On the first anniversary of his exodus, Rising Sun salutes the Iroh, Robert Nesta Marley, O.M.

RISING SUN

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BOB

LIVES
ROOTS - 'UP ROOTED'
Within the Third World, there is a unique social phenomenon. It was created by one of the terrible diaspora of Latin America. There our ancestors were subjected to the act of cultural decimation and transcended its suffering and accommodation. Perhaps, the American consciousness of oppression is first the creature of the oppressor. Yet, the children of the slaves need faith and have faith. They are there is a God and they are sure that somewhere that God is their God rooted in the land of the past and visualised in terms of their self-image.

Rastafari is a true faith in the sense that its believers have taken that step beyond mere rationality into the acceptance of a view of the unknown, unknowable and unprovable which is faith. To them Haile Selassie is the symbol of God on earth and God himself is as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The true Rastafarian, therefore, has traced his identity beyond mere history and geography to the ultimate source of all things, for the believer, the Creator himself. But he has arrived at his Creator through the images and the soil of Africa. By that act he has re-discovered the self that was mislaid in the Middle Passage.

CALYPSO
The CALYPSO, exclusively Trinidadian, is cynical, satirical at times; often cruel; and its troubadours are not afraid to speak of love, of loyalty, of hope, of ideals, of justice, of new things and new forms. It is this assertion of revolutionary possibility that sets reggae apart. It has evolved from the original folk form of the MENTO. From this there sprang SKA which began a sort of marriage between American Rhythm and Blues, Gospel and the indigenous mento form. The mento itself often was driven by the strong beat of the digging song which helped the workers to survive the monotony of long hours. It was only until the 1960's that it reflects in every mento a commentary on every pulse, something to do with survival and accommodation. The children of the diaspora struggle for a place in society to this day. Wone, they struggle for their identities, mislead as the slave ships made their way to the New World through the MIDDLE PASSAGE. Therefore, their commentaries must deal with these realities.

BLUES
The BLUES have some of this but are more reflective of the consciousness of oppression. Perhaps, the American black has always known his situation to be closer to the hopeless.

REVOLUTIONARY POSSIBILITY
Of them all, the REGGAE is the most explicitly revolutionary. It is commentary;
ROBERT NESTA MARLEY
O.M.

ROBERT NESTA MARLEY, Order of Merit (O.M.), super star, father and definitive exponent of reggae, was a Rastafrarian. He had taken that journey. By that act he had solved his identity crisis. He had become a complete human being. In his completeness he could sing songs of compassion: “No Woman, Nuh Cry”; he could spit revolutionary defiance: “War”; he could embrace proletarian internationalism: “Zimbabwe”.

I first knew Bob Marley in 1971, in the days of “Trench Town Rock”. At this stage his music was still like visceral protest carried on the wings of a relatively uncomplicated, commentary on the ghetto. Throughout that year, he used to perform as part of a group of artists who travelled all over Jamaica with me as the Party which I led prepared for the General Elections of 1972. Until that time my personal political perceptions had reflected a mutually reinforcing marriage. On the one hand, there was the political theory which I had absorbed from my Father as a youth and had developed into explicit Socialist doctrine as a student in University. On the other, the years as an organiser and negotiator with the Jamaican Trade Union Movement. To this was now added a vital and new ingredient. I could never pretend that the lyrics of the protest music which were the driving motivation of reggae taught me things that I did not know. From an intellectual point of view, they were confirmatory of all that I believed as a Socialist, and have struggled against, as a Trade Unionist. But I had not myself been born in the ghetto and was not personally a part of that experience. Reggae music influenced me profoundly by deepening the element of emotional comprehension.

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I suppose a rough equivalent might be sought by a consideration of the influence of a writer like Dickens upon the sensibilities of English readers in the Nineteenth Century. In highly literate societies, the pen is a mighty instrument. It cannot change the structure of classes, nor the relations between classes, because it cannot, of itself, change the nature and organisation of production. But it can pry loose from traditional class attitudes those extraordinary individuals who become a part of the process of political change in a society. Jamaica had produced a handful of great writers like GEORGE CAMPBELL, ROGER ARTHUR, GERALD BRICKELL, W.R.G.ERMA and VIC REID who had spoken to the issues of suffering and oppression. Their works helped create an awareness of the imperatives of change. But how many people read them? Everybody listened to Marley and his school of reggae protest singers. Certainly, I listened and was reinforced in the conviction that we had to struggle for change.

REGGAE GONE INTERNATIONAL

The invention of the gramophone, the radio and television have created a mass market for contemporary music. Where the symphony orchestra became the principal instrument for the dissemination of great music of the classical European tradition, simpler forms of music would now have international currency. Technology brought into the market the broad masses of the people virtually everywhere on the globe. So there is no mystery about the means by which Bob Marley’s music, and reggae along with it, have become familiar to the peoples of Europe, Africa and the Americas.

The real issue to be examined however, is why has reggae established an audience for itself among the myriad of competing musical forms which jostle for space in the communication apparatus? Pride of place is held by synthetic, escape music. With its bromides and anodynes it is there to pour balm on the souls that are either damaged by the failure to, or the economic system or bored because they have.

At the other end of the spectrum is the biting but parochial satire of the calypso which makes no impression on the international system whatsoever. Blues hold a significant place because sadness is a recognisable part of the human condition. In any case, America has produced most of the greatest technical virtuosos who have come out of the non-classical tradition. Clearly, reggae cannot, and is not going to compete with the escape music; but unlike the calypso, it has already carved a significant niche for itself. I can only hazard a guess that this owes much to two factors. Firstly, there is Marley himself, an authentic innovator, a genuine original in the sense that is true, say, of a STEVIE WONDER. Reggae has “gone international”, therefore, partly on the back of Marley’s gifts, and it must also be true that the protest of reggae, the positive assertion of moral categories goes beyond parochial boundaries. AMONG OTHER THINGS REGGAE IS THE SPONTANEOUS SOUND OF A LOCAL REVOLUTIONARY IMPULSE. BUT REVOLUTION ITSELF IS A UNIVERSAL CATEGORY. IT IS THIS, POSSIBLY, WHICH IT APART EVEN TO THE INTERNATIONAL EAR.
RS: Was the fact that Bob was a Rastaman a principal reason for his success?

Nettleford: I think this was most important — in fact, the appropriation of the term "Rastafarianism" gave to the whole Reggae music a total philosophy; this was against black people, gave him tremendous credibility and tremendous energy. I think that is part of the significance of Bob Marley.

RS: In a country like Jamaica where over 95% of our people are of African descent, would you say that Bob was able to make a contribution in the area of African culture bearing in mind that the African culture (in Jamaica) is still very much subordinate to the white European culture. Was Bob able, even for a while, to lift the African culture into the ascendency?

Nettleford: Yes. If African means having Africa and the cultural heritage and patrimony of Africa at its centre — yes. Undoubtedly, Marley made a tremendous contribution here, because I think, one of the fundamental problems of a society like this, is how do you give legitimacy to the products of the creative intellect and the creative imagination of the people of African ancestry in this part of the world. Marley certainly did this because contrary to common belief, the form or the acquisition of formal symbols of authority, of participation in political and economic decision-making, blur the reality of the persistent denigration of things of African origin in the Western world.

Marley and all that gave him the source of energy, the Rastafarian Movement, questioned all the fundamental assumptions made by Western society about people of African descent. So, in this sense he certainly (through action), that is through the composition of music and the performance as he created, he was able to show to the world the capabilities of the person of African descent to define himself, to create proper nouns for himself. This, of course, is a great achievement and in essence, a revolutionary act.

RS: Which of the lyrics mean the most to you?

Nettleford: "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery..." — that one line speaks a thousand things for the whole black people of the roots of epistemology, the theory of knowledge, broadening the human condition. In that line we find a thousand and one meanings about the true significance of people of African descent in the Western World.

The Hon. Robert Marley, O.M. being honoured in New York for his contribution to the Liberation Struggle in Africa.

Bob Marley showed in his songs that there is only one history that is human history. This revolutionary prophet realized that the liberation of man in history is a concrete process, but this process is global and must happen wherever oppressed peoples strive to regain dignity, personhood, manhood, through freedom and economic sovereignty.

— Rev. Ernie Gordon

Marley

Jamaica's cultural explosion as defined by the message and music of Bob Marley seems to have been temporarily stalled in its tracks with his passing. It awaits a new lyrical strength and sense of direction. Make no mistake, he was the master of reggae, sacrificing his life to transcend the music from its parochial confinement to today's international sound.

A day does not pass without my either humming or whistling one of his lyrics or humming one of the many memories I have of him. He was the heaviest spirit.

— Dermott Hussey