley, echoing a sentiment shared by virtually everyone who knew Bob, commented that it was his discipline. Manley recalled visiting Bob in 1976 during rehearsal sessions for the Smile Jamaica concert and being impressed with the way in which Bob

drove the band, rehearsing the

same song obsessively until everything was right. Manley admitted that Bob Marley was the most disciplined Jamaican he had ever known and a superb leader. What made him such a great leader, I asked? Manley responded, "Bob Marley was a great leader not only because he did what he did very well, but because he always knew his limitations and never thought that he could do it alone."

Bob Marley never suffered from illusions of grandeur typical of performers in his position. For him creativity could only be born out of community. In a country where the social barriers created by colonialism pit the haves against the have-nots, his music has always been a celebration of unity. His unflinching belief that in the struggle against oppression everyone had a potential role to play was made manifest in his life. Whether on stage, on the football field, or in his approach to music he always considered himself part of an entity. After Manley and Seaga descended the stage at the One Love Peace Concert, Bob's first utterance to his Jamaican audience was, "The Spirit of Togetherness must be there." This philosophy remains one of his most important lessons for humankind.

Jamaica has changed a great deal since Bob's passing. Despite the country's rich creative potential it is doubtful whether the sociocultural forces that exist now can produce another artist of his caliber. It is no coincidence that Bob Marley's entire musical career (1962-80), spanned what was undoubtedly the most progressive period in the independent history of the country. Fortunately his legacy is strong and will only grow stronger. Jamaicans like the rest of the world, will continue to look to him for guidance and understanding of the uncertain future that lies ahead in this century and the next. His work will forever be a lesson to us all.

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