



Ziggy Marley and the Melody Makers

by John Radanovich

Like the Caribbean Négritude poets Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor, Ziggy Marley and his siblings see their music as a vehicle for social protest and asserting the value and dignity of African culture in the Americas. Just as their famous parents did, they feel their music as no less than prophesy, vital to the survival of the black man and ultimately that of all mankind. If one member of the family is troubled, goes their moral reasoning, the entire family is also unbalanced. They also continue the tradition of the late Bob Marley in practicing Rastafarian beliefs.

The Melody Makers consist of sisters Cedella and Sharon on vocal harmony; Ziggy on lead vocals and guitar; Stephen on vocals, drums and as DJ. They rely on various studio players to round out their productions. Recording since 1979, the group has sold millions of records and won several Grammys. Often in the past, they tended to prefer a reggae sound of more highly produced rock and hip hop than contemporary reggae. This sound has produced huge hits with "Conscious Party," "Look Who's Dancin'," and "One Bright Day" among others. Although the major innovations in reggae had been dancehall and stylee, both strongly influenced by American hip hop, the young Marleys have only dabbled in these offshoots. Their music has largely been reggae-flavored but essentially what you'd expect to hear in a late-night dance club. One hit "Joy and Blues," is a heavier reggae, with its bubbling bassline, against-the-beat drumming, and characteristic chank-chank rhythm guitar.

But it wasn't until *One Bright Day* in 1989 that Ziggy's (David) vocal showed to the world an uncanny resemblance to his late, phenomenally popular father. As time goes on, this eerily exact replica is so much more amazing. And the occasional vocals by brother Stephen can even be more Bob Marley-esque.

Another past hit is an edgy reggae called "Lee and Molly" about an interracial couple, and features Keith Richards on guitar. Sonically and spiritually, "One Bright Day" and "Lee and Molly" are so reminiscent of Bob Marley's approach that many listeners thought at first that they were his lost basement tapes.

One of the Marleys' later records on Elektra, the superlative *Fallen Is Babylon* (1997), is the second of a return to a deeply roots reggae sound, the first being "Free Like We Want 2 B" in 1995. *Babylon* was recorded in the renovated Tuff Gong studio, where much of their father's most famous songs made popular music history. The Melody Makers see this record as something of a warning: against violence and the after-effects of colonialism.

Written by Ziggy, the title song is a thumping, bass-heavy reggae groove with full vocal harmonies. What with its biblical imagery and haunting "angel speech" by Jah Lloyd, "Fallen Is Babylon" is about as grooving and listenable as a jeremiad could be. Ziggy explains that "the



time that we're living in is Revelations time and people should know that. That's why the angel comes and shouts out the word to God's people."

Ziggy is the leader and spokesman for the band. In his Kingston patois he has explained that "Babylon is the whole world system right now, the G7 and the IMF, everyone who oppress other people. Just because they want power. They don't care about children dying. They just want to make sure their interests are served all the time. The truth is not known because they are the ones who hide it. Money is the main interest in the Babylon system, which is on its way down, and has been on its way down. We feel that the truth in this upcoming age will become known. That spirituality will be higher than materiality, and the change will occur within the psychological realms of man. People will be more in tune to searching for their spirituality. We know that the material part of life has proven unsatisfactory. Babylon cannot satisfy the human being."

The Melody Makers saw their warnings as timely, with the last millenium having come to a close.

"Even the solar system is going to change. The planets are moving into line and many things are happening. Everything that's happening is related. Certain ways of thinking are coming with this for the people, definitely."

Another powerful song, "Everyone Wants To Be," features Wyclef Jean rapping briefly over a melody very familiar to American ears: background music from a Clint Eastwood spaghetti western. The song message is anti-violence and hatred. It is a strange and altogether original sound (Jean also worked on the previous Melody Makers record, *Free Like We Want 2 B*).

"It's about where I'm from, Jamaica and especially Kingston. It's something that's happening in my town and in America and other places. I've experienced guys who are acting tough, or want to be tough. Everybody wants to be a gangster, like that's the way to go. Even the kids. No one is teaching love. The television, even cartoons, is filled with violence, violence, violence. No one wants to say that love is being strong. They think it's a weakness. Be rough, be tough, as if that is the way it should be. We know that love is the key. Right now our connection to God needs a better connection."

The Marleys cover the "People Get Ready," by Curtis Mayfield on *Fallen is Babylon*. Although originally suggested by producers, this song is so perfectly suited for this band's entire approach that they give their version a life of its own, with uplifting key changes. Also a cautionary song with Christian overtones in its message and black gospel singing, "People Get Ready" was one of the great Curtis Mayfield's biggest hits. Since early reggae was so heavily influenced by 60s Motown, it's only fitting that Bob Marley's children cover this song. Not to mention the elder Marley's quoting of Mayfield on "One Love." Stephen adds the swirling, exciting dancehall vocals.

Ziggy does remember hearing American R&B and the great soul singers while he was growing up. "When I was young, my great aunt Violet Anderson liked Nat King Cole and that type of music. Coming up, when I could buy my own records, I listened to Sam Cooke and Marvin



Gaye, all the old-time singers.”

"Born to Be Lively," written by both brothers is built on their father's classic "Lively Up Yourself" and again features Ziggy on lead vocal and guitar while Stephen fills the dancehall DJ role. The loose-jointed "Born" uses breathy, percussive keyboards, while one guitar plays lines from "Sugar, Sugar," and another plays twangy riffs around the rhythm. It is a very fun song and an excellent tribute to their father's music.

Aside from a live album, their latest studio recording is *The Spirit of Music* (1999), a quiet record with American blues overtones. Avoiding dance party music altogether, it is probably the band's most musically successful record so far.

When asked if he or his brother Stephen believe themselves to be the Jeremiahs of the 21st Century, Ziggy responds:

"I would never put myself in a class of people like that. I'm still in the baby stages of the fulfillment of my ability. I'm still in that creeping stage. We are all prophets, really. We are all healers, children of the most high. But the development of that inner strength just takes a long time. It's not like I'm saying that anything we're doing or saying are out of the norms of human being experience. If we were living right, we would be like the creator. But I don't see us as special or greater.

"We want to make this music like a science. We're going to work with all the knowledge of the music: the vibration, the keys, the notes, to make it into a science. We're working on some experiments. Just like when you take aspirin for a headache, the doctors have put some substance in there to make you feel better. We are going to work on people's minds, but with the knowledge of what harmony does to the body."

About being such a musically gifted family, Ziggy says this. "Just like there are families of actors, or farmers, doctors, even thieves [laughs]. We are a family of musicians. It's in the blood and you can't avoid it. We were already around the music of our father and mother anyway. There probably was some unconscious influence. But from the first time we recorded, we just kept on rolling."