

THE PASSING OF PETER TOSH

**Tribute to
the Mystic Man
and His Music**

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I AM THAT I AM: In the Path of the Stepping Razor

By Timothy White

By 1976, according to the man himself, he had died and been reborn for the second time, stronger and fitter for whatever the Fates intended.

"As a you! I was reborn as a Wailer," he assured, showing the sly crescent smile that was a trademark. "Now, today in this September of 1976, I am a new mon again—as I have jus' recently come to realize! Winston Hubert McIntosh is *not* me real name, but is a blood-claait slavery name! Me real name is Wolde Semayat. Dat's my African-Ethiopian name!"

Peter Tosh took a stubby pencil from the breast pocket of his crisp, new fatigue jacket and brusquely requested a piece of paper on which to write. He was handed a crisp white *Crawdaddy* envelope (from the magazine of which I was then managing editor) that had been serving as a book marker for Carey Robinson's *The Fighting Maroons of Jamaica*.

"Let me make it certain for you, then," he ruled, using the flat surface of the *Fighting Maroons* (which he balanced on the large, slender palm of one hand) while penciling out his revised appellation. He was giving back the inscribed stationery when my book's title caught his eye.

"So you wan' to learn about dem brave Jamaican boys dat never give up the fockin' fight?!" he roared with gusto. "Well, *dis* is where me first learn to fight—and fight to learn," he assured, dashing off, just below his new name, an additional notation: *Savanna La Mar*. "Where I attended Savanna-La-Mar Elementary School!"

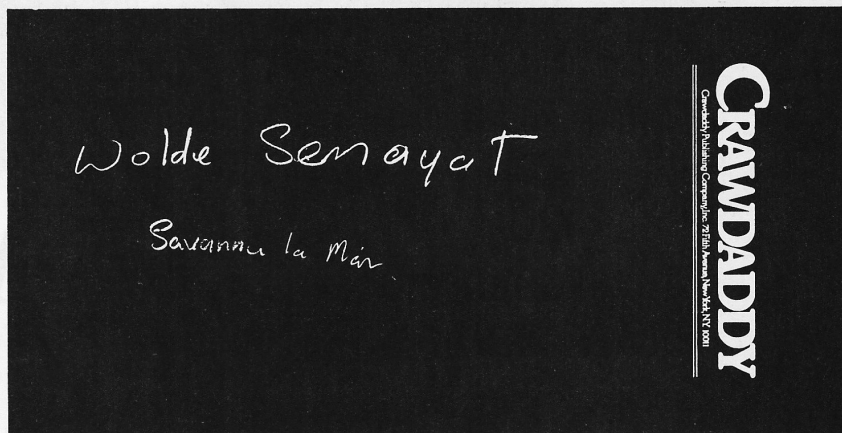
Why one would retain so quaint a keep-stake as that autographed envelope for all these years is difficult to explain to anyone who never encountered Peter Tosh in the flesh. He was as proud, pompous, stubborn, suspicious, argumentative and hasty-tempered a figure as could be imagined, yet when he deigned to focus his energy for even a moment's genuine communication, there was an earnest charm in such gestures that seemed to freeze time. To gain the undivided attention of a man so readily distracted by life's slings and arrows seemed special indeed.

It was the same concentrated desire to confide, apprise and report that led Peter Tosh to reach the artistic high points in his post-Wailers recording career: *Legalize It* (1976), *Equal Rights* (1977) and *Mama Af-*

rica (1983). On the first two lps, Peter was reggae's answer to Bukka White, cursing the West Kingston equivalent of the Parchman Farm with a snarling intelligence. Yet for all his fabled sulfur and balefire, his songs on the former album were less deep-blues diatribes than radiant street carols. And while fans remember the latter record for such splenetic fare as "Stepping Razor," it was the trancelike ballad "I Am That I Am" that likely lent the effort its greatest magnetism. Peter was a deft assimilator, so in the resonant contours of "Ketchy Shuby" or "Brand New Second Hand," and in the rig-

video and a sizeable airplay-oriented promotion campaign. However, time has shown that, from the title track to his homage to Chuck Berry, a redisciplined Tosh had finally, truly, enlivened and enriched his reggae palette.

Sadly, it was at this juncture that he became embroiled in protracted legal wrangles that sapped his creative drive. *No Nuclear War*, the album long in the can during these difficulties, demonstrates plainly how determined Peter was to keep both his sound—and reggae's focus—fixed on a socially responsible worldview. And so, as



orous angularity of "Get Up, Stand Up" and "Apartheid," one could hear lucid echoes of the ingenious "turnings" (variations) of centuries-old Jamaican digging songs, as well as intriguing strains of contemporary Afropop and Afro-r&b forms.

When Peter gained the uptown top-ranking status in 1978 of his signing to Rolling Stones Records, his musical goals temporarily surrendered a large measure of their keenness. Intent on an undefined brand of crossover stardom, he spent the greater part of several albums diluting or diminishing promising material with egregious overproduction and self-conscious pop gimmickry. However, the periodic JA takes and mixes of his output during this juncture almost invariably retained the unalloyed verve on which he had built his reputation.

Some would later criticize *Mama Africa*, Tosh's EMI-America comeback album, for its "commercial" revamping of "Johnny B. Goode," which was released with a witty

with Bob Marley, we've forfeited not only a committed craftsman but a discerning strategist.

There is no greater dignity than in the truth, a maxim Tosh would surely have embraced, so it's best in a eulogy to see the man accurately. Tosh never ran from a fight, but he also bypassed few opportunities to pick one. His brazen courage in 1978 in openly challenging the broken promises (ganja decriminalization, et al. of Michael Manley and Edward Seaga at the April 22, 1978, One Love Peace Concert at Kingston's National Stadium—"Me don' wan' peace, me want equality! I am not a politician! I jus' suffah de consequences"—was an act that will live on in Jamaica history as a veracious volley from the collective soul of the sufferer.

Unfortunately, Peter was less eloquent or selfless in his attacks on departed colleague Bob Marley's legacy. He repeatedly either reviled or entirely dismissed his late



Peter Tosh outside the Roxy Theatre in Hollywood, where he performed in 1983.

PHOTO BY CHUCK KRALL

cohort's abilities in several jealous public cants that served only to becloud Peter's copious contributions to the Wailers and to reggae.

Peter Tosh's rages stemmed, in significant measure, from hurts and rejections inflicted in his childhood. He was born in October 1944 in Church Lincoln, Westmoreland, an only child. He and his mother, the former Alvera Coke, were soon afterward abandoned by his father, James McIntosh. Peter's mother then turned the baby over to an aunt to raise because she was unwilling to accept the responsibility. He was taken as a tot to the coastal town of Savanna-La-Mar, and then to the Denham Town section of Kingston in 1956. After his aunt died, Peter moved in with an uncle on West Road in Trench Town. He was a sensitive, cocky youth, alert to the nearness of any indignity in a harrowing ghetto drama that dispensed little else. That Tosh was able to accomplish so very much, from his days at Savanna-La-Mar Elementary onward, is an inspiring fact that will loom long after his attendant human failings have been forgiven and forgotten.

The last time I saw Peter face-to-face was in Boston during the midsummer leg of a 1983 tour. I was invited backstage follow-

ROBERTO: What's the difference between a mystic man and a Rastaman?

PETER: Well, a mystic man is a Rastaman.

Because to be mystic is to be divine, is to live up to certain divine principles. And to be mystic is to be in communication with the Almighty every time, to have a special live, private number every time.

ing a sold-out, sweltering show held in an un-air-conditioned former armory near Boston Common. Tosh had been in peak, nononsense form all evening, singing and signifying with a passion that cut through the humidity with ferocious facility. The crammed crowd demanded and got three encores and still seemed deliriously unsated.

"One incredible show," I offered by way of greeting in his dreary garret dressing room, clasping his extended hand as he

leaned, sodden and spent, against field marshal Charles Comer's solid shoulder. All Peter could do was beam and nod as he gradually dropped backward onto a waiting couch, a picture of beatific exhaustion.

If my final specific image of Peter Tosh is from that too-fleeting moment of personal post-concert fulfillment, my favorite recollections reside in the autumn 1976 afternoon we spent doing the following informal interview in producer-promoter-manager

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Tommy Cowan's Kingston yard.

It was my second time meeting Tosh, and I would go on to interview him on numerous subsequent occasions. (Twice in 1977 he simply stopped by the *Crawdaddy* offices on the corner of 13th Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan to hang out and discuss *Equal Rights* and his then-upcoming *Bush Doctor*.)

But this Kingston encounter was our first extended chat. He had completed *Legalize It*, was well into assembling the material for *Equal Rights*, and on that sunny Jamaica day foresaw a bright future beyond the boundaries of his Wailers era.

Tosh's chilling song "The Mark of the Beast" figured prominently in this discussion. It's a sort of grievous ghetto vesper about premonition, about ambush, about the coming of 666 as foretold in Revelations, about the Last Days. While Tosh released "The Mark of the Beast" on a Jamaican single, it never did find its way onto any of his solo lps. Perhaps there's a symbolic irony in its absence.

This much is certain: While Peter Tosh's opportunities to learn, reason and create in this life are done, our own chances to better understand and appreciate the music and the message of the man have scarcely begun.

Timothy: The first things often heard from former Wailers are criticisms of your former producers. Were all of them a drag?

Peter: (Murmuring) Producers, all of dem pirates and thieves.

Q: Lee Perry too?

A: (Grinning, loudly) Alla dem! They just take a song and decorate it a little bit and then steal the money. To really settle with them, the best way is to pick up a gun and shoot them—but we are not here for those things. We're not here to fight flesh and blood or do something bad, but to fight spiritual weaknesses in high and low places.

Q: Is there any reason why reggae musicians have never banded together to fight against crooked producers?

A: Accordin' to the thinking of colonialists and exploiters, people can't come together when them hungry, cause then ev'ry mon must feel for himself first, fighting for his right to get fat too. I prefer to stay hungry and still sing one song fe myself on me own Intelligent Diplomat label. Fourteen years I been singing, singing with the group called the Wailers. All I hear was, "Wailers, Wailers, Wailers," ev'ry fockin' place I went, all over de island; and how fantastic we were in England and in America. And now I don't have a bloodclaat to show for it.

The Wailers don't have one fockin' thing. I don't know if you know dat but it's true. And all I have is humiliation and aggravation. That's why I write the kind of songs I like, because who feels it, knows it. (Cautious laughter) All I have left is a name—the

ROBERTO: What's your definition of reggae music?

PETER: It's a king of kings music played by the kings because we are the kings who were inspired to play this music. It's a music for the poor. It's an educational musical entertainment where people can learn and dance at the same time. It's the only music that has that potential. It's the music of the Rastaman's inspiration, and its origination is Africa and in this time Jamaica.

Wailers—and I can't cook dat in a pot to eat!

Q: What can you do to turn the situation around?

A: It's a direct, psychological way. You have to know how to penetrate the people, because most people love music. You have to get into dem, to make them *rock* to the music, and in the meantime push them with words to where they say, "Let me listen to what I been rockin' to." So he starts really listening and he finds the words serious, and them get in touch so much it becomes a part a dem. So, have to get to the people through the music.

Q: But corrupt producers and other human obstacles can get in the way. I know the police have frequently arrested you too.

A: I was not only arrested! I was *to-tal-ly bru-tal-ized!* I was taken to Kingston Public Hospital on North Street under police guard two or three years or so ago for smoking herb. And I was totally brutalized!

I can't afford to go through that humiliation again! Everybody say (Sarcastically) "Ja-ma-ica gettin' better and reggae is hot," but I say a bloodbath is coming. Deh put Marcus Garvey in prison once, but dem can't do dat this time! We shall hit dem wit' death, disease, destruction and all forms of disaster!

Q: How did it happen? What provoked them?

A: Dem fockin' bloodclots! Craven dogs! Well, I was at me 'ouse on Solitaire Road, I was there, smokin' a spliff while a dance was 'appening outside, and I was writing, making a tune called "The Mark of the Beast." There was a party outside in the same yard. I was singing the words when in comes the police—the Beast—to manifest itself! See, the words took on a phy-si-cal self!

So deh jus' used that party as an alibi to enter my 'ouse, and deh beat me up. I got seven stitches 'ere (Pointing to his forehead), and me get my ribs dis-lo-ca-ted. And deh mash up my abdomen with de butt of a rifle. I was taken to de hospital hand-

cuffed as a fockin' criminal. And I had to lie down on the floor and beg a nurse to come attend to me! Just for smoking herb. That's why I-man have to stand up predominantly and say, "Legalize it!"

I'm not a criminal! And the world know dat! I sing music to my people, yet I suffer many police brutalities and harassments. I don't do nothing, subversion to no government. The only thing I do is smoke 'erb, and I will smoke 'erb in Buckingham Palace or the White House!

Q: Tell me about your early days in Kingston, how the young Wailers met Joe Higgs.

A: Joe Higgs was a brother amongst the Wailers for years. He was encouragement, and he inspired us and kept us together. Also I looked up at Horace Andy, and admired Delroy Wilson and Ken Boothe, but dem rather sing commercially about "I love you darlin' " and alla dat.

Now me like Max Romeo, because him sing about reality. Me like to sing about reality and life and not only the love of your girl, but the love of your brother too.

Q: On your Intel-Diplo single, "Burial," you sang about one of your brethren being arrested—Bunny.

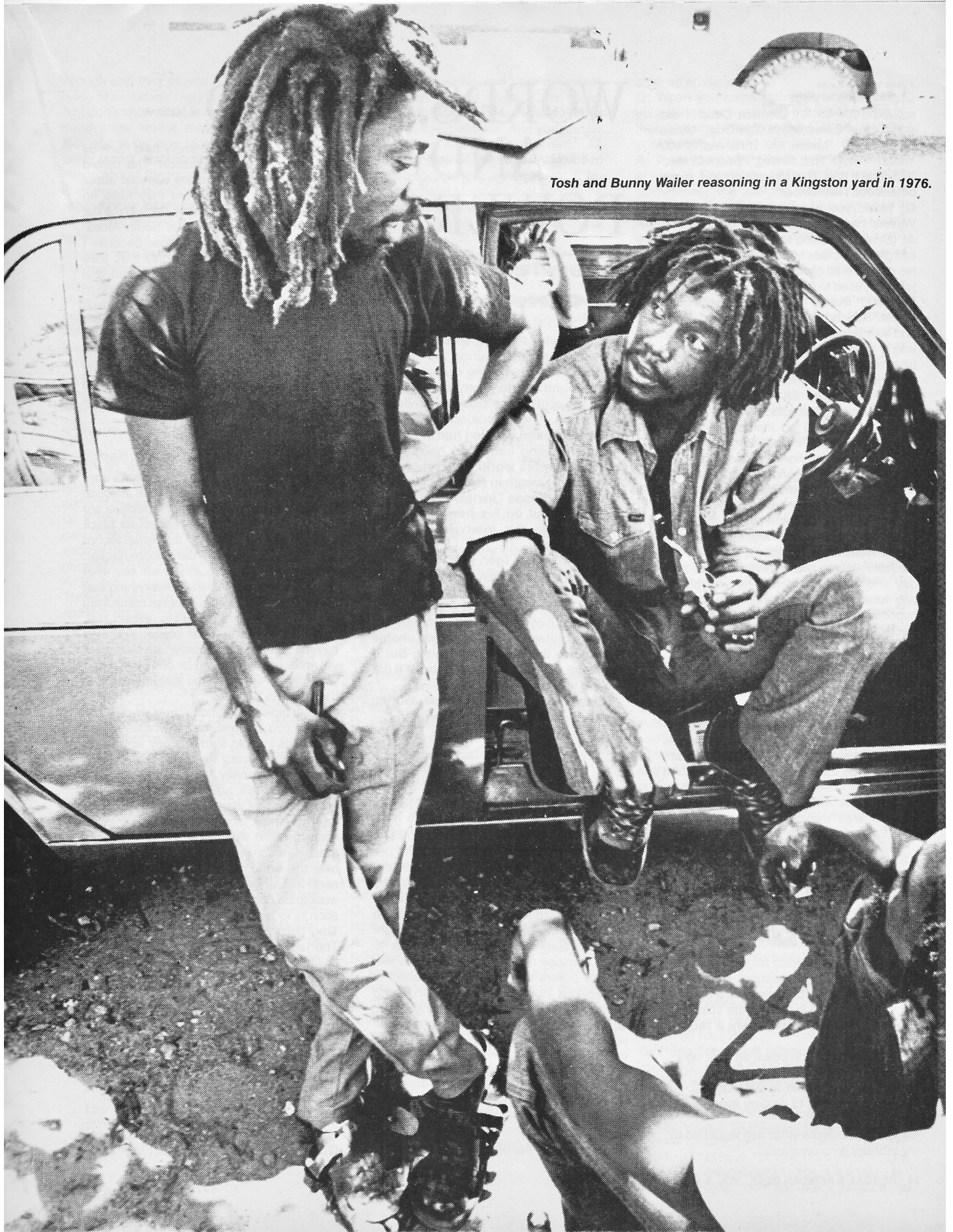
A: I wrote "Burial" just before Bunny went to prison in about 1967. He was arrested for 'erb, but he was framed.

It's happenin' daily! Guys who kill the righteous end up gettin' killed and deh wan' me to come to them funeral. But we say no: "Now we know the truth, so might as well *you* be dead!"

There are many things you see goin' on, but you don't really express it. You just diplomatically go around it. Bunny had his freedom taken away for a year for using something that was created for the use of mon! So you can see how much legal things are said to be illegal.

Q: Tell me more about a happier subject: your discovery of music.

A: I got myself an old guitar when I was a youth in the country—it was Wailers' first guitar, ya know. The first tune I ever recorded was "I'm the Toughest." I did that



Tosh and Bunny Wailer reasoning in a Kingston yard in 1976.

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around 1964-65 for Clement Dodd. I did some other tunes like "Maga Dog," "Arise Black Man," "Leave My Business," "400 Years," "Stop That Train," "Soon Come," "Go Tell It On The Mountain" and many other I don't remember.

Q: Would you mind detailing a bit of the Wailers' background?

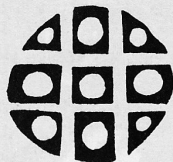
A: (Smiling, leaning back against a Rasta companion's black Morris Minor car, lighting his pipe) We all group up in Trench Town as youths. I used to live up on West Road, and Bob and Bunny live down on Second Street. Second Street was off West Road and so it was just a coupla blocks down the way. I was way down in my teens at the time, maybe 17. (Exhaling smoke, sighing) What is routine is routine, what is gone is gone. It was about '62 that we started, and Wailing Wailers was about '64-'65.

I always played an instrument—see, I was *the* beginning. I *teach* Bob to play guitar. Yeah mon! Before I played guitar, I played piano and organ. I played piano as a youth, because my mother—her name is Alvera—said I'm gonna learn that.

Me just one time see a mon in the country play guitar and say, "My, that mon play geetar nice." It just attract me so much that me just sat there taking it in for about a half-day and when him done—he was playin' one tune for the whole half-day—he had hypnotized me so much that my eyes extracted everything he had done with his fingers. I picked up the guitar and played the tune he had just played with him showin' me a t'ing. And when he ask me who taught me I tell him it was him! (Laughter)

Q: Did your mother play an instrument?

A: My mother and father didn't know anything 'bout instruments. My father, James McIntosh, is a bad boy, a *rascal*. That's what him do for a livin'. He jus' go around and have a million and one children! Right now me have many brothers that me don't know. I was the only child me mother have....



He draws deeply from his pipe, exhales, then slips into the passenger side of the Morris Minor. In the brief moment before the car pulls away, he leans out the open window and recites, very pensively, a verse of the song:

"I see the Mark of the Beast on their ugly faces

I see dem congregatin' in evil places...

Deh made pledges to destroy even their mother

So you can imagine what deh would do to my brother." ★