Bob Marley: One Love—Airbrushing the complicated life of the great reggae singer

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Jamaican Robert Nesta Marley (1945-1981) was one of the most gifted and appealing musicians of the 1970s. This outstanding singer and songwriter did much to popularise and develop reggae, taking it in new directions for a global audience. Young people everywhere responded to his anti-establishment and rebellious music. He was a popular music star at a time when such figures still meant something substantial to masses of people.

Bob Marley's continued popularity is reflected in the size of the audiences flocking to see Reinaldo Marcus Green's biopic *Bob Marley: One Love*, despite almost universal criticism of its airbrushed superficiality.

At the end of Green's film, we are told that Marley's songs have become beacons for the oppressed everywhere. This deserves attention, but the necessary reflection on the contradictions in Marley's life and work this involves is not forthcoming.

Marley lived through a period of intense political turmoil. His musical career began as Jamaica was establishing its independence from British imperialism in 1962, and he achieved prominence and fame during a period of global revolutionary upsurge beginning in 1968 and into the mid-1970s.

These revolutionary movements of workers and the oppressed poor, however, lacked a political leadership. They were derailed and betrayed by Stalinism, social democracy, bourgeois nationalist formations sometimes advancing peasant-based guerrillaism and pseudo-left parties associated with Pabloism and state capitalism oriented to them—any force but the international working class mobilised on a socialist programme.

Marley, like others of his generation, was shaped by this political environment in his response to the political and social oppression he stood against. Reggae voiced opposition to repression in a spiritual form that shackled and limited even its finest exponents, like Marley.

Green focuses on the period between 1976, when Marley left Jamaica following a politically motivated attempt on his life, and his return two years later, having recorded his masterpiece album *Exodus* in London. The songs from *Exodus* are at the core of the soundtrack, but Marley's whole catalogue is significant.

This was a period of extreme political violence in Jamaica. The leading parliamentary parties—the People's National Party (PNP) led by Michael Manley, in power since 1972, and the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP), which had ruled after independence—were both bankrolling criminal gangs as muscle.

The PNP advanced a left-nationalist programme of reforms for what Manley called "our own model of socialism which must grow out of the application of basic principles to the special nature of Jamaican society."

While orienting towards the Soviet Union and Cuba, Manley also appealed to US imperialism and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for economic support, at the expense of the island's poor. His vague anti-imperialist rhetoric, however, won popular support against the right-wing JLP, which was more openly identified with US imperialism.

Under Jamaica's first Prime Minister Alexander Bustamante, the JLP fomented political violence against any protest. The JLP's head in the 1970s, Edward Seaga, commonly dubbed "CIAga," was prominent in Bustamante's campaigns. In 1965, Seaga told a PNP crowd, "We can deal with you in any way at any time. It will be fire for fire and blood for blood."

As Manley flirted with Castroism, the CIA armed the JLP and doubled its presence on the island. More than 100 people were killed in the run-up to the 1976 election.

In the absence of an articulated political response to this crisis, popular opposition to the brutality found its outlet in music and spirituality. In a distorted form, reggae music and Rastafari/Rastafarianism both spoke to popular discontent.

Rastafari is a religious and social movement that emerged in the 1930s, influenced by the black nationalism of Marcus Garvey. Rastafari idolised Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia between 1930 and 1974, as the returned messiah and god incarnate. On a religious basis it espoused unity of people and rejected earthly governments (Babylon) as oppression. Notwithstanding this idealist, individualist form, Rastafari provided an outlet for anti-imperialist sentiment before independence and against government oppression afterwards.

In a pattern familiar across anti-colonial movements, such criticism became a threat to the newly independent national bourgeoisie, and Rastas were targeted and victimised after independence. In 1963, Bustamante told the police and army to "Bring in all Rastas, dead or alive," resulting in more than 150 detentions and an unknown number of deaths. Early in the film, we see traffic police pulling over Marley (Kingsley Ben-Adir), a prominent Rasta. He is only released because of his high profile.

Rastafari contributed to the development of reggae as a fusion of older Jamaican music styles with soul. Bob Marley and the Wailers' first album (1965) was a ska release that included "One Love," incorporating Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready."

"One Love" was later reworked on *Exodus* in the now internationally famous reggae version.

Reggae became a popular expression of hopes for peace and an end to political violence. By 1976, both the PNP and JLP were trying to exploit this, which is where Green opens his film. Marley, already a star, was due to play "Smile Jamaica," an ostensibly "non-political" peace concert in 1976 increasingly linked to Manley's PNP.

Green shows Marley coming under pressure over it. His wife Rita (Lashana Lynch) wants him to cancel because of the violence. Some Rastafarians see it as a concession to "Babylon." Others suggest it could be interpreted as support for Manley.

The violence here is described, even shown, but there is a disconnect between this and the musical response. Marley is presented as an otherworldly figure striving for peace. The film offers only a rather vapid presentation of his religious perspective for achieving this that does not bear scrutiny.

It sidesteps the real contradictions, offering a sanitised view of a world in conflict and responses to it. Rita tells Bob later, "You swim in pollution, you get polluted." But a Rastafarian aloofness from Babylon gets us no closer to understanding anything.

Marley's "Natural Mystic," central here, sums this up. Apocalyptic about conditions, it anticipates even worse ("Many more will have to die"), but counters this with "a natural mystic blowing through the air / If you listen carefully now you will hear"), all while remaining compellingly listenable and danceable.

The film's weakest moments are all but a beginner's guide to Rastafari. Rita introduces the young Bob to Rastas who discuss "the prophet Marcus Garvey." A repeated dream image of a horseman rescuing the child Bob from a burning field is finally revealed as Selassie himself. The lyrics of arguably his finest track, "Redemption Song," reflect its inspiration in the writings of the unprincipled opportunist Garvey.

Gunmen attacked Marley's home ahead of Smile Jamaica. Rita only survived a shot to the head because her dreadlocks slowed the bullet's impact. Marley's manager Don Taylor (Anthony Welsh) was so seriously injured he required airlifting to Miami. The wounded Marley played Smile Jamaica, then left Jamaica to recover from the trauma.

He decamped to London for two years in late 1976, where he began work on what would become his masterpiece, *Exodus*, which became a massive hit in the UK staying in the album charts for more than a year and spawning several hit singles. London was socially and politically volatile—riots in the street prompt the comment, "This reminds me of Trench Town [neighborhood in the Kingston, Jamaica area]"—but Green does not get beneath the surface of these conflicts.

Nor can he get any deeper into relations between this social crisis and musical responses to it. We see Marley at a Clash gig as they play "White Riot," an appeal for a reaction against oppression. Hearing Marley's new songwriting, Rita says: "You sound like you're vexed."

Marley began to develop his sound, taking on the guitarist Junior Marvin, who was raised as a child in Britain and played some of his career in the US. Marley encountered several different musical influences, as when Aston "Family Man" Barrett plays him the soundtrack to the 1960 film *Exodus*. Yet the primary driving force behind that soundtrack's influence is the referencing of the biblical Exodus cited in a Hollywood movie depicting a Zionist account of the foundation of the State of Israel. Marley's totally uncritical response to such issues is given voice in the song "Exodus," with the line "Movement of Jah people."

Marvin and Barrett are played by their sons (David Marvin Kerr Jr and Aston Barrett Jr). Like the Marley family's backing of this film, this is touching but signals that Marley's depiction as an icon is assured.

It is no criticism of Ben-Adir to note that Marley was more complex than painted here. Green offers perfunctory indications of this complexity, confined within a framework of saintly justness. Only in the electrifying archive footage during the end credits do we get a better sense of Marley's intensity and power as an artist.

Marley always wanted to tour Africa. This is presented as a clash between his pan-African idealism and cynical financial corruption. When Chris Blackwell (James Norton), owner of Island Records, tells him there is no infrastructure in Africa, Marley says, "Then we build it." Marley physically attacks Taylor for instead lining his own pockets from African backhanders. When Marley finally did play in Africa, as the end credits note, it was for a 1980 gig celebrating the end of colonial rule in Zimbabwe.

Marley considers a unity gig in Jamaica to end the political violence, saying, "I'm in it because of a cause." The 1978 One Love Peace Concert came about because gang leaders Bucky Marshall (PNP) and Claudie Massop (JLP) hoped it might quell the violence.

Green reinforces the myth of the concert, with its iconic image of Marley between Manley and Seaga as they shook hands. Rita tells Marley his struggle is the source of his power and that sometimes the messenger has to become the message. By this point we already know about the rare skin cancer that would kill him at just the age of 36, so this is the consolidation of a mythic hero.

The real concert was more interesting and less conclusive. Former Wailer Peter Tosh spent half his set berating Manley and Seaga about conditions in Jamaica. Footage of the handshake (in the end credits) reveals the leaders' cynical calculation. Far from achieving peace, the concert saw an escalation of violence. Massop and Marshall were both killed in 1979, while the next election year (1980) saw 889 murders. Jamaican parties continued to fund murderous gangs.

Marley's music deserves a serious appreciation, but that requires an equally serious assessment of the world that created it.