

BOB MARLEY

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was a joyful noise that all humanity could love.**

It might surprise some to see Bob Marley's output described as rock & roll. Indeed, there is a tendency to view rock & roll as African in its ultimate origins but American or European in its prime exposition, with scant notice of modern musical kinships from the lower half of this hemisphere. Yet Bob Marley was raised on rock's full heritage of social forces and stylistic influences, just as surely as he handed each of them back in marvelously reinvented form.

The story of the rise of Jamaican roll is Bob Marley's own story of innate curiosity and singular vision, along with the belief that his celebration of his Jah-given uniqueness was a joyful noise with which all humanity could find common cause.

In a talk with Bob Marley in September, 1975 at his house in Kingston, he described the organic musical education of his boyhood: "Yah see, my people was always amongst bars. You have jukebox and you always have music going on... I used to hear things like 'Jim Dandy to the Res-cuel,' 'A-Bony Moronie,' 'What Am I Living For,' 'Don't Break Your Promise To Me.' Heavy music."

Ska's jazz-shaded shufflebeat, of the early sixties would evolve in the latter portion of that decade into the tremulant pulse of Jamaica's rock steady craze, a development that Marley in '75 described thusly: "Well, the guys who were in control robbed the older musicians up, and them get frustrated and stopped playin', you understand? So the music changed from the older musicians to the younger, hungrier ones. People like I, we love James Brown and love your funky stuffs — yeah mon — and we dig into dat American bag, you understand? Strong. Cause this was rock steady now *du-du-du-du-du* [he mimics a quickened bass line]. Rock steady going through!"

As rock steady matured into the elastic taffy-pull of the reggae tempo, its timbale-like snare drum triggering the tensile drops of the bass riddim, Marley drew inspiration from the bold strategies of Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone. The parallel cross-pollinations of Bob Marley's Wailers and the rhythmic strides of American rock, pop and soul were of no small import, since the Wailers would be the sole group to flourish at each stage of Jamaican

music's modern evolution. Still, none of these things qualified Bob Marley as a truly distinctive rocker.

Rather, it was the moment in 1963, roughly one year after Jamaica had achieved independence, when Marley looked at his homeland and its emerging place in a post-war world and decided that in order to communicate with maximum integrity, he had to explode the music-industry proprieties of which he'd become apprised. The result was a song of the sufferah called "Simmer Down," a crude, spontaneous volley from the psychic depths of the shantytown underclass.

"Simmer Down" announced that, for all Marley aimed to become in the wider world of music, he wanted first and foremost to embrace the difficult truths of his native surroundings. The song gave a voice to people who'd had no voice in creole society, who were not spoken of in polite circles, pictured in the advertising media, quoted in newspapers or acknowledged in any fashion beyond the briefest mention of supposed transgressions they'd committed outside their ghetto enclaves. In short, Marley awoke with pride to the worth of his own often sorrowful background.

He did not merely "mirror" the realities of his fellow downtrodden — an artless, cynical exercise — but rather interpreted, championed and then embodied the rich possibilities of self-realization for those previously considered social phantoms.

Until his untimely death in May, 1981, Marley continued to produce material like "No Woman, No Cry," "I Shot the Sheriff," "Could You Be Loved" and "Redemption Song," that lifted the pariah agenda of the desperately poor into the international arena of ideas.

We honor this man tonight not for the popular musical milieu he absorbed, but rather for the potent personal metamorphosis he achieved. To proclaim one's dignity in the face of all diminishment, to take the humblest elements of existence and make them the basis of transcendence, to create a brash, timely and tuneful sound that ennobles us all with the courage to act on hope — this finally is the ability to forge a fresh adjective that differentiates rock & roll: Bob Marley.

—Timothy White



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