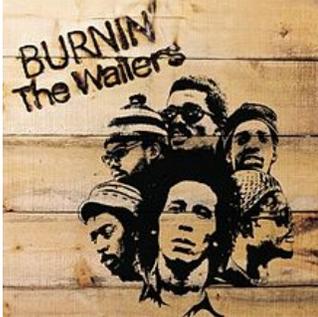


# “Burnin’”—The Wailers (1973)

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Essay by Roger Steffens (guest post)\*



Original album



Original label



Bob Marley

## “Burnin’”: The Wailers’ Final Statement

“Burnin’,” the resonant final album by the original Wailers trio of Bob Marley, Bunny Wailer and Peter Tosh, had its beginnings in Harry J’s studio in Kingston, where all the basic tracks were laid. Mixing and overdubbing took place at Island Records’ Basing Street Studios in London during the spring of 1973, in between live dates the group played to support their critically-acclaimed first international release, “Catch A Fire.”

“The album should have been titled ‘Reincarnated Souls,’ after a song I recorded for it,” recalls Bunny, “but because I dropped out of the group before it was released, the album was retitled ‘Burnin’,” with ‘Reincarnated Souls’ used only as the b-side of an English single. We were coming to England on a mission.” He continues:

We were going to establish Rastafarian culture and reggae music. So I knew that we had to have the Nyahbinghi drums so as to make the chant so that the people would understand that we had some foundation, that this music did not come out of nowhere. The drums had just been finished out by Six Miles [in Jamaica] by a guy named Ferry. The bass was made from the wood of the wine barrel and the funde was made from the trunk of a coconut tree.

In late April ‘73, accompanied by these most rootical of instruments, the Wailers--Bunny, Bob, Peter, keyboardist Earl “Way” Lindo, drummer Carlton Barrett and his bassist brother Aston “Family Man” Barrett (also known as Fams)--landed in the foggy chill of England. Bunny’s memories are bitter: “We were taken to a dump in a commercial district owned by [Island Records’ president] Chris Blackwell, King Street, above an Indian restaurant. There was a basement where we rehearsed, which was also a dump. When we weren’t cooking our food and we wanted a quick cook-snack, we would get it from the Indian store. There was not a bed in the place, there was just mattresses. Bob stayed around the corner with Esther Anderson in her flat most of the time.” Anderson, Bob’s companion at the time, became the guide for the Wailers during their stay, and played a vital role in several of Bob’s compositions during the 1973-1974 period.

“We did twenty-odd Polytechnic colleges, and one or two big nightclubs, including four nights at the Speakeasy, which was our breakthrough. We were like the biggest thing with reggae coming in town, ever since Jimmy Cliff or Desmond Dekker. The Wailers were now definitely the star of the lot. Each night at the Speakeasy was better than the one before,” despite the fact that the aristocratic crowd was virtually all white. “We opened the show with ‘Rastaman Chant’,” remembers Family Man. “The first track cast a spell on them, and after that it was just magic.” Adds Bunny, “It was the ‘Catch A Fire’ tour [their debut album on Island], but we were still singing tracks from the ‘Burnin’” album. And when there were break times, days off, we were in the studios doing the ‘Burnin’” album. No days off. We spent our days off in the studio, that’s the only time we would get to relax.”

“Everyone had their input,” says Fams, who was the chief arranger and often uncredited co-composer of the music. “I would listen to everyone’s ideas, and then we’d try to take it to the tape. We would record the backing tracks, making them special; we were all there during that stage. Then the three singers would sing, and Tony Platt and Phil Brown [the engineers] would listen technically. They were always having a good time. But the studio was kind of...,” he pauses, searching for a diplomatic word to describe a time when tensions among the three were growing daily, “smokey.” He is definitely not talking spliffs here. “And you never see smoke without something burning.” Both Peter and Bunny spoke often in later years about their concern that their creations were not being given proper exposure in the Wailers, being passed over in favor of Bob’s and thereby cutting them out of the lucrative writer’s royalties that were beginning to pile up for Marley. It was for this reason that Peter was asked by Bob to contribute the verse he sings on “Get Up Stand Up,” giving him the opportunity for a co-writers’ credit on the album’s anthemic opener.

“Get Up Stand Up” was also one of those tracks on which the stunningly beautiful Anderson played a role. She had met Bob in New York through a young film director named Lee Jaffe. Herself a successful actress who had co-starred with Sidney Poitier in a film called “Warm December,” Anderson found herself hopscotching across the Caribbean in February of ‘73 from Jamaica to Trinidad to Haiti and back to Jamaica in a plane chartered by Blackwell. “Bob and I wrote that song in twenty minutes flying from Haiti to Jamaica,” she said in a phone conversation from her home in Cornwall, England. “I was teaching Bob how to be a rebel, based on what I learned from living with Marlon Brando for seven years. In fact, I bought him a jacket just like the one Marlon wore in ‘On the Waterfront’ when he said he coulda been a contender.” “Get Up Stand Up” was the final song recorded for the Wailers’ valedictory album, left for last, says Bunny, “because it was the easiest track on the album, just unison singing.”

“Hallelujah Time,” a Bunny composition placed in his baby-mother’s name [Jean Watt] to avoid sharing royalties with those he felt didn’t deserve them, is a pastoral lament that man lives “on borrowed time,” but it is also infused with a Jah-blessed hopefulness. The unorthodox harmonies achieved after more than a decade of close musical brotherhood are among the most interesting the group ever recorded.

Eric Clapton’s worldwide smash cover of “I Shot the Sheriff” brought the final ray of attention necessary to shine the global spotlight on the Wailers. Ironically, the Jamaican

radio stations favored Clapton's version over the local fellows', and it wasn't until some of Marley's friends threatened physical retribution that local djs began to play Bob singing his own composition. Several people have claimed a hand in its creation. For Bunny, "from the start it was intended to have that kind of cowboy ballad vibes like Marty Robbins." Esther Anderson says "the story line came from me in my bedroom in London. It's about birth control. Bob was always after me to 'breed' and have a baby with him. He kept asking me why after I'd been with him for a month already I hadn't got pregnant yet." This led to the lines "every time I plant a seed/he said kill it before it grow." "You see," Anderson continues, "the sheriff is the doctor. It was the third song we collaborated on."

More details emerged from lengthy interviews with Lee Jaffe, who lived with the Wailers in Kingston at the time, and who was Bob's "beard" for his relationship with Esther, allowing Bob to tell Rita Marley and others that Esther was actually Lee's girlfriend. From his home in Los Angeles, Jaffe recalled that:

The song came out of me playing harmonica on a beach in Jamaica. Bob was playing guitar and he said, "I shot the sheriff," and I said, "But you didn't get the deputy." It was a joke, because they don't have sheriffs in Jamaica. Bob was funny, he was witty, so it was about him hanging out with this white guy, me, it was a comment about that. And yes, it came out of Western movies, which Jamaicans really love. "The Good, The Bad and the Ugly" was always playing somewhere in Kingston. So they're into that whole attitude, and here Bob was hanging out with this white guy, so it was like being in some Western movie with me. I remember there was these two really, really fat girls dancing on the beach when Bob came out with that line. And then, it was like such a funny song, the beach wasn't that crowded, but we had a whole bunch of people just dancing to that song. I wrote down all the lyrics that Bob was singing, and I was excited 'cause I knew it was a big song and I felt I was integral to its conception. And then I came up with the line, "all along in Trench Town, the jeeps go round and round," 'cause the police and military drove jeeps and I was thinking of the curfews that were being called in the ghetto and what it was like for the poor people, the sufferers, to live in a militarized zone and to have the basic freedom of walking in the street taken away. I think of what a genius Bob was for coming out with the line "I shot the sheriff" because, though it was funny, it was also so poignant, so relevant to the global repression. Later he changed the line to "all around in my home town" and that was better, because it made the point that these violent interventions into everyday life in the shanty towns of Jamaica were intrinsically foreign influences. And when I said, "But you didn't get the deputy," it was ironic and slightly self-deprecating, because what it was saying was yeah, I got the balls to shoot the sheriff, but I don't have it together to get all his backup. And this is going to be a long tragic struggle that's going to need a lot of everyday heroes.

"Burning and Looting," after which the album is named, was, according to Bob, "about burning illusions," not material things. According to Esther, "It's completely based on something that happened to Joe Higgs." Higgs, the magnanimous early teacher of the

teenaged Wailers, would go on to replace Bunny during the group's final tour in late 1973. Higgs:

He told me that the night before he had awakened to find the police surrounding and raiding his house in Trench Town. So I told Bob about it and said that we have to write about it. These are the kinds of things that are happening in the country, and you have to document it. "Weeping and Wailing" was the first title. We wrote half of it at Hope Road, another part in Castleton Gardens in St. Mary near Golden Spring, and finished the song in Annotto Bay. People around him were beginning to use cocaine, so that's what those lines are about when he said, "Let the roots man take a blow/all them drugs gonna make you slow, now." I added the line, "It's not the music of the ghetto." Fams worked out the entire score to go with it in the rehearsal room in Tuff Gong. When we came to London to record it, Bob changed it to "Burnin' and Lootin" because, he said, that's what's going on down there.

Bunny Wailer has another take on the song. The group's career began in 1964 with Coxson Dodd's Studio One label during the ska era, where they recorded approximately a hundred tunes, many of which were re-pressed in England by Chris Blackwell's nascent Island label. According to Bunny Wailer, when the Wailers met Chris Blackwell in late 1972 in London, "He told us that he had sent the Wailers through Coxson hundreds of thousands of pounds for the records of ours that he had released in the 1960s," money which the group never saw. "Chris told us he was afraid to meet with us because he had been hearing that 'you people were dangerous people, that you were killers'." At the same time Coxson was telling the Wailers that Blackwell never spoke to the singers whose works he was releasing in the UK, so they shouldn't even try to contact him. Thus, seeing the Wailers finally looking at the boss for the first time, the Big Boss, is what inspired Bob to write the lines: "How many rivers do we have to cross/before we can talk to the boss/all that we got seems lost/we must have really paid the cost."

"Put It On," a remake of an early seven-inch for Coxson Dodd was done originally, says Bunny, "About November 1965, because it was a hit record in the Christmas time. It was the last session Bob did before he left for the States" to earn money for the Wailers to start their own label and gain their independence.

Another cover, this of a track initially cut three years earlier for Lee Perry's Upsetters label, was "Small Axe." According to Fams, "It was one of our favorite songs, a big local favorite. We wanted to do it in the r&b style on the album in an international style, add a little more flavor to get it across." Bunny describes the double meaning of its lyric: "This was Peter's idea and Bob wrote the song. Studio One, Treasure Isle and Federal had intended on forming an organization called The Big Three to manipulate, keep up all the business with them, where all the artists would have to come to them. Well, the conversation was now, 'we'll make a song, deal with this t'ree.' Peter said, 'All right, if them are the big t'ree, we are the small axe.' And Bob now go ahead and write the song. Lee Perry didn't have anything to do with writing it."

Years later, Lee Perry angrily autographed a copy of the Upsetter single for me: “I Upsetter write this song. I am the small axe. Bob was not even there when I wrote this song.”

The oldest song on the album is “Pass It On” which Bunny wrote around 1962, prior to the formation of the Wailers. Bunny related, “I should have recorded it at Beverley’s at the same time Bob did his second solo record of ‘One Cup of Coffee.’ But I was late, so I missed the session. Over the years I added new lyrics to it and it got stronger still.” It took eleven years before it was finally laid. “It was one of those songs that I hear when I was a very little child that I never forget. It’s a kind of traditionally adapted song, the first song that I ever wrote.”

“Duppy Conqueror,” originally recorded in late 1970 for Lee Perry, is taken here, in Fams’ words, “to the next stage.” A duppy is a malevolent spirit in Jamaican folklore. “A bullbucker,” says Bunny, “means like a guy who bucks bulls, a guy who’s so strong that he can buck bull, knock him out. So if you a bull bucker, then I’m a duppy conqueror. It’s an old traditional saying, like if a man say to you, ‘If you think you chew ‘pon iron, I chew ‘pon steel!’ I conquer duppy, and duppy’s the hardest thing to conquer. If you think you kill ten men, I kill twenty.”

“One Foundation,” Peter’s composition, is a plea for togetherness under the implied leadership of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie. Oneness, the Wailers believed, was the answer to all the world’s ism-schisms, and any duality was the work of the devil, a false veil of separation that only a belief in the oneness of Rasta could lift.

“Rastaman Chant,” the album’s speeded-up closer, was partially inspired by Esther Anderson, who took the original album’s photographs. “I was a photo journalist with a socialist newspaper at the time with Alex Cockburn,” Anderson revealed:

One day Countryman [about whom Dickie Jobson made a well-known film in 1982] turned me on to a man who lived on the beach across from Bunny in Bull Bay, a man named Bongo Mackie. He’s the dread with the goat in the centerfold of “Burnin.” Mackie was living in a big Rasta compound with all these children. I was so amazed at all the red, gold and green there. This was a time when none of the Wailers had dreadlocks yet. I took Bob there the next day with Countryman to photograph them together. In the evening, Mackie started to play these akete drums, and they reminded me of a time I had gone to Africa with Millie Small and Brando was there. The big university in Accra gave a private thousand-drum concert for us, and Bongo Mackie’s drums reminded me of these. When I heard him sing “One bright morning when my work is over,” I told Bob, “You must wear red, gold and green and grow your locks and open your show with the drums.”

The rest is history.

The significance of “Burnin’” lies in its declaration of faith in Rastafari, which would underpin all of the solo work they would go on to make. Like the Beatles, to whom they were often compared, the center could not hold. They were all capable of being leaders

in their own right, proselytizing the faith to a worldwide audience on the brink of embracing a brand-new philosophy of equal rights and justice and--above all else--One Love.

Let the final word on the eternality of "Burnin'" rest with Jon Pareles, the eloquent chief pop critic of the "New York Times." In 1996, the "Times'" Sunday Magazine celebrated its one hundredth anniversary, and asked each of its critics to choose one work of art that they believed would survive a hundred years into the future. Pareles chose "Burnin'" and wrote:

Bob Marley became the voice of third world pain and resistance, the sufferer in the concrete jungle who would not be denied forever. Outsiders everywhere heard Marley as their own champion; if he could make himself heard, so could they, without compromises. In 2096, when the former third world has overrun and colonized the former superpowers, Marley will be commemorated as a saint.

*Roger Steffens is the author of seven books about the Wailers and the history of Reggae. His award-winning "Reggae Beat" radio program was syndicated to 130 stations worldwide, and since 1984 he has lectured internationally with a multi-media presentation called "The Life of Bob Marley." He is the co-founder of "The Beat" magazine. He served as founding chairman of the Reggae Grammy Committee for 27 years, and is the former national promotions director of Island Records.*

\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.