

THE MARLEY MOMENT

BY ADEBAYO OJO

Reggae, and Bob Marley specifically, are well known and command a massive following in Nigeria, the most populous black nation on earth. There are millions of Marley fans cutting across religious, age, social and gender barriers. Marley is seen in many respects: more importantly as kayaman, prophet and freedom fighter, perhaps less as singer and entertainer. Marley gave fashion very little consideration. Nevertheless, one interesting way in which the womenfolk have immortalized him is to "invent" a style of weaving the hair christened "Bob Marley." It is ever in fashion, exquisite to behold and can be done in several "style and versions." You cannot walk the street of any city or town in Nigeria without sighting it being worn by a lady.



Among the many uses to which Bob Marley's music is put in Nigeria is this particular one that not only gladdens my heart all the time but is unwittingly a great tribute to the depth and everlasting quality of Marley's work. However, I am here concerned about the Legend's music and the way it is played by an institution—the electronic media. It is interesting to note that, apart from Marley anniversaries, Bob Marley is not lightly played on radio and by television in Nigeria and this can be easily verified. Whenever Bob Marley is on the air, rest assured that something of significance is afoot: the ordinary run of daily living with its countless allied negatives is somehow interrupted and a *pause* is provided in which to ponder things that are of depth and great impact. Whether this is occasioned by industrial strikes, fuel scarcity, university closures, delayed workers' salaries, communal clashes, strife in oil-producing states, "war in the East," "war in the West," etc., that *pause* is invariably Hon. Robert Nesta Marley (OM).

I can recall many examples. Rather than list them, however, I will provide only the pattern, which demonstrates conclusively not only the profundity of Marley's works but the sad fact

that hardly anything is done anymore by today's humanity with thoroughness, passion and expertise. Now that you can hardly ever find a positive, simultaneous combination of vision, depth, passion, commitment and expertise, it is little surprising that the world is no longer seeing anyone comparable to Marley, Muhammed Ali, Pele, Che, Neruda, or their likes.



Illustration by Robert Steinhilber

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To go back to the way Marley is played on the Nigerian airwaves: Whenever there is a grave injustice prominent enough to come to public and media attention, not one but many stations will start playing "War," "Get Up, Stand Up" or "Zimbabwe." In the same vein, "Natural Mystic," "Real Situation" and "So Much Trouble" is the ominous trio with which approaching disasters and tragedies are heralded and protested. As the Zimbabwean crisis deepened, you could hear them for many days on different programs on different stations at different times of the day, and recently as the U.S. war on Iraq built up. There are apparently no better songs, with as deep emotional and principled commitment, to surmise and "chant down" the contradictions and insanity in human society. After hearing this trio, you can very predictably expect a stop-in-program—I mean a real *pause* or time-out—then suddenly "One Love" will ring out.

IN LAGOS, NIGERIA, BOB MARLEY'S SONGS HAVE BECOME SOUNDTRACK AND COMMENTARY FOR SIGNIFICANT EVENTS, AND TIME SEEMS TO STOP WHEN THEY ARE HEARD ON THE STREETS.



MARLEY IS PLAYED AT MOMENTS OF TRUTH IT IS ALWAYS MARLEY PLAYING AT THESE MOMENTS BECAUSE ONLY MARLEY SEEMS ABLE TO DELIVER... A SONG THAT CAN RALLY ALL, GIVE HOPE, DISSOLVE TENSION AND FEARS, REDEEM THE SOUL AND MOBILIZE FOR THE SAKE OF GOOD.

Whenever I experience this phenomenon, I am neither surprised nor intrigued. It seems to me quite natural, quite matter-of-factly but nevertheless very touching. From a high level of socio-political awareness and Marley appreciation you can easily pick up the significance. Whether it is the conscious act of advanced electronic media anchors or a compulsive response, it is significant that this pattern is present. For no apparent reason, some continuity announcer will suddenly drop in "Kaya" when the rains are coming; during the program "My Type of Music," an anchor will play all the classics of Marley on the theme of hope—"Three Little Birds," "Waiting in Vain," "Time Will Tell," et cetera; again, all at once for some half-hour you'll hear Marley wailing on unity: "No More Trouble," "Africa Unite," "Coming From the Cold," "One Love," and so on.

Do not wonder so much what the stations saw today that's making them play these very, very acceptable and unique tunes (a session that you'll not want ended), just pause and look at the social or natural environment or the headlines of the various dailies, then you'll understand why! Whenever there's a weighty public issue, Marley's songs relative to that issue will more often than not be played. For instance, as I write this Nigeria is about to go the polls (April 12, 19 and 26) and anxiety heightens over violence and political intrigues, for several sober moments you'll hear songs like "No More Trouble," "So Jah Say," "One Love," "Coming in from the Cold" playing.

Of course, if you're not keen, perceptive or listening you *won't* hear Marley playing, but the discerning, the conscious and those who really listen to the radio can attest to the actuality of this trend. Certainly, Marley is played on many other occasions not suggestive of anything other than the pure fancy of the radioman or in answer to the request of a listener who wants "Is This Love" played for her hearthrob. There is, however, what can be termed Marley Play—heavy, deep and deliberately focused. This is the way Marley is played at moments of truth. It is always Marley playing at these moments because only Marley seems able to deliver. There might be other great songs and other great singers but only Marley delivers that *pause* from the aimless and reckless pursuit of vanity; a *pause* in which man can contemplate *something else* that is dear and abiding, with a song that can rally all, give hope, dissolve tension and fears, redeem the soul and mobilize for the sake of good.

Marcus Garvey said "The ends you serve that are selfish will take you no further than yourself, but the ends you serve that are for all—in common—will take you even into eternity." When it is said that Marley lives, I can conclude that there's no better testimony to Marley being alive than this phenomenal use of his music to this day, and for me there is no greater inspiration to seek eternity above all things so that, like Bob, all things can truly be given me in the end.

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