

OBSERVER

9 APRIL 1978



**THE
RASTAFARIANS**
A vision of
repatriation



Above, Prince Emmanuel, who claims to be the Black Christ. Right, ghetto gunmen Claudie Massop, (23) and Bucky Marshall make peace.

THE ROOTS OF THE RASTAS

By JAMES FOX. Photographs by COLIN JONES.

For thousands of Jamaicans living in England repatriation means only one thing: a 'return' to Africa, and specifically to the 'promised land' of Ethiopia. This is the vision of the Rastafarians, who embrace the late Haile Selassie of Ethiopia as the living God and the returned Messiah. The Rastafari movement, bred in the ghetto of Kingston, Jamaica, has taken hold – either as a religion, or a style of black consciousness – of the imagination of Jamaica's youth, and has spread to the streets of London, Birmingham and Manchester. Its followers are increasingly visible, their striped woollen 'tams' in the Rastafari colours covering their 'dreadlocks'. Today it is the most powerful cultural force among young Jamaicans, and among the black youth of Britain, and its message is not race war, but peace, non-violence and an end to 'captivity' in the West.

AT A point along the road between Kingston and Spanish Town, we turn off on to the dirt and towards the sea. In an open space, somewhere in this odd landscape, which is both dense, tropical hill country and the outer reaches of suburbia, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, one of the largest groups of Rastafarians in Jamaica, are holding a nocturnal meeting. It is already 11pm but still about 75°F.

I am travelling with Countryman, a dreadlock man who lives in Runaway Bay, right on the beach, fishing and raising goats. When he was a boy he ran away from his father and joined his brother who lived in a Rastafarian community. For nine years he learned the Bible by heart, grew his locks, disdained meat, and kept to the discipline of the Rastaman. Then he left the community to live alone. He is now something of a movie star. Two scripts are waiting on him, one written by Perry Henzell, director of 'The Harder They Come', the definitive Jamaican story, and now a third

world cult movie. The other called 'Countryman' is backed by Island Records and British impresario Michael White.

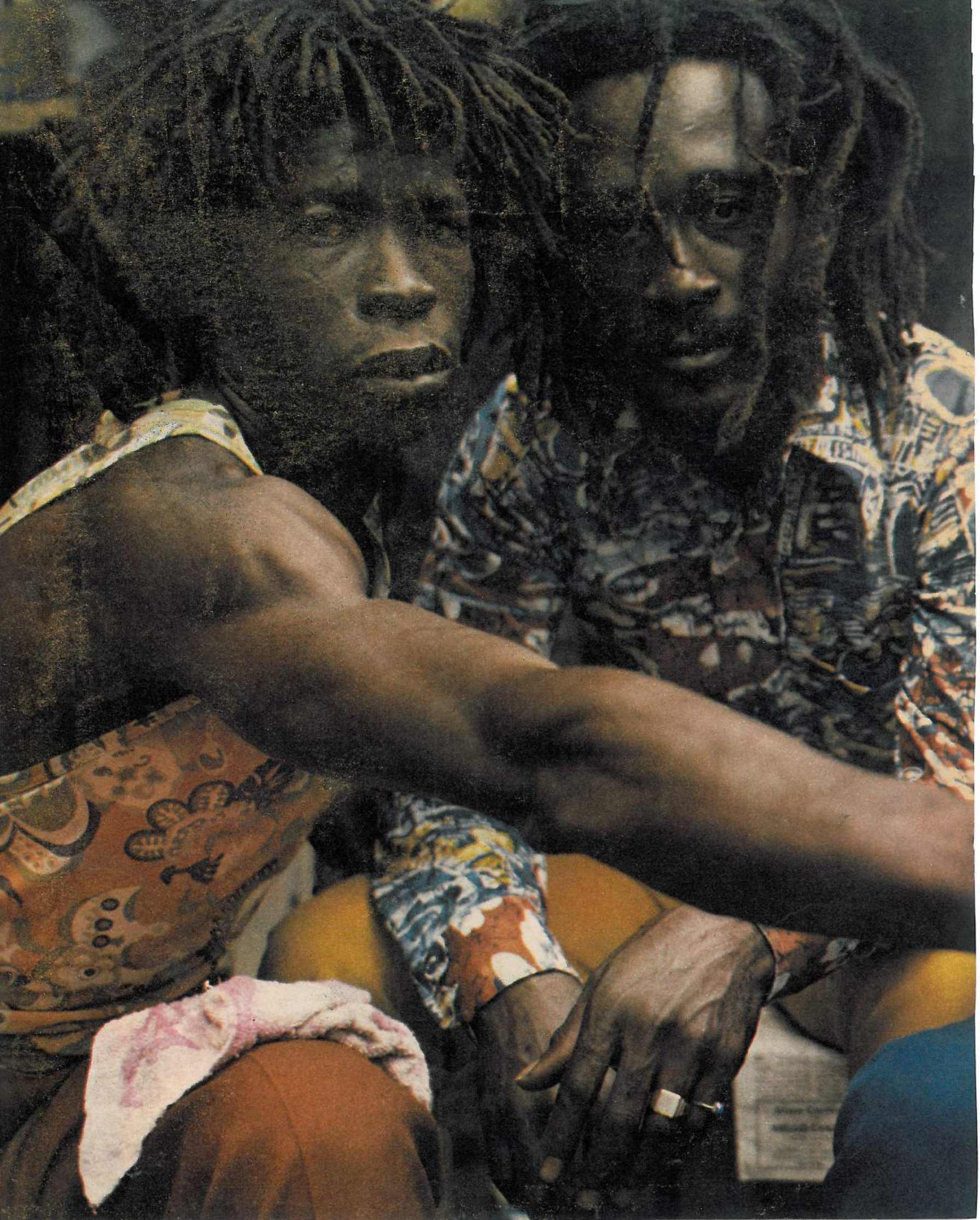
Countryman is gifted with an hilarious sense of fantasy, and his knowledge of the Rastaman's mind is deep, which is fortunate, because for a white man to come to a Rasta gathering is a touchy business. He is a symbol of 'Babylon' and the white oppressor, until his manners suggest differently.

Countryman winds down the window and addresses passers-by: 'Peace, dread,' he says and asks directions. When these are given, Countryman says, 'Give thanks, Rasta,' and we move on.

From the edges, the meeting of the Twelve Tribes presents an extraordinary sight. Under a high hill, with fires blazing in caves to keep the mosquitoes down, groups of Rastas are lit up in front of tall, pale green cacti. In the centre there is a circle of perhaps 2,000 brethren, each with a

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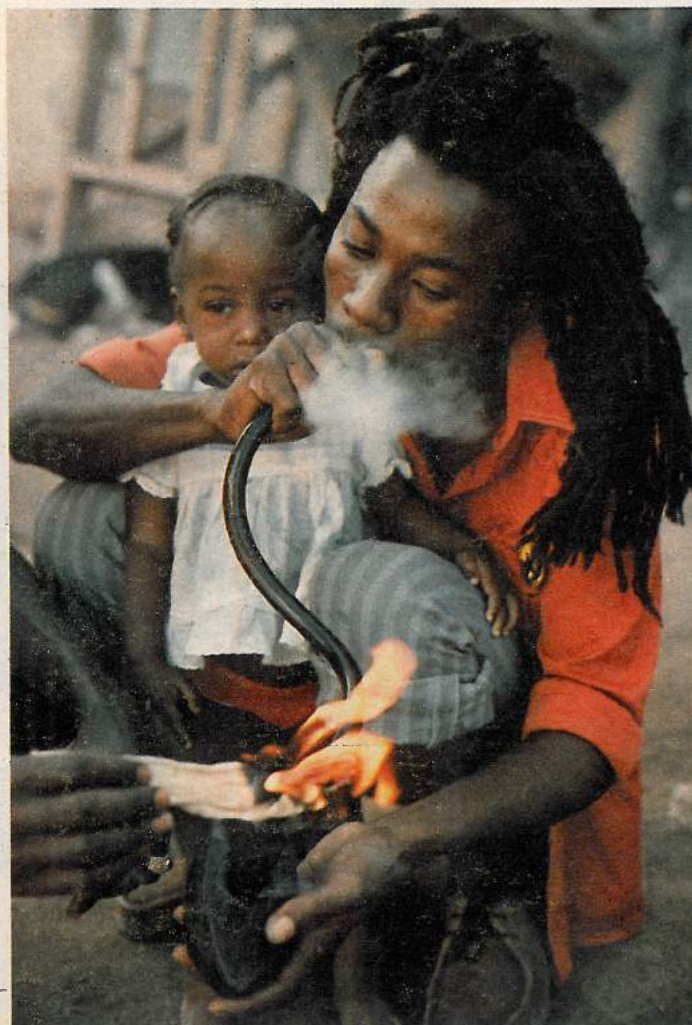


Ganja, although illegal, is sacred to the Rastaman for the healing of suffering and the raising of consciousness, and is therefore in plentiful supply. The 'chalice' pipe is the symbol of brotherhood.





Rasta bands like this use reggae music to spread their message. Above right, chronic slum conditions in the Kingston ghetto gave the Rastas the



woollen tam hiding his locks, knitted in the Rastafari colours. These are *red*, for the blood of the martyrs, *gold* for Jamaica, *black*, for the colour of the Africans – Rastas do not consider themselves Jamaicans – and *green* for the sacred ganja herb, marijuana, and the green fields of Ethiopia, which is the promised land, and where they demand to be repatriated, ‘under our own vine and fig tree.’

There is immediate resistance to my presence. ‘Can’t go in there, man. This is Rasta business. Seen?’ Countryman begins ‘reasoning’ in the patois that I could only barely understand after three weeks; there is some rapid ganja trading, the rolling of huge cone-shaped ‘spliffs’, to smoke, and we are allowed to slip into the crowd.

Over the PA system, speakers in the centre were declaiming to mass and spontaneous chants of ‘Rastafar-eye, Selassie-eye, Jah,’ fervently saluting his ‘Divine’ majesty, the late Emperor of Ethiopia. A prophet dressed in a red robe and a wizard’s cap was preaching about a unique political phenomenon which had occurred in Kingston the previous week, and about its central heroes, Bucky Marshall and Claudie Massop. These two were ‘top rankin’ gunmen in the ghetto for Jamaica’s two main political parties, managing



desire to return to the simple life in Africa, out of the 'captivity in Babylon'. Below, some of Jamaica's self-appointed 'Ethiopians'.

a vicious system of political tribalisation and 'divide and rule' politics. The ghetto had become swamped with automatic weapons, producing warfare on a scale that, for ten years, had turned the Kingston waterfront into perhaps the most lethal and fearful slum in the world. Together the two gang leaders had suddenly declared peace, and held it intact.

Twenty-eight people had died in gun battles in the first nine days of January alone. But from the moment Massop and Marshall embraced each other on a borderline street, not one shot was fired. The truce united the quarter million ghetto inhabitants, who saw it as something close to a miracle. A ten-year-old curfew had been lifted.

Politically it looked to many observers like a re-grouping of forces against Jamaica's elite. Massop, Marshall, and their peace committee were determined to stand permanently between the politicians of both parties, and the ghetto.

It was also the first sign of the Rastafarian spirit affecting Jamaican two-party politics. It has always been there, as an untouchable force of peace and non-involvement, which has angered and frightened politicians in the past and led to official harassment and discrimination. But for the Rastafarians the

continued



'Theirs is clearly the most powerful cultural force on the island!'

peace was tangible proof of the power of righteousness over the evil of 'Babylon' (the oppressor), and even the beginning of the prophesied destruction of Babylon itself. So it was a big topic that night, and the brethren applauded wildly for Mas-sop and Marshall.

The prophet in red, I discovered, was Brother Gad - who 'raised up' Twelve Tribes in 1968, inspired by a verse in Isaiah. He lived in a community called 'Dread Heights', in a valley of rocky wasteland outside Kingston, which we visited.

He greeted us with consummate politeness and the authority and nobility common to many of the brethren. The cockerels and turtle doves in the compound drowned out our dialogue. He showed us goats and rabbits: 'I try to raise the things that God told us to name.'

There were many pictures of Haile Selassie, framed copies of his speeches, news photographs of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, one with the Emperor's foot resting on an unexploded bomb. In the yard was a wood cut-out of the aeroplane that brought him to Jamaica in 1966 - the day 'Jah (God) Come' - with the Conquering Lion of Judah, one of the Emperor's many titles, emblazoned on the tailplane.

Between religious meetings, to

keep the 'yout' (young people) out of harm's way, Gad organises cricket and football matches. Twenty-two dreadlocks on the pitch below Dread Heights, in green, red and gold track suits, is an awesome sight. The reggae song says, with reason, 'Dread flash him locks anna weak herb drop'.

'Our motive,' said Gad, 'is to fulfil the people's wish to be repatriated to Ethiopia. Deep now in my mind I see that the time is going to come that you are going to have a mass movement of people to the land of Africa - not specifically Ethiopia.' Some of the Rastas see repatriation as a divine act. Gad and the Twelve Tribes, however, have already settled 28 people on the 500 acres of land given by Selassie in the fifties to descendants of African slaves in the West.

The Rasta movement was born in the ghetto in the fifties out of unemployment and despair. Gad himself, who was born in the same street as Bucky Marshall - Matthews Lane - was driven out when the movement suffered its worst persecutions under Jamaica's first Prime Minister after independence, Alexander Bustamante. He portrayed them as criminals and lunatics and his bulldozers flattened their bases in Trench Town and Back O'Wall in the mid-sixties,

scattering them all over the island.

Since then the Rastas have gained some respectability if only because theirs is clearly the most powerful, indeed the only, cultural force on the island. Its styles and attitudes, if not its strict doctrines, have captured the hearts and minds of Jamaican youth (53 per cent of the population is under 19). Its influence reaches from the ghetto, where it serves also as a disguise for criminals ('wolves in sheep's clothing'), to the middle class, where it is high fashion. The whole reggae music industry is bound up with it and acts as its communication system, projecting it worldwide.

It is hardly a nationalistic force, however. Common to the 100,000 or so true believers - who are loosely associated in various sects - is the belief that Jamaica is a hell on earth - the symbol of captivity for the black man, and of the slavedriver's whip - which the ultraconscious Rastamen say they can physically feel. They have embarked, in Rastafarianism, on a mass psychoanalysis to find the black man's true identity, delving into the Bible, weeding out the parts introduced by the white man to conceal the true, black identity of 'the children of Israel'.

Haile Selassie was seized on as a symbol of black greatness and turned

into a God, and the returned Mes-siah. He himself claimed descent from Solomon and Sheba. Solomon, they believe - and will quote biblical texts to prove it - was black, as were Jesse and David before him. Thus the Israelites were black men and the Jews imposters, set up, they say, to camouflage black ancestry.

To the Rastaman, fact, metaphor and symbolism exist on the same level, and objective truth is blurred. Thus Haile Selassie's death in Addis Ababa in 1975 presents few problems. Some flatly deny it, saying that it's a rumour prophesied in the Bible; others deny it on a metaphysical plane, explaining that God can never die, because God and man are one. And because of Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, despite its disagreement with the Rastas that the Emperor is the living God, is growing fast in Jamaica.

Second in importance to Selassie is Marcus Garvey, the black activist of the twenties, who is elevated to the status of a prophet for allegedly predicting: 'Look to Africa for the crowning of a black King. He shall be the Redeemer.' Haile Selassie, previously Ras Tafari, was crowned in 1930 and adopted, among other titles that of 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords'. Garvey's attempts at repatriation to Africa - which ended

continued

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THE ROOTS OF THE RASTAS continued

with the bankruptcy of his Black Star Line in 1922 - will be miraculously repeated on the day of repatriation, according to Rasta belief. A string of ships, seven miles long, will do the job. Garvey's warning that they would sail in 'a sea of blood' is taken literally.

Because of a deep belief in reincarnation, history can be a confusing matter to the non-believer, since dates have no importance. In Britain for example Edward VIII will return as Nebuchadnezzar - King of Babylon - to rule after Elizabeth II, and preside over its destruction. The Queen herself is regarded as a new embodiment of the Whore of Babylon. So is the Duchess of Windsor whose fate can be read in Psalm 137:8.

Inherent in the Rasta consciousness, too, is a belief in black supremacy, and the higher consciousness of the black man. To reach this state requires the ritual smoking of large amounts of ganja. This is so essential to the faith that if the Jamaican Government were unwise enough, or even able, to cut off supplies, they would undoubtedly have a nationwide rebellion on their hands.

* * *

In the ghetto we had acquired two boon companions - Churchill and Texas - who acted as bodyguards and advance men. Churchill was seconded to us by Claudie Massop and, as it turned out, was a key man for

the opposition Jamaican Labour Party; a born warrior and a natural politician.

We wanted to go to Bull Bay, a few miles east of Kingston, to meet Prince Edward Emmanuel, one of the oldest Rastafarians, who claims to be the Black Jesus Christ.

Prince Emmanuel's 'foundation' was the nearest thing to a Rasta monastery, sealed off from the outside world. Churchill spent a whole night doing some 'fundamental reasoning' with his disciples to get us in. 'With the Rastaman, you must deal with him heart, man,' said Churchill. The next day we drove out there and saw, from the coast road, high up on a rock, a remarkable citadel walled in and painted with the Rastafarian colours.

We climbed up the rock with the goats and donkeys and waited for a word to come from Prince Emmanuel. We were reminded that we were to enter the presence of Christ, and were told to shed all material belongings, loose change, ball points, metal of all kinds, tape recorders.

His robes were so stunning, his presence so imposing, that it was for a moment believable that this was my first and only view of the Messiah. Disciples passed by, put their hands on their hearts when they got near him, and said, 'Blessed My Lord'. The Prince is old now and hard to understand. Nevertheless we

talked for over two hours, looking from his verandah down on to a perfect Caribbean bay. He produced oranges for our refreshment, which he peeled himself.

One of the disciples, Prince Donald, could throw little light on the Prince's titular claims. Was I indeed in the presence of the Black Christ? 'Oh, most naturally,' he replied. 'This is the crowned head for the Western World - God in three persons, Blessed Trinity, prophet, priest and King. He will take I and I out of bondage in the land of Egypt. Oh Emmanuel-I, Selassie-I, Jah, Rastafari.'

The community lived, he said, by growing a little grain and gungo peas. A small income came from making brooms and sandals. 'We are skilled men and women from creation. We are the masters of creation, not jobbers and beggars. We only seek for our daily food until the hour that the seven miles of ships of the Black Star Line come.'

'We will not take meat until we enter into our father's kingdom. I and I live within the holy principle of black supremacy.'

I asked whether Marcus Garvey had been reincarnated. 'Natural,' said Prince Donald. 'In St Anne.' Is he living there now? 'Oh most natural. He is the same President Idi Amin now seated as Chief Field Marshal General.' Amin, according to Emmanuel, will be standing on the

shores of black Africa when the Black Star Liners return the children of Israel to their homeland.

In the tabernacle below the Prince's house a service had begun in our honour. The music was indistinguishable from the drumming and chanting of West Africa, and there was one verse aimed at the Queen:

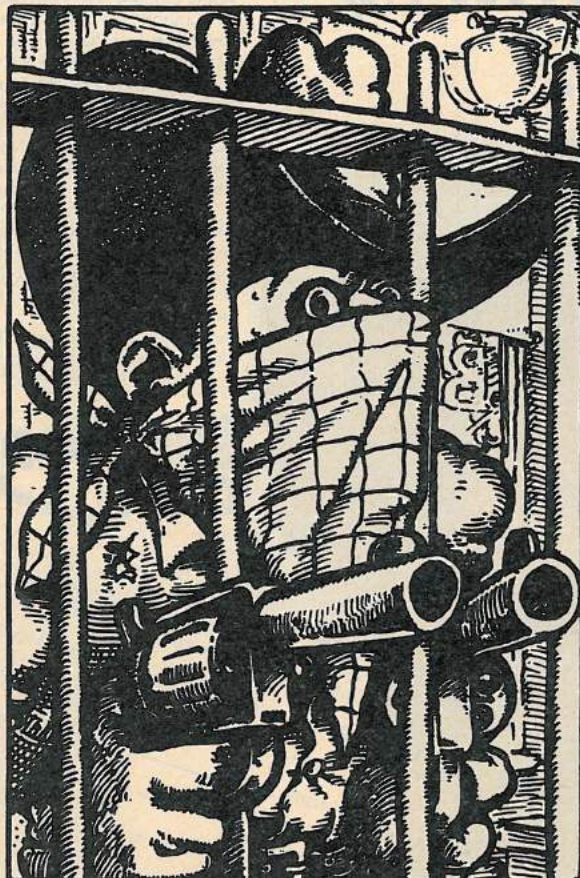
Come down Elizabeth
Come down, girl
Come off a black man's shoulder
For the spirit of Selassie a go'
take you down
Come off a black man's shoulder.

* * *

In a Rasta 'yard', behind a massage parlour in the ghetto, a famous Rastafarian leader called Mortimer Planno holds court, 'reasoning' for hours with his brethren over the ganja 'chalice' pipe. Planno is famous because it was he who, single-handedly, went to the rescue of his Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie, when thousands of Rastas turned up unexpectedly to greet him on his visit to Jamaica in April 1966. They smashed through cordons, tore up the red carpet (because the Queen had once walked on it) and swarmed around the plane, chanting and smoking and creating the worst fire risk the airport has ever known.

The Emperor appeared, burst into tears and returned to the cabin. Planno persuaded him to emerge, made a way through the crowd and escorted him to King's House where

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36 **THERE IS STILL NO CURE FOR MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS.**

THE ROOTS OF THE RASTAS continued
the Rastas once again took over, ostentatiously smoking joints in the state reception rooms. God had come, and it was their day. The huge turnout had a massive impact, and symbolised official recognition of their movement. Haile Selassie's denial that he was divine, only confirmed his divinity to the Rastas.

Planno has wild and well-grown dreadlocks and his massive feet are plunged sockless into black boots without laces. He welcomes me with the usual prophet-like grandeur, and shows me a picture of the great day. He then takes up the ganja chalice, which holds water in the base to cool the smoke. He sucks and he blows, the water gurgling, until the ganja is a cinder burning brightly as a blast furnace. He draws a gigantic inhalation, holds it to bursting point and lets out a fog of smoke in a fit of spluttering, watering eyes and waving of locks. 'Iree,' he says.

Soon he will be in communication with the Emperor, but first he explains the 'mystic breeze' that is blowing through Jamaica, that has brought a peace and unity not seen for 20 years. On 7 January the Rastas celebrated their Christmas. The next day 'The sign of the triple rainbow hung across the firmament showing the handiworks of God's master-stroke. This was the sign of peace.' Next day, 9 January, 'The call for peace was heard through the length and breadth of Jamaica.' It is indeed true that a rainbow appeared twice on the very day that Massop and Marshall declared peace in the ghetto. But Planno finally says, 'Why am I telling the Englishman all these things? It's making him too wise.'

* * *

Michael Manley's People's National Party cultivated the Rastafarian movement and won a considerable youth vote that helped to bring him to power in 1972. Several Rasta musicians, including Count Ozzie - who later had a state funeral - and the Mystic Revelations of Rastafari, beat their drums on PNP platforms. Manley went to Ethiopia and came back with a stick, given him by Haile Selassie. He called it the 'Rod of Correction', and toured the country with it. It produced great arguments among the Rastas, but Manley's declared commitment to social justice swung major support over to the PNP.

In 1974 he made a further concession by releasing first-time ganja offenders from prison. But by now, and since the 1976 election, the relationship has cooled.

The experiment of using the powerful Rasta message and popular musicians for political ends, came to a nasty finale in 1976 when Bob Marley - whose music was certainly strong enough to alter the outcome of an election - agreed to appear at a rally organised by the PNP at Kingstons racecourse. Shortly before this, Marley, his wife and several mem-

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bers of his band were attacked with sub-machine guns in his home, and narrowly escaped death. There were equally convincing arguments for putting the blame on either party. But the result was that Marley left the island and has never been back.

In that same election Manley's and the PNP's election slogan was 'Heavy Manners'. A record appeared immediately called, 'Living under Heavy Manners', and a wall slogan went up that reads: 'Heavy is true, but heavy is a burden'. The ghetto was armed to the teeth, and the election was a farce. Things got so bad that the local cinema in Trench Town had to put up a concrete screen because members of the audience would take an active part in the screen shoot-outs.

When the peace came, Manley had to decide whether the Rastas had shown up as a new force in politics. He had said that he was delighted with the peace, but in private he seemed to give the opposite impression. The Government did not see it as a massive movement at all. It was taken by surprise and saw the peace as a weakening of official control over the volatile ghetto. Marshall, who grew up among Rastas, was saying, 'You see the one cake that is baked for all Jamaicans? Every Jamaican is to get for them a slice. And right now all of them up there eat some of our cake. It's a long time since we've been waiting for something like this. The people can really see themselves now. Everyone just see God and we no see no Prime Minister. Equal rights and justice. Ya no see it?'

Manley was clearly annoyed at being forced to sit around a table in Jamaica House and talk politics with men he considers to be arch criminals and even murderers. He even had to agree to deal with them on a bi-partisan basis.

But Massop and Marshall, however vulnerable, were already enshrined as heroes, both among the Rastas and in the corporate area of Kingston, so Manley had no choice.

During the 1976 election, Manley had talked with several Rasta leaders, including Bongo Blackheart. One day I took a ride into the Blue Mountains, with a carload of guides and companions from the ghetto, to search him out. He belongs to a sect called the Judah Coptic Theocracy, and is a founder member of the Organisation of Rastafarian Unity - formed (late in January) 'in case of governmental bargainings'.

The journey took some time. The consumption of ganja along the route turned the expedition into a mystic communion with nature and blurred the precision of any directions given to my companions. We stopped to admire the breadfruit, jackfruit, pimento, and the ackee fruit, which splits into three perfect segments when ripe, but until that moment is deadly poisonous.

We came first to a dark cabin in a wood, set on stilts, full of silent dreads eating in unison. After lengthy 'reasoning', an ageing dreadlock led us up a rocky hill to a shack made of brand new tin, open on one side to a ploughed field. There was Bongo Blackheart. He looked like a guerrilla general - a man of formidable presence and authority. We sat side by side on his canvas bed, and he spoke as if this was his last warning to the world. The patience of the black man was clearly running out, the way Blackheart expressed it, and his mouth trembled with anger.

'If this time they don't come to some imminent solution for this damn hole they have made in our

people, it will be a human volcano in the house of black and white and we can all stop it if we so much as cares for ourselves.'

The rain began to pour down on the new tin - hammering, tropical rain. Blackheart resumed. He said that Manley had talked to him on 17 January 1973, 'to discuss matters touching and concerning our nation'.

He had asked Blackheart for help over 'violence, agriculture and education'. Blackheart had asked for recognition of basic rights for the Rastas in return. Blackheart said the Rastas had delivered, but Manley hadn't. 'And we had to put out the charge against him for sacrilege. Oh yes. He continuously and shame-

lessly used our divine object to gain popular political support from our people who are not politically literate.

'They look upon us as obeah (witchcraft) men,' said Blackheart. 'But we control the hearts and minds of radicals all over the world. So what we say to our good brother. These missiles which now Mr Carter has in America. It takes us nothing to let it go off without no-one touch the button. We have something here much more powerful than it. I am in close contact with the Ancient First Field Marshal, Divine Majesty Selassie I, and if they want to know more about me, they can continue to pussyfoot with our rights.'



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