

The life of bob marley: the man, the religion, and the music



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Abstract

Bob Marley and the Wailers was a group that started during a time where people were looking for something to believe. Marley, conceived by a white man and raised by a black woman, centered his life around his family and faith while trying to understand the politics of his country. Marley's music was instrumental in acknowledging the problems with his poverty-stricken country while at the same time, spoke of the passions, the politics, the race, the culture and supplied a platform for peace, love and ultimately change. Marley influenced by his religion, Rastafari, displayed in his life and ultimately highlighted in some of his music. His music became an inspiration for his people of Jamaica to "Get Up, Stand Up" and fight for what they believe. Marley inspired a community and a nation during the brief time he was here, but his music and his outspoken desire for change supplied the fuel to cause the change to happen.

Keywords: Marley, Rastafari, Trench Town, Music, Politics

The Life of Bob Marley: The Man, The Religion and The Music

Bob Marley and the Wailers became an international group that specialized in a type of music that spoke to the millions. It became a sound that became known in neighborhood backyards to malls to elevator music. Marley's childhood experiences, compounded by both poverty and racial tension, developed a talent for music that increased the awareness of his country's political tension while playing to the soul of his people. His music conferred his religious beliefs as well as his political ones. Marley's music transpired

not just social change in his country but inspired social and racial change throughout the world.

Bob Marley, born Nesta Robert Marley, was born on February 6, 1945, in what is referred to as “ Nine Mile” (White, 1983, 1). The poorest of the poor areas of Jamaica centered around houses made with thatch roofs and floors made with dirt. During a time in Jamaica when whites and blacks were separated and relationships among them were frowned upon. His parent’s relationship was formed in secret and consummated in darkness. Marley was born to a black native woman, Ciddy, and white captain, Norval, of the British regimen with an age gap that spanned decades (Steckles, 2009, p. 3).

During a time when inequality flourished and living under the poverty line was routine, Marley had equipped himself with survival skills that would take him into adulthood and produce music that was significant to the peace of his country while accomplishing a sound, a flavor or music that incorporates the soul with a system-wide feeling of peace. Marley’s childhood while scrutinized by both poverty and racial tension, set the stage for his subsequent use of music to become a powerful political and spiritual transformation.

Bob Marley grew up in the rural “ countryside” of the Caribbean. Marley centered his life around family, friends, and later music. The day after his parents were married, his father, Norval, rode to Kingston on the back of his black stallion with plans to never return. His mother, heartbroken, sought counsel from her father, Omeriah. He instructed her to learn from her mistakes and move on. Ciddy proclaimed what she wanted was to build a life for herself and her son. She eventually moved to a house built by her father
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and paid for by her husband where she provided a meager life for herself and her son (Steckles, 2009, p. 6). Ciddy owned a shop that mainly sold goods based on credit and rarely saw actual payments. Norval rarely returned from Kingston. One of the rare days he did return, he informed Ciddy he decided to send the young Marley to a boarding school in Kingston. Ciddy had argued about sending her only child away, but as to the times, her voice was unheard. Marley wound up leaving and found himself in the same city that became his father's home: Kingston (Steckles, 2009).

Ciddy, under the misguided preaching of her husband, sent her son to Kingston to a boarding school. Upon arriving in the city, Marley found himself abandoned. He watched the city and the people passed by in any means available and with no sense of unity what so ever (White, 1983). He envisioned Nine Miles, the town of his birth and the connection to his mother and could not compare it the sprawling city before him. Nine Miles, in essence, was a speck in a much bigger picture. He saw people of skin tones, status, and everything in between; he saw the filth that littered the streets. The stench wafted through his nose, permeated his brain, and seeped into his pores. He saw the pain and degradation of those who did not care, the uninviting smiles lingering in doorways. He was shocked because the life he became accustomed to in the country was different from the life he experienced in the city. Marley was met by his father, Capt. Marley, whom he had never met before this day.

Ciddy was under the falsified impression her son was in Kingston to go to school. It was not long after he left she realized her son was missing. She received no report about him and all the letters she sent to her husband <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-of-bob-marley-the-man-the-religion-and-the-music/>

were left unanswered. It would be over a year before she heard anything about her son. One day while shopping, she was stopped by a friend who swore she encountered Marley. After a brief exchange and a promise that her aunt in Kingston would know where her son was, she left for Kingston. Ciddy made her way to the city in search of the woman who would know where he was. Ciddy and her aunt began searching the streets for Marley. After a few hours, they finally encountered a man who knew where Marley was staying. Standing back from the house, Ciddy spied her son kicking a ball next to a house with another kid. She watched and with tears in her eye and eventually screamed for her son. Marley, hearing his mother's voice, was astonished and excited to be seeing his mother after all this time. She learned Marley had been living with an older, sick woman and had been taking care of her. Ciddy was upset her son was not in school, that his father had abandoned him, and he was virtually fending for himself. She discovered her husband left him in the care of this elderly woman. He was unable to attend school or work. Ciddy was upset but excited to be reunited with her son. After all this time, mother and son finally made it back to the country, back to Nine Mile.

Marley was able to return to the life he missed; he returned to school, his grandfather's farm, and to his mother's shop. Most importantly, he returned to music. After living in Nine Mile, Ciddy realized country life was too hard, and after her brother made an offer. Ciddy moved to Kingston and left behind Marley with his grandfather. After a few years, Ciddy was able to bring him to live with her. This time when Nesta moved to Kingston to be with his mother, it was permanent.

After moving around Kingston a few times, Marley with his long-time friend; Bunny, kept to themselves while they continued to explore the city. Marley was captivated by the reflexive solidarity of his neighbors and felt drawn to them (White, 1983). He started viewing the city differently than when he was a boy who had been abandoned. He learned to play cards, dominoes and was instructed how to win fights. Life living the yard was permeated with a new and unspoken custom of having alone time with young girls. During this time, men were not considered men until they gained employment and acquired carnal familiarity with girls (White, 1983). Marley met and fell in love with a neighbor girl named Esther. The romance was short-lived as Ester's family did not want the mixed raced Marley involved with Esther and effectively ended their attempt at a relationship. After the relationship failed, he became known as " Tuff Gong" because of the reputation he acquired in the ghetto as " someone not to be trifled with" (White, 1983).

After leaving school when he was fifteen, he and Bunny decided to take a serious interest in music. Late in 1959, Marley asked two of Jamaica's most renowned musicians to meet with him. He wanted to come up with a new sound that was different from the island's traditional music; Marley wanted to incorporate Rastafarianism into his music. Marley was influenced by experiences from his childhood that gave him the experience he needed to create his music. Marley was exposed to numerous musicians that captivated him and allowed his music to argue for social change. Rastafari is a Christian influenced religion Marley centered his life around and began to creep into his music. He and Bunny began to work, the first result was ska- the precursor to rock steady, which in turn became reggae (White, 1983).

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The first ska record, a hit, was recorded on a primitive one-trace equipment. Although Bunny and Marley were absorbing the ska rhythms and were continually influenced by the sound of the era, they realized they would need help, especially since they were set on making music as a career.

Joe Higgs, a professional of a music university in their ghetto, was a legendary music pioneer and a star in Jamaica (Steckles, 2009, p. 23). The music university Higgs taught from was not your typical university by any standards, the style of teaching was connected to the environment and fostered the minds of the youth. “ Lectures were conducted amidst a cloud of ganja smoke and the sound of beer bottles” (Steckles, 2009, p. 24). He was passionate about passing on his knowledge, while also being stern and unrelenting when asking for perfection. He entertained jam sessions with many young singers and musicians and would often halt any performance to correct mistakes. Marley, so intrigued by Higgs, convinced Bunny and his other friend, Peter Tosh, to try and make their group more professional. While in Professor Higgs yard, Marley acquired two backup singers, Beverly Kelso, and Cherry Green (White, 1983). Often Marley and his Trench Town “ bredrin” were seen singing while a fire roared in the background. They continued attending Higg’s master class, learning pitch and harmonizing all the while wasting time. Through another of Marley’s’ friends, they were introduced to Alvin Patterson, an accomplished musician and percussionist who also knew the sound system king and pioneer record producer Clement “ Sir Coxon” Dodd (Steckles, 2009, p. 30). In 1963, Dodd held auditions every Sunday. Patterson convinced the group it was their time and urged them to audition. The audition did not go as planned, Dodd was not

impressed. Peter asserted they needed to do one more song, the song Marley wrote, "Dimmer Down," a ska song that directly spoke to Jamaican boys (Steckles, 2009, p. 31). The song and the group were a hit and by that night, the song was playing on Coxson's Down sound system.

Soon, Marley was organizing studio sessions and working alongside other big musicians. He learned the ins and outs of studio music and learned how recording worked. He learned everything from creating to distributing music. He also learned to mentor another group with a woman who would later become important to Marley. Alfarita Anderson was part of the music group, Soulettes. When Marley announced he had fallen for the dark beauty, she was as surprised as the rest of the group. Their love flourished in a time when spirits were down, and stress was high. The couple moved into the room she shared with her daughter and aunt. Her aunt came from a time when you did not share a bed without being married and promptly kicked the couple out. The next day, after much pleading and realizing the couple was serious about each other, she let them return. Although Marley had a roof over his head, he still needed money in his pockets, and while he recorded numerous tracks with "Simmer Down" becoming a No. 1 hit, he got only a pittance while Dodd gained the full amount (Steckles, 2009, p. 32). During this somewhat challenging time in Marley's life, his mother was now living in the United States with her new husband. She begged and pleaded with Marley to move with her to the States. She did not understand what was keeping Marley in the ghetto. What was this hold the slums had over her son? The perils of street life fired his imagination, giving himself something to rub up against, to challenge and outwit (White, 1983). While he did not

agree to the move the states, he did agree to get a passport. It was at this definitive point Nesta changed his name to Bob Marley. Marley and his group continued to make music and the music continued to climb the Jamaican charts. The group continued to earn little money while they padded the pockets of the record label. The group decided they had enough and solution and decided if they were going to make any money, they would have to make their own music. The only place the group could make that kind of music was in the United States. In 1966 Marley wrote to his mother about his plans, hopped on a plane, and flew to Philadelphia (Steckles, 2009).

Upon arrival in the United States, Marley was amazed at the opulence of his surroundings. He stayed with his mother and was impressed by the home and the bathrooms; he was also excited to have his own room, something unheard of back home (White, 1983). He quickly realized in order to make money, he needed to obtain a job. His mother helped him get a job on the dock of the waterfront. Eventually, Marley was unable to handle the labor needed to work and managed to find an inside janitorial job (Steckles, 2009). Marley's group continued without the leader, producing hits of their own. Marley also realized being in the United States, came with the possibility of being drafted. Marley returned home shortly thereafter to avoid the draft (Steckles, 2009).

When Marley returned home with the little money he did save, the group was able to produce their own record under the strained tutelage of Clement Dodd (Steckles, 2009). Again, Marley and his group did not get paid for the music that resulted from the self-produced hit, Marley finally had enough and never recorded another record with Coxson. Only years later did he learn of <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-of-bob-marley-the-man-the-religion-and-the-music/>

the royalty payments that were sent to Coxson that never made to Marley's hands. During this time, a new slower, heavier, more sensual rhythm called rock steady was being introduced, which is the foundation of Jamaica's musical evolution a marginally faster reggae (Steckles, 2009). Another major event took place would have a profound impact on Marley for the rest of his life: the arrival of their beloved Jah. Their living god, and the foundation for the Rastafarian movement he incorporated into his music.

After immersing himself with Rastafarian religion, Marley again realized to achieve the dream of owning his own label and producing music, he needed to move back to the United States. After moving back to his mother, now with his wife and kids in tow, Marley found work driving a forklift at night which inspired the most famous composition, "Night Shift" (Steckles, 2009). He met new friends, learned new talents, and made new music. Before long, he decided it was time to return to Jamaica. He had more money this time around, even with more mouths to feed. The sounds of the rock-steady movement waned and a new sound was replaced with reggae. "Reggae is a form of catchy, syncopated music that crystallized out of mélange of Caribbean dance music's (Rockwell, 1975)." Marley acquired abilities increased the popularity of his music. He went beyond every day "star." Marley used his Rastafarian religion to design a type of music that the end goal was a positive social change for Jamaicans, for the world, for people of color and especially for all of humanity. The Wailers continued to record new music but soon needed new musical guidance.

In walked Lee "Scratch" Perry. A monumental figure in the evolution of Jamaican music, Marley and the wailers turned to the diminutive genius to <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-of-bob-marley-the-man-the-religion-and-the-music/>

help them achieve their dreams. Perry was able to carry out something Coxson and even Marley himself could not—they made music with the sound everyone wanted to hear. Magic was in the air, but the musicians were so busy making it happen, they did not realize it (Steckles, 2009). They got down to their roots, lost the doo-wop style and focused on the infusion of Rastafarian and their own musical instincts. During their time with Perry, Bob and the Wailers recorded song after song which earned hit after hit on the pop charts. The only downfall to being with Perry was the same as being with Coxson, they were still not getting paid for their music. Despite their rise to the top of the charts, Marley and the Wailer were still broke. After a few strained years and a couple of chart-topping labels, Marley and the Wailers left Perry and took with them the musical group that originally helped produce the Wailers (Steckles, 2009).

This time, Bob and the Wailers created music that held the soul of Jamaica. Their music incorporated the soul of the earth and the breath of everything that surrounded them. The music was a source of release for Marley. In it, spoke of pain, loss and finding love. To this day, his music is listened to and conveys the same emotions. Although Marley was on track to becoming famous and to let the world hear his music, his group continued to fail financially. The money remained in the pockets of the producers. Marley and the Wailers realized they were still missing something, and they were about to be introduced to Chris Blackwell and his company called Island Records (Steckles, 2009). Blackwell made a deal with the Wailers. He gave them money to go and produce one of their songs, despite thinking he would never see the money again. What came from the deal was going to change

the history of popular music. The record the Wailers' recorded was completed in three sessions and called *Catch a Fire* (Steckles, 2009).

Although Marley and the Wailers recorded other albums, it was *Catch a Fire* which introduced the Wailers to the world with his unique rhythm and soulful voice. David Sinclair (n. d.) noted this was an "album with a groove that was languid, soulful and sun-drenched, yet lean and taut as a coiled spring." *This* record was the first of their music to be heard around the United States, the Wailers were now International.

The contributions of Marley and the Wailers had a spiritual and emotional pull that was hypnotic, ecstatic, and joyful (Barrington, 2011, p. 25). The listener responded to the feel of his music; at a time when a systematic deculturalization had taken roots, the community tried to overcome. The people saw Marley as a savior. He took the music, that transcends time, and gave a sense of peace to the people of Jamaica. "He was and remains a symbol of peace and freedom-a glimmer of hope in the midst of all the political strife and social inequality" (Gallardo, 2003, p. 201). Marley and the Wailer continued to make music and promote it while traveling from the States, Europe, and Jamaica. Touring became difficult for the Wailers. The touring, the food, flying, and being away from family is taking its toll on the group. By the end of 1973, two of the bands' major players decided to part ways, leaving Marley and the remaining member of the band to question their future. Marley had to act fast. He started creating music for a third Island album while gathering members to reform the Wailers (Steckles, 2009, p. 103).

Marley and the newly formed band created music that reflected his religion as well as militant compositions. His music inspired by the democracy of the times in Jamaica and his experiences with his wife. The band just wrapped up a song that became the most famous and was a changing point for Marley- “No Woman No Cry” (Steckles, 2009, p. 104). This song dedicated to his wife, Rita; it referenced their impoverished life together in Trench Town. According to Song Facts (2018), he was reassuring her to not let the slums get her down, that she should not shed a tear and that everything will be all right. Marley’s music had an undertone that incorporated the experiences and reflected his beliefs against what was happening in his home country. Marley was now going to have a platform to spread his message of “universal love and righteousness to every corner of the earth” (Steckles, 2009, p. 113).

Marley’s life and music revolved around his religion, Rastafari. It helped promote his religion with the use of Reggae music. “His utilization of religious and social metaphors established a dichotomy between good and evil, proved strategies for action, and offered a solution for peoples’ problems by advancing the concept of repatriation” (King & Jensen, 1995). Listening to his music has increased the popularity of the Rastafarian religion. Music is a unique way of communication. Listening to music, individuals can put their own interpretation to the words. According to King and Jensen (1995), music is a vehicle for sharing personal experiences (p. 20). Marley music was powerful and had a profound effect on the community and it became a powerful message to the world. Marley’s songs had metaphors that described heaven and hell and everything in between. Marley had said, “Politics and church are the same thing...Dem keep the

people ignorant” (Steckles, 2009, p. 202). His messages made the world question their own politics and beliefs. Producers, record labels, and the public had a hard time coming to terms with the knowledge Marley and his reggae music is essentially telling the story of his life. It was hard to understand Marley came from the slums of Jamaica, from a white father and black mother, from living on dirt floors and surviving on little, can produce music with a powerful message behind it. “ He was more than just a musician, more, even than what he aspired to be, an ambassador for Rastafari” (Steckles, 2009, p. 129).

Quoting Marley on his beliefs of what he thought about the government- “ Only one government me love-the government of Rastafari” (Steckles, 2009, p. 200). Marley was instrumental in the political realm of his country. He brought his people together through music and contested the politics through his words “ Time Magazine (Bob Marley, 1996) proclaimed he rivals the government as a political force.” Marley’s country was poverty-stricken and boasted a high crime rate. The country was torn with war and fighting, and he wanted a way to say thank you to his people; for supporting him and he wanted to find a way to stop the fighting, a way to people everyone together regardless of their political affiliation. On “ December 6, 1976, after a few harrowing days, Marley took the stage at National Heroes Park for the Smile Jamaica concert in Kingston and played to a crowd estimated to be eighty thousand and considered one of the biggest (Steckles, 2009, p. 136).” Marley was making a statement centered around his country. He was not going to let the wars, the politics or the poverty get the better of him, he was essentially risking his life for his people. The following few days, Marley left

his country for a self-imposed exile to tour during which some of his greatest and brilliant songs were recorded according to Time Magazine (Steckles, 2009, p. 137). Marley became more vocal about what was going on in his country. He was standing up and trying to give power to his people to stand up for themselves and face the country's domination. " Bob spoke for the people without infusing anger and by doing so he almost became an unbiased reflector of reality which was so convincingly clear that change had to follow his wake (Duncan, 2016)." His music made a statement, and everyone listened. Marley's music was becoming an inspiration to anyone who listened. It became a source for peace and redemption, a way to show the world co-existence was possible.

Marley continued to give concerts and as stated by Gary Steckles (2009), Marley headlined many historic concerts, but the one that would define his stature as a symbol of peace and universal brotherhood, and confirm, beyond a reasonable doubt, his status as one of the greatest figures ever to emerge from the melting pot of humanity we call the Caribbean-was the Peace Concert in Jamaica's National Stadium in 1978 (p. 153).

This was not to be a normal concert, it was a concert for the people by the people. During a crucial time in Jamaica's history and politics, the " One Love Peace" brought together two authority figures and joined hands with Marley. " It was the longest and most political reggae concert ever staged (Denslow, 2011)." His country backed Marley and his music. They stood by him and agreed with his statements. Marley used his concerts to grab the attention of the everyone around. He music eclipsed time and generations. Marley

continued to play at local venues when he accepted to play at another major event. The event was close to Marley's heart because the proceeds were to go to the African National Congress and other liberation forces in South Africa (Steckles, 2009, p. 172). It was here where Marley introduced to the crowds the still-to-be-written "Redemption Song." The song's meaning is as personal to the country as it is personal to Marley and his beliefs. It talks about redemption, freedom, and total emancipation. The song talks about freeing your mind from mental slavery and that only we can carry out. Most, if not all, of Marley's songs have a powerful message behind them. Listening to the music and hearing the message behind the words is what Marley believed was instrumental for change. Steckles (2009) mentioned he was awarded the United Nations Medal of Peace (p. 168) and his song "Zimbabwe" became his country's unofficial national anthem (p. 169).

Bob Marley and the Wailers music plays on various XM radio stations and streams over the internet daily. As eloquently said by Salmon (2011) "The proverbial orphan has become the staple of a mélange of pop music and commercial genres." He can be heard at parties and his religion is seen during Halloween. We share his music with our families and friends and pass it down to our children. "Legends are born, they fill a societal need, not created, not molded by record labels, but are driven by a genuine universal compassion and relation to the world without effort, just raw talent (Bob Marley, n. d.)."

Marley's music and passion were finally making a statement worldwide.

Effectively seen as more than just the reggae-pop; his music gradually

became a sound that has a unique flavor of its own. Marley was inducted in <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-of-bob-marley-the-man-the-religion-and-the-music/>

the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1994 and earned the Grammy Lifetime Achievement award in 2001, the Jamaican Order of Merit in 1981, as well as a boulevard in Brooklyn being named after him in 2006 (Bob Marley, n. d.). Marley was not one who prided himself on the awards he won, he prided himself on the fact his music made a difference. His awards and accomplishments are few but are also monumental in the truth of his words and actions. According to Thompson (2011),

Today, it seems as though no discussion of modern music can pass without reference to Bob Marley's influence, no examination of its popularity could be considered without his mention, and no visit to the local record store would be complete without a quick glance up the reggae aisle, to see how many more dubious compilations of oft-recycled oldies have hit the streets since last time.

By 1980, the tirelessly amount of travel and concerts were adding to the already ill Marley. While he experienced headaches and failing strength, he continued with another concert in Pittsburgh's Stanley Theater. He was under the impression this would be his last concert. Marley's cancer has spread to his body and reached his brain (Steckles, 2009, p. 179). He poured his heart and soul into this performance. Unfortunately, Bob Marley was unable to see the effects of his music on his country. The off-beat-accented Jamaican star, the charismatic voice, an outspoken public figure succumbed to cancer in 1981 (Rockwell, 1981). Although his voice is quiet, his music and the words are loud.

The legacy of Bob Marley and especially his music had transcended time. “ His music uplifted the existence of millions around the world, many of whom weren’t born when Bob was alive” (Steckles, 2009, p. 185). When we think of reggae, because of Marley’s influence, many modern musicians have utilized a reggae style sound. *Inner Circle, Magic!, UB40* are some classic examples of the blending between reggae and Indie and R&B. However modern Hip Hop roots can be traced directly to reggae and native African music (Mize, 2014). We think of his slow, soul pumping, Jamaican laced voice infusing politics and music to give a voice to fellow Jamaican’s that had none otherwise. “ His music was memories” (Gilmore, 2005). He spoke of the dirt floors of his home in Trench Town. He spoke of the love of his wife, the wars, and the politics he experienced. His songs were a testament to his life. His memories were passed along to his children and to the scores of people that love him and to the many others that learned about him.

Marley and the Wailers created a form of music during a time when history and politics clashed. His music came from a place within Marley that spoke of his passion, his adventures, his desires, and his life. His music had hidden meaning; that meant something a little different to everyone. “ Marley always believed that songs should contain strong, symbolic messages to instill unity and passion in the listeners and embolden them to fight for a cause they believe in” (Ray, 2017).

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