

Fashion dread Rasta - Jamaican music since Bob Marley's death; includes glossary of reggae terms



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It is amazing that a religious sect on a small Caribbean island could produce a style of Pop music that has had toes tapping around the world.

A lot has happened to Jamaican music since Bob Marley's death in 1981. Greg Stephens lives in Austin, Texas, where he is a journalist and songwriter, Part of his fascination with reggae music stems from time spent in Southern Bible Belt churches in his youth. -Richard Nilsen

THE HISTORY OF POPULAR MUSIC BEGINS with slavery.

With the African diaspora, the rhythm of the earth was ripped apart and left to right itself where it could. Black rhythm filtered across the earth, infecting the West with a fever which is gradually taking over the host. The whole world is sneezing, and more and more of us are liking it. Who feels it knows it.

As Michael Ventura described it in "Hear That Long Snake Moan" (WER #54 and #55), the Africans built their temples in their bodies with their rhythms. Like a Morse code of the unconscious, African-derived music has a not-entirely-understood unifying force, a power I call the One.

"Keep it on the One," musicians will say. A form of Unity. Nowhere have the magical properties of African music been more fully developed than in Jamaican reggae, as epitomized by the music of Bob Marley.

Although we still tend to think of reggae as cult music, it has had an influence entirely disproportionate to the number of people who actually practice the Reggae Rasta beliefs (see glossary). Jamaica, after all, is an island of only two million people. But the list of popular entertainers upon whom reggae has made a major artistic impact is staggering: the Clash, Eric Clapton, Boy George, Grace Jones, Level 42, the Police, the Rolling Stones, Sade, Tina Turner, the Talking Heads, Stevie Wonder, just to name a few. It would be almost unthinkable for many younger British acts like Terrence Trent D'Arby, Stan Campbell or Hollywood Beyond to put out an album without reggae references.

Granted, it is the style of reggae more than its content that has been absorbed into the language of international culture. Reggae as a fashion or a badge of hipness has continued to grow in influence while Jamaican reggae music per se has devoured itself, become a mirage, a ritual intended to evoke former glory.

With the passage of time it has become clear how much of that former glory was tied up in the spirit of Bob Marley. Millions of people of all races and religions see Marley as a prophet, a messenger of the One. With Marley's tragic early death by brain cancer in 1981, the movement

lost its voice. Many lesser prophets appeared, but the spirit of unity that made the Marley-era reggae's golden age quickly dissipated as the realities of the Reagan era (and that of his Jamaican counterpart, Prime Minister Edward Seaga) set in. Reggae Rasta was more like a Caribbean Ghost Dance than an organized system of thought, anyway. Without Marley's leadership, the music grew repetitious, the message cliched. Marley's children have grown up with a different set of values.

Jamaica's current popular music, Dance Hall, has roughly the same relation to Marley-era reggae that American rap music has to '60s soul. Like their fathers, this generation of performers often looked north for inspiration. But instead of encountering the harmonies of New Orleans R&B, they heard the arrogant, angular beat box that is hip hop. And instead of spiritual inspiration, many of the Dance Hall followers looked no further than between their own legs.

In August 1987 I went to Jamaica to witness the 10th annual Reggae Sunsplash Festival, which occurred auspiciously during the 25th anniversary of Jamaican independence, as well as the 100th birthdate of Marcus Garvey.

In many ways, Sunsplash 10 was a battleground for control of the minds of the youth between the Dance Hall Posse - which had the money and the momentum - and the Reggae Rasta Posse, which had Marley and moral authority. In sheer numbers, the X-rated Dance Hall Posse was clearly winning the battle. But in the war, Reggae Rasta had seeded the unconscious of the youth. They saw images of their fathers returning, editorialized and institutionalized by the mythmakers of Babylon. That twist was endlessly rebroadcast and returned with comment until it acquired the resonance of legend.

It helps to keep two things in mind while considering Jamaican music. First, the island's population is divided into Rastafarians and nonRastas. It's hard to estimate how many there are either way, because so many fall in the cracks between belief and unbelief. But the mainstream non-Rastas clearly control most of Jamaica's economic superstructure. They have a historically antagonistic relationship to the Rastas, who keep prophesying their downfall as part of the Babylon system. At best the mainstream Jamaicans tolerate the Rastas; at worst, those who fear the Rastas' influence have waged a consistent campaign of terror against them.

Second, although Jamaica does not quite fit the stereotype of a nation stoned out of its mind, an estimated 80 percent of the populace uses marijuana in one form or another. The herb fuels the Rastas' Messianic mindset and also serves as a pretext for oppression.

Peter Tosh, a founding member of Bob Marley's group the Wailers, a running mate of the Rolling Stones and Reggae Rasta's resident renegade, was shot to death gangland-style in his home shortly after Sunsplash 10. He was merely the latest in a string of Rasta musicians to be slain, a long list that also includes Wailers drummer Carlton "One Drop" Barrett.

"Reggae" is the generally accepted term for Jamaican-inspired music. But in trendy Jamaica, reggae is just one of a series of musical styles. Before reggae, there was Rock Steady and Ska. After reggae, there was Rub-A-Dub and Dance Hall.

The Wailers started out in the early '60s as a Ska trio with R&B influences from the American south, shifted semi-successfully into the Rock Steady period, then busted out as they eased into and helped define Reggae, in collaboration with Chris Blackwell and Island Records.

Bob Marley had the charismatic gift and the good timing that enabled him to succeed in fulfilling certain Messianic projections. Millions saw Marley as, if not exactly the Black Messiah, then certainly one of the New Prophets. Bob Marley was On the One, and everyone wanted to be On the One.

But as influential as Marley and the Wailers were, they were still just a part of the shifting tides of Jamaican music. In later days, Marley would often name the DJ Big Youth as his favorite Jamaican entertainer.

Today's Dance Hall music has gone international. Reggae's grandchild has grown up ill-mannered, full of all the crimes and energy of youth. Reggae Rasta fears that it may have lost Dance Hall to Babylon. Or that the prodigal son may have simply blown off the spiritual concerns of Reggae Rasta, and contented himself with trying to get his cock wet.

Reggae Rasta's only hope to fulfill its dream of bringing a reign of peace and unity to the world is for the youth to carry on the Rasta message. Some of the Rasta message is indeed being forwarded, but in the language of a new generation. Rasta has become a fashion that I call Fashion Dread.

JAMAICA IS AN ISLAND THAT HAS taken the "on the One" or "Unity Consciousness" to a whole new level of thinking. When Jamaicans get on a groove, they really get on the One. Riddims drive Jamaican music, and when a new riddim hits the top, everyone cops it. It's the King Riddim for a few months or even years in basic formula. In a singledominated record industry, the competing studios will endlessly recycle a riddim when it gets hot. In fact if it gets really hot, like Admiral Bailey's "Punaany" in 1987, people will want to get the same charge over and over, variations by the DJs that often use the exact same rhythm tracks. It's a matter not only of profit but of style and a way of thinking. Riddims are treated in some sense as scripture, to be quoted often by the faithful. And therefore riddims are public property, a cultural heritage.

Early DJs such as U-Roy and Marley's successors like Big Youth mixed in a healthy dose of Rastafarian teaching along with the usual posturing. But later DJs, whose style was a juggle somewhere between singing and rapping (some called themselves "singjays"), did not necessarily share the Rastafarian ethic. It didn't take long to see that the Jamaican kids were into a new thing, something wild. The Devil was back in Jamaican music, seducing young virgins everywhere and then bragging about it on the air. Almost every Jamaican youth I encountered at Sunsplash asked me the same thing: 'Are you coming to DJ Night?' The Dance Hall Posse's reputation preceded them at Sunsplash 10. Few of my travel group wanted to brave young Jamaican toughs because of stories circulating about pickpockets. Very few cabbies were willing to fight the 15-mile bumper-to-bumper traffic on DJ Night for less than highway robbery. Three of us waited it out and finally landed a cabbie who was desperate for American currency.

It was slow going, so there was time to let the scenery soak in. Just outside of Montego Bay, on the narrow road to Bob Marley Memorial Stadium, was a huge billboard only the illiterate could have missed:

AIDS CAN KILL

USE A CONDOM AND LIMIT YOURSELF To ONE PARTNER

KNOW THE FACTS

The van gradually slowed to a crawl. When people began passing us on the shoulders, we got out and walked the last several miles.

It seemed like we walked forever. The road was swollen with people walking quickly, and the momentum carried us along, the sensation of being in a river approaching a falls. We could hear the pulse of the soundstacks massaging the earth in the distance.

The vendors called out incessantly, sometimes jumping in our path, their eyes hungry, insistent, some weary, others bitter, thousands fated to sell the same pack of gum, it seemed, or merchandise only slightly more enticing.

Inside the arena, the DJ fans had taken over. The tension hung as thick as the gritty, fragrant smoke from hundreds of cooking fires and thousands of spliffs. Across the enormous field, 50,000 people jostled jowl to jowl. The language that rushed off the stage was really foul.

This was not a night for the righteous. This was Youth Night, and the youth were full of piss and vinegar. The Youth Posse believed in Star Power, not Jah Power. The DJs were more about bragging rights than human rights. Still, I found it hard to fault their energy and showmanship, which was phenomenal.

This night belonged to the devilish energy of these new Jamaican folk heroes, post-modern journalists whose spontaneous reports from the frontier of sex and society kept their army enthralled. Admiral Bailey, the current (1987) superstar of Jamaican music, ruled the DJ fleet. He wore an immaculate white admiral's uniform, complete with white gloves and cap. He owned the stage - which was built as a model of the Black Star Liner, Marcus Garvey's famed repatriation ship, complete with portholes. From the narrow lane provided for photographers, I could look back and watch thousands of youths leaping in unison whenever Admiral Bailey landed a direct hit. Admiral Bailey's megahit "Punaany" is (in case you haven't inferred it) about the international pursuit of - in literal translation - pussy. This beefy bard of the bedroom provided a sailor's view of shore - women lined up waiting for his services.

Admiral Bailey's crotch-grabbing out-beastied the Beastie Boys; his humor outweighed the Fat Boys, and his braggin' outran Run-D.M.C. He was the Jamaican Pan, Coyote and Anancy all rolled in One. He at once enlarged and reduced the world to these mythic, simplistic dimensions:

"Sit on it."

"Run from it." It was the command of the sexual renegade, a metaphor for the common man of JA. "We are hard. We are coming at you. Sit on it. Or run from it. The choice is yours."

But even in slackness there was a moral. That huge anti-AIDS billboard on the highway got constantly rebroadcast by the DJs. Admiral Bailey did a preventive measures rap. When someone threw him a pack of condoms, he unrolled one and acted out the whole process. That undoubtedly offended the moralists, but it was probably the most constructive thing he could have done for the hot-blooded youth. Condoms were now in. The crotch-grabbing got old just as fast with Dance Hall as it did with hip hop. I kept thinking, is that really the only thing on their minds? The music itself was relentlessly repetitive, but the way the DJs orchestrated repeated breakdowns to build up and release tension had been raised to an art form. Basically Dance Hall was the push and pull of sex.

Dancehall can be seen as an extreme reaction to Rasta piety. The gap between the sensual, musical side of Jamaican popular music and the Messianic, message-laden Reggae Rasta has grown rapidly since Marley's death.

In some ways, poet-singer Mutabaruka epitomized this split. He embodied the Rasta message in its most analytical form, almost devoid of an entertainment sensibility as such.

Mutabaruka burst upon the scene shortly after Marley died, the leading light of a movement called "dub poetry" that also included England's Linton Kwesi Johnson and fellow Jamaican Michael Smith, who was stoned to death by a political gang for his brutal honesty.

With his trademark streak of white hair parting his dreads, Muta cast a striking figure. He had the raw power of the prophet fresh from the wilderness. The opening lines from his debut album Check It set forth his credo, a new theory of aesthetics:

"Of course we can't write about flowers

& bees & birds & trees And lovers in the park & all them someday. What use we 'ave a write about someday?

Right now the reality different,

We haffa write about South Africa,

the youth in the ghetto

We haffa write about Inqlan, we haffa write

bout all dese tings."

Muta was like Bob Marley's intellectual cousin - Franz Fanon set to reggae. And almost alone among the Rastas I've been exposed to, he is an ardent feminist. Muta's Sunsplash booth, representing his Kingston store ("Food For Life") was the vortex for an enclave of talented Jamaican women.

Muta's Sunsplash set wiped out any doubts about his place near the top of the Reggae Rasta world.

After entering in his customary white prophet's robe, he skinned down to a pair of white dungarees and launched a tirade against the slackness of the DJs. He called them "bloodclots" and worse. The audience roared, many of them egging him on as a black congregation would encourage the preacher.

During Muta's incendiary reading of "Dis Poem," I got the eerie feeling of looking the entire black race straight in the face. The poem was revolutionary in style and content, written on the run, in the streets, outside known literary tradition but perhaps the root of a new tradition.

The man born Alan Hope made a few self-deprecating comments admitting he was not really an entertainer like the DJs. But he had obviously connected on a gut level. By the time Muta and the band kicked into the rude urgency of "White Mon Free Up The Land," the crowd was electrified. Muta was back on the One.

ANYONE WHO CAN'T SEE THE Economic as well as artistic potential of reggae crown prince Ziggy Marley hasn't yet understood the Messianic fervor that runs among Third World peoples, especially in Jamaica. Jamaican music has been able to infect nerve centers in the New World - particularly New York and London - spreading a less severe case of Messianic expectations among American Dream refugees and entertainment consumers. So there is a potentially immense audience for a young, sexy, fashionable, implicitly spiritual Third World superstar.

Ziggy is like a reflection of his father Bob, a young echo. As time goes on it is almost scary how this reflection seems to grow more and more like the original, in spirit if not always in style. One hears echoes of many things, the American counterculture among them. Ziggy is the counterculture that never went away; he is cut from the roots of the counterculture; the seed of the counterculture that had to journey to a foreign land to find soil deep enough to nourish it, and people with attention spans long enough to water it. Of course, Ziggy and his siblings in the Melody Makers are all near 20, so they can appeal to a new generation of Babylon's children who think reggae is "jammin' mon" but who aren't haunted by memories of Bob Marley. When they think of reggae, they may think of a Budweiser commercial with Spuds McKenzie, or, if they are trendy, of UB40.

Ziggy has in fact been groomed for the role of Bob Marley's successor from an early age. As Marley's eldest son, he was widely seen as heir to the heritage, and he was given moorings for the journey by a mixture of strict but worldly Rastas and Jesuits. The images that have come out of this man-child's imagination remind me of the paintings of the children of Guatemala and El Salvador. They are all images of a world at war. Fortunately Ziggy seems to have inherited his

father's ear for melodic hooks. Thus far he is sinking them into strident calls to action and "bald slogans." They are catchy, but limited by the abstracted idealism of a youth who has an unusually broad, but also somewhat insular, view of the world. It will be interesting to hear what Ziggy comes up with when he comes home from the battlefield to write about love and other shades of grey.

Reggae Rasta has an important message that Marley sent us on our way singing. It says that the liberation and unification of the black race is crucial to the salvation and survival of the One Race, the human race. It was a concept that most of the Anglo/ Western world did not want to hear, so many latter-day reggae stars are learning to imply it. Reggae, a language of implications, often implied its own divinity, either through words or through sound itself. For instance, a true reggae fan will tell you that a good reggae bass line is the voice of Jah his own self.

Reggae Rasta postured as a sort of modern electronic church of the unconscious mind, a rhythmic religion destined, in some hybrid form, to get everyone on the One.

Those who want reggae to keep implying our divinity in Bob Marley's language are no better than right-wing American evangelists who want us to pretend we are living in the time of Christ. Both are missing the point. We keep movin' on down the road, and if we are to keep it on the One, each generation must invent a new language to make sense of its existence. We hear the words of the master but we listen to his children. We dance with them if we are to enter the future in useful fashion.

The elders don't like it, but this is a generation that talks about sex as if sex is Jah. Maybe they're onto something, if that's the only thing on which the human race can come together. One thing is certain: this obsession with sex didn't just pop out of thin air. If young people have to make a choice between spirituality and sexuality, guess which one most of them will choose?

Bunny Wailer had some wise words at the end of Sunsplash, in an effort to bring together the warring factions of the post-Marley "There's been a lot of talk about the DJs as if Dance Hall was a new thing," Bunny "We all came out of the Dance Hall. Reggae is the roots and the DJs are the branches, but we are all part of the same tree."

As a hybrid form of music and religion, Reggae Rasta developed the power to awaken a spiritual awareness in people who would not admit to being spiritually inclined. It awakened a long dormant human urge to look over the horizon for One who is greater. I have the feeling that we are going to be seeing Rasta symbols reappearing in popular culture for a long time, because Rasta has an immense transformative power, a power not susceptible to reason, but a power that is capable of being perpetually reinvented.

The most significant hybrids in the post-Marley reggae world are taking place on the frontiers between rap/hip hop and Dance Hall. The two are thrown together in the hippest clubs of New York and London in such a way that one can sense an emerging fusion that can also incorporate a fashionable version of the Rasta message. We've already seen something close in the work of toasters like Shinehead, whose "Rough & Rugged" album features a hip hop-style anti-coke rap

on top of Bob Marley's "Who the Cap Fits" chorus. In Jamaica, New York, London and other crosscultural meccas, the fusion of Rasta with the contemporary style I call Fashion Dread is a growing phenomenon. On one of my first nights in Montego Bay, I went to a "Beach Party" that was preceded by a very racy fashion show. After the show, I watched four of the models walk through the crowd and onto the arms of some sharp-dressed Rastas. Fashion and Dreadlocks paired off rather nicely.

Rather than chastising the admittedly sexist first fruits of this new music, we would be better off accepting the manic energy of our rappers and DJs and rewarding those who manage to stumble on the ancient discovery that sexuality is a path with heart. You cannot fruitfully separate music and message; you cannot healthily separate sexuality and spirituality, because they are One thing.

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