

# “*Rebel Music*”: Bob Marley’s Rhythms of Resistance

“*Rebel Music*”: los ritmos de resistencia de Bob Marley

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## ABSTRACT

“Rebel Music”, from the 1974 *Natty Dread* album, is a classic articulation of Marley’s liberatory politics. Though the album credits state that the song was written by Aston Barrett and Hugh Peart, the vision is unquestionably Marley’s. “Rebel Music” both road-block and curfew become symbols of a larger system of brutality with its roots in plantation slavery.

**Key words:** Bob Marley, Rebel Music, Resistance, rasta woman

## RESUMEN

“Rebel Music”, del álbum de 1974 *Natty Dread*, es un clásico de la articulación política liberadora de Marley. Aunque los créditos del álbum afirman que la canción fue escrita por Aston Barrett y Hugh Peart, la visión es, sin duda, de Marley. En “Rebel Music” los toques de queda y las restricciones de movilidad se convierten en símbolos de un sistema más amplio de brutalidad con sus raíces en la esclavitud en las plantaciones.

**Palabras claves:** Bob Marley, Rebel Music, Resistencia, mujer rasta

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Reggae music is a potent medium through which the political consciousness of the Jamaican people has long been expressed. Iconic Bob Marley, the global face of Jamaica, is one of the finest political poets the Caribbean has produced. In his song “One Drop”, from the 1979 *Survival* album, Marley vividly defines reggae music as a “drumbeat . . . playing a rhythm/resisting against the system.”

Hardcore reggae music is, indeed, an instrument of political insurrection. Its central ideological pre-occupation is radical social change. Bob Marley’s rebellious songs are a compelling affirmation of resistance against the systematic dehumanization of oppressed peoples across the globe.

“Rebel Music”, from the 1974 *Natty Dread album*, is a classic articulation of Marley’s liberatory politics. Though the album credits state that the song was written by Aston Barrett and Hugh Peart, the vision is unquestionably Marley’s. In the opening verse of the song, he asks two profound questions:

Why can’t we roam this open country?  
Oh why can’t we be what we wanna be?

Then he makes a stark declaration: “We want to be free”. The quest for freedom is a recurring theme in Marley’s body of work.

But there are obstacles to freedom. In “Rebel Music”, Marley chants: “Three o’clock roadblock, curfew”. The early-morning roadblock and curfew are decidedly literal. In the 1970s, Jamaican society was in a state of political upheaval. Policing the movement of the citizenry was a strategy designed to exert control over a dissenting populace. But in “Rebel Music” both roadblock and curfew become symbols of a larger system of brutality with its roots in plantation slavery.

In Rastafari iconography, the metaphor of biblical Babylon is deployed to denote the system of institutionalised oppression. So in “Babylon System,” from the 1979 *Survival* album, Marley denounces the victimisation of the downtrodden and asserts the human right to rebel:

We refuse to be  
What you wanted us to be.  
We are what we are  
That’s the way it’s going to be.  
You can’t educate I  
For no equal opportunity  
Talking about my freedom  
People freedom and liberty.  
Yeah!  
We’ve been trodding on the winepress  
Much too long  
Rebel, rebel.

Rebellion is the inevitable response to the legacies of enslavement and colonialism. Indeed, Marley underscores the role of the school system and institutional religion in prolonging the suffering of the masses of the Jamaican people. He uses the metaphor of the vampire to signify the parasitical political system that robs the people of their life force:

Babylon system is the vampire  
Sucking the children day by day.  
Babylon system is the vampire  
Sucking the blood of the sufferers.  
Building church and university  
Deceiving the people continually.  
Me say them graduating  
Thieves and murderers,  
Look out now  
Sucking the blood of the sufferers.  
Tell the children the truth.

Similarly, in “Crazy Baldhead,” from the 1976 *Rastaman Vibration* album, the theme of revolution resounds. Again, the social institutions of Babylon are seen as dysfunctional – the educational, religious and penal systems. “Brain-wash education” must be rejected and the con-man/crazy baldhead sent running out of town:

Build your penitentiary  
We build your schools  
Brain-wash education to make us the fools.

Hateraged you reward for our love  
Telling us of your God above.  
We gonna chase those crazy  
Chase those crazy bunkheads  
Chase those crazy baldheads  
Out of town.  
Here comes the con-man  
Coming with his con-plan  
We won't take no bribe  
We got to stay alive.

Bob Marley insists that the truth must be told. Colonialist distortions of history must be revised, particularly for the benefit of the children whose self-concept will be compromised by false narratives of the past. Marley's assertion, "We want to be free", is a fundamental challenge to racist ideologies that imprison African people in roles of perpetual servitude. The motif of internalized liberation, "we are what we are," is elaborated in Marley's lyrical "*Redemption Song*," from the 1980 *Uprising* album.

The opening lines of the song telescope time, compressing a whole history of exploitation and suffering into "minutes". Marley's choice of the word 'pirates', confirms the fact that many revered heroes of the British Empire were nothing but common criminals. Sir John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake, for example, were key factors in the slave trade, earning great wealth from the business of human torture.

But Marley also reminds us that Africans were implicated in the mercenary enterprise of trans-Atlantic slavery. The ambiguous placement of that neutral "they" inextricably links both the robbers and sellers. There is no real difference between the 'they' who rob and the 'they' who sell.

If there were no buyers there would be no sellers. But the instinct to exploit seems to be our common inhumanity:

Old pirates, yes  
They rob I  
Sold I to the merchant ships  
Minutes after they took I

From the bottomless pit  
But my hand was made strong  
By the hand of the Almighty  
We forward in this generation  
Triumphantly.  
Won't you help to song?  
These songs of freedom?  
Cause all I ever have  
Redemption songs.

Bob Marley appears to be contrasting songs of freedom with redemption songs. A popular hymnal, *Redemption Songs*, was first published in London in 1929 or thereabouts. It has become part of the religious culture of Jamaica, regularly incorporated in the rituals of communal mourning such as wakes. The title page describes the book in this way: "A choice collection of 1000 hymns and choruses for evangelistic meetings, solo, singers, choirs and the home". *Redemption Songs* seems to have come to Jamaica with evangelicals from the U.S. Erna Brodber<sup>2</sup>, historical sociologist and novelist, argues that Marley is actually rejecting "redemption songs". They are part of the Euro-American religious legacy. And that's all Bob Marley and so many Africans in the Diaspora were once forced to have.

But there's another meaning of redemption that we must also take into account. Redemption is the act of buying oneself out of enslavement. The religious and commercial meanings of "redemption" converge in Marley's song. Redemption songs are also songs of freedom. There is

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divine grace – the hand of the Almighty. But there is also the practical justice of freeing one's self from both physical and mental slavery. Marley's "Redemption Song" is both a rejection of evangelical Christian orthodoxy and an affirmation of a new redemptive vision.

Liberation becomes much more than the freeing from physical chains, for true freedom cannot be given; it has to be appropriated. Authenticity comes with the reassertion of the right to self-determination. Emancipation from "mental slavery" thus means liberation from passivity – the leaned posture of automatic subservience that continues to cripple the neo-colonized:

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery  
None but ourselves can free our minds.  
Have no fear for atomic energy  
Cause none a them can stop the time.  
How long shall they kill our prophets  
While we stand aside and look?  
Some say, "it's just a part of it,  
We've got to fulfil the book."  
Won't you help to song?  
These songs of freedom?  
Cause all I ever had  
Redemption songs.

Marley pays tribute to Marcus Garvey who prophetically declared, "We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves

can free the mind." (Garvey, 1938). This metaphorical representation of the liberation process as freedom from ideological shackles is an artful, street-wise restatement of a familiar academic concept: the cultural politics of decolonization. Transposed by Bob Marley into the moving "Redemption Song", Garvey's injunction is amplified by the resounding reggae beat.

Garvey gives a profound warning: "Mind is your only ruler, sovereign. The man who is not able to develop and use his mind is bound to be the slave of the other man who uses his mind" (Garvey, 1938). Garvey is advocating a new kind of education. Not "head-decay-shun," as Rastafari mockingly describe colonial schooling. If that's all we ever have, we will continue to be enslaved by old notions of redemption.

Like all great local literature which we come to call "universal," Bob Marley's songs speak first to the particular circumstances of his own time and place. The meaning of his music expands in ever-widening circles of compassion, levelling barriers of race, class, gender and geography. This is his legacy which we must continue to celebrate. And we must also create our own new songs of freedom: *la lucha continúa!*

## REFERENCES

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