

Success or Sell Out?

by Ras Jahmark Tafari

It is a well-known fact that the positive spirit-healing, heart-mending, soul-cleansing vibrations of the original and true roots reggae music and the dog-eat-dog world of the "business of music" are two completely different animals. They may even be said to be polar opposites: as light is to darkness. No one overstood this concept more than the chief musician himself, the Hon. Robert Nesta Marley.

In the beginning days of the Wailin' Wailers, whereas Brother Bunny (Wailer) at first refused to fly on the "iron bird," and Brother Peter (Tosh) at first refused to tour "inna dem cold country deh" (i.e. Europe, Canada and the northern parts of the U.S.), Bob did not have a problem with either situation. He saw them merely as minor obstacles to be overcome in order to spread his message of the "three Rs," and I don't mean "readin,' 'ritin' and 'rithmetic" ...but rather "Reggae, Rasta and Redemption" for Africa and all Africans.

By the time the '70s rolled around, the Gong was experimenting with electric rock guitar licks, which other Jamaican reggae artists of the day did not dare to entertain the thought of indulging in. For a long time the great majority of Jamaicans considered Bob's music as "dat's not reggae man" and "him a sell out." Of course such remarks just rolled off him like water off a duck's back. In fact, the more he was insulted and put down by his own people, the stronger and stronger he became. He did not earn the nickname "Tuff Gong" for nothing.

It is often said that "a good man is never honored in his own country," and when it comes to that saying I have certainly learned volumes from Brother Bob's fine examples of strength,

conviction, faith, flexibility and sheer determination. He expresses his ability to be flexible in his song "Coming In From the Cold." As a child I heard the saying many times, but it was driven home so to speak by that song, "...when one door is closed, when one door is closed, many are open..."

Jamaicans on the whole, started to appreciate and respect Bob and his music after they saw that the rest of the world not only began to accept him, but to embrace him in no uncertain manner...so sad to admit, and yet so true. Today, the Gong continues to sell more albums than any roots reggae artist alive today, and due to this, the message of Rastafari continues to be delivered to the masses; for when it came to message, Bob was uncompromising concerning Rastafari and the majestic messianic return of the African King of Kings.

As any artist who has come in contact with any form of music contract (or "agreement") knows, the word "exploit" appears in the pages of these contracts over and over and over again. A "music deal" basically is a business exchange whereby monetary compensation is given to an artist in exchange for the person (or persons) providing the funds to have the artist's written consent to go ahead and "exploit said artist's music and his or her image" however such a person (usually known as a "producer") sees fit. Such is the workings of capitalism in its grossest form, and unfortunately such is the way of the world that we are currently living in. The secret to the success of the most successful of entertainers is that firstly, such ones by the grace of God realize this very obvious reality of exploitation; and secondly, once having realized this, they proceed to use it to their most strategic advantage without somehow becoming swallowed up by it.

**Playing one song in front
of millions of people,
rather than playing 30 songs
in front of 100 people
does wonders
for an artist's career.**

**We should give them our support
and encouragement
for as long as they are able
to hang on to and maintain
their integrity;
these are the doors
which have opened up for them
and we should rejoice with them
in their rejoicing.**



Bob Marley - exuding his powerful energy

Success or Sell Out?

Even Peter Tosh, who at first refused to tour "inna dem cold country deh," eventually did a song with Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones titled, "Walk and Don't Look Back" which did wonders for his career by giving him tremendously increased visibility. Playing one song in front of millions of people, rather than playing 30 songs in front of 100 people does wonders for an artist's career, especially when said artist really has something



Grant Barita

Toots Hibbert

of substance to offer to his audience. In the same way did Bob's musical audience begin to grow after Eric Clapton covered his song, "I Shot the Sheriff."

A personal example: in the '90s I was performing at a fraternity party at Cal State Northridge University in the San Fernando Valley, CA (of all places, ha-ha). After the show a gentleman by the name of Peter Wolf approached me. He had obviously liked what he had just seen and heard (all praises to the Most High). It turned out that Peter had written the songs "We Built this City on Rock and Roll" for Jefferson Starship and "Everybody Let's Dance" for Wang Chung. Before the year was over, I had co-written a song with him titled "Ocean Blue," which appeared in the movie *Weekend at Bernie's II*. Due to this one song, I have people from all over the world checking out the rest of my songs from time to time when I least expect it, even to this very day. I said that to say this, open-mindedness goes a long way in this business.

As far as I can see, the key to retaining sanity and balance in all of this mixing of reggae music and commercialism, to my estimation, is to strive to remain totally centered at all times and totally down-to-earth in any given situation, so that in all cases, the commercialism when it arises, is used by the artist in no uncertain terms in order to further his or her message or career, and not the other way around where the commercialism begins to overtake the artist and eventually swallows him or her up, as in "easy sex, easy drugs and easy rock 'n roll," I'm just saying... in other words, "a we run t'ings, t'ings no run we."

In spiritual terms, we reggae artists in America are in essence in the "belly of the beast." To be a Jamaican Rastafarian based in America and playing the original and true roots reggae music (or Rasta music) is almost like an economic suicide mission: no joke...but then again, Jah never gives anyone a burden if He knows that burden is too heavy for the said one to bear. It is definitely not easy to sing King Alpha's song in a "strange land," where Jamaican musicians are almost forced by major U.S. labels to take the "roots," and in some cases even the "reggae," out of the music. However, the race is not for the swift but for the sure, and those who are unsure shall surely filter out.

Therefore, when we see Damian Marley on TV on the red carpet at the Grammys, or Sean Paul's music selling milkshakes in a commercial, and Toots and the Maytals opening up for the Rolling Stones tour, we should give them our support and encouragement for as long as they are able to hang on to and



Damian Marley



Ras Jahmark Tafari

maintain their integrity; these are the doors which have opened up for them and we should rejoice with them in their rejoicing. This is not the time to be holding on to bad-mindedness. As long as an opportunity arises for our brothers and sisters and they make positive use out of it, we should stand with them and not against them.

Listen people, even money in itself is not evil if you use it to do positive things instead of allowing it to control you and lead you to negativity. In conclusion, I say again to support your reggae artists (especially the conscious ones), support authenticity, support what is true, for Jah knows it is hard enough for reggae artists to get their music out to the masses in a world whose "leaders" do not want the masses to hear the message of Rastafari, and worst of all, to really comprehend the message of Rastafari...for the way of Babylon is to "divide and conquer," while the way of Rastafari is ONE-NESS...JAH Live!!! ♡

Ras Jahmark Tafari, a.k.a. Jahmark, is a Jamaican reggae artist based out of Los Angeles, CA. He is bandleader of the internationally recognized reggae ensemble, Jahmark and the Soulshakers. In February, they took home the Southern California Music Award '06 for Best World Music. They are currently submitting songs for the upcoming Adam Sandler film, 50 First Dates II, as well as finishing up their latest album titled Misconception. According to Jahmark, this album will be a living testament to the fact that sometimes the best roots reggae music arises out of places that you least expect it to... as he puts it, "from right out of the belly of the beast." Be sure to visit Jahmark and the Soulshakers' websites at www.jahmark.com and www.myspace.com/jahmark1 for more information.