

## Chant Down Babylon



"The PBS documentary, Jeremy Marre's excellent *Rebel Music*, makes clear that Bob's talents as an entertainer are among the least of the reasons why people are still talking about him today. Marley was a "real revolutionary", on whom the CIA kept a file which it still refuses to release, for reasons of "national security". He was the voice of a new world trying to be born, the face of international freedom movements, both political and spiritual. Today, Bob is a paradox: it is primarily as a spokesperson for underprivileged people that he has become a global icon, but his music and image have become thoroughly commodified in every imaginable way.

. . . The Rastas, the culture which spawned Bob . . . believe in a concept called *Word/Sound/Power*. That is, if you combine visionary words with seductive sounds, you get world-transforming power. Bob and the Rastas ritually refer to this as "Chant Down Babylon". It's a variant on the Bible story about the ritual demolishing of Jericho's walls. But it's got a curiously post-modern twist: Babylon is chanted down from within.

. . . Jack Johnson-Hill . . . defines Babylon as "an artificial affluent society of self-absorbed individuals who worship idols and live decadent lifestyles at the expense of the poor". When I read this to my audiences and ask if that reminds them of anyone they know, I get a ripple of laughter—the laughter of self-recognition. "It's you," Bob sang, "it's you I'm talking to".

Bob Marley not only criticized a way of life that many of us recognize as destructive, he also voiced a more attractive alternative. In my book *On Racial Frontiers*, I list three main features of this alternative: non-racialism (One Blood), sustainability (living within the earth's limits), and I-and-I consciousness ("the God within"). If we recognize that the Creator is everywhere, then there is no division between us and our Creator, no division between us and Creation. So we cannot hate other humans, and destroy creation, without hating and destroying ourselves.

I think one of the most far-sighted aspects of Bob's social vision is that he differentiates between revolution as oppositional fashion, and revolution as a true change of consciousness. This is illustrated beautifully in a filmed interview of Bob at the Black Studies Department of UCLA in 1978. A cofi cap-clad grad student asks Bob how he can claim to be a revolutionary, when he is a pop star, living in the West.

Bob responds: "We don't even claim to be revolutionaries [in that sense] . . . I wanna tell ya: if them want to win the revolution, them have to win it with Rasta. 'Cause if you win another way, you have to go fight again. When you're Rasta and you win, there's no more war." Over the past year, I have been showing this clip to audiences all over the United States, and in Great Britain, as a means of talking about what Bob meant by a "real revolutionary".

Bob sometimes claimed he and his people were revolutionaries, "fighting single-handed with music". But here he adapts the Gandhian principle that "an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind". Violent revolutions inevitably bring to power a "new boss" who, although previously oppressed, once in power, turns into an oppressor. This is the cycle of his-story. We have seen it in Yugoslavia. We have seen it in the tribal war between the Hutus and the Tutsis.

The only way to break this cycle, Bob is saying, is through a revolution in consciousness. A revolution that goes beyond merely naming what it opposes, and learns to create a more attractive alternative. Bob's more attractive alternative to the "Babylon System", and "mental slavery" of all forms, he called *Rasta*.

Some say Bob died young, at age 36, because he never separated himself from the people whom he felt called to serve. . . . It's as true as ever, that there is no greater love than being willing to lay down your life for your friends. Especially friends who do not look like us, friends who have not even been born yet.

Now imagine that becoming fashionable: self-sacrifice for the benefit of future generations. That would be something truly revolutionary."

- Gregory Stevens, excerpts from [http://www.jahworks.org/music/features/marley\\_star\\_real.html](http://www.jahworks.org/music/features/marley_star_real.html)