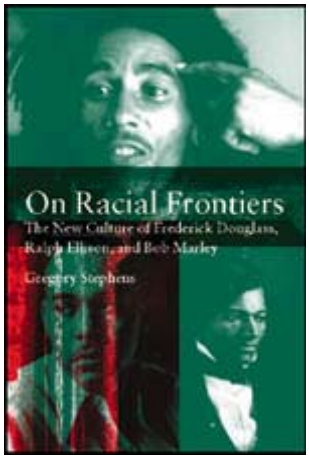
MEDITATIONS ON MARLEY

THE ISLANDLIFE INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR GREGORY STEPHENS



Gregory Stephens' provocative and challenging new book **"On Racial Frontiers: the New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley"** will be published this Spring by Cambridge University Press.

The University of California at San Diego scholar focuses on Marley's vision of "an imagined community where 'black redemption' and 'multiracial redemption' could coexist." Heartfelt and well-researched, "On Racial Frontiers" is an academic work that seeks and deserves a wider audience.

We recently conducted this on-line interview with the author.

Greetings Gregory, and welcome to bobmarley.com, official web site of the man you describe as "probably the most enduringly popular songwriter of the 20th century, worldwide." Before getting into the specifics of your book, how might you account for this extraordinary popularity?

A--Well first of all I think you have to start with the fact that Bob was really an extraordinarily talented and visionary songwriter. The greatest I've every known. I've been listening to Bob for 25 years, very intensely since 1987, when I first went to Jamaica. And although there are times when I put him aside for awhile (although you can never really put Bob aside if you're listening to contemporary conscious dancehall, so often is he quoted), I always come back and find new levels of meaning in his songs. They just keep growing richer. Roger Steffens refers to his songbook as "an embarrassment of riches," and says that Marley "had a sense of melody that is unmatched in the history of modern music." I think that's a common perception.

As far as what made his songs so great and so enduring, well, stand up for your rights they're really literature too, you know. Carolyn Cooper of the University of the West Indies says that Bob had a "highly charged literary sensibility." She writes that this literary richness of his work comes from "a fusion of scribal and oral literary influences." Specifically, he drew from two literary traditions--the oral folk culture of Jamaica, and the Bible, as it was read creatively and critically by the Rastas.

Then there is the way that Bob is perceived as a prophet, which is partly the way he saw himself, and partly the things that have been projected on him by his audiences. Steffens and Neville Garrick call Bob's music "the new Psalms." Carlos Santana says of Marley that "as we enter the new millennium, his songs will be hymns and anthems that people can use to build a new world." You can read lots of interviews with Bob where he talks about trying to word his songs in the most open way possible. So they are a form of poetry which are written in a way that people from all over the world can hear them and interpret them in different ways. As Carolyn Cooper points out, Bob was "astonished" by the multitude of meanings people found in his songs, but he was also very "permissive" about this.

Let me also big up Carole Yawney, a Canadian scholar who has studied the international reception of Rasta reggae. She says that Marley's global popularity is tied to the fact that Bob spoke "in the metaphors of the Judaic heritage." Lots of people identify with his rejection of a dysfunctional, dehumanizing, and unsustainable "Babylon System," even if they don't agree with the views of the Rastas, or with the Bible. But

everybody can understand the idea of an "Exodus."

Finally, there's no doubt that Marley's mixed-"race" look has played a role in his popularity. People of all groups can see something of themselves in him, so his image, even apart from the music, has taken on a life of its own. He's become a global icon almost on the scale of a Buddha or a Virgin Mary.

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Q--Marley was a "missionary" for Rasta, and Rasta was, you write, "a word that both signified a history of racial oppression, and yet pointed to a definition of community beyond the language or race." Could you explain a bit further about this apparent dichotomy?

A--There was a big controversy in 1998 when Sizzla came on stage at Sumfest and went into a rant about "bun the white people in Jamaica." This was reported in Vibe Magazine and Reggae Nucleus Magazine, among other places. It was all over rec.music.reggae (RMR). Some got real shocked and indignant. It was certainly no surprise to me, cause this anti-white man strain has always been one part of Rasta culture, no? Sizzla is a Bobo, who are into the black supremacy thing. Bob was from the Twelve Tribes, which was always multiracial in orientation. But Nyabinghi, the heartbeat riddim which is the foundation of reggae, comes from Kenya, and refers to warriors in the 1930s who were fighting British imperialism. Their slogan was "death to white oppressors." By 1960 in Jamaica this had evolved to "death to black and white oppressors." But a certain binary racialism has persisted among many Rastas. Bob was uniquely situated to help push Rastas towards the "One Love" or "One Blood" ideal. But even when he does so, he's still talking about slavery and colonialism. When Sizzla says "run white people out of Jamaica," there's an echo of Bob's "chase dem crazy Baldheads out of town." But with Bob, there are always many interpretations possible. A Baldhead can be "the whitemon," but it can also be a blackmon without dreads. Or any unbeliever. So there are all sorts of ironies at play when Bob goes to England and sings "didn't my people before me slave for this country" and "chase dem crazy baldheads out of town." To an almost all-white audience!

"Rasta includes all Africans, but it also carries a potential for multiracial community that is not present in the word "black." Japeth, the mythical father of the Europeans in the Bible, had the same father as Ham, the father of Africans, and Shem, the father of Asians. So Rasta is both a short-term means to African unity and a long-term path to multiracial community."

Bob gave a very revealing interview to the Afro-American journalist Greg Broussard in 1977. That was a reasoning in Bob's Delaware house not intended for a mass audience. He tells Broussard that he prefers Rasta over "black" because Rasta carried a unity vibe, so that "once yuh know seh yuh Rasta, them cyaan black yuh out again." Bob wants to use "Rasta" because he believes "black" carries too much baggage and is too contested to unify. Rasta includes all Africans, but it also carries a potential for a multiracial community that is not present in the word "black." Japeth, the mythical father of the Europeans in the Bible, had the same father as Ham, the father of Africans, and Shem, the father of Asians. So Rasta is both a short-term means to African unity and a long-term path to multiracial community.

Q--You view Marley's biraciality as a key to the broadening of Rasta into a more inclusive "One Love" movement. This is a crucial argument in your book. How would you respond to black people who "claim" Bob and say that the fact that he had a white dad is irrelevant?

A--Well, I don't think that anybody who has heard the testimony of Bob's friends and family could say that his biraciality-- or being "brown" as they say a yard--is irrelevant. Rita Marley recalls that Kingston toughs often taunted Bob on account of his absent

white father. "Having come through this white father caused such difficulties that he'd want to kill himself," she says. There's a scene in Steven Davis' biography where, in 1962, Bob had an affair with a girl in a Trenchtown government yard. Her brother broke it off hecause he didn't want "no white boy messing up our blood lines." "Them style him a white man," one friend remembers. The authors of the book "Songs of Freedom" write: "Considered a white boy, his complexion would often bring out the worst in people." See, most browns in Jamaica had always sided with the white ruling class. So Bob went completely against type, "cleaving to the black." But people like Benjamin Foot, Bob's tour manager for his tour of Great Britain in 1973, felt that Bob was still quite ambiguous about being a figurehead for this black liberation movement. It was something he grew into. But he never lost a transracial perspective: just check the quote at the beginning of the film "Time Will Tell." Bob was asked if he was prejudiced against whites, and he said: "Well, I can't be prejudiced against myself. My father was a white and my mother black, you know. Them call me half-caste, or whatever. Well, me don't dip on nobody's side. Me don't dip on the black man's side nor the white man's side. Me dip on God's side, the one who create me and cause me to come from black and white, who give me this talent."

And when Bob says "God's side," well, you must understand that he is seeing God through Selassie, and that what he called the most important philosophy of his life was Selassie's speech to the United Nations in 1963, which Bob set to music in "War." Pure trans-racial philosophy, dat! In my book "On Racial Frontiers" I argued that Marley's imperfect white father Norval, who was not around to help raise him, had an important role in the way that Bob imagined Selassie as a "perfect" African father. Selassie could resolve the tensions of Bob's biraciality, in a way that was "pro-black" and yet ultimately non-racial.

Q--You also make an interesting point regarding a shift in the way Marley and his music have been perceived by his audience, and the consequent basis of his appeal. How did the fact that his first mass audience was "white," as you suggest, drive some of his later career moves?

music man A--Well, Bob's first mass audience wasn't "white," it was Jamaican, and more broadly Caribbean, which is of course predominantly black. Or Afro-Caribbean. But certainly his main international audience, during his life, was European and Euro-American. I find it interesting that in the first tour of Great Britain by the Wailers in 1973, their shows were evenly divided between dual audiences: half at reggae clubs, half at rock-style clubs. By 1975 the audiences were more mixed, but predominantly "white." Some people think this is merely because Chris Blackwell of Island Records marketed him as a rock act. I think that is partially true, but it underestimates the degree to which Bob had always tried to break through to a pop audience, and had always participated in shifting his image, and to some degree his sound and message, to try to reach that audience.

"Natty Dread" was of course originally "Knotty Dread" in Jamaica, which meant something far more radical. Island renamed the album "Natty Dread," which was kind of an airbrush move, like the cover. But Bob embraced the new term and the new image. More significantly, "Survival" was originally "Black Survival". A sell-out or de-racialization? Hardly, because pictures of slave ships and African flags were all over the covers. Yet minor shifts like this could only be done with Marley's approval, and indicate his determination and wilingness to seek the widest audience possible.

Bob engaged in "career moves" aimed at several audiences. "Punky Reggae Party" was aimed at whites who were coming to his shows while he was in exile in London in 1977. Bob was asked if he was going to use strategies to go beyond his white base. He said "Me no really sing fe white people, me sing fe all people." Yet he certainly wanted to connect with Afro-Americans, above all, as a target audience. Bob was accused of "going soft" on "Kaya," yet the truth is that this, his most commercial-sounding record, was primarily an attempt to get urban airplay. As Neville Garrick notes, R&B

programmers were very narrow-minded at the time, and were calling reggae "jungle music." On "Survival," of course, Bob went for broke, as far as leaving his lasting legacy to people of the African diaspora. I think this was both a reaction to the criticism of "Kaya," and probably driven by his awareness that his time was very short.

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Q--Your discussion of Marcus Garvey is sure to raise a few eyebrows (and perhaps not a few hackles). Why do you see Garvey as "a paradoxical choice as a patron saint for Marley-era Rastafarian reggae"?

A--The short answer to that is, above all, because Garvey said some very nasty things about Selassie, when he fled Ethiopia after Italy's invasion, and because he was extremely hostile to the Rastas he encountered in Jamaica during the 1930s.

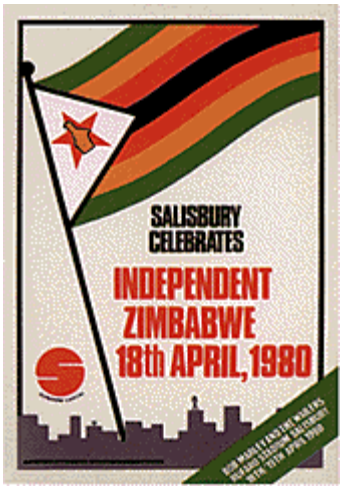
Now I would like to say that I have no desire to try and "tear down" a Jamaican hero. I was in Jamaica in 1987 when the island was celebrating his 100th birthday, and I know how deep the love of Garvey is for many Rastas. Yet the way Garvey is remembered, and what he actually did and said, are often two different things. You don't have to dig very far into the historical record to realize that the interest in Garvey by both the Rastas and black nationalists has been "characterized by a blindness to his personal faults and ideological shortcomings," as Wilson Jeremiah Moses writes. The shortcomings include persistent anti-Semitism, a pathological hatred of race-mixing, and a dictatorial and culturally Eurocentric worldview.

You can look this up. Garvey told Afro-American writer J.A. Rogers that "We were the first Fascists...Mussolini copied our Fascism." Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean scholars such as Moses, Clarence Walker, and C.L.R. James have all agreed with this self- assessment and called Garvey a fascist or a proto-fascist.

Yet Garvey also inspired people all over the world, including many in Latin America, to take pride in their African heritage. And for this, at least, I think that respect is due.

Q--Marley's relationship to Africa is a complex and frequently misunderstood one. You refer to his vision of a return to Africa as a "utopian horizon," a place to escape from the Babylon system. Could you elaborate a bit on this?

A--You know, we just got a Malcolm X stamp in the U.S. That's really amazing, when you think about it. Back when Malcolm was a fire-breathing "white man is the devil" Black Muslim, he sometimes talked as a Garveyite--taking the "back to Africa" movement literally. Yet as his thought matured he came to advocate a cultural TURN (reorientation) rather than a physical return. In a way I see Marley as the fulfillment of Malcolm's late advice that Garvey's "back to Africa" should be embraced as a cultural orientation. Yet Marley never ceased portraying Africa as a literal destination. It is an open question to me how much Marley continued to believe in literal repatriation, late in his life. He visited Ethiopia in December 1978, and he came back saying he was "vexed with Africa," because he had seen that many Ethiopians disrespected or even hated Selassie and what he stood for. You know, the Amharas, the ethnic group of which Selassie was a part, did not see themselves as "black." They saw themselves as Semitic, and sometimes even as white. And they used this myth of Solomonic descent to engage in a brutal imperial conquest of many black tribes to the south. So there was a lot of resistance to Selassie and the Amharas, which was by turns political, tribal, and some degrees racial. Bob saw some of this, and he came back acknowledging that when the Rastas went back to Africa, it might have to be somewhere besides Ethiopia.



Bob had other encounters with the "real" Africa. There's a wonderful picture in the book "Spirit Dancer" of Bob arguing with youths on the beach in Gabon, in early 1980. They were saying, you know, "who are you to come and tell us about Africa?" Then of course he played the Zimbabwe independence ceremonies later that year. I have read several reports that he became disillusioned by some of what he saw there.

So there was some conflict between the African Zion of faith, and the African reality. But the truth is that the geographical Africa had very little to do with what Garvey imagined, or with what most Rastas projected onto it. Just like Jerusalem, as a real city, has little connection with the Zion of faith for most Jews or Christians.

Still, we need to imagine a promised land to move towards, whether it exists as a geographical and political space or not. Bob wanted to live near his father, his imagined father, his spiritual father. He couldn't picture a future in which he wasn't moving toward his father. "My future is in a green part of the earth, big enough where we can roam freely," he said. "I don't think Jamaica going to be the right place, because Jamaica likkle bit small...the only place big enough for us is Africa."

This is the point at which, although I respect and honor the Zion of Marley's faith, I have to think with a critical mind about the political implications of what he says. I mean, you can hear Mutabaruka, who recently came back from Ethiopia, saying the same thing. Yet when you talk about "roaming freely" in African, well, this assumes that Africans would welcome with open arms diasporic Africans who want to come home to Zion. And as many Rastas who relocated to Shashamane have found out, the real Africa isn't that accepting of diasporic Africans who want to enact their fantasies of actual relocation.

Still, Africa as a horizon--a goal towards which we orient ourselves, has been tremendously important for diasporians on many levels--spiritual, cultural, etc. And the real Africa has given us and still gives us so much in terms of models of community, etc. When Bob sings about Babylon as "a world that forces lifelong insecurity," he needs the African Zion in order to imagine an alternative. And in that sense, Africa has survived as a horizon toward which reggae's global audience has moved--out of Babylon, and toward the motherland.

Q--You describe Marley's vision as "one of collective work and responsibility, of good overcoming evil." Do you suppose he would be disappointed by the situation in the world today? I'm thinking in particular of the ongoing conflicts in Africa.

A--What would Bob have made of Rwanda? I don't know. That's tribal war of the africa sort that Bob saw in Jamaica with political gangs, and which broke his heart, but on a much grander scale. It is certainly sobering for those who want to see all conflict through a racial lense. I have no doubt Bob could have written a great song about this conflict.

The tribal war in places like Liberia also challenges us to move beyond black vs. white thinking. You know, much of this conflict is centered around native Africans, vs. blacks who were relocated from the New World, or England. The returning "black" people were often fair-skinned, and thought of themselves as superior. They set up an apartheid in which the native, black Africans were second class citizens. Some of those divisions are bearing vicious fruit today.

Bob, like many Rastas, often said "Africa awaits her creator." By that he meant it was

diasporic Africans who would create a modern Africa. There's a sort of imperialist mindset behind that assumption--that African can only get herself together if we come show her how. Re-create Africa in our own image. Yet maybe there's a truth to that, too. Maybe if Bob's international audience could learn to pull back their projections onto the imagined Africa, and pour their love and resources into the real Africa, then Africans could develop the infrastructure and other things they need to give people enough security to quit fighting tribal wars.

Q--Bob's life was obviously one of great drama. As you suggest, however, it is his work that ultimately will be remembered. What do you see as his most important legacy?

A--If I could think of a core of Bob's legacy that is most important, it would have to be the line from "Redemption Song": "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery/ None but ourselves can free our minds."

Bob has multiple legacies, of course. The Ethiopian Orthodox archbishop at his funeral in 1981 said that trying to assess Bob Marley was "like trying to take a sip from the ocean." That's really true, you know? Bob said in 1975 that "my music will go on forever." It might have seemed arrogant at the time, but he knew, he knew because his music drew on very deep roots, and it was so broad and so visionary that it would have very distant fruits. I have absolutely no doubt that many of Bob's songs will live forever. And that we can only know in part the ways in which people in the future will interpret those songs, the ways in which they will use them and re-create them and forward them in each generation.

One lasting legacy that is important all over the world is that every generation and every people must see God, must seek the Almighty One, in their own image. Malcolm used to say, if someone gives you a God that doesn't look like you, then hand that God right back to them. Marley and the Rastas taught us an invaluable lesson about looking not to a "God above" but to a living deity who lives within the consciousness of every one. For Rastas, the "God within" reappeared in their own image to assist in the rebirth of a new world. The beauty of this legacy is that the representer and the representation of this God took a form in which all "races" could see themselves.

For me, there are also warning signals in Marley's legacy, most specifically, the dangers of the Judeo-Christian tradition of projecting messianic expectations onto our leaders or heroes. Prophets and messiahs always die young, seen? So that gets to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. I'm don't think that the sacrifice of prophets to appease the collective soul is a legacy which I want to teach my own children.

Yet maybe Bob was right: "our prophets" go on being killed, and maybe "it's just a part of it/You've got to fulfill the book."

Coming back to your earlier question about the reasons for Bob's enduring popularity: Marley's humble origins endowed him with a moral authority which would be impossible to achieve for an artist from a "superpower." He fulfills an archetypal role of the hero which has worldwide resonance: he was an abandoned child who was "adopted" by royalty and later "died for his people." If Bob was merely "fulfilling the book," then I hope that some day we write a new book in which prophets live to a ripe old age.

If you are interested in ordering a copy of Gregory Stephens' "On Racial Frontiers", you can place an order through Cambridge University Press' web site.