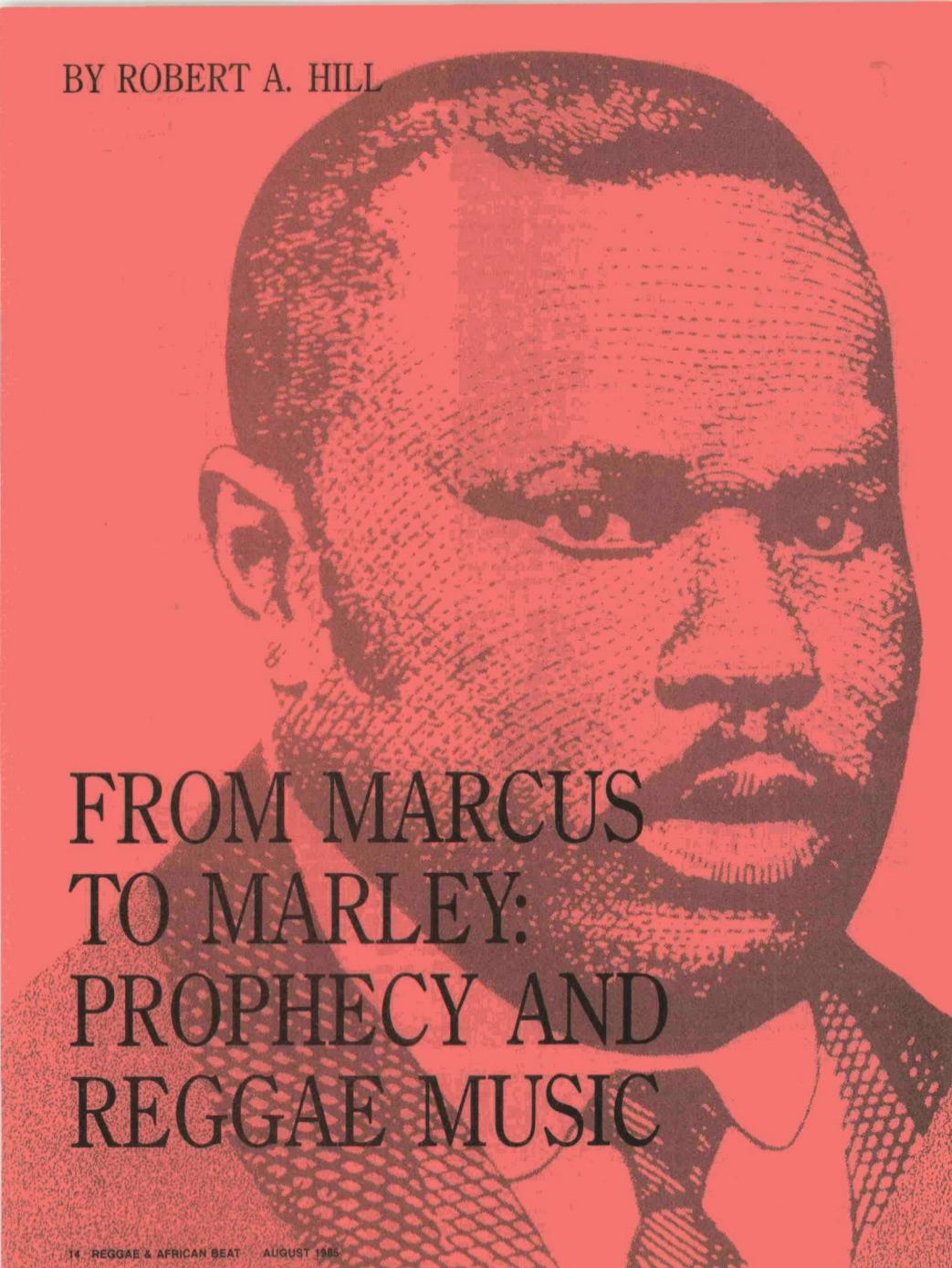


BY ROBERT A. HILL



FROM MARCUS
TO MARLEY:
PROPHECY AND
REGGAE MUSIC

This article is a revised transcript of a lecture by Dr. Hill delivered March 13, 1985, at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, CT, as part of a lecture series presented by the Artists Collective, Inc., with support from the Connecticut Humanities Council and the West Indian Foundation. Dr. Hill is the editor of *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* (University of California Press), a monumental ten-volume survey of 30,000 archival documents and original manuscripts of Garvey and the UNIA.

Good evening, brothers and sisters, friends. I come to you with some trepidation. This organization, The Artists Collective, has a lot to do with music; musicians were founding members of this organization. However, historians don't usually talk about music and I've never done anything like this before. I've never talked about music in my work. But as someone who has lived with Marcus Garvey daily for the last 17-18 years, and who has been totally immersed in the written record of that man and his worldwide movement, I've developed some experience of going beneath the surface words of the text to reach for deeper historical significance. Even so, it's an altogether different thing we're going to do tonight, because I bring no text, or rather, the only text I bring is music. This is a big leap across the documentary chasm into the cultural realm, a realm of astonishing movement of spirit which leaves in its wake — sound. For that reason mainly it is exciting, and I've gained a much deeper understanding of Garvey, giving my mind over to the testimony that we shall hear tonight.

Before I actually begin, I'd like to outline the major points I will be discussing. Number one, I'm going to say here tonight that it is in the music, more than anywhere else, that the legacy of Marcus Garvey is most enshrined. That's the first point. The second point is that I know of nothing comparable, in all of contemporary music, to this expression of prophecy and political legend in popular music. There is no parallel that I know of in contemporary music of a political legacy being articulated to such an extent, celebrated, in the music of a people. The only historical precedent that I can think of is to be found in many of the blues songs of the 1930s, when Joe Louis, the great champion and black popular hero, had his boxing triumphs celebrated in various blues lyrics of the day. In the case of Jamaica, a precedent may be found in the Maroon jawbone songs found in Moore Town that make mention of Paul Bogle and the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, though the name Bogle for the most part is used in these songs without very much historical significance. There are also one or two traditional songs that recall the healing powers of the charismatic religious prophet, Alexander Bedward, who shepherded a

large flock of militant believers from 1895 until he was finally consigned, after promising to fly to heaven, to the mental asylum in 1921. I notice also that there is a recent song by Prince Far I about "Bedward the Flying Preacher" on the album, *Staggering Heights* (On-U Sounds, 1984).

In talking about Garvey and reggae music, we are talking about something that goes beyond such stances. That's the second point. The third point is one that I hope to demonstrate here, tonight, and it is this: by understanding how Garvey and his legacy relate to the music of our day, we come away knowing a good deal about the sources out of which this music springs. In the absence of any cultural history or theory of the music, this becomes an important goal. Tonight we shall try to offer a framework for approaching this phenomenon. That's what I would like to share with you tonight. That is the third point and I come now to the fourth. Garvey, however great he might be, is not an end in himself. If you study Garvey because you see Garvey as an absolute and an end unto himself, then you will not understand very much. By the same token, neither is the music an end in itself. It is the people who made Garvey and it is the people who made the music, and if we understand that, then we come closer to the source. Garvey is not an end in himself; the music, however magnificent, is not an end in itself — it is our struggle for survival as a people that is the source out of which everything comes. That's the fourth point.

Now to get us started, I would like to present, along with some commentary, some samples of how Garvey and the Black Star Line find their way into contemporary Jamaican music. I will play for you these musical examples and I will comment as I go along. Then I will break and talk about Garvey, Rastafari, and reggae, a brief overview of those relationships. From there I will move to discuss certain seminal political events that occurred in Jamaica in the 1960s and 70s. We will then conclude by showing how prophecy works in the music. So that is the scheme for tonight.

Steel Pulse, in its song "Rally Round," sings these lines:

How can we sing in a strange land
Don't want to sing in a strange land
Liberation, true democracy,
One God, One Aim, One Destiny.

The words of the refrain, "One God, One Aim, One Destiny," come from the famous motto of Garvey's worldwide organization — the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

Bob Marley, shortly before he died, sang:
Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom

Cause all I ever had, Redemption Song,

These songs of freedom . . .

The answer to Steel Pulse's question, "How can we sing in a strange land?" is what we're going to find out here tonight and that Bob Marley gave with his life.



It appears that the first recorded example of Garvey's influence in popular Jamaican music came about in 1964. It was sung by a person whose name was Bongo Man (very significant, as we shall see), but we know nothing further about the identity of this individual. In 1964, to call yourself Bongo Man was an important departure. That name was to become popular in the late 60s and early 70s, but in 1964 to call yourself Bongo Man was in itself a radical statement. Because Bongo, in the Jamaican vernacular, means a stupid person, a person who has no claim to intelligence so that it is a term of ridicule. But Bongo is also a language sung during the dance of the Kumina.

Now this recording has an interesting history. There are three versions. One was "Where is Garvey?," the second, "Garvey Dead," and the third version is just plain "Marcus Garvey." It was recorded by Bongo Man and the Skatalites for Coxson's Studio One label in 1964. It comes right out of the period of ska, the first really major breakthrough in contemporary popular Jamaican music:

Marcus Garvey is a Negro who was born in Jamaica,

Garvey is a hero who was born in Jamaica,

Married two wives named Amy and Mary.

Have two sons for one of the Amy,

One is a doctor, one is a teacher.

Some say Garvey dead'o, some say him no dead'o,

Some say 'dem know him, some say 'dey don't know him . . .

At the time the song was recorded, Garvey's remains had just been returned to Jamaica from England, where they had remained embalmed in a vault in St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery in London from the time of his death there in June 1940. Then, in 1964, the government of Jamaica decided to name Garvey as Jamaica's first National Hero and brought his body back for a massive state funeral and reburial in what was then George VI Park (later to be renamed National Heroes Park). The whole event was surrounded by controversy, however, largely because of the wholesale doubt expressed by many about whether the body was truly Garvey's. That is the point of the song: it commemorates not only Garvey's return but also the popular mistrust of the official handling of Garvey, and so the title of the song asks, "Where is Marcus Garvey?"

Now that song was the only song for a very long time with lyrics that actually mentioned the name of Garvey. There were

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other songs recorded at about this same time but they were in every case instrumental songs, and that is very important to stress. Note that in the first line of the song it says, "Marcus Garvey is a Negro." So although Bongo Man was out there in front, he was still referring to Garvey in terms of him being a "Negro."

There were two, possibly three, other songs about Garvey at the time. We haven't been able to find them, unfortunately. The other two were by the legendary Don Drummond, the great trombonist of the Skatalites band. Don Drummond was reputed to have recorded a tune called "Tribute to Marcus Garvey;" he is also said to have recorded another tune called "Marcus Junior," which I think may have resulted from the fact that Marcus Garvey's son, Garvey Jr., played a prominent role at the time of the return of Garvey's body to Jamaica. It is possible that Garvey was also mentioned by Count Ossie in his song, "Another Moses," a song that may have been the original for a song that would later be recorded by L.G. Lovindeer called "Another Garvey." The point to be stressed is that Garvey's name was far more current in the 60s among musicians than among singers for two basic reasons: first, key musicians were already heavily into Rasta, while the singers were not yet at that point; second, the impetus of the music was coming from the drumming, not from the lyrics, which at this time were by no means challenging to the system.

It's not until 1975, a decade later, with the release of the Mighty Diamond's album *Right Time*, that we begin to really hear about Garvey on a sustained scale in the music. In the title song, "Right Time," the Mighty Diamonds turn us toward prophecy:

Natty Dread will never run away, no no no
Natty Dread will never run away,
Marcus Garvey prophecy say,
Man a go find him back against the wall,
It a go bitter.

The term "Natty Dread" had now become

the people had gone astray. Thus, the past treatment of Garvey by the people was now occasion for *releuke*:

Them never love
Them never love
Never love
Poor Marcus
Till they betray him
Him own'a brethren sell him fe rice'n peas
They didn't know there'd be days like these . . .

In this song we are also alerted, for the first time that I can find, to one of the now enduring myths about Garvey, one that connects him, moreover, with another figure out of recent Jamaican folklore, Bag O'Wire. The connection shows that the music was now plumbing new depths of folk memory, a sure sign that reggae had found its own voice:

Men like Bag O'Wire
Should burn in fire
The betrayer of Marcus Garvey.

In a later song, "I Want to Know," the Mighty Diamonds reinstate the same quizzical attitude toward the official version of Garvey. They ask:

Is Garvey really dead for sure?
Black man gonna know now
Is Garvey really dead for sure?
I and I want to know
Where is the black man's prophet
Where does the black man's future lie
Where is Marcus Garvey gone
Them say him dead long ago
Now them come back with the ashes.

And then they mock at the credulity of those who allowed themselves to be duped:

What a hard, hard
What a hard man fe dead.

What we are being told is that there is no death for the righteous. Black people have come to reclaim their prophet from the clutches of official death.

"Right Time" was also significant for popularizing through the song the prophecy linked with Garvey, namely, that "Swallow Field a go be in a de battlefield." Swallow Field is just above Crossroads, which is the midway point dividing the city of Kingston proper from the suburbs to the north. It is

bunch of politicians going to independence, terrified of the prospect of being on their own, the British government gave Jamaica a little gift: five million pounds and the land at Up Park Camp.

We come now to the singer who really anointed the theme of Garvey in reggae music, bringing it to a new level of deep spirituality and communion with Garvey. We're talking about Garvey's fellow townsman from St. Ann's Bay, Burning Spear, whose first album in 1975 was called simply, *Marcus Garvey*. He sang two songs on that album, "Marcus Garvey" and "Old Marcus Garvey." Clearly, 1975 was a very important year. There had been little or no commentary about Garvey in the music between 1964 and 1975. Why?

Burning Spear released a subsequent album called *Marcus Children*. You know how many songs on that album are devoted to Garvey? — four. And every album that Burning Spear makes there's at least one song and sometimes two or three about Marcus Garvey. Garvey becomes literally a musical banner for Spear. Burning Spear sings of Garvey as still the outcast, the sufferer's prophet, when he sings, "No one remembers old Marcus Garvey," and adds:

Children, children, children, children
Humble yourself
One day somehow
You will remember him.

The essence of Garvey is that "Marcus Garvey Suffer," which Spear sings about on his album in 1978, *Marcus Children*.

In the years after the release of the Mighty Diamonds' and Burning Spear's two seminal albums in 1975, there followed a veritable flood of new releases chanting the praises of the prophet Garvey and through him calling upon the people to reform their ways. Jimmy Cliff and Joe Higgs, two of the great legends of reggae music, teamed up to sing about the "Sons of Garvey." Around the same time, the group Culture caught the popular imagination with the mystical "Two Sevens Clash," thereby giving wide currency to the notion that Garvey had prophesied 1977, "when the two sevens clash," as being a particularly fateful year:

What a lick and bam-bam-ba-ye, (re-peat)
When the two sevens clash.

Martin Luther prophet,
Marcus Garvey prophesy say,
St. Jago de la Vega and Kingston is gonna meet,

And I can see with my own eyes
It is only a housing scheme that divide . . .

Look up a' cotton tree out by Ferry police station,
How beautiful it used to be,
And it has been destroyed by lightning,
Earthquake and thunder . . .

Marcus Garvey was inside of Spanish Town district prison,

The music is the message of our lives. It is the embodiment of our deepest tales, tales of suffering, hope, faith, beauty.

emblematic of defiance which was felt by increasing numbers of people for the system, particularly the youth. "Natty Dread" was the brother of "Rude Boy" ("Rudie") who was also the relative of "Bongo Man." This ever-increasing verbal use in the open of terms subversive of the prevailing social order signified the hooking up of the music with a language born of resistance.

The lyrics sung by the Mighty Diamonds reflected also the growing confidence of the music as a vehicle for pointing out how

just to the east of Crossroads. Swallow Field is a strategic area, for it is the place where the camp of the British colonial army was based, known as Up Park Camp, a large area of land where the British garrisoned their soldiers. It is also the area where the government set up the Gun Court, the National Stadium, and the National Arena, and where the Children's Hospital, the library and the cultural complex are located. When the British were leaving Jamaica in 1962 to the scared

And when they were about to take him out,
He prophesy and say,
"As I pass through this gate,
No other prisoner shall enter here through."
And so it is until now,
The gate is being locked. . . .

It's repatriation,
Black liberation,
Yes, the time has come,
Black man, you're going home . . .

Marcus Garvey told us
Freedom is a must,
He told us that
The Black Star Liners are coming one day for us . . .

When the two sevens clash,
A man a'go feel it,
You better do right
Take heed of your bad ways,
I'm warning you.

The examples could be multiplied many times, drawing upon songs by Black Harmony ("Everybody Love Marcus Garvey"), Mikey Dread ("Black Star Liner"), Big Youth

1975 was a critical year for another reason, one that might have been partly responsible for the prophetic turn that became manifest in the music in that year. What happened in 1975? His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I was reported to have died in Ethiopia. That is the year when the Mighty Diamonds cut the album, *Right Time*. That is the year when Burning Spear cut the album, *Marcus Garvey*. It would almost seem as if, with the disappearance of the Emperor, the brethren decided to redress the imbalance created by bringing Marcus forward. The wholesale entry of Garvey into the music is keyed to a phenomenon that still requires a lot of patient research, but it would seem reason-

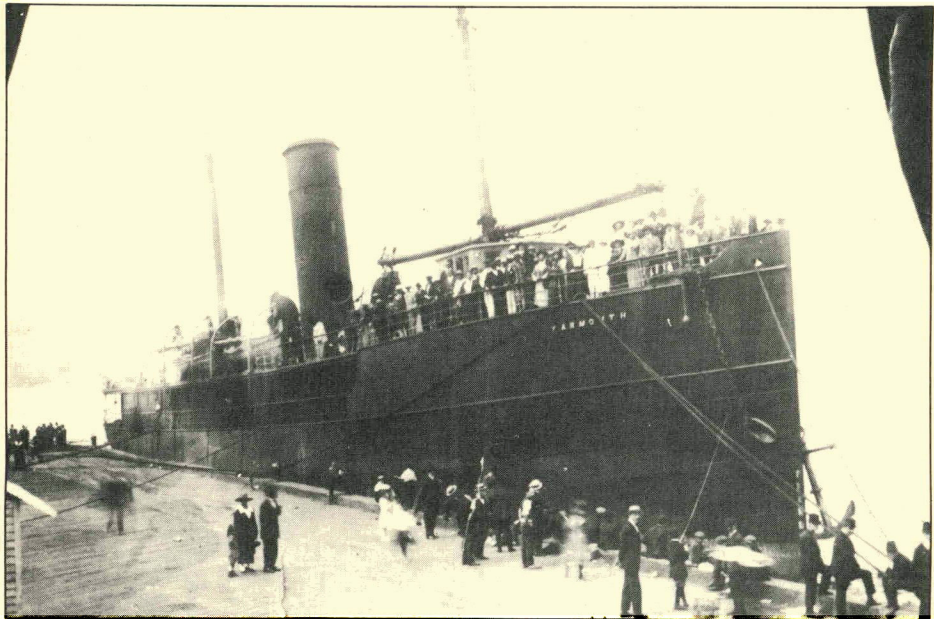


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MARCUS GARVEY ARCHIVES, UCLA 1985

"Black man, you're going home . . ." A rare photo of the Black Star Liner.

Among the many recurrent themes to emerge about Garvey in the music is the great symbol of repatriation to Africa, in the form of Garvey's legendary Black Star Line. It is everywhere present in the music but perhaps is most notably manifested in Fred Locks's big hit, "Black Star Liner"

Seven miles of Black Star Liners
Coming in de harbor,
Seven miles of Black Star Liners
Coming in de harbor.

I can see them coming,
I can see idren's running,
I can hear the elders saying
These are the days for which we been praying. . . .

("Mosiah Garvey"), Reggae Regular ("Black Star Liner"), etc. From 1975 onward the music was literally flooded with references to Garvey and wholesale appreciation of Garvey. The cruel prodigality that these songs spoke about and called the people back away from was, in reality, a call for the people to turn their backs against politricks and political violence in the present day, a cry for the people to find a way to heal themselves so that they would not fall prey to the politicians' promises, to find, in short, another way. Out of the need to address these problems, the music turned toward prophecy and in so doing it turned to the native Jamaican prophet of black liberation, Marcus Garvey.

able that it was related to events taking place in the world.

But what we still need to know is how the music transforms these materials of consciousness, how they emerge and take form in the music. I feel that the answer to that question is to be found in the verbal art of the Jamaican people, in the way that the people employ language. It requires us to understand how the people appropriate reality and turn it into story and play. A big hit in Jamaica last fall, "Get Flat," illustrates the point very well. It is a serious subject about what happens when gunmen invade your premises or where you are and everybody has to "get flat." But even so it is

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prefaced by a nursery rhyme! The music draws upon the oral life of the people, the verbal art, and presents in musical story-form what the people are saying every day. That's the key. A truly notable example of the way in which the reggae singer uses the verbal art is Bob Marley's rendition of "War," Emperor Haile Selassie's speech set to music. In fact, Marley is the classic example of how everyday Jamaican speech, once he became confident enough and comfortable enough with its use, provides the fuel for reggae compositions: you hear it in his "So Jah Say" (1974), "Talkin' Blues" (1974), and "So Much Things to Say" (1977). Many of Marley's greatest songs are taken directly from Jamaican folk proverbs, such as "Craven a Go Choke Puppy" (mid-60s), "Small Axe" (1973), "Duppy Conqueror" (1973), "Who the Cap Fit" (1976), and "Bad Card" (1980). Timothy White makes the point, but does not develop it, when he reports that early on in his career, "Marley was equally distraught over what he saw as the racism and ignorance of critics who damned his music along thematic lines while making no attempt to investigate its underpinnings, to learn that it was steeped in folklore, in the country maxims he had been raised on." ("A History of Bob Marley & the Wailers," p. 82, in Stephen Davis and Peter Simon, *Reggae International*, 1982)

That is where the music is coming from, from the life of the people. The question, I repeat, is to find out how one gets from the oral tradition of speech, everyday speech, how you get from that to the music? Notice that when Lee Perry leaves Coxson's employ, after a dispute in 1968, his first hit record is entitled by him "People Funny Boy," which is a musical accounting of Coxson's real-life behavior. Perry's most recent effort is a devastating song about his dealings with Chris Blackwell, so he's obviously still at it! To understand how it happens will take us to the very source of the artistic creativity of the people.

Oral speech is not just people talking, it's people performing! That's the basis for the transformative essence of the spoken word especially in conditions of cultural denial, as in Jamaica. The spoken word becomes an actual performance in progress. In my view, reggae music is Jamaican verbal behavior translated into music, stripped of that earlier crippling stigma that prevented its creative potential from being achieved. Without that liberation from the cultural oppression of middle-class Jamaican values against "speaking bad," there would never have been reggae music as we know it.

The reggae singer is a singer-performer of tales taken from everyday life and that are embodied in the medium of everyday Jamaican speech. Prophecy thus becomes just another kind of story to be told. Reggae is the vehicle today for a revival of traditional storytelling, with the story of Garvey

being one of the most frequently celebrated. This testifies to the fact that Garvey has today penetrated so deeply into popular consciousness that he has now achieved the status of a genuine folk hero.

Today the music is drawing on children's rhymes and proverbs and riddles to such an extent that it is troubling to many. The resources of spoken performance are still the energy propelling the music forward, only it is drawing on a deeper layer of verbal art. If we understand that, it means that the music is more and more a form of oral poetry. This is the people's poetry in song.

The struggle to recover the meaning of Garvey in reggae music leads me inexorably to recognize the essence of storytelling as the basis of the Jamaican oral tradition. This folk tradition that invaded the popular music is the irreducible essence by which we survive, we survive in history, living to tell the tale. So the music needs a story to tell and Garvey became one of the chief stories to tell. When you reach a crisis point like 1975, with the disappearance of the

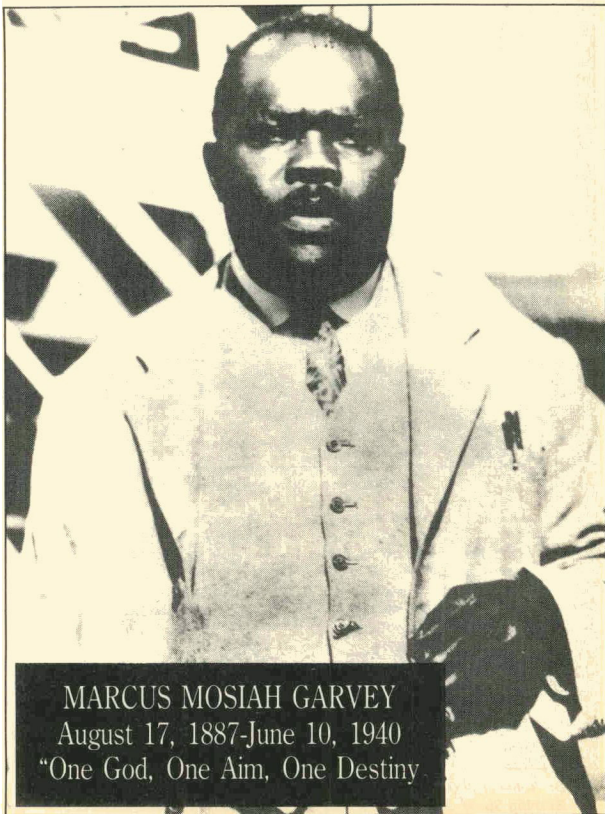
Emperor, and you now need to redress the imbalance, you go back and bring Garvey forward. So Garvey is a resource to take us through the present and into the future.

So that is it. Prophecy, history, words, tales of a people yearning to be treated as human beings, betrayal, treason, the future, the children, it is about all of us and the music is the message of our lives. It is the embodiment of our deepest tales, tales of suffering, hope, faith, beauty. It is the tale ultimately of naming ourselves. So let me just leave it there and leave it with Bob:

Won't you help us sing
These songs of freedom,
It's all I ever had,
Redemption song,
It's all I ever had,
These songs of freedom.

Give Thanks.

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MARCUS MOSIAH GARVEY

August 17, 1887-June 10, 1940

"One God, One Aim, One Destiny"

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MARCUS GARVEY ARCHIVES, UCLA 1985