

The Gleaner

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Story of the Song: His Imperial Majesty traced through song

Published: Sunday | November 11, 2012 | 12:00 AM



Jacob Miller - File

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November 2 marked the 82nd anniversary of the crowning of Emperor Haile Selassie I, the First and Her Imperial Majesty Empress Mennen at the Cathedral of St George in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It is a date central to the Rastafarian community and, with Jamaican popular music forms reggae and dancehall heavily influenced by Rastafari, has made its way into song.

However, in addition to the date, other aspects of Haile Selassie's public life have been included in Jamaican singers and deejays' lyrics, making for an informal record of significant moments in his life in Jamaican popular music.

Unfortunately, however, many times the essential female component - Empress Mennen - is left out of the narrative.

Sizzla is one of those who has recorded the coronation date in song. It is included in **Mash Dem Down** on the 2002 album **Da Real Thing**.

Mash Dem Down, a song of faith in the inevitability of prevailing over one's opponents and obstacles ("*come we go mash dem dung nah lose/all dem a wrinch an a frown stumbling blocks will have to move*"), gives the coronation date in the context of instructing youngsters on how to live:

Little children I say to honour your mother and your father

Tell you again I say to love one another

Praise Selassie I crown in Addis Ababa

Second of November 1930 ...

The image of Haile Selassie and Empress Mennen on their thrones, looking composed and serene, is striking and powerful. The Natural-ites, in **Picture On The Wall**, literally put it in a place of paramount importance in the home. The song starts with a question and answer narrative:

Q: *The I have a picture of his Majesty Rasta?*

A: *Yes iyah, Jah live y'n*

Q: *And the I have a picture of His Majesty dread?*

A: *Yes iyah, Jah is within I*

Q: *And the I dem have a picture of His Majesty Rassas?*

Chorus: *Yes I*

Then, singing, they confirm:

In my house there's a picture on the wall

Rastafari sit upon his throne

Jacob Miller died in a motor vehicle accident in 1980, one of his signature tracks being the slow **Chapter a Day**. Musically, the introduction is dominated by the organ, giving it a distinctly church atmosphere. A song of deep faith, in a spoken section Miller expands on Emperor Haile Selassie's titles, part of which he had already sung. Miller includes the titles in his exhortation:

The works of His Majesty Haile God Selassie I the First, ever ruling God who ever stands firm and show all leaders of the world that he is Kings of Kings and Lords of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Earth Rightful Ruler, His Majesty God Haile Selassie I, give thanks and praise, Jah Rastafari!

Emperor Haile Selassie I visited Jamaica in April 1966, his tumultuous reception at the Norman Manley Airport on April 21, 1966, the basis of enduring legend. As part of the 'Pieces of the Past' series in **The Gleaner**, Rebecca Tortello wrote:

The heat that rose from the tarmac of Kingston's Norman Manley International Airport was nothing compared to the level of expectation that was seeping through the thousands gathered on the tarmac that 21st day of April, 1966. The day was declared a public holiday in honour of the emperor and people had started arriving from Wednesday night from places near and far, to form the largest crowd to have ever assembled at the Norman Manley International Airport. They came to the airport any way they could - by car, by truck, by bus, by bicycle, by foot. Drum beats and chants were heard almost non-stop, providing an almost hypnotic rhythm. The smell of ganja wafted through the air completing a welcome unprecedented in size and expectation for the Emperor on his first state visit to Jamaica ...

When the insignia of a roaring lion and stripes of red, green and gold finally came into view, the rain stopped. People shouted, "See how God stop de rain." The sound from the crowd was deafening as masses of people rushed to get closer to the island's distinguished visitor. The crowd simply broke down any barriers that stood in their way in their eagerness to position themselves as close as possible to the 'King of Kings'. But the Lion of Judah did not appear immediately as expected. Instead, the plane stood there, silent in a sea of activity and sound. No movement could be seen from within the cabin. The door to the plane finally opened 45 minutes later, close to 2:15 p.m., and His Imperial Majesty came to the top of the stairs to deplane.

The crowd responded with a roar that "was louder than the sound of thunder rolling, louder even than an explosion" recalls Mitsy Seaga who accompanied her husband, Edward Seaga, the then minister of development and welfare."

Deejay

Early B, the late standout on Kilimanjario sound system and whose

One Wheel Wheelie is an early 1980s hit record, puts

the historic visit into the dancehall record. He starts **Visit**

of the King with speech, placing himself in the historic

occasion as a child ("*Well I've seen many world leaders, many*

heads of state, but none of them impress me like when I was youth, bout

six, seven, eight when King Selassie I visit, 1966

...).

Deejaying on the Midnight Rock rhythm,
associated with Jah Thomas, Early B details the occasion, a high point
for those not in
officialdom:

*It was the
year 1966*

*When Selassie I made a
visit*

*Mi seh Rasta make de wicked
dem look like rubbish*

He

sums up the crowd ("*Thousan' of people Jah know de crowd
thick*"), the weather ("*It was good weather but the
rain did a drip*") and an open use of the sacrament
("*Mi seh every dreadlock a burn up a spliff*"). The
detailing is exquisite, from the rain stopping and a rainbow coming to a
flock of birds on the plane's wing. The King emerges
("*Selassie come out wid him lion on him stick*") and,
after describing his outfit and height ("*about four foot
six*"), Early B notes the overturning of the social
order:

*Babylon dem have to
run, them couldn't stan it*

*Because
the airport come in like Rasta
district*

The song

continues with Selassie's address at the National Stadium, then wryly
notes how it was back to business as usual after Selassie
left:

*When Selassie I
come, the herb did bun*

*But now him
gone home dem a run we
dung*

At least two of His

Imperial Majesty's addresses to the highest world body have made it into
reggae. The most widely known is **War** by Bob Marley
and the Wailers on the 1976 **Rastaman Vibration**
album.

The lyrics are almost verbatim from Haile

Selassie I's speech to the United Nations General Assembly in 1963.

Poet Mutabaruka notes the potential world-changing effect of Selassie's speech to the League of Nations in 1936, speaking to Italy's use of chemical weapons against Ethiopia.

In Great Kings of Africa

by Dennis Brown, Ini Kamoze and Mutabaruka, the poet says:

Now the King of

Kings Haile Selassie

Was invaded by

the fascist Mussolini

If the world

had listened to this little

man

World War Two might have never

began

Haile Selassie I

died on August 27, 1975, at 83 years old in circumstances that remain obscure. Bob Marley and the Wailers responded directly to the news of His Majesty's death with **Jah Live**, released shortly after news of the death broke as a single and included on the **Songs of Freedom** box set.

In

Jah Live, Marley sings "*Fools say in their*

heart/Rasta your God is dead/But I an I know/Dread it shall be dreader

dread". And nearly two decades after Selassie was reported

dead, Capleton observed "*A say Selassie dead an dem cyaa show*

no tomb".

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