

# Discovering Rastafari!

INTERNATIONALLY



by **Jake Homiak,**

**Director of the Anthropology Collection and Archives Program,  
National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institute**

Many are familiar with the role that Jamaican reggae and icons like Bob Marley have played in spreading the message of Rastafari worldwide. Far fewer however, fully understand the link between roots reggae – with its repeated call for truth and rights and inspiring lyrics of global unity – and the development of communities outside Jamaica influenced by the actual practice of Rastafari *livity*. True, as Bob said, “There’s a natural mystic flowing in the air.” Beyond that is the more complex story of how Rastafari – once a despised and marginalized group struggling against colonial containment – broke the bonds of Babylon to spread not only its message, but an uplifting and principled way of life around the entire globe. A crucial part of this story involves the inseparable ties between the roots culture forged by the Nyahbinghi elders of the 1950’s and ‘60’s movement – those mentors of Marley’s generation – and Bob and other reggae ambassadors who were the first to travel internationally.

Roots reggae not only transformed the political and cultural landscape of post-colonial Jamaica during the 1970s, it also served to lay the groundwork for the decolonization of much of the Caribbean during those same years. By the early ‘80s, the music in Jamaica was beginning to change. Bob made his cosmic transition in 1981 and not long after, dancehall and its local appeal to slackness and ghetto politics displaced the pan-African and internationalist themes of the roots generation in Yard. But the roots



**Members of the Washington, D.C. Rastafari community at the Discovering Rastafari! exhibit, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institute** By Amy Staples

**Ras Ivi and Bongo Tawney drumming at 1st Hispanic Rastafari Summit, Panama, 2005**  
By Jake Homiak

vibration was out there or as Bongo Ackeemon, a Rastafari ancient would say, “[It was] here, there, and everywhere to no ends of Creation through the *Iwah* (power) of the Living Jah Rastafari, Selassie II!” (*Kongo to Zion*, Heartbeat Records, Elliot Leib and Ken Bilby, 1983). Not only was it out there – across the Caribbean, on the African continent and in Europe and North America – it served to continuously focus attention on Jamaica as the birthplace not merely of reggae,

**Ras Sam Brown in his yard in Jones Town, West Kingston, 1980** By Jake Homiak





**Discovering Rastafari! (r-l) unidentified bredrin, Ras Ivi, unidentified bredrin, Priest Dougie, Jabulani, Ras Judah** By Jake Homiak

but of Rastafari. By the late '70s and early '80s, "Jah-mek-yah" had become a virtual pilgrimage site for those who had sighted up Rastafari "in foreign" and were looking to connect in a deeper way with the roots of the movement. It was into this space of transnational cross-currents created by reggae that a self-selected set of Rastafari Elders boldly stepped.

I got my first glimpse of this "mystic" in Jamaica in 1980 as a graduate student whose fieldwork was taking shape around ongoing reasonings with the elders of the House of Nyahbinghi. Some five months into my work I had been to several Nyahbinghi celebrations and established congenial relations with several groups of elders, including one that revolved around Ras Sam Brown. Shortly after Bob Marley returned to the island from performing at the independence ceremonies in Zimbabwe, I was visiting

**Ras Iyah Tee and Ras Ivy with placard painted by Ras Daniel Heartman to greet Emperor Haile Selassie on his 1966 visit to JA** By Jake Homiak



Ras Sam at his gates in Jones Town. To my surprise, Sam proposed we collect some of his brethren and pay Bob a visit at Island House. I had already tried, unsuccessfully, to meet Bob several times and was a bit skeptical about getting through on this occasion. But Ras Sam had known Bob from his pre-Rasta days in Trenchtown and I was certainly open to another move to Island House, whatever it might bring.

The long cue of a hundred or more people that greeted us as we entered the yard did nothing to raise my expectations. Those in line, *sufferahs* from places like Trenchtown, Denham Town or Waterhouse – Rasta and non-Rasta alike – were patiently waiting to put an argument to Rasta's most famous icon while he held court in the style of a ghetto don. Ras Sam ignored the imposing cue and acting as if he knew something the rest of us didn't, proceeded to settle himself under a spreading mango tree. He prompted us to join him as he set about building a spliff. After ten or fifteen minutes, Bob shoved his head out of the second-story window, scanned the yard and seeing Sam, called to him. Moments later we were inside Marley's study.

Bob greeted the elder with a knock of his fist and Sam introduced us. Sam congratulated Bob on his works in Zimbabwe and they passed a few words about events there. They moved on quickly to the matter at hand – which was Ras Sam's proposal to purchase agricultural acreage in Westmoreland Parish to start a Rasta farm as a sustainable project for the youth. Sam was asking Bob for a significant amount of money for the project - \$28,000 JA (roughly \$10,000 U.S. at the time). "Mi a look ina dat, Iyah," Bob told the elder. While there was no immediate commitment forthcoming from Bob, Sam later got a portion of that support. I later learned Ras Sam's project had a history that dated to the late 1970s and included negotiations with Michael Manley and his Minister of Agriculture.

This was my first-hand experience with the kind of links Bob maintained

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with the poor sufferah communities in which he moved prior to becoming an international superstar. My understanding of other links would unfold in due course, but many of them traced back to this meeting with Marley. In the yard that day were several other well-known Rastafari elders including Bongo Blackheart, Jah Stone and Jah Lloyd – all Nyahbinghi ancients linked to the Royal Judah Coptic Assembly of Elders. Throughout 1980 Bob had been funding these elders to keep a series of Nyahbinghi gatherings around Kingston. He would routinely send truck-loads of food to every Nyahbinghi assembly held on the island. Bob never lost touch with the communities in which he was rooted, or their key figures who influenced the people there. Although they might not have had the same economic impact, the same could be said of other notable reggae performers including Joseph Hill, Ras Michael and others.

As Bob's time (unbeknownst to us) was coming to a close, those who mentored him were beginning to travel more widely. Prophet Gad, the founder of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, an organization Bob joined in 1975, had already sent emissaries abroad to the U.S. and England to establish "the Twelve" in those countries. Ras Mortimo Planno, widely regarded as the elder who brought Bob into the movement, had already been to Africa on three occasions and the U.S. several times. In 1980, funded by the late Professor Carole Yawney, Mortimo made his second trip to Canada to lecture on Rastafari in Toronto. That same year, Ras Sam Brown traveled to VT and MA to lecture on Rastafari at several Ivy League colleges.

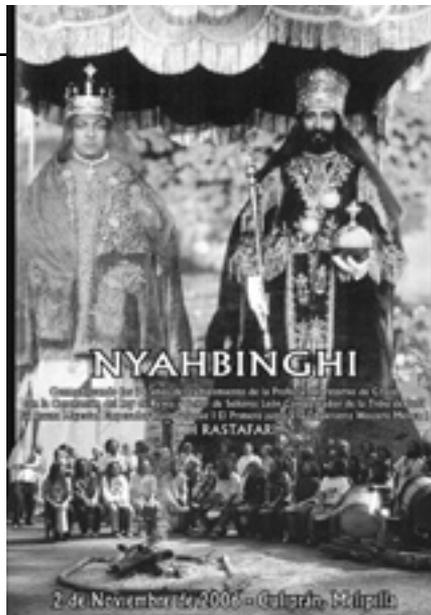
1980 – the Golden Jubilee year of His and Her Majesty's Coronation – was a special year for the movement. Ras Shango Baku and Ras Sekou Tafari – both from Trinidad – launched *Rastafari Speaks*, a newspaper that followed in the publishing tradition of Marcus

Traveling Rastafari elders and representatives of the various mansions began to evolve their own ambassadorial tradition outside Jamaica. The following are just a few of the highlights:

- Late 1970s/early 1980s: Rastafari in the English-speaking Eastern Caribbean crosses over into the French-speaking islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe and St. Martin**
- 1983: R.I.T.A. in Kingston followed by an Eastern Caribbean tour by Jamaican Nyahbinghi ancients Ras Boanerges, Bongo Time and Pa-Ashanti**
- 1984: Voices of Thunder mission to Toronto, Canada (Ras Boanerges, Ras Ayenton and Ras Iville); Ras Sam Brown visits Jah Bones in Handsworth, Birmingham, U.K.**
- 1986: Rastafari Focus at the Commonwealth Institute in the U.K. gathers ones from Jamaica, Eastern Caribbean, North America, England and Ethiopia**
- 1988: Rainbow Circle Throne Room of Jah Rastafari mission by Nyahbinghi Elders to New York, D.C., Philadelphia and Baltimore fortifies Rastafari communities in the Eastern U.S.**
- 1989: Elders trod to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival; augments the development of Rastafari communities in Baltimore, Miami and Atlanta**
- 1992: Centenary of His and Her Imperial Majesties. Trod from JA to Ethiopia involving Bongo Rocky, Mama Baby-I, Ma-Ashanti, Ras Ivi and others; followed by another Eastern Caribbean trod by Ras Boanerges, consecrating the Nyahbinghi tabernacle in St. Lucia and elsewhere**
- 1994: Boboshanti mission to Ethiopia; later members relocate to Ghana**
- 1996: Ras Boanerges and Ras Tesfa (England) the first Elders to trod to South Africa and the communities of Cape Town and Johannesburg**
- 1998: Bongo Time and Mama Beryl trod to Cape Town and Kimberly, South Africa**
- 2001/02: Durban Conference on Reparations**
- 2003: Global Rastafari Reasoning in Jamaica**
- 2005: 1<sup>st</sup> Hispanic Rastafari Summit**

Garvey. This newspaper not only gave Rastafari across the Caribbean, England and North America a greater sense of nationhood and their connectedness as members of an international vanguard, it announced the coming of age of brethren and sistren across the Eastern Caribbean and their strength as a regional network of Rastafari. The following year, Ras Sam traveled to Toronto as the ranking elder in the first Rastafari International Theocracy Assembly (RITA) that gathered other Rastafari from across the Caribbean, England and North America. In the next few years, with the second International Theocracy Assembly held in JA and the third in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, there was a virtual explosion within the movements of Jah People. Traveling Rastafari elders and representatives of the various mansions began to evolve their own ambassadorial tradition outside Jamaica.

The international mobilization of Rastafari to celebrate the Centenary of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile



**Rastafari Family in Santiago, Chile** Poster by Ras Jorge Ascension Esparza

Selassie I's birthday was a major event that gave continued impetus to the internationalization of the movement and the growth of Rastafari communities abroad. It strengthened the perennial Rastafari vision of repatriation and

movements to the continent by brethren and sistren who, like Ras Sam, represented the foundational generation of Dreadlocks Rastafari. The stories of their repatriations and trods to the continent are themselves mystic. How is it, if not through the iwah of the Most High, that a people who were once denied passage on public transportation in JA during the 1950s and '60s, now board airliners to travel far and wide in spreading the livivity of Rastafari.

The story of Bongo Tawney, among others, is exemplary in this regard. A master drummer and heartical elder who came up in the faith in Back 'o Wall, Kingston, Bongo Tawney was one of the original co-authors of what is now commonly known as *Iyaric* or Dread Talk. "*Iyasta Yoolie-l...lyuncom lyoder...l-n-l Yanting Ises unto lyack lyadda, Selassie II!*" (translation: Rastafari! The Nyahbinghi Order is upon the scene chanting praises unto our Black Father, Selassie I.) One of the first *I-mples* (Brethren/Temples of the Most High) of Ital livivity, Bongo Tawney

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along with his entire family, is present at every Nyahbinghi celebration in JA. He made his first international trods in 1988 and 1989 to the U.S. as part of the Rainbow Circle Throne Room of Jah Rastafari missions that were sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and supported by brethren and sistren from the New York and D.C. communities. In 1991, he and six other brethren broke with Nyahbinghi tradition and went in the studio to produce *Rastafari Elders* – a moving compilation of 'binghi chants and oratory produced by RAS Records. Since that time he has traveled as a messen-JAH of Rastafari livity to the Virgin Islands, Barbados, Panama, Chile, and in 2005 to Ethiopia. His trod to Ethiopia and his personal story as an elder is featured prominently in the recently released, highly recommended DVD, *Africa Unite* (produced by Stephanie Black and distributed by the Bob Marley Foundation; see [www.BobMarley.com](http://www.BobMarley.com)).

At *Africa Unite* he would be joined with repatriated brethren and sistren from Guadeloupe – members of *La Sainte Famille JAH* (Ambassade de la Diaspora) – who have established themselves in Benin. Theirs too is an unheralded, but inspiring story. While living in Paris in the 1970s, the elders of this group decided to repatriate, but determined to do so from their birthplace Guadeloupe. After living Maroon-style in the mountains of the island as a way to prepare for repatriation, they repatriated to Benin in 1997. Their example has inspired two other groups from Guadeloupe and Martinique to repatriate to Shashemene, Ethiopia. In 2005 they along with repatriates from JA, England and the U.S. participated in the *Africa Unite* celebration that was held to mark Bob Marley's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday (see [www.Africaunite.com](http://www.Africaunite.com)).

Invariably, all of these circuits of travel – both to the continent and elsewhere – link, intersect and strengthen other previously forged connections in the now far-flung Rastafari world. A recent example (also 2005) is that of four brethren (Ras Iman-I, Ras Izarus, Ras Ni-E, and Ras Uldrick from the tiny island of St. Vincent traveled



**Bongo Tawney, Empress Mahyana and Ras Abuna at Howard University, 2007**

By Brother Asher Hammang



**Mere and Pere JAH with King Onikoyi Abessen of Benin on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their repatriation to Benin (1997-2007)**

By La Sainte Famille JAH



**Ras Izarus wearing a treasure he obtained in Ethiopia, a pith helmet worn by His Majesty's royal guards**

By Jake Homiak

**Priest Douglas Smith with the Boboshanti display, *Discovering Rastafari!* in the African Voices Hall, Smithsonian**

By Jake Homiak



with Ralph Gonsalves, the Vincentian prime minister, as part of a nine-member delegation to Ethiopia and the Rastafari land-grant settlement in Shashemene. While at least two Caribbean prime ministers have made sojourns to Ethiopia, Gonsalves – educated at the University of the West Indies during the late '60s and sympathetic to Rastafari brethren in Jamaica from that time – is the first to have traveled with Rastafari on such a mission. While there, Gonsalves and the four brethren met with Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in an effort to forge closer relations between St. Vincent, the Grenadines and Ethiopia.

Among the most notable developments in recent years is the growth of Rastafari communities in the Spanish-speaking world including Cuba, Puerto Rico and nations of Central and South America. These links were given an enormous boost in 2005 by the First Hispanic Rastafari Summit held in Panama. At this week-long event, Jamaican-born Rastafari Elders (from both the Nyahbinghi and Boboshanti mansions) came together with Rastafari representatives from Costa Rica, Panama, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Chile and Argentina. With an Afro-Antillean population that includes the bilingual (English/Spanish) descendants of Jamaicans, Barbadians and others, Panama has come to play a critical role in orchestrating the outernational reach of Rastafari across the Hispanic world. The mystic has its own logic: sessions of chanting were held every day during which 'binghi Elders would intone the choral lines of chant in English and their bilingual brethren and sistren would then transition those lines into Spanish. As the adage goes, "each-one-teach-one," and "Iron sharpeneth Iron" – thus realizing the prophetic reality that "...there is no tongue or language in which HIS name is not known." Prophecy and history continue to walk hand-in-hand from one continent to another.

Many of these global Rastafari themes find expression in *Discovering Rastafari!* – a path-breaking exhibition that was launched by the Smithsonian Institute on November 2, 2007 – the 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary

of His and Her Majesty's Coronation. In this small but powerful exhibit (co-curated by myself and the late Professor Carole Yawney), key parts of the story of the Rastafari passage from so called despised "cultists" to the proud "members of a new race" is told. There, in the Africa Voices Hall of the National Museum of Natural History, tens of thousands of people have already passed through on their way to discovering the seeds of a universal philosophy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As one visitor exclaimed to me upon leaving the exhibit, "So this is what is behind Bob Marley's music. I never knew!" ☺

*Jake Homiak is a cultural anthropologist at the Smithsonian Institution who has lived and worked with Rastafari around the world for over 28 years. During 1980-81 he lived in Bull Bay, JA, spending time with the Boboshanti commune, also attending Nyahbinghi celebrations. This began his long-term association with members of the Theocracy Reign, Divine Order of the Nyahbinghi which continues to this day. In the mid-1990s, Jake teamed with the late Professor Carole Yawney (York University, Toronto) to initiate the International Rastafari Archives Project (IRAP). That initiative culminated in *Discovering Rastafari!*, a first-of-its-kind exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. The exhibit traces the origins and spread of the movement and is scheduled to run until November, 2009. Homiak is Director of the Anthropology Collection and Archives Program at the Smithsonian Museum and has general oversight for the Department of Anthropology's nearly two and a half million cultural artifacts and archaeological specimens as well as the manuscript, photographic and film holdings of its National Anthropological Archives and the Human Studies Film Archives.*



**Mama Fiya, the Kongo Queen of Panama, and sistren at opening ceremony of the 1st Hispanic Rastafari Summit in Panama, 2005**  
By Jake Homiak