

GARNET SILK Issue #2

Garnet Silk Returns to Zion

by Howard Campbell

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The inevitable comparisons that have been made since Garnet burst onto the scene three years ago have been further fueled since his death a few months ago. Such a flattering likeness is evidence of the social impact the 28-year-old singer made in such a short period. In fact, he created a spark more famous names, like Ziggy Marley, failed to ignite among the masses.

That was probably the most glaring similarity between Bob Marley and Garnet Silk, the fact that they were both hero worshipped by Jamaica's lower class and, through their music, transformed the status quo of a country obsessed with social standing.

Neville Garrick, a close friend of Bob's and director of the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, thinks because of Marley's international appeal, any Reggae singer who emerges in his wake will face the pressures of comparison.

"Bob remains the yardstick by which every up and coming Reggae artist is measured," said Garrick. "It was the same thing with Peter [Tosh], Bunny [Wailer] and Ziggy. There's nothing wrong with that, because the impact Bob made was so great."

But we aren't going to indulge in Bob Marley comparisons. It's Garnet Silk who gets top billing here. He deserves his posthumous place on the marquee for being the only artist since Bob to project the larger-than-life image Reggae music needed to lift it out of the morass-like mire in which it had stagnated.

Everybody praises Jah in the dance halls these days--not the gun, not the crotch, but Jah. Most don't give a hoot about Haile Selassie's philosophy, but Garnet seemed to have some fascination with the man and that was good enough for them.

He didn't cut a superstar's image. He had a slim-build, slightly knock-kneed frame, and his voice was tinged by a rural "accent." But if you spoke to Garnet Silk about his less than glamorous appearance he would have probably told you: "Fire, mi nuh inna this fi win no beauty contest, yuh nuh."

News of Garnet Silk's death sent the proverbial shockwaves throughout Jamaica, which paid homage to yet another fallen son with week-long tribute in song, an honour bestowed upon Bob and Peter Tosh, an honour reserved only for musicians held in high esteem. No one cared about the curious circumstances under which he died. They refuse to have the wings of their "angel" tarnished by innuendo and hearsay.

I guess that's the way diehard fans react when their heroes pass on. And they usually pass in their prime, don't they? Holly, Cochran, Hendrix, Morrison, Joplin, Lennon, Marley

Garnet Smith was a part of a Rastafarian resurgence that emerged from the cool climes of Manchester on the south coast of Jamaica. Along with his mentors, DJ Tony Rebel and Dub poet Yasus Afari, Smith, as Garnet Silk, fine tuned the rude boy style of '90s Dancehall by adding his own brand of '70s Cultural vibe. The resulting brew remains as potent as ever. You need only to listen to the latest Capleton or Buju.

Tony Rebel is usually credited with the rebirth of the Rasta culture in the dance halls. But for all his pioneering work Rebel is a DJ. You can get DJs (especially Cultural ones) a dime a dozen these days. Garnet Silk was a singer, and Jamaicans have always loved singers. Whether it be Alton Ellis, Slim Smith, John Holt, Delroy Wilson, Leroy Sibbles,

Dennis Brown, Sugar Minott, Barrington Levy or Sanchez, they have always held a special place in their hearts for a man who can take the mike and croon a crowd into a state of frenzy.

But Silk was respected for more than just his voice. He, along with Rebel, was seen as a shepherd whom the misguided Dancehall flock looked to and considered a Godsend by the purists who longed for a change from Ninjaman's gun-toting sneer and the punanny-mad Shabba.

One of those "purists" was Dr. Lechim Semaj, a respected sociologist who hosts a popular radio show and who has long been an ardent advocate for a return to the days of uplifting lyrics in Reggae music.

According to Semaj, it was Garnet's unique presence and delivery that once again turned the tide in favour of the Roots man, his intense vocal tones and lyrics being a refreshing change from the limited monotony his DJ counterparts offered.

"He refocused Reggae, re-rooted and re-routed the music," said Semaj. "He brought back a definite '70s connection with his love of Rastafari. What was admirable about him is that he was no gimmick; he was a true Rasta. Above all," Semaj stressed, "he was a leader, not a follower."

While his earlier work was a mixture of ballads and covers interspersed with the rare Cultural song, Garnet Silk's Rastafarian beliefs became more pronounced in the last two years with a salvo of uplifting chartbusters at a time when it was thought songs of that nature were lost to Reggae.

But because of Garnet Silk, lighters flickered and clenched fists were raised to the opening bars of songs with unlikely names like "Zion in a Vision," "Mama Africa" or "Father's Name." The DJ with the most violent songs or the most ribald lyrics was honoured just to have Silk sing a note on their recordings.

Tony Rebel teamed with his protégé on several songs and was one of the people responsible for the lanky, nasal toned singer "bussing out" three years ago. He heard of Silk's unfortunate passing while on tour in the Bahamas. Describing his reaction on first hearing the news as "something even Michelangelo could not paint. Even now, I still think it's a bad dream."

Like Semaj, Rebel pointed to the impact Garnet has made in such a short time: "His impact was tremendous. He was the cornerstone of a revolutionary program."

Performers with the influence of a Garnet Silk are usually responsible for fashion spin-offs and fads. Every axe slinger imitated Hendrix's distorted Blues licks; just as every white girl wanted to sing black after hearing Janis shriek her best Bessie Smith; not everyone could write like John Lennon, but they sure liked his glasses.

Garnet Silk couldn't make the guitar talk, but he had a unique voice and he was the most promising songwriter Reggae knew since Bob. Because of him it was cool to once again wear locks and praise Jah.

Now that he's gone, will the cries of "Jah Rastafari" fade away just as it did 13 years ago when Bob died? Garrick, Semaj and Rebel all agree it will not.

According to Garrick: "Once he got the ball rolling it won't turn around just like that, especially this year when we celebrate Bob's fiftieth birthday."

"It won't," was Semaj's emphatic retort. "Garnet set the pattern for Reggae music in the '90s. If we allow the music to drift once more into oblivion that means we were just passengers on a trip."

Rebel agrees: "We haven't lost, we have gained; we are going to see greater things now because people are going to penetrate Garnet's music even more."

And while he would still like to think his bad dream will soon be over, Rebel says the Creator knew best when he called Garnet home: "God is just. His judgment is just and infallible. He knows right. In the future, we'll know why he left."