

BUNNY WAILER

INTERVIEW

BY ROGER STEFFENS

The following telephone interview took place between myself in Los Angeles and Bunny Wailer in Kingston, on October 10, 1983. It represents one of the longest conversations the elusive Wailer has had with a reporter since leaving the group ten years ago. The entire transcript comes to 28 pages, and we have edited it to its salient points so that we can run it all in one issue. The overall tone of our conversation was businesslike, parrying at first, then settling into extended raps on many of the major questions fans have had about Bunny and his work. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences I have ever had in reggae, and I am grateful to Bunny for his generosity and patience in taking an hour and a half of his time for us.

ROGER STEFFENS: Bunny, is the news of the Wailers reunion true?

BUNNY WAILER: That's very, very true, man! That started already. We've laid tracks, already. I'm just waiting on Peter now to finish this leg of his tour, and then he's settled, and then he start working on voicing and all of that, putting it together.

ROGER: Who are the singers in the reformed Wailers?

BUNNY: The singers in the Wailers would be Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, Junior Brathwaite, and a possible Vision (Dream), that is with Peter doing some harmonies now.

ROGER: Now, Dream replaced Bob in '66...

BUNNY: Dream—I don't know if you know about it, in 1965 when Bob was in America...

ROGER: ... '66 ...

BUNNY: ... Dream was the other member that joined the Wailers at that time to do songs like "Let Him Go," "Who Feels It Knows It," "What Am I To Do," "Jerk In Time," and a good lot of songs when Bob wasn't in Jamaica at that time, Dream was part of the Wailers.

ROGER: Dream told me last year that Bob really didn't like to sing harmony songs. Is that so?

BUNNY: Well, Bob wasn't really the harmony singer, you know. Bob was the leader, the kind of solo voice, that up front voice. He wasn't the harmony singer, although he had to cope with harmonies as much as he could, but he wasn't really the harmony singer . . . Most singers develop more from backing vocalists, from being part of groups, from being part of harmonies or something like that. And then you have the leaders, who really are the leaders, like David Ruffin or those type, they don't really deal with harmony too tough, they're always up front. So Bob was that kind of singer, he wasn't too much the harmony type. He did it. He had to!

ROGER: Who are the musicians backing the new Wailers?

BUNNY: The musicians? Well, the Wailers are musicians, aren't they?

ROGER: I mean are you going to play with the Radix, or . . .

BUNNY: Yeah, we are going to play and we're gonna sing.

ROGER: The Wailers themselves will play the music?

BUNNY: Yeah, the Wailers themselves. Did

"We didn't want no album to be no *Best of the Wailers* because the best of anyone is when you are finished. And the Wailers were just getting started."

you know that *Catch A Fire* tour bore the Wailers with Peter Tosh playing guitar? . . .

ROGER: And you on percussion . . .

BUNNY: . . . playing all the little things around the place. And Bob at that time was playing

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guitar. Well, right now Vision is a bass man, he's also a guitarist, he's also a drummer. He's a lot of things that man Dream there, now he's developed totally. And Junior Brathwaite is a keyboard specialist. All these years he's been playing keyboards in America—and we are ready! Just like we'd get a couple of more people who are ready to go out there; we wouldn't like get any new people. We'd get some people who are there, and we'd have to get the Wailers going. The real Wailers going!

ROGER: Now what does this mean to the Wailers Band—I mean the Barrett Brothers and Tyrone and the rest?

BUNNY: Well you see the Barrett Brothers, that's another sad story. What happens with the Barrett Brothers is like, I don't know, maybe they think they should pack it up all and sit it out. Because Peter and myself had proposed, just after Bob had passed, that we should get together and bring the Wailers together again including the Barrett Brothers, and all the I Threes, and everyone. But somehow the Barrett Brothers weren't with it. It was like we weren't needed within the group. It's like they didn't want us to be in the group, they didn't want the original Wailers. They think that we had walked away and left the group so we didn't have any rights. That's what they think, but a Wailer was a Wailer, and a Wailer will always be a Wailer.

ROGER: Was it true that Junior had the best voice in the early days of the group?

BUNNY: Junior's voice was the youngest voice, and the youngest voice is more high pitched, more sensitive. I wouldn't say the best voice.

ROGER: "Get Up Stand Up" is the only Wailers song that each of the three of you has recorded separately. Why do you suppose it's that song more than anything else?

"Music . . . has no language, it has no boundaries."

BUNNY: That song, it's like an anthem. It's like a reggae anthem. It's one of those reggae anthems which I think most reggae artists would at some time or the other perform such a song. You know, "Get Up Stand Up" even in a performance—it's how people get the message, and at the same time it's how the artist feels about it. And I feel about "Get Up Stand Up" that it's an anthem, it's really a strong reggae song. It means a lot to me and it means a lot to a lot of people.

ROGER: I wanted to ask you about a song called "Tread Along." And I've only ever seen one copy of it. Did you write "Tread Along"?

BUNNY: Yeah, mon. Why?

ROGER: Well, it's just one of my absolute favorite songs by you, and I realize it's not a particularly philosophical song. But I wonder if you would ever have the urge to re-record that?

BUNNY: Why do you say philosophical?

ROGER: Well, I mean lines like, "You're like a

stick of macaroni in bed," and "I knew you when you were just a bottle on the shelf."

BUNNY: "When I say that people get the moral, based on what they're thinking of, what's "bed" and what's "macaroni?" But if you was to listen to the song, you would hear it mentioning spiritual food. Did you hear that? "So that your macaroni . . ."

ROGER: ". . . will get steady so;" "Go easy on my pony, go easy how you ride . . ."

BUNNY: Macaroni in a sense is relevant to like a needle in a haystack, it's like you alone in this sinful world. So if you get your macaroni spiritually steady, it's better for you, man.

ROGER: So do you think you might re-record that sometime, Bunny?

BUNNY: Well, maybe. If I know that people are going to take to it like you did, I won't.

ROGER: (laughs) I'm sorry. It seemed a carnal song at first and second listenings, but it's a beautiful song. The melody especially. Is it a Coxson record, "Tread Along"?

BUNNY: No, that was my production.

ROGER: Is it a Solomonic release?

BUNNY: No. Solomonic didn't take distance yet. It was just a Bunny Wailer production at the time. It was a time-off production. At that time Bob was in Germany, I think, and we had a cool-out session. It was like something to keep the time away, to keep yourself up.

ROGER: Many critics think that the absolute best period of the original Wailers was with Lee Perry. Would you agree with that?

BUNNY: Na-aaw! No, man. The Wailers really did move around a lot, but we spend some time here, some time there and I wouldn't say that . . . It wasn't any long period, anyhow, that you could say most of the time. Because Wailers got started like in '64, '63 or '64, and Lee Perry didn't come until way up in the early Seventies. And then by '72, as you know, we were with Island. We even had an album with Beverly's. So it was like, the situation with Upsetters was totally a misunderstanding on everyone's behalf. Because what Wailers and Lee Perry had as an understanding in the whole matter of the recording and the distribution of the records, worked out to be different altogether, based on what Lee Perry thought. So that was just like an experience. Because Lee Perry didn't have anything at the time, other than he had the record connection, he could go to the radio station, he could get the record played based on his contacts within that field. We were producers, we weren't like in the business, like in the marketplaces and that; so the whole understanding was that we would go to work and produce the record, and Lee Perry would be the one to sell the record. And it turned out to be different. Turned out that it did seem to Lee Perry that it was like we were working for Lee Perry. And that made the whole thing collapse. 'Cause Wailers are very proud people, and when we come to an understanding we don't really care for anyone who try to break it. 'Cause we respect an understanding. If you don't, then we don't. So that was it. So that was just an experience. Well, good work was done there, and you know the work has got to be, because when you don't get anything else, satisfaction is at least what keeps you going.

ROGER: What really went on with the Best of

the Wailers album that you told Leslie Kong not to bring out? Did you really tell him if he brought it out, he would die?

BUNNY: Well, the truth about that was, we were discussing business matters with Leslie Kong pertaining to the making of this album. We discussed the tracks, the title of the tracks, what the tracks was really all about. We even sang the tracks in his office. And we talked about the type of arrangements and all of that and what the title of the album would be, and the possibilities. Well, the argument came up about some Best of the Wailers. We said no, we didn't want no album to be no Best of the Wailers because the best of anyone is when you are finished. And the Wailers were just getting started. And we showed him that if he had done that, then it would mean either that we would be finished, or it would be his last album so he would be calling it Best of the Wailers, based on he wouldn't be looking for another. And any company that has the Wailers on their first album would be looking for another. So he was going to call the first album The Best of the Wailers. Which we knew, we weren't finished, then someone would have to be finished. Doesn't it seem that way? So he was the one who was finished, because he did go ahead and call the album Best of the Wailers and the best of the Wailers were yet to come. He had reached a conclusion that that was the best, so he had seen the best of the Wailers. So he would no more be seeing what Wailers would have to do in the future. That is what the argument was all about. And you know, words take unto themselves flesh. And if something is pointed out to you—if a child comes up to you and says something that is positive and is logical, you got to look into it. If you judge it, then you got to pay the cost—you know, it's got to float, it's got to happen. So Beverly's killed himself in saying that it was the "Best of the Wailers" because for him, he had seen the best of the Wailers. So that was him, that was the closing of him, and the Wailers as you know are still here with us.

ROGER: How soon after the release of the album did he die?

BUNNY: Not even a week.

ROGER: Whoa! And he just dropped dead, right?

BUNNY: Just dropped dead. I went to Dynamic Sounds to do some—because at the time we were doing our own recordings too. We didn't find any contract that we were obligated totally to anyone, so we were still doing our Wail 'n' Souls (label) recordings. So we were down at Dynamic Sound looking (for) some pressing when someone told us that Beverly's just went home feeling sick. He was in the studio recording, and he felt bad, went home. And there's a j call from home saying that he just died.

ROGER: You said you never wanted to be a businessman, but here you are running an international record company, managing a large farm . . .

BUNNY: Oh! I never wanted to, but I had to!

ROGER: Is that why you started Solomonic?

BUNNY: Yeah, you see, the experience of the musicians in Jamaica, and the singers, is really a messed up thing, based on the

ignorance of them all. Even the producers. And it began with the producers too, because we only approached the music on the sense of loving music, and wanted to put some music on record, and wanted to hear what we could do. You know that type of thing. Musicians wanted to know if they could be singers, and the producers wanted to know that they produce the record. But the whole aspect of the business, and what goes with the business, was ignorant here in Jamaica. We were ignorant of that, like the rights that go with a song, and with the whole production and distribution of a song. That really messed up things, because then the producer would get blamed, and frustrations would be on the singer, and the musician would be playing under pressure and all of that. So that whole experience was like ignorance.

ROGER: You have just released your first American collection in three years. (*Roots Radics Rockers Reggae*). I would like to ask you about a couple of those tracks, and why you decided to release an album that had basically been in circulation for three years, rather than an all-new collection?

BUNNY: When you say "in circulation," ah . . .

ROGER: I mean *In I Father's House* had been available as an import in America.

BUNNY: *In I Father's House* was exported from Jamaica, it wasn't released in America by any American company, which means it only reach the ethnic people, the people who are like the reggae-conscious people, who would be looking out for the latest reggae, or the latest Bunny Wailer. But the American market itself, the big market place, this record is totally new. And seeing that we've added tracks, and we've changed even the whole concept of the jacket and all of that, and the title of the album, although it basically has the track titles there on the album. But we have fashioned it—it's new, you know, it's like it's new. It's new to who haven't heard it yet, which I think is the majority of the buying public in America.

ROGER: And the pressing is very good too. It's nice to hear the songs so clean. I want to ask you about the title track, "Roots Radics Rockers Reggae." Who are the roots you're speaking about in that song?

BUNNY: The roots are the foundation of everything. Everything has a foundation and that is supposed to be the root. And if the foundation is removed, then the whole thing topples over.

ROGER: And who are the radics?

BUNNY: The radics are the people who keep the whole explorative part of creation going. Those people who are like gypsies. They are like normal, natural pioneers for a relationship that is radical, that is natural. That is not like he's unsophisticated, and it's all separated from the part that is the reality, that is the most humble part. Well, a radical is the person who fits in between that.

ROGER: And then, who are the rockers?

BUNNY: The rockers are, you know, the music it keeps rockin', all those music that rocks you. It's rockin', and Jamaica's music, as you know, it's reggae and the rockers, which comes from the roots by the radics, you know.

ROGER: On some of your recent work (*Hook*

Line and Sinker) you seem to have gone into a totally different, non-reggae mode. And for someone who once said, "Get up you black Yankee, don't be no follow fashion monkey," it seems a little odd to some observers that you would be approaching the black audience through funk rather than reggae. Are you going to be releasing more of the kind of funk and rap music?

BUNNY: Well, as time go on, yes, why not? Don't you see that where the American people are like taking to reggae now, the American singers are like singing more of reggae. Aren't you seeing that?

ROGER: Yes.

BUNNY: Well, it's the interchange of music, that's music. It's like if they appreciate reggae in the sense that they would go ahead and start going into it, then I think the reggae artist that could cross over and present something showing the Americans that at least we have been listening to your stuff, and we have developed. You have reached us. It's good.

"Rasta is not a thing you become. Rasta becomes you."

Because we are really trying hard to reach the Americans, we think we are now reaching them somewhat. So that record, it's good. In any way, it's good. I don't like the negative feeling, like "going from to." No. It's music, man, music that has no language, it has no boundaries. It's music. And music in a sense that it's unselfish, if you are just playing your own music, you're going to get bored by your own music sometimes. If you're a fisherman and you keep eating fish because you're

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Kim Gottlieb-Walker © 1984

Bunny Wailer: Getting the Wailers back together.

"My specific message is Unity. That's my message. One big, small, humble word: Unity."

BUNNY WAILER ALBUM DISCOGRAPHY

(Listed Alphabetically)

Blackheart Man (Island/Mango)	1976
Dubdisco Vol. 1 (Solomonic)	1978
Dubdisco Vol. 2 (Solomonic)	1980
Hook Line & Sinker (Solomonic)	1982
In I Father's House (Solomonic)	1980
Protest (Island/Mango)	1977
Rock'n'Groove (Solomonic)	1981
Roots Radics Rock Reggae (Schanachie)	1983
Sings The Wailers (Island/Mango, Solomonic)	1980
Struggle (Solomonic)	1979
Tribute (Solomonic)	1981



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catching fish, then you're going to get tired of eating fish, you're going to want a little of this sometime, or a little vegetable sometime. So that's it, man. But you gotta keep fishing, because that's your food basket, isn't it?

ROGER: There has been some confusion about your early life. In the press release for your new album it says you actually lived at Nine Mile with Bob when you were both young children. Is that true?

BUNNY: Well, you know, that's part of the culture. We all grow up together, we all have time together. Some people know each other along the way, some people know each other from the start. With Bob, I went to live in St. Ann, and Bob like any other youth that was living in St. Ann was in the neighborhood that I was. We all went to the same school, and that

was when I started to know Bob, when I went to St. Ann's to live. That was in the early times, when I was about nine. So that was from when I knew Bob. But in those times, the Wailers weren't talking about the Wailers, that's what I'm telling you about, see? We have fall into plan, we didn't plan anything. Because I knew Bob from I was nine, but I wasn't a Wailers until I was 18 or 19, or thereabouts, 16, 17. So it's like the whole thing was like we fall into plan, it was planned by the Great Planner, the Most High.

ROGER: You said something to Carl Gayle years ago. You said, "I'm always bubbling with the love of Jah Rastafari." In 1966, Bunny, did you see His Imperial Majesty when he came to Jamaica?

BUNNY: Yes.

ROGER: At the airport?

BUNNY: All over the place.

ROGER: You followed him around?

BUNNY: Well, he seems to be everywhere.

ROGER: Indeed. Were you a Rasta before He came?

BUNNY: To Jamaica you're talking about? Well, you see, it's a long story. Rasta is a long story, man. Rasta is not a thing you become. Rasta becomes you. You don't become Rasta. You don't join it. There's nothing to really get involved. You're caught up in Rastafari. It's the Power of Creation. The Power of HIM created all things. His name is Rasta-Far-I, and blessed are they who come in His name: Rastafari. So the people would call us Rastafarians. A Rastaman is a created soul. In other words, we are all Rastas, because we are all created by HIM. And if he dwells in all, then in all, He is pure. He is first. I wonder if you understand what I am saying?

ROGER: Yes I do. What I am driving at, I think, is—was there a specific point at which you sighted the fullness of Rasta, or was it something that came gradually and just built more and more?

BUNNY: That's what I'm saying. I was caught up. It was a Revelation. It was revealed. There's a consciousness that was there but it's like you had a veil over your eyes, and someone pulled that veil. And then you start looking at the reality of things, and you start to get conscious and aware, and have the full knowledge of what is, in that whole thing. In other words, it's like it was in you, until it came out of you.

ROGER: Do you believe a person must have locks to be a true Rasta?

BUNNY: It's a confusion you see. I know what you're getting at, I know what's happening to you. I understand what's happening to you. It's just like the parsons. Every parson is a parson, or every preacher is a preacher, or every priest is a priest. But not every priest practices what he preaches. You understand that?

ROGER: Yes.

BUNNY: Well, it's like in dreadlocks. You have people who dreadlock, and you have people who is Rasta, right? You have the dreadlock Rastaman. You have the Rastaman who isn't dreadlock. And you have the dreadlock who isn't Rasta. It's all about a man's integrity. A man practices what he preaches: that's a Rastaman integrity. A man that holds up his integrity, and lives to the principles, the laws of the Creator Himself. And tries hard to live it, to be with it.

ROGER: Would you say then that Rasta means a righteous person . . .

BUNNY: Yeah, that's what I'm saying. I say everyone is Rasta, in a sense, because the Creator in all is pure. And the name of the Creator is Rasta-Far-I. So because Rasta-Far-I lives in all, we are automatically All Rasta! We are a microcosm of the macrocosm. We are total. We are all. We are the little piece of the whole, but we are still the whole.

ROGER: My final question is specifically geared toward our African listeners . . . What specific message does Bunny Wailer have for the people of Africa?

BUNNY: My specific message is Unity. That's my message. One big, small, humble word: Unity. ★