

The Roots of Reggae

Nearly thirty years ago, Bob Marley sung of love, pain, and revolution, and in the process left a lasting mark on the music world. This is the story of how Bob Marley became a musical legend.

When Bob Marley's soothing yet sorrowful voice breaks over the chords of the acoustic guitar in "Redemption Song," it still has the power to make the heart ache a little less. His nostalgic crooning in "No Woman, No Cry" invokes feelings of gratefulness for even the smallest remembrances of joy. And his gentle and coaxing commands to set the mood in "Turn Your Lights Down Low" could make even the lovelorn and scorned believe in romance again. He was good at this—prophesying exactly what his listeners needed to hear. He never employed fancy musical production or complex lyrical themes. He knew that what mattered most was love, pain, and how to cure one with the other. Even thirty years after his untimely passing, amid the twenty-first century challenges that include terrorism, famine, and the growing disparities between rich and poor, his music still heals. This is what makes him a legend.

His ascension from third-world musician to cultural icon began in the early 1970s in his homeland of Jamaica. There he formed a band named The Wailers with his two childhood friends, Bunny Wailer and Peter Tosh. Aston "Family Man" Barrett and his brother Carlton later joined the

group. Collectively they created a kind of music that plucked the bass guitar from the background of other musical styles and made it the essence of every song. The beat, which they borrowed from traditional African rhythms, was as easy and free-flowing as the dreadlocks they wore. As if they knew that their music was destined to flourish over the years, they began to call their new sound "roots reggae." The name stuck.

In the subsequent years, a young Bob Marley and his compatriots would learn of Rastafari, a religion born in Jamaica that linked together people of the African diaspora. Marley infused his lyrics with the promises of this religion, lending an uplifting message to the roots reggae beats. Central to the music were the themes of poverty, corrupt politics, and the gang violence that existed throughout the island, killing Jamaican youth. His songs, however, also bore a message of hope and a promise of deliverance from those circumstances. Because Bob Marley wrote and sang about misery, war, and the redemptive power of love, reggae became more than entertainment for its listeners. It became a coping mechanism for life.

It seemed that after this religious awakening, time sped up for the



reggae superstars. The year 1973 saw the release of the *Catch a Fire* and *Burnin'* albums. In 1975, Marley added a female singing trio that included his wife, Rita, to the musical mix. That same year, the band released *Natty Dread*, which brought about international admiration for the Jamaican musicians.

Though the lyrics were mainly in Jamaican Patois, an English-based creole, their music became a language in itself. Bob Marley and The Wailers enjoyed success in English-speaking countries and non-Anglophone territories alike, a difficult feat when considering the possible language barriers to be mounted. Their work, and consequently all reggae, is now a major force in places such as New Zealand, India, the United States, Indonesia, England, Japan, and South Africa.

“I think Bob Marley had the gift to be able to express himself as an artist using a very simple musical language,” reflects Pier Tosi, an Italian writer and advisor for Rototom Sunsplash, one of Europe’s largest annual reggae festivals. “[He went] straight to the heart not only with his words but with the chords and the sound of his wonderful voice.”

During their last outing together in 1980, Bob Marley and The Wailers made history by performing for the largest audiences in Europe at the time, including an audience of one hundred thousand in Milan. The band became the first reggae band to go on tour throughout Great Britain and the United

States.

In the same year, their history took a tragic turn when Marley became gravely ill with skin cancer. He tried to fight the disease for eight months, faithfully using only traditional Rasta remedies and eschewing modern medicines. Once the treatment began to fail, he embarked on a trip back to Jamaica.

He never made it home. Bob Marley died May 11, 1981, in a hospital in Miami. He was thirty-six.

Despite the reggae community’s tremendous loss, The Wailers have continued to play for three decades, performing with other musical legends like Stevie Wonder, Sting, and Carlos Santana. In 1987, however, the group would suffer another loss when their drummer, Carlton Barrett, passed away.

The Wailers found new life in the new millennium. In 2010, young reggae singer Koolant joined the band as lead singer. His popularity was already solidified from an appearance in the 2006 documentary *Made in Jamaica*. He appears in the last moments of the film, singing “Rat Race”, a song about the hardship of living in Jamaica. In this scene, a backdrop of dirt roads and shanty houses surround him. His captivating charcoal eyes are piercing, even from the other side of the screen, and it’s easy to hear traces of a young Bob Marley, the influences of a legend, in his voice.



In September 2010, Bob Marley's family and friends also put on a tribute concert at the Benedum Center in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, in the United States, in the very same spot where Marley played his last song thirty years earlier. In February 2011, a double disc recording of his last concert was released to mark the thirtieth year since Bob Marley's death.

With the current events in northern Africa, a continent which Marley regarded dearly, his music rings truer now than ever. One can imagine Marley's "Revolution" mirroring the international news coverage of 2011. Even from the other side of three decades, Bob Marley professes the inevitability of the bloodshed and burning fires of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.

"A lot of people are experiencing now what Bob would call 'an exodus, the movement of Jah People,'" Tosi ruminates. "This is basically why Bob Marley's words and legacy are still so strong and probably will keep growing."

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