

The Music and Life of Bob Marley class

Introductory remarks by Matt Jenson:

Often times when someone discovers Marley they become obsessed, sucked into his musical/spiritual/political vortex and changed. I was one such person, yes, obsessed. I once told an old girlfriend that **I wanted to be Bob Marley**. While I was studying for my master's degree in jazz piano and by day deeply involved in doing Thelonius Monk transcriptions and learning about the history of western European musical style, and certainly inspired by it all, the only thing I did during my free time was listen...and dance to Marley.

Receiving the opportunity to teach this class has led me to dissect Marley's life and recordings on an even deeper level. During the course of teaching it at Berklee College of Music and elsewhere, I have had some amazing opportunities giving me a deeper understanding of Bob's livity and music: I've acquired many recordings from Roger Steffen's famous Reggae Archive in LA, of rare rehearsal tapes, board mixes of many concerts and radio interviews with Marley, I have been to Jamaica many times on research trips that have put me directly in contact with those in Marley's inner circle and I also had the opportunity to walk the streets and meet the people of Trenchtown. A decade ago I was asked by Rita Marley and the Rita Marley Foundation to be a guest speaker at the symposium associated with her Africa Unite cultural celebration of Bob's 61st birthday in Ghana, West Africa and recently returned from an amazing trip where I was doing research for my "The Art of Playing Reggae" course that I'm developing. More recently I am co leading a yearly experiential trip to the island called "Inside Reggae" in which we inject participants directly into the roots experience of the Jamaican music and cultural scene.

Don't ask me what it is; **I'm not black, I'm not a Rastafarian, I grew up in the woods of New Hampshire**, and I've never been part of the weed smoking ganja culture. I've known all along that my connection to Marley is rooted in some sort of primal necessity, and perhaps many of you feel the same way about your own reasons for being here.

As I travel down this path of my passion for Marley I find that part of ***my identification with African-American and Afro-Jamaican culture is that I see a parallel between the struggle of black experience in the 'new world' and the struggle of humanity in general against what I see as the slavery of the destructive and unfair practices of the hyper profit-driven and often racist corporate culture we now live in.*** To me, if a person's main goal in life is the pursuit of money and things or simply **the worry** of not having enough money or necessary things, **than one is enslaved**. I don't want to be forced into supporting a system that says because someone has more money and power, that their life and opinions are more important than someone with little money or power.

With the responsibility of teaching this class I feel that some sort of higher purpose is being played out. When you boil it down, trim away all the fat, get rid of all the self doubt and insecurity, the ultimate challenge Marley presents, as does any great artist, sage or spiritual leader, ***is for you to get to know yourself better.***

As I have learned about the specifics of Marley's life, an image of a pyramid comes to mind, with Marley sitting on top and a stream of divine light pouring into his head. However, just below his feet are layers and layers of controversy, contradiction, and broken promises. When you find out some of the intimate details of the culture surrounding Marley.....like the air of "homoerotic violence" that at least one observer recounts, his renowned polygamy, the outright theft committed by most of those closest to him, the difficult to understand role of Rastafari and religiosity in his life, his copious amounts of pot smoking, his role in the confusing Jamaican and international political landscape...**I just throw my hands in the air and drop the needle on the record**. Marley was as much a saint as he was a man, vexed as we all are by the ways of life on earth with the

acute juxtaposition between the divine and the lowly ways of Babylon. Again, I just press play on my phone and turn the volume up to FULL WATTS.... *“when it hits, you feel no pain.”*

When one sees the light of certain fundamental truths, and becomes committed to helping change things for the better, one automatically assumes the **responsibility of rebel and warrior**. *Bob Marley was very well aware of his role as such. He was a spiritual warrior; a natural mystic who blew through the air* and who, like a true shaman, traveled to the parts of existence that are somewhere beyond that which is seen as our day-to-day reality. In that sacred space, he *struggled* with both personal and universal demons, and returned to us all with a deep message. **He was also a physical warrior**; a skilled street fighter known to all as the “Tuff Gong,” and “sufferah” who grew up in one of the world’s most destitute ghettos. As a tireless worker he toiled against the odds of the ruthless music business, and throughout his life he made great sacrifices via endless touring, interviewing, peacemaking and rebellion. Through this long sufferation, *and only through it*, Bob Marley periodically entered a mystical/spiritual space, many times on stage, or alone in his bedroom with his guitar, or while looking up at the stars in his tiny home village of Nine Mile, and astonishingly, **even in the squalor of the government yards in Kingston**. In all of these settings, Marley saw pure beauty and light and the need for both personal and societal revolution.

Bob Marley proclaimed to be living in this world but not to be of it.....to be ***in*** this world but not ***of*** it! It seemed that in every aspect of his life, except for the writing, recording and performance of the music itself ...and a damn good soccer game, he was only truly part of it for fleeting moments while the rest of him was firmly planted in the transcendent.....**perched atop that pyramid**. Some even say this was how he felt about his involvement with the more formalized aspects of Rastafari...to be ***in*** it, but not really part ***of*** it.

Armed with a deep vision of the foibles of mankind, he *“...never expected to be justified by the laws of men,”* who, in their fear based and ignorant ways, accomplish not much more than the continuation of division. Bob Marley acted, and acts, as a reminder to us of something that we all have deeply embedded in our spirits, ***that of truth, honesty and love.***

Bob Marley *believed* in the much-deserved redemption of black society..... in One Love.... in human brotherhood as constantly displayed in the expression “I and I,”...in total unity and that the Peace Movement in JA circa 1978 could actually work.

He believed that an African ruler named Haile Salassie was actually **the divinity**, returned to earth as predicted.

He believed that Capitalism was nothing but a dehumanizing *“machine that make money.”*

He believed that smoking herb was critical to the waking up of consciousness, allowing one to have reflective time to oneself.

He believed in freedom from all oppressive forces, both physical and spiritual.

He believed that music was the most powerful weapon of all because it saves and heals, and doesn’t kill.

He believed that *“none but ourselves can free our minds”* and that it’s imperative to *“emancipate oneself from mental slavery.”*

Perhaps some of his truths are hard to understand, but his belief was of a transcendental nature and occupied every cell of his body **and that made ALL the difference**.

Bob died on May 11, 1981 in Miami, Florida at the very young age of 36. He died of cancer; melanoma and 5 malignant tumors spread through his body. Most don’t believe that the **CIA actually killed him**...but they were keeping a very close watch on him and it’s generally accepted by most Jamaicans in the know that if Edward Seaga (the conservative opposition leader) did not win the 1980 election, defeating the socialist government of Michael Manley, that the USA would have invaded. The last couple years of Marley’s life were rife with let-downs: many of his closest friends betrayed him, the Peace Movement in Jamaica failed and he was self-exiled from his homeland, some of his closest friends in Jamaica were murdered, the cancer spreading through his body was becoming more and more painful, and **the responsibility he felt as a spiritual/musical leader was immense**. Also, Bob Marley was a man who couldn’t say no. He **literally** kept some 6000 hangers on in Kingston alive with monetary hand-outs; he almost never refused an interview. He took good care of his

many children, wife, lovers and band-mates and kept up quite a physical routine based on his soccer obsession. ***By the end, he was totally exhausted.***

To see him perform, *though I never did*, to feel his commitment, which I have, *through his recordings and video footage*, was **(is)** to become a believer.

No, I don't believe in some of Marley's more earthly beliefs but the overriding message of his music and his life, transcend all of that and put a smile on my dancing soul. Brother Bob's music and life assures me that "*everything is going to be alright*" and that, amongst the tremendous difficulties in this life, there is a battle to be fought, **that**, at its most basic level, ***requires a truly rebellious attitude fostered through meditation and consciousness... and ACTION through music!***

There's a lot of talk out there, a lot of spin, even about these righteous things, but "***who feels it, knows it!***"...and that's what it's all about, the *feeeeeeeeling of this spirit*. It is at once a very personal journey that one must take responsibility for, yet it is directly connected to the universal.

It is my intention that this class will be much more than a fun time playing Marley's music and studying his life. Any musician worth anything must spend time taking apart and mimicking the music of the artists that inspire him/her, and then, *hopefully*, take those influences and create something new when **mixed in with your own personal experience**.

I want to transform you into revolutionaries! As you know, the world is in peril as our broken and abusive economic system runs headlong into the environmental crisis and now with the global pandemic underway many are weaving together the abuses through the lens of the Black Lives Matter movement. The decisions we make collectively as a human race now will determine if we survive or not. Will ignorance, greed, racism, endless unsustainable expansion and fear win *or* will we allow the truths of cooperation, sustainability and love to determine all of our decisions? Will we become a human-centered society or continue to be a thing-oriented society? Will we flip the script and truly put people before profit? **HOW WILL YOU HELP TO SAVE THE PLANET??!**

And to finish:

At other time and in other civilizations, this path of spiritual transformation was confined to a relatively select number of people; now, however, a large proportion of the human race must seek the path of wisdom if the world is to be preserved from the internal and external dangers that threaten it. In this time of violence and disintegration, spiritual vision is not an elitist luxury but vital to our survival.

–Sogyal Rinpoche, The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying. P127-8

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Boston, September, 2020

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