



# Bob Marley

MUSIC MAN, MAN WITH A MISSION

BY MICHAEL A. STUSSER

***If you've ever listened to Bob Marley's songs, you know his story better than you might think. "Redemption Song," "Exodus," "Get Up, Stand Up"—they're songs of freedom, the central force behind everything in Marley's life.***

***"We come from Trench Town, Trench Town... We free the people with music, sweet music."***

—from "Trench Town"

Born on February 6, 1945, Robert Nesta Marley grew up in Jamaica's West Kingston ghetto, often passed between a variety of caretakers and family friends. His father was a white man long estranged from the family, and his mother was a black Jamaican woman who'd picked up and left for America when Bob was just a youngster. Effectively abandoned, Marley spent most of his time in Trench Town, the worst of Jamaican slums, where he got to see firsthand the world of crime, shanty towns, and

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impoverished gangs. Even the name of his band, The Wailers, was inspired by hardship. “We started out cryin’...” Marley once said.

But oppression and poverty were only two cornerstones in Marley’s life and music. The other foundation was his Rastafarian faith—a way of life that included studying the Old Testament, smoking copious quantities of ganja (in a sacred communion with Jah, or God), growing one’s hair out into dreadlocks (tresses are seen as a part of the spirit), and worshipping the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I. Most Rastas consider His Imperial Majesty Selassie, who died in 1975, to be the Messiah of the African race—a representative divine connection with the holy land. (For those needing a family tree to understand the Rasta picture, Selassie was believed to be the direct descendent of Sheba and Solomon.)

Hokey as it sounds, playing music and smoking marijuana were actually a religion to Marley. He believed both were ways of communicating with Jah—a way to be spiritual and offer your musical gift to a higher place. Marley wanted people who listened to his music to understand his own beliefs, hoping it would bring salvation through one love for all mankind.

*“Open your eyes and look within / Are you satisfied with the life you’re living?”*

—from “Exodus”

The “one love” theory is great on paper (and in song), unfortunately, Jamaican politics has been filled with violence

since the country’s independence from Britain in 1962. When general elections were held in February 1967, the two major political parties—the People’s National Party (PNP) and the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP)—were ruthless in their tactics. Opposition members were intimidated, threatened, and even murdered. A political culture had been born, and the craziness never stopped.

The Rastas called it “politricks.” They’d seen their share of the corruption, broken promises, and violence that had come with reform and elections. And Marley was right there with them. He distrusted the process and avoided out-and-out campaigning.

Fortunately, some progressive changes began being made after the PNP won a majority in the 1972 election. The party had campaigned on a job growth platform, and it was the better option for any Jamaican who didn’t own a swank tourist hotel or a coffee plantation. Further, its elected prime minister, Michael Manley, was a left-winger who bore the slogan “politics of participation.” Once in office, Manley implemented social reforms welcomed by the masses, which included reducing government censorship and eliminating the crackdown on civil liberties. Marley may not have been a registered member of the PNP, but with its emphasis on reducing illiteracy, he was clearly on its side. Unfortunately, the party’s economic plan never gained traction—in part because businesses and conservatives dug in their heels and in part because of strikes, shortages, and a lack of cash to fund its social agenda.

Despite his nonpartisan nature, Marley wound up in the political

crossfire—mainly because, by the mid-1970s, he’d become a national celebrity. Marley (and his Wailers) had been recording songs since 1961 with some success, but it took more than a decade for their ska-based style to catch fire with a broader audience. Helped along by legendary producer Lee “Scratch” Perry, the band developed a more mainstream, reggae-rock sound. As a result, Bob Marley and the Wailers gained worldwide popularity, finally hitting it big with their 1973 album *Catch a Fire* and Marley’s song “I Shot the Sheriff” (recorded the following year by Eric Clapton).

Marley’s status as a leader and prophet in Jamaica also bloomed, not only with the kids in Trench Town, but also with the population at large. In other words: If you had Bob on your side, you might very well win an election. So, when campaigning time for the 1976 election came around, Marley got pulled into a political fight he wanted no part of. Scheduled to perform at the nonpartisan Smile Jamaica Concert (more for party animals than party faithful), Prime Minister Manley used the government’s sponsorship of the event to his advantage, making it look as if the PNP was orchestrating the concert, and announcing there’d be an election shortly after the big show. The conservative opposition candidate, Edward Seaga of the JLP, had a few choice words to say about Manley’s deceptive tactics. Death threats flew, and Marley got caught in the middle.

On December 3, just two days before the Smile Jamaica Concert, a group of thugs ambushed Marley and his bandmates at his compound on Hope Road in Kingston. (Ironically, Marley had designed his Hope Road home to be a safe haven for youth to escape the shootings and crime on the streets.) Marley’s wife, Rita, was shot in the head, Bob was nailed in the arm and chest, and Marley’s manager was hit several times—but they all somehow survived. The shooters were never caught, though it’s assumed the violence was a political attempt on his life from the JLP camp to stop Marley and Manley from going ahead with their Smile Jamaica concert.



Amazingly, Marley was undeterred, and he played the concert two nights later in front of 80,000 strong. Rita sang with bandages on her head, and although Marley couldn't play guitar due to his injuries, he blew away the crowd with a 90-minute set. It began, aptly, with his song "War," and continued with him exiting the stage doing a ritualistic hunter dance and pantomiming a gunslinger's quick draw. After the show, Marley and his wife left Jamaica, and he spent the next 14 months in England crafting his famed album *Exodus*. But back in Jamaica, the PNP won the election, and the violence got worse.

**"If you listen carefully now you will hear ... Things are not the way they used to be, Don't tell no lie; One and all got to face reality now."**

—from "Natural Mystic"

Whereas most folks might have avoided politics after being shot, Marley did just the opposite. In an attempt to promote a cease-fire between Jamaica's political parties—not to mention the gangs on the street and the Rastafari factions—Marley returned to his native land in 1978 to headline the "One Love" Peace Concert. The show was performed at the National Stadium in Kingston before tens of thousands of proud Jamaicans. Among them were both Michael Manley and rival Edward Seaga. On stage during the event, Marley grabbed their hands, clasped them with his own, and held them high in a show of solidarity and hope for a new era of peace in Jamaica.

Sadly, peace did not prevail. During the bitter elections of 1980, more than 700 people were killed in the streets. And in the following years, several influential members of the Jamaican music community were murdered, including close Marley friend Claudie Massop in 1979, peace-maker Aston "Bucky Marshall" Thompson in 1980, and both Rasta

## IN HIS OWN WORDS

### ON HAVING A WHITE FATHER AND BLACK MOTHER:

"I don't have prejudice against myself. My father was a white and my mother was black. Them call me half-caste or whatever. Me don't dip on nobody's side. Me don't dip on the black man's side nor the white man's side. Me dip on God's side, the one who create me and cause me to come from black and white."

### ON HOW HE BEGAN SINGING:

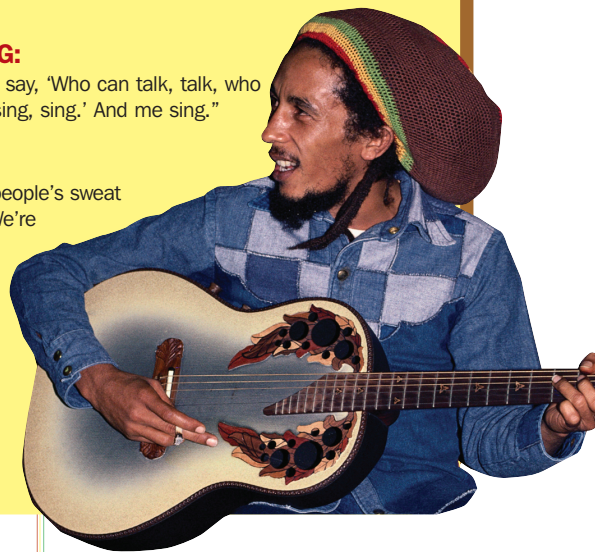
"During school break, de teacher she say, 'Who can talk, talk, who can make anything, make, who can sing, sing.' And me sing."

### ON POLITICAL LYRICS:

"De government is tramplin' over de people's sweat and tears. Comin' down hard, hard. We're oppressed, so we sing oppressed songs and sometime people find themselves guilty. And dey can't stand de terrible weight of it."

### ON THE POWER OF MUSIC:

"One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain."  
(from "Trench Town Rock")



leader Peter Tosh and Wailer drummer Carlton Barrett in 1987.

**"Emancipate yourself from mental slavery; None but ourselves can free our minds."**

—from "Redemption Song"

Asked if he was a political figure, Marley always denied it. "We're not talkin' bout burnin' and lootin' for material goods," he told *The New York Times Magazine* in 1977. "We want to burn capitalistic illusions. Me no deal with politics. Me sing and deal with detrot' (downtrodden) de best I can. Me sing de song and hope de people catch de tune and mark de words. People have plenty misunderstanding, mon. No ting is important dat much. Love life and live it. Dat's all."

Look at his accolades, though, and they suggest otherwise. In 1978, the Senegalese Delegation to the United Nations gave Marley the Third World Peace Medal for helping to inspire Zimbabwe to independence. (The line "One love, one heart, let's get

together and feel all right" inspired freedom fighters during Zimbabwe's struggle with Britain). And in 1981, the Jamaican government awarded their native son the Order of Merit for his international recognition in the arts. Sadly, Marley died only one month after this honor, on May 11, 1981. In 1977, he'd discovered a wound on his right big toe that he thought was a soccer injury but was later diagnosed as a malignant melanoma. Despite doctors warnings, Marley refused amputation saying, "Rasta no abide amputation. I don't allow a man to be dismantled." The cancer spread through his body and took his life when he was just 36 years old.

Bob, of course, lives on, not only in the minds and spirits of all he inspired, but on their iPods and CD players, too. His retrospective collection, *Legend*, is the bestselling reggae album of all time, with sales of more than 15 million. A legend indeed, Marley's music always carried a message. And even though his music often dealt with hardships and revolution, it always did so in a positive way that guided the world to a better place. 🙌