

HIS FACE APPEARS ON T-SHIRTS AND BANNERS

MARLEY



LONDON, ENGLAND



SANTA BARBARA, CA

Story and photos by Roger Steffens

There's a fire burning in Victoria Park in Sydney, Australia. It's been burning there for five years. And it is a sacred flame.

Set by Aboriginal elders, the fire is a symbol of hope and freedom, lighting an encampment of devoted protesters determined to achieve satisfaction in their struggle for reconciliation with a right-wing government that seems determined to undo the small progress Australia's original inhabitants have made over the years. Up until 1975, I had heard, it was still possible to get a license to hunt and kill Aboriginal people in certain parts of the country that they have inhabited for a hundred thousand years. Today Bob Marley is their hero.

"That's absolutely true," says Isabel Coe, a stately grey-haired Aboriginal spokesperson who lives in a small tent ("our Embassy") on the park's grounds, adjacent to the fire. "Marley speaks for us. He tells us never to give up the fight for our rights. We play his music all the time. Because of him, there are many Koori reggae bands," she tells me, using the term that the Aboriginal people themselves prefer when speaking about themselves.



ST LOUIS, MO

Marley's mark on the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific has been profound, despite the fact that he only played there once, a quarter of a century ago, in the spring of 1979. The Maori people of New Zealand were particularly taken by his revolutionary stance, and in his wake, a band called Herbs was formed, composed of Tongans, Samoans and New Zealanders, singing protest songs to a reggae beat.

Twenty-four years after his passing, Marley is fulfilling the prophecy he made about reggae music – that it would just get bigger and bigger until it reached all its rightful people. Today Marley is a global figure, almost a deity, especially to those in what is still sneeringly referred to as the "Third World." His face appears on t-shirts and banners and posters in every corner of the earth, rivaled in its universality only by Che Guevara, another contemporary hero for those who question authority and think for themselves.

For the past twenty-one of those post-Marley years, I have been traveling the planet with a multimedia presentation on *The Life of Bob Marley*, spinning his tale in between unreleased film clips of some of the most astonishing unseen moments of his life, both professional and private. As a result, I have met with a steady stream of disciples, all of whom are living testimony to the longevity and timeliness of his message of One Love.



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There is an underlying feeling among the audiences – that Bob Marley's music transcends mere show-biz and becomes something akin to food for life itself. The reason I say this is because after almost every show I'll be approached by someone who will look at me with a blistering intensity and say something like this: "I know you won't laugh at me when I tell you this, but I just want you to know that Bob Marley's music literally saved my life!"

For example, at the University of Indiana last year a young man whose face was traced with a heckuva lot of life for one so lean in years, told me that "I was on the verge of committing suicide, lying around the house for days not even eating. I put on the *Uprising* album, and when Bob told me to 'emancipate yourself from mental slavery' something clicked, and I realized that it was all up to me, that nobody else could do it but myself, and I started to get better from that moment forward. And I continue to listen to him every day."

It's unlikely that one would hear that kind of remark about Duran Duran or New Blocks on the Skids or any other of today's "paint by numbers" so-called artists. Bob Marley's music really stood for something, the true new psalms for our times, and the evidence for this continues to rise daily.

The fact that Bob was such a vocal champion for the legalization of herb hasn't hurt his image any either. That struggle still goes on as well, and de you't dem continue to respond with passion to his call. I'm often asked if Bob died from smoking pot – and of course the answer is a resounding no. It was melanoma cancer that took him so prematurely from us, beginning in the big toe of his right foot, and metastasizing into his lungs and brain over a period of four years, ending his life at 36 in 1981. The alleged deleterious effect of herb smoking is negated by the sheer enormity of his anthemic output. Consider this: virtually all of the songs for which Bob is best known – "Redemption Song," "Get Up Stand Up," "Jamming," "No Woman No Cry," "One Love" – were composed under the influence of Jah holy weed. The later song, in fact, was chosen as the Anthem of the Millennium by the BBC, used in their 24-hour round-the-world coverage as the one song that virtually everyone on earth could relate to. As governments begin to see the folly of their prohibitions, and laws are relaxed, Marley's prophecies are fulfilled.

To call him a prophet is not a blasphemy; much of what he predicted has come to pass, and still other prophecies, as I-Three Judy Mowatt insists, have yet to manifest. In 1969 he told Ibis Pitts and Dion



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Wilson, two young men who lived near his mother's house in Wilmington, Delaware, that he was going to die at 36. He announced the assassination attempt on his life, which took place on December 3, 1976, months earlier on the back sleeve of *Rastaman Vibration*. Serious listeners comb his lyrics for clues to the future..

Those listeners can be found from urban metropolises to the far corners of the earth. A friend of mine once walked the length of Zanzibar, back in 1994. On May 11, the anniversary of Bob's demise, he came upon a remote mountain village with a couple of hundred people, all of them wearing red, gold and green t-shirts with an image of Bob and that date. Above his face was a message: "Kumbukumbu Ya Bob Marley, mungu hamtupi mja wake." "What the heck does that mean?" asked my pal. "It means," he was told, "the second coming of Bob Marley."

Likewise in the thin-air Himalayan climes of Katmandu, Nepal, Marley is considered to be a reincarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. American Indians, particularly the Hopi Nation and the Havasupai who live in the bottom of Arizona's Grand Canyon, regard him as the fulfillment of ancient prophecies of their own nations. In fact, when Bob passed, his mother and Tyrone Downie, Wailers' keyboardist, went to the Canyon for a weekend of song and story, embraced by the Supai, who told them that Bob was prophesied by Chief Crazy Horse as "the long awaited herald sign of the original American Indian Movement." Writer Doug Cruickshank was informed by one of the Supai that "reggae tells about what is really happening in this world today, about people who lost their rights. These reggae songs contain a message we Indians have been trying to get across, yet we have never been listened to. We feel that the Rasta are like the Indian people here in the States. They have their own culture. They have their own religion. They are alone in their own way of life." And so American Indians sing their own brand of reggae riddims, forming groups with names like the Wailing Coyotes, recasting Marley's messages with their own cultural slant.

It may surprise some to know that one of the places where reggae, and therefore Marley, seems biggest at this moment is France. Gorgeous full-color French reggae mags sell out 60,000 copies on the newstands regularly. Jamaican touring bands play

the provinces to adoring audiences. It was in France, in fact, that Marley's poorly chronicled middle period was first compiled in toto for a 15-disc series known as *The Complete Bob Marley and the Wailers 1967 - 1972*. Bruno Blum, perhaps France's most distinguished reggae chronicler, joined me in spearheading the project which made the rarest and most valuable Marley collectors' items available to the public for the first time. These included "Selassie Is the Chapel," Bob's most valuable single, of which only 26 copies were pressed; "Comma Comma," "Tread Oh" and "Black Progress," Marley's Caribbean recasting of James Brown's "I'm Black and I'm Proud" and several other obscure gems. Universal Records has now bought out producer Danny Sims, who had laid legal claim to that period, and is recasting the series under its own label worldwide.

Another legacy-enhancing project has been undertaken by Universal's Bill Levenson, a series of double album re-releases of Marley's '70s albums for Island. Chief among these are the *Catch A Fire* double CD, which contains the previously unheard original Marley-mixes for that ground-breaking record, *Burnin'* coupled with *Live at Leeds 1973*, revealing Marley and Tosh in their final days together in a boisterous and uncharacteristically talkative performance at a Polytechnic College in England; and the frenetic single CD *Live at the Roxy 1976*, played to a star-studded Hollywood audience.

Other material remains in the can. In the winter of 2004, I was visited at my Reggae Archives in Los Angeles, the city Peter Tosh called "Hellay," by Damian, Stephen and Ziggy Marley. For four hours, they listened to a constant outpouring of rehearsals, studio out-takes and "bedroom tapes" – acoustic marvels recorded by Bob alone, or with a few close friends. It appears that the Marley Boys finally overstand the need to delve deeper into their father's legacy, because some of the most creative work of his life remains unheard a quarter of a century and more since it was recorded. An all-acoustic album, reminiscent of the critically acclaimed solo medley on the magnificent *Songs of Freedom* career retrospective, is a must. So is another studio album, which could feature tracks like an alternate scat version of "One Drop," a bass-rich instrumental out-take from *Exodus* called "Jailhouse," and a song of regret about the great love of his life, Cindy Breakspeare (mother of Damian "Junior Gong" Marley), called "She Used to Call Me Dada." Then there's his lawyer, Diane Jobson's favorite unreleased track, "Can't Take

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Your Slogans No More," and a ten-minute rehearsal jam called "Good Times," that could be made releasable in the same manner as the "Mix Up Mix Up" rehearsal was polished for the posthumous *Confrontation* album.

Marley's legacy, however, is most obvious in the performing and recording careers of seven of his alleged eleven children: The Melody Makers (Sharon, Cedella, Ziggy and Stephen), Damian, Julian and Ky-mani. In summer 2004, an American tour initially named the B.O.B. show ("Boys of Bob") changed its name to the Roots Rock Reggae Bob Marley tour, and featured Ziggy, Stephen, Damian and Julian in a heavily hip-hop inflected showcase. Close your eyes, and any one of the young men could make you think Bob himself was standing on stage before you. Stephen finally released his long-awaited first solo album in 2005, distributed through Motown, the label that brought Damian to America's notice and garnered him a reggae Grammy of his own, to display alongside the three already won by the Melody Makers. The sisters, meanwhile, have pursued other avenues, Sharon with a juice bar at the Marley Museum in Kingston; Cedella at her roots clothing company in Miami, where most of the Marley children have homes, away from the constant hassle of being hit on night and day in Kingston.

New books about Bob appear constantly. *A Marley Reader*,

edited by Hank Borowitz has just been published, featuring such first-class contributors as Alice Walker, Lester Bangs and Robert Palmer. Kate Simon, the meticulously observant photographer who covered Marley from 1975 to his final days, issued a spectacular book, *Bob Marley Rebel Music*, through England's Genesis Press. Costing several hundred dollars, it has become an instant collector's item. And recently, a project that was five years in the making finally hit the stores called *One Love: Life with Bob Marley and the Wailers*, by Lee Jaffe and this writer. Jaffe fulfilled every Wailers' fan's dream – he lived with Bob and the group for four years, from 1973 - 1976, and ended up playing harmonica on "Natty Dread," and producing Tosh's landmark *Legalize It* album and taking its provocative cover picture of Tosh squatting in a seemingly endless field of ganja. The pictures that Jaffe took reveal the eye of a trained artist, alert to the historic uniqueness of what he was witnessing firsthand. The splendid British music journo Vivian Goldman has just completed a book on the making of *Exodus* and *Time* magazine writer Christopher John Farley is working on a book about Bob's life from birth through the early '70s.

Finally, the oft-promised *Bob Marley and the Wailers: The Definitive Discography* will be published in the fall of 2005 by Rounder in the States and LMH in Kingston. It combines 55 years of research on the recorded history of the group that Leroy Jodie Pierson and I have been doing. Much of the information is

derived for a series of 64 hours of interviews that we did with Bunny Wailer in 1990, in preparation for his now-aborted autobiography. The breadth of the work of these three artists is staggering, particularly in view of the premature deaths of Bob and Peter.

A further indication of Bob's ability to unite disparate communities is the fabulously successful commemoration held earlier this year in Addis Ababa for Bob's 60th anniversary. Produced by Rita Marley with Neville Garrick, Bob's art director, and other close associates from back in the day, the Ethiopian festival attracted as many as 200,000 people to the country, flashing pictures of the Emperor Haile Selassie, an action that could have got them killed just a few years ago. There is little doubt that this event changed that country in a way that, even recently, would have been unimaginable. And these effects are only beginning to be understood. Concurrently, Rita earned the enmity of the vast majority of Jamaicans when she announced plans to rebury Bob's body in Ethiopia, an action that has been precluded legally by both the Jamaican and Ethiopian governments, neither of whom are inclined to let this happen.

For my own part, 32 years of collecting all things Marley and reggae has resulted in my Reggae Archives being purchased by a Jamaican philanthropist to become the basis of the forthcoming National Museum of Jamaican Music. My bottom lines have always been that the collection remain intact and that its contents

be made available to anyone who wants to use them, with all rights of the artists involved being recognized. Jamaica needs to be aware of how potent its art has been throughout the globe. A documentary on the evolution of the archives is in the final stages of completion and playing at film festivals currently, called *Livicated*, produced by Erik Crown and Paul Madelenat. It features Carlos Santana, Jimmy Cliff, Peter Tosh, Bob Marley, Miriam Makeba, Little Richard and many others.

A legacy is only good if it is carried on. With that in mind, it's illustrative to note how ubiquitous Marley's image remains on college campuses. "Hey, man," a student at a major university told me at the beginning of last fall's term, "If a student comes here and says he's never heard of Bob Marley, within a couple of days, everyone else in the dorm will have told him all about Bob, and played him his records, and then they become instant fans too." In a world where unjust "authorities" demand to be taken at face value, the music of the Reggae Prophet demands that humans make their own voices be heard and heeded – the lips of the righteous speaking truth to the ears of the downpressors, giving thanks and praises, and forever loving Jah. ♡

Roger Steffens is the founding editor of The Beat magazine and chairman of the Reggae Grammy Committee since its inception in 1984. His upcoming "Life of Bob Marley" tours include dates in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Montreal, South Africa, Israel, Palestine and Ethiopia. He can be reached at rasrojah@aol.com.