

BAFFLING THE INSIDERS

31 ◀ sports a dreadlock hairstyle, plaiting his locks in a long-flowing style that retains the woven appearance of corn rows. 'Haile Selassie is stronger than any,' the Rasta man affirmed the day after his second sold-out performance at the Lyceum in London in July. 'He is Imperial Majesty the Almighty, the Creator. Him can do whatever him want. He is earth's rightful ruler.' Suggesting that Selassie had been deposed as Emperor or trying to do anything but take notes in the face of such faith is, as Robin Denselow noted in the *Guardian*, 'like talking to a genial creature from outer space'.

The universal sentiment

Yet popular as he may be at home for these aspects of his persona, Marley has been championed by pop celebrities and critics alike for his words and music. The plight of the Jamaican slum-dweller is an experience of suffering and repression with which rebellious pop fans can empathise. 'Why can't we roam this open country/ Oh why can't we be what we want to be/We want to be free', is a universal sentiment.

Marley recognises the duality of his appeal. 'People are people, people think good, people think bad,' he said in the Hammersmith offices of Island Records, where he had just conferred with his mentor, label chief Chris Blackwell. 'In Jamaica, there is not just for Jamaica. I think universal. I talk Jamaica. To be universal, I still have to talk Jamaica. People might have a hard time understanding what I'm really saying, but some songs I leave Jamaica and deal with universal people.'

It is these that are his most famous numbers, songs that non-Jamaicans can relate to without embarrassment. *Stir It Up* is a sexy number taken to the BBC Top Twenty by Johnny Nash in 1971, *Guava Jelly* a Nash follow-up later recorded by Barbra Streisand on *Butterfly*, and *I Shot the Sheriff*, a worldwide hit for Eric Clapton.

It was the Nash connection that first won Marley a white audience. He had been active in the Jamaican recording industry since 1962, and the Wailers, formed in 1964, had done much to popularise the infant reggae form, a refinement of the ska beat that briefly received British notice in the mid-Sixties. Like most musical pioneers, Marley had to be plagiarised before his own work was accepted.

'I met Johnny Nash in Jamaica about five years ago. He was on vacation. We had some records on the radio, and him listen to it. Him kind of get interested in the type of lyrics and type of melody. Johnny did *Stir It Up* and later finished *I Can See Clearly Now* there.'

Nash's *Stir It Up* was sweeter and more refined than Marley's own version, which appeared on *Catch a Fire*, the first Wailers release in England. Yet *Stir It Up* was a small hit compared with Nash's own *I Can See Clearly Now*, an American number one which helped give him a hit follow-up with Marley's *Guava Jelly*. Streisand's hairdresser/producer Jon Peters had her record the song, which she released as a single shortly after Clapton had gone to number one in the States with *I Shot the Sheriff*. That tune had originally appeared on the Wailers' second album, *Burnin'*, as a plea for mercy from the accused, who admitted that 'I shot the sheriff/But I did not shoot the deputy.'

'Someone told me Clapton was doing the recording. I said, great!' Marley enthused at Hammersmith. 'When I heard it, it sounded good. Eric Clapton did all right to it. I feel we have too much musical break. Eric Clapton just went in, "I shot the sheriff," wham, right into the verse, wham, "I shot the sheriff," another verse. Meanwhile, we shot the sheriff, hit some music, then the verse. People can dig it on an LP, but for a 45 it can't work. When you do an original song, someone can listen and try and improve on what you did.'

Explosive lines

Marley's genial personal manner belies the revolutionary tone of his lyrics. His albums sound like the work of a man dedicated to perhaps violent social change. *Burnin'* took its title from the track *Burnin' and Lootin'*. *Revolution* from *Natty Dread*, the most recent album, affirmed that 'It takes a revolution to make a solution.' *Talkin' Blues* included the literally explosive lines 'I feel like bombing a church/Now you know that the preacher is lying.' The composer grinned when asked about the latter lyric. 'Some people might not appreciate that, because them love God and feel the church is a holy place. The Man himself isn't in one church. People talk about one church and another church, who preach. That isn't the real thing. Anyone can read dem Bible and get dem education ▶ 36

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34 ◀ from the Bible.' Marley also diluted his reference to revolution. 'There's a revolution going on, a secret revolution that won't be televised. People want righteousness. The revolution is bringing children back to God. "So Jah seh,/Not one of my seeds,/Shall sit in the sidewalk/ and beg bread./And verily, verily,/I'm saying unto thee/ Inite oneself and love Inanity."' 'I don't know if big people can get together, but the youth could. When the youth unite, maybe the big people will follow. Youth have to get a chance to run the earth. Only the youth can do the right thing right now. We need youth, youth have more love inside in this time than the big man, who get lost in the material type of thing. The big man did a great job in getting all these material things, but the youth can rule it.'

Marley roared at his own audacity. He realised his lyrics were to be taken in the spirit, not to the letter, for he is a warm man as well as a rebel. His *No Woman No Cry*, which Island have tried to capture live for single release, is a moving admonition to a lover not to weep when her man leaves her to seek the future. If anyone weeps, it may well be the listener: 'My feet is my only carriage/and so I've go to push on thru./Oh, while I'm gone,/ Everything's gonna be alright/ Everything's gonna be alright./ No woman no cry/No woman no cry, I seh little darlin'/don't shed no tears,/No woman no cry.'

Appeal to the heart

Numbers like *Lively Up Yourself*, an ode to the physical pleasures of dancing to reggae, and *Get Up, Stand Up*, a call to stand up for one's rights, also have humanistic lyrics, and it is this appeal which has won such a diverse audience. His London Lyceum crowds were composed of almost equal elements of black and white, the whites swaying to the rhythms of the Wailers and some blacks also appreciating the occasional cries of 'Rasta!' coming from the stage. At times the music would stop and a single spotlight shone on the Selassie portrait hung on the stage backdrop.

The double appeal has yet to get Marley in trouble, even in his Los Angeles club appearance this summer attended by a pop world Who's Who that perhaps had no idea what continent Ethiopia was in. Yet it has provoked a bit of disagreement among fans, some of whom champion Marley as a literate musician and the

Wailers an accomplished instrumental group, and others of whom see the group as an important part of their life style. Writing a Marley cover story for *Time Out* shortly before the Lyceum concerts, Myles Palmer concluded that the more people who realised the Wailers were music and not just reggae, the better. An irate Rastafarian replied in print that the more people who realised the Wailers were reggae and not just music, the better.

The group goes on, oblivious to the split in their wake. *Natty Dread*, named after the hairstyle was their first LP to enter the American charts, giving them personal success. Demand for live performances increase in both America and Britain, although it is difficult to pry the act away from home. When they last came to England they interpreted a snow-fall as a divine omen and fled the country.

Not for the kids

That gesture, humorous to many people in the record industry, was consistent for the Wailers. Being faithful to their roots has delayed their acceptance in other ways. Their refusal to embellish their records means that their radio exposure, outside specialist programmes such as appear weekly on Radio London and Capital, is virtually nil. Children's programmes like *Top of the Pops* are out of the question. The Wailers expand their white fan following only through word-of-mouth and the rave notices of the popular music press. The recent visit earned Marley not only the cover of *Time Out* but the front of *Melody Maker* and the *New Musical Express*.

The group gets another boost from its celebrity following. Paul McCartney names the Wailers as one of his three favourite acts, and George Harrison and Ringo Starr turned out to see them in Los Angeles. Marley is enjoying the 'musician's musician' sobriquet Stevie Wonder held before breaking through to the mass market in 1973. A tour with any major pop act could break the Wailers open at any time.

The only question is whether they seek this fame. Because their music is an extension of their life style, they cannot and should not change, even if pressured from pop moguls who want to simplify their message. Outsiders are usually baffled by pop phenomena. In the case of Bob Marley and the Wailers, even insiders are sometimes baffled. ■