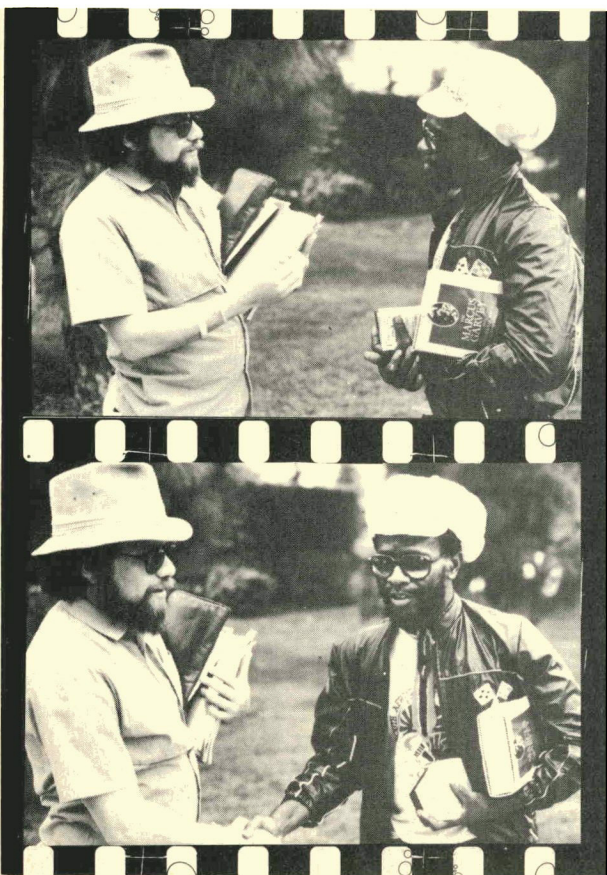


# BURNING SPEAR AND BOBBY HILL THE ROOTSMAN MEETS THE PROFESSOR

INTERVIEW BY  
ROGER STEFFENS



**Dr. Robert Hill (left), world's foremost Garvey expert, meets and muses with Burning Spear, Santa Monica, California, April 1985.**

**L**ast April, Roger Steffens, co-host of KCRW's "Reggae Beat" in Los Angeles, introduced to each other, live on the air, Dr. Robert Hill and Winston Rodney, known worldwide as Burning Spear. Dr. Hill is a Jamaican scholar who has spent the last two decades researching the rich history of Marcus Garvey, the century's most-noted prophet of black repatriation, and has already published three books in a projected ten-volume set of the collected papers of Garvey. Among reggae singers, none sings the Garvey gospel as profoundly or as often as Spear. Their meeting was one of titanic significance for reggae music and Garvey scholarship alike, as the soul of Marcus Mosiah Garvey lives on! The following excerpts are from their conversation that day.



**Roger:** One of the most important messages of Garveyism is repatriation. Let me throw a loaded question out to both of you right at the start. But preface it first with a question to you, Bobby. Have you any idea how many Blacks live outside of Africa?  
**Dr. Hill:** I would say at least a 150 million Black people, Africans, live outside of Africa. At least a 150 million.

**Roger:** All right. My obvious question then is how practical is repatriation? How can Africa, which has vast regions that are starving and can't support themselves, for whatever reason, take an influx of another 150 million people, and is repatriation a practical thought?  
**Dr. Hill:** My feeling, with all due respects, is that repatriation is a must. Yes, then . . . certainly repatriate. But I think that to declare repatriation for yourself, and therefore, that everybody must pursue that goal, I don't think that that is how personally within a spiritual realm, that is how things happen. Any man or any woman who feels, looking at their past, and thinking of their future, who comes to a knowledge of Africa and says, I feel entitled within myself to make that move, no man can stop them. No man can stop them. Personally to me, as I see it, I say Africa is where the African is. That is my philosophy. Africa is wherever the African is. And that is a thing them can't stamp out. The fact that they brought . . . so many millions of Africans, they brought Africa with them. And right now here in Santa Monica, Africa is right here present now, right here where we are. And so I feel that, before we even make that move, we have to further consolidate where we are now.

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*Dr. Hill: As I see it, I say Africa is where the African is. That is my philosophy. And that is a thing them can't stamp out."*

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And, within that, if you feel that there personally have to be repatriation, then I say no man can stop that. But to me, Africa is worldwide, universal.

**Roger:** Jah Spear, how practical is repatriation?

**Spear:** Well now, you them seh repatriation is a must, seen? Regardless in what way repatriation exercise itself, it is a must. And, as my brother said before, is like you know a Black man is, is Africa.

**Dr. Hill:** Seen.

**Spear:** That when you see a Black man, you really see Africa. Or a Black woman, you see Africa.

**Roger:** Bobby, what other things would you like to cover with Jah Spear?

**Dr. Hill:** I wanted to ask Jah Spear about his own distinctive approach to Garvey in his music. What I think we all notice is that when others sing about Garvey, they make constant reference to Garvey's prophecies. Many people refer to the fact that, when Garvey left the St. Catherine General Penitentiary, in 1913, they never opened that gate again. Many people talk about that place on King Street which is now a parking lot, that Garvey prophesied, said that that would be a parking lot. Other people sing about Garvey's prophecy concerning the area around U Park Camp, and many people keep referring to these prophecies. Now when Spear sings about Garvey, you don't specify anything about a prophecy as such. Why do you . . . do you notice that difference between your singing of Garvey and how others sing about him? They use prophecies more, and you don't really do that. You approach it differently. Tell us a little bit about your approach.

**Spear:** Seen. The way I see it, Garvey prophesy, when the two seven clash you know, then this gwan happen and that will happen you know. See Garvey really never tell no man that, you know, this gwan happen in 1977, or that gwan happen in 1977, or that gwan happen in 1977. Garvey just speak his word, which is the reality, the prophecy, you know, the prophecy from the prophet, which is Marcus Garvey himself. So, individually, we don't have to be it, pon some individuality, like the rest of people do, for prophecy fulfilled through nature. And no one can put itself in the front of nature, ha fe allow nature to exercise itself in the right and proper way, at the right time. So the things that Garvey really speak and act and I come and I sing, I wouldn't really ha fe sing individually about these things, what Garvey speak about, for singing about them not gwan make it happen,

if something should happen. If you don't sing about it, it still not gwan make something happen if it should happen. So I say what is to be, through the prophet, it must be.

**Dr. Hill:** Well, let me ask you this, Spear. After many hours of listening over and over to your songs about Garvey, I wonder, and I should ask you this question now, when you come to compose a song in your mind, spiritually about Marcus Garvey, is it very difficult? Is it very hard? Do you find those songs the hardest songs to put together?

**Spear:** Yes, I would say yes, for most of these song that I really write by Garvey, most time I find myself in the deeper part of the hills. Like Seville, you know, the land called Seville that's where most of these Garvey song inspiration.

**Roger:** Is it a Maroon area?

**Dr. Hill:** No, it's an old plantation, the Seville estate.

**Spear:** Old slave plantation. So, I always notice at the time I try to get into Garvey, always ha fe pay a visit to the hills.

**Dr. Hill:** I see.

**Spear:** And . . . in the hills is so humble, you know, you really have whole heap of environments and you have as much time as your thought or your mind can go, all around and search.

**Roger:** I'm going to abdicate here as interviewer, and Bobby, what's going to happen?

**Dr. Hill:** Well, Spear said that he had some questions about Marcus Garvey that he would like to put to me. And I don't know what they are. I just hope that I'll be able to answer them to the best of my ability.

**Spear:** Well is like what I-man was saying up front before is like a lot of things 'pon Garvey where some other people don't have the understanding or never heard, or read. Well, all I like fe ask my brother is that, what did really happen 'pon Garvey before him leave the States and come back to Jamaica?

**Dr. Hill:** Well, Garvey was tried by the U.S. government on a charge of mail fraud. The government of the United States had been trying to get Garvey arrested since 1919 — J. Edgar Hoover and all that. And, they couldn't succeed, no way. They tried to have Garvey arrested on sedition charges. That didn't work. They tried to have Garvey deported out of America. That didn't work. Declaring that he was a subversive, and then Garvey left America on a tour of the West Indies and Jamaica where he came back to Jamaica in 1921. And at that point, J. Edgar Hoover and the govern-

ment said well, all right, Garvey leave America, therefore we just won't let him back in. And Garvey had come to Jamaica and Cuba, expecting to be away for only five weeks. In the end, he spent five months languishing in Jamaica because the government of the

United States refused to give him a visa to come back to America. So finally, they let him come back in. And a few months, right after they let him come back in, they put these charges of mail fraud against him in January 1922. So, Garvey then was put on trial for allegedly defrauding shareholders in the Black Star Line. Well, they couldn't get anybody to testify against Garvey and they found a man who said that he had gotten in the mail some flyers from the Black Star Line, but nobody could produce in court the actual contents of the envelope. All they had was the envelope, and they didn't know what was in it, or they couldn't produce it. So Garvey was convicted on one charge of mail fraud, on that score. But Garvey was actually indicted with three other officials of the Black Star Line. They let the other three officials off. They acquitted them, and Garvey was the only one who was found guilty. He appealed and lost the appeal, and then they took him, in February 1925, down to Atlanta, Georgia, where they put him in the U.S. penitentiary. But right after they put him in the penitentiary, the government was so concerned that Garvey might get out of the prison. So, in the event that Garvey was acquitted and won the appeal, they had another charge backing up to lay on him, which was income tax evasion. And on top of that, the immigration people went to Atlanta and carried out an immigration hearing there declaring Garvey as a person who would have to be deported from America the moment he finished serving his sentence. So, in 1927, when Garvey received a commutation of his sentence by the President of the United States, there was no alternative, according to the government lawyer, than to immediately deport Garvey. And, in December, I think December 10th, Garvey was landed back in Jamaica, after being deported through the port of New Orleans back to Jamaica. So this was really what happened just prior to that.

**Roger:** Is it fair to say he was railroaded?

**Dr. Hill:** Well, that is a sort of comparative, relative term. It is more important to see the fact that the government's political aim had nothing to do with the specific charge of mail fraud. Mail fraud was the fourth, probably the sixth charge. They tried to get Garvey on the Mann Act, accusing him of white slavery. They tried to get him on some other charges,



so that mail fraud came as a kind of desperation act, after they had tried many things and had failed. And, somehow mail fraud worked for them. But they wanted to destroy Garvey and rid America of Garvey. That was the truth. Mail fraud was just really the front, you know, the face card.

**Spear:** Yes I. So back in London, England, the I supposed to know a few things, what was going down on Garvey.

**Dr. Hill:** Yes. Yes, the British government was keenly aware of Garvey, and the government in England was exchanging highly confidential, secret information with the United States, F.B.I., and military intelligence and naval intelligence. There was back-and-forth cables, each government keeping the other government sort of informed of Garvey's movements. Garvey wanted to make a world tour in 1923. When Garvey was facing a lot of hostile propaganda here in America, he said, well listen, I'm going to make a world tour. And word got to Africa, and the governments of Africa panicked and passed a lot of legislation prohibiting Garvey from ever setting foot in Africa. But, of course Garvey couldn't leave America because he was at that time awaiting trial. But it was just a kind of an aspiration, you know? That he would like to make a world tour and you should . . . I mean you'd be amazed to see the amount of reaction that the British and the colonial governments in Africa put up just at the very thought that he might be coming to Africa.

**Spear:** You see as much as I can gather, gather on Garvey, is best for I. You see I really come fe do this work on Garvey, without any apology or partial.

**Dr. Hill:** Seen.

**Spear:** So, you know, any time I run into people who have the understanding about Garvey on a different level more than I do, it best to keep as close as possible to people like those.

**Dr. Hill:** Well you have been an inspiration to all of us. And I'd like to say, Burning Spear, let me say it on the radio now, this Garvey work is a work of more than just one hand, you know. It is a work encompassing many people, and you have, in a sense, universalized the message by chanting it. I come behind that and put forward papers and writings. But, the spirituality with which people respond to what I put out there, I know don't just come from the "susu-writing" as we say in Jamaica. It comes from a much more universal vibe that people have picked up from — you, Bob Marley, and through the music, people relate to the story now, in a way that you could never have dreamt of, ever dreamt of, in even, say, the

early 1970s. It had a much greater significance worldwide now. But let me ask, Spear, this question. When I started to study Garvey, and went around Jamaica interviewing people, I was taken aback one night when I was on a camp with some youths, and we were just reasoning and, a youth-man said to me, That man think Garvey dead? And, it shook me because I did realize for the first time that, in the minds of a good number of people, the belief is still alive that Garvey is alive.

**Roger:** "Is Garvey really dead for sure? I want to know," sang the Mighty Diamonds. There is some mix-up about the bodies, or the body, or the ashes, or what?

**Dr. Hill:** Well, when Garvey died in London in 1940, June 10, 1940, the war was on, and the original intention was to have Garvey's remains brought back to Jamaica, but they couldn't get any shipping, so they interred Garvey in the catacombs at St. Mary's Cemetery in Harlesden, London, waiting for the war to end. When the war ended, there was a dispute, confusion, between the first Mrs. Garvey and the second Mrs. Garvey as a result of which they kept the body in England. And the government in Jamaica in 1964 decided that they wanted to bring Garvey's body back to Jamaica. That was at the time when they were going to create him as the first national hero of Jamaica. Now, when Garvey died in England, many people in Jamaica you see . . . Garvey was supposed to have died a month before. A false report was published in the newspapers around the world that Garvey had died. And they had to retract it. It was, it turned out to be a false report. So when the second report came out that he died now, people were naturally very suspicious, and Mrs. Garvey, the second Mrs. Garvey in Jamaica, took a picture of Garvey in the casket to convince people that he was dead. But even so, many people wouldn't buy the idea. So, when Garvey's body came back in

1964, many people were dubious that what was supposedly in the casket was the real Marcus Garvey. That is why the bredren sing, "What a hard man fe dead." Now, Mrs. Garvey and her family did not want the government took counsel and realized that if they didn't open that casket, there could have been a big riot. So, they overruled the family, and opened the casket in the Roman Catholic cathedral in Kingston. And thousands of people came by. And the verdict more or less was that is not Garvey in the casket. So, even after opening the casket . . .

**Roger:** Still, that's 24 years of decomposition.

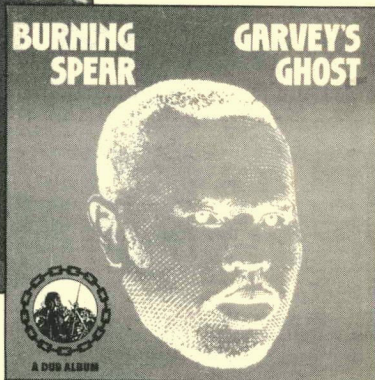
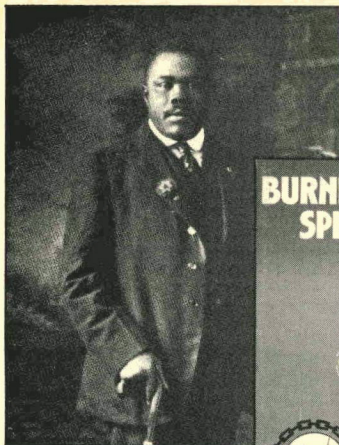
**Dr. Hill:** Well, the body had been embalmed, and it was badly decomposed, but people said that that was the only thing to do. The government. So, when they buried Garvey, in what is now National Heroes Park, it wasn't that name all along you know, it used to be called George VI Park. Prior to that, they used to have just a little bust of Garvey in the eastern part of the park, which my uncle Ken Hill, when he was mayor of Kingston, had established there. And there is where the old Garveyites used to come out every Sunday and, you know, have their meetings. In 1964 now they created a big shrine in what is now Heroes Park. And that is where they buried him. But most people still feel that that is not the real Garvey. I don't know whether that has changed.

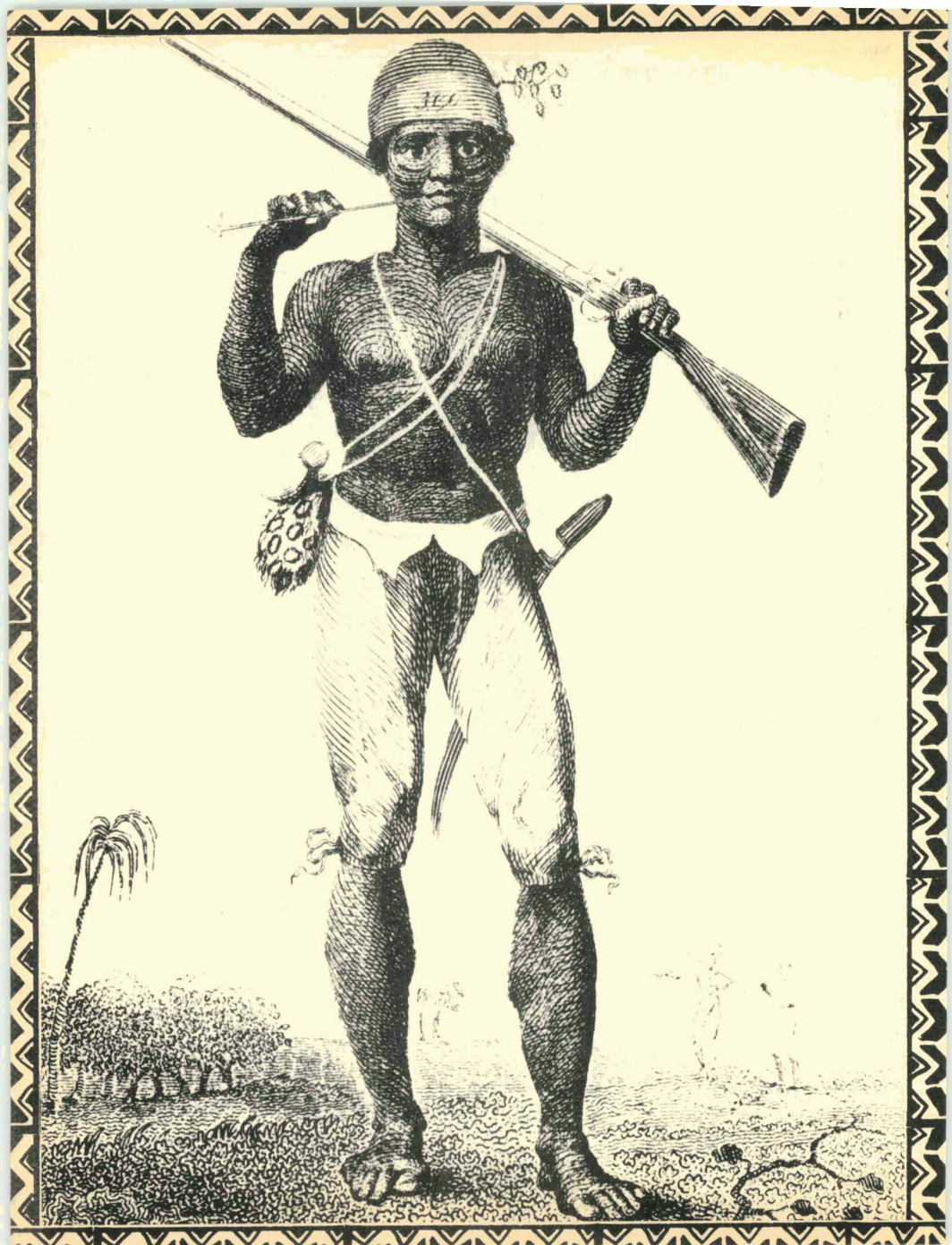
**Roger:** Any comment on that, Jah Spear?

**Spear:** Most people, to be truthful, feel that Garvey don't dead. Possible, I would say, in flesh Garvey's not here.

**Roger:** But in the spirit, he is stronger than ever.

**Spear:** Yes, yes! He is still around.





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