

METROPLUS

The many faces of Marley



Reji Varghese

CHENNAI, FEBRUARY 05, 2016 16:41 IST

UPDATED: FEBRUARY 05, 2016 16:41 IST

From being the face of reggae and revolution to championing peace, Bob Marley means a lot of things to a lot of people. On his birthday, REJI VARGHESE traces his journey

I didn't know a genre like reggae existed till I got to my first year of college. I was at a Saturday night party in a friend's room, listening to **music** on an old car tape recorder connected to two beat-up speakers. All of a sudden, someone slipped in a new cassette, and my ears perked up as an unfamiliar sound wafted through the cool Bangalore night. The staccato chords played on the off beat, the seductive bass line and the wistful keyboard parts were distinctive, and so was the voice singing in a lilting, thick accent.

"Cos I remember when we used to sit in a government yard in Trenchtown..."

Trenchtown is a slum neighbourhood in Kingston, Jamaica, whose most distinctive feature was an open sewer trench. The government yard was a public housing project for the poor, where Bob Marley and his family lived. Trenchtown doesn't seem like a place that would provide inspiration for song writing, but much of the songs Bob Marley wrote were rife with references to the poverty, discrimination and violence that were part of his childhood. In 'Concrete Jungle', Marley sings about life in a ghetto, with little or no hope for escape: "No chains around my feet, But I'm not free, I know I am bounded in captivity."

In 1974, Clapton's cover version of Marley's 'I Shot the Sheriff', one of the bestselling reggae songs of all time, and the subsequent rise of Bob Marley to international fame is well documented.

But that was just the break that brought focus on the body of work that Marley had already done in the nine years prior to that.

If reggae was only about the beat and the sound, it would have been long forgotten. What brought international attention to Marley's work was the core of what his songs were about – rebellion, revolution, defiance and peace. His album, *Exodus*, was declared album of the century by *TIME* magazine, and his song 'One Love', as song of the millennium by BBC. Bob Marley was the first truly international music icon from a third-world country, and his brand of music soon became the background score for protest the world over.

His message was radical – 'Revolution' is a call to arms, and the Beatles song by the same name seems to be a church hymn in comparison. Marley's 'Get up, stand up' was the marching song of the Chinese students during the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989. He was honoured by Zimbabwe at its 1980 Independence celebration, because his music "had inspired freedom fighters in the bush". Amnesty International uses 'Get up, stand up' as its unofficial anthem. In the Nicaraguan civil war, Marley's music was popular with both the 'Contras' and 'Sandinistas'. NASA played Bob Marley's 'Get Up, Stand Up' at the Mars Rover landing on Mars. When the Berlin Wall fell, **people** stood at the fallen rubble and sang, Marley's 'Three Little Birds', for hours. In 2011, 'Get Up, Stand Up' lyrics were repeatedly chanted at the 'Occupy Wall Street' protests that spread around the world.

Closer home, in March 2014, was the ludicrous crackdown by the Kerala police in Thrissur, seizing goods and arresting vendors who sold anything with a hint of Bob Marley: T-shirts, CDs, bags, posters. Their claim – Bob Marley's picture with his dreadlocks and his music were encouraging kids to take to marijuana.

A confused street vendor who was arrested in Thrissur confessed, "I don't know who this man is, but T-shirts imprinted with his face have a huge demand, and I have been selling these for more than 15 years. I never knew that this man is trouble, and that selling such T-shirts is a crime."

Today, February 6, is Bob Marley's birthday, celebrated in Jamaica as 'National Bob Marley Day'. Today, in ghettos and inner cities all over the world, at radio stations and concert halls across the globe, his songs are being played.

Bob Marley means many things to many people. He's the militant who advocates violence in 'Revolution'. He's the peace activist who pleads for peace in 'One Love'. He's the seditious anarchist in 'Burnin and Lootin'. He's the human rights activist crying out to the oppressed to 'Get up, stand up'. He's the face on the poster that's up on college hostel walls alongside Che Guevara's. He's the face of the 'legalise marijuana' campaign in the US. And he's also the face that sells T-shirts in Thrissur.

While inducting Marley posthumously into the Rock n Roll Hall of Fame, U2 singer Bono's description of the man was the closest anyone could get to defining the indefinable – "Bob Marley was everything at the same time: prophet, soul rebel, Rasta-man, herbs-man, wild man, a natural mystic man, lady's man, island man, family man, Rita's man, soccer man, shaman, human, Jamaican."

Robert Nesta Marley was all of that... and so much more.

Printable version | Nov 14, 2018 7:16:16 AM |

<https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/celebrating-the-phenomenon-called-bob-marley/article8198283.ece>

© The Hindu