

BOB MARLEY: ARTIST OF THE CENTURY?

by Gregory Stephens

The Beat, June 2000

Why is Bob Marley the artist of the century? Because even if we entertain the possibility that some other artist equalled Bob's influence in a given artform, no one else comes close to Bob's most enduring legacy, which extends far beyond music and into the realms of political rights, and of spirituality. Bob predicted in 1975 that "my music will live forever."

Prophecy fulfill. The reason why Bob was "the most enduring influential popular songwriter of the 20th century, worldwide," as I argue, is not just because he wrote great hooks (tho' he certainly did that!). His music endures because his spirit endures, and his spirit endures because of the moral depth and poetic expression of his political and spiritual vision.

This fusion of great music, political rights, and moral vision comes across in Carlos Santana's comment that Marley's songs are "hymns and anthems that people can use to build a new world." Perhaps Neville Garrick, Marley's artistic director and a former student of Angela Davis, said it best when he called Marley's songs "the new Psalms." The Psalms are songs of praise and words of wisdom that have influenced people around the world for millenia.

They are scriptures, to be quoted often by the faithful--set to music and recycled in an endless variety of ways. This is what is happening to Bob's Songs of Freedom--they are recycled by artists from jazz to jungle, from rock to rap. They are quoted by political and spiritual leaders. But more importantly, they are inscribed upon our hearts, a touchstone reminding us to "emancipate ourselves from mental slavery."

In both political and spiritual senses, all people can find resonance in the notion of an "Exodus" away from an old, repressive world towards the promise of a new way of life. Marley's vision was rooted in the memory of slavery, but he applied it to other forms of bondage--mental and economic slavery. He urged listeners to rebel against a system that built schools which were "graduating thieves and murderers." But above all, he voiced an alternative to "spiritual wickedness in high and low places," which was a new form of community, bound by "One Heart," "without regard to race."

Because of the strength of his faith, and the richness of his culture, Robert Nesta Marley, although a mere mortal like the rest of us, will sing his songs of freedom forever.

[Gregory Stephens is a visiting assistant professor of Human Relations at the University of Oklahoma. These reflections were adapted from "Bob Marley's Zion: A Transracial 'Blackman Redemption'," from the book *ON RACIAL FRONTIERS: THE NEW CULTURE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, RALPH ELLISON, AND BOB MARLEY* (Cambridge University Press)]