

Sing Our Own Song

Judy Mowatt's Quiet Fire

The passing of Bob Marley, seven years ago this month, has left a seemingly unfillable vacuum in reggae. One who feels it most keenly is Judy Mowatt.

As a member of Marley's backing band the I Three, she shared the Wailers' triumph and tragedy. Today, while carving out a successful solo career, she admits things ain't what they used to be.

"Right now, the whole music industry is in need of a positive role model," she says. "Bob was that role model, and I haven't seen anyone who could replace him."

"But Bob has left volumes of music behind, and what I'd like to see is people striving to achieve the same standard. We have to focus on that level, because I think standards have dropped immensely, especially in constructive lyrical content."

"In Bob's time, a lot of artists tried to emulate his style of message, and everyone had a positive message then because they had a positive role model to follow. But because we don't have that image now, everyone is doing their own thing, and it's really depreciating the music. The standard of the music itself has grown immensely, but not the lyrical content. What made reggae go international was the message that Bob delivered, and we haven't really seen anyone equal that. We have seen his son, Ziggy, who is doing a great job and I think is someone we'll probably have to look up to. He is making music for upliftment, something to stimulate the intelligence, so you can look on the positive side of life."

Dance-bore

Even in its evolutionary days, reggae was a conscious music. The old ska and rock steady

singles were filled with comments on social problems, especially those facing the youths. Songs like '007' and 'Rudy A Message to You' were as pertinent as anything in the 60s. Sadly, the dancehall rules these days. The riddims get faster and faster, the voices snappier and sexier, the lyrics more banal.

"Music now is too physical," sighs Mowatt. "Everybody wants to dance but nobody wants their minds stimulated, nobody wants to think. I think right now, nobody wants to be confronted with the evil and the plagues of our world. Everybody just wants to remain in the state of decadence that we're living in. Anyone who comes along with a deep-seated message seems distant and alien, especially to this young generation. It's really a shame and a pity, because we're in trouble. The world is in trouble, and people need to know. The Bible says, 'A people without knowledge is a people doomed.'"

Despite these gloomy words, Mowatt is not giving up her own efforts to make people more aware of the world around them. The message survives, through artists like herself, Bunny Wailer, Burning Spear and Jahman Levi, all devout followers of Rastafari. Mowatt is a functioning member of the 12 Tribes of Israel (Tribe of Asher), who have a flourishing base in



Auckland. Her convictions are obvious both in her own lyrics and in the words of the songs of others which she chooses to cover.

"We have to try, in whatever way we can, to send out that energy through music, because music is what is most listened to right now. A lot of people don't visit the church houses anymore. A lot of people have their tape recorder or listen to the radio, so that is where the source of inspiration has to come from. I think it is our responsibility as singers, regardless of what kind of music we represent, to make sure that positive energy is being displayed in whatever message we are portraying."

Sound principles, but Mowatt readily concedes that performers of her ilk are in the minority these days. In Jamaica, new technology has grabbed the youth. Emulators replace musicians, riddims are computerised and over it all, a

constant stream of motormouth DJs rap mostly about sex.

"I personally don't like the sound because it's a little lifeless," says Mowatt. "You don't get that human feeling from it. I can't relate to it at all, but you find that young people are attuned to American music, a lot of which is being played on the radio here in Jamaica. It's becoming so accepted here among the younger generation that sooner or later, we will probably convert. It's a change that we will have to accept, but I don't think that it can destroy the sound of a live band. However, it will keep a few musicians out of work, I can tell you."

JA and DJs

Despite this, the JA studios are thriving, with two new ones under construction, one in Kingston, the other in the tourist resort of Montego Bay, host to the annual Sunsplash festival. New artists are

constantly arriving on the scene, some like Brigadier Jerry and Jean Breeze being conscious performers. But mostly, says Mowatt, it's DJs who specialise in sexist lyrics, or "slackness."

"The slackness outweighs the few who are trying to give a positive message. Every new DJ who comes up wants to be as popular as the one before, and if he's into slackness, then the others try to emulate him. This is just depicting dirt, and that is what the people go for, especially the women. Most of the lyrics are really degrading women, yet they're the ones who support this music the most. The DJs don't live very long, they generally last about six months and then another one rises, reigns for a short time and then is dethroned by another one. But good music will live forever."

Positive sentiments. The same, too, for the role of women in the music industry and in general. Mowatt has recently spent six weeks touring Africa. She visited Liberia, Nigeria and Zaire and played with the likes of Fela Kuti and King Sunny Ade. Back in 1980, she expressed both personal and general frustrations in the song which has become her trademark, 'Black Woman.' Eight years on, her views, as a black woman, reflect a changed environment.

"I think a woman allows herself to be treated as she sees herself. I know that these rules were forced upon women in the early days, but I haven't seen anything like that happening now. We are seeing women in so many areas of life, projecting themselves, asserting themselves. I don't think that in this age a woman needs to allow herself to be subjugated by a man, or men."

"Going to Africa, I was so surprised because the women there are moving, they're making great strides. They're on the forefront, they're working alongside their brothers. They have taken up ministerial positions, they have a lot of lawyers, a lot of doctors, engineers, mechanics... professions you would think were mainly for men. I don't really see women as being in the back-

ground anymore."

New Shores

Mowatt's reputation in reggae circles is unquestioned. Her live performance at the 1986 Sunsplash ranks among the finest I've ever seen. Someone with her pedigree, especially with her association with Marley, should be in the superstar category.

The I Three still work as a unit for three or four months a year, doing their bit to keep the legend alive while trying to forge ahead. Mowatt's recent album *Love Is Overdue* was a shot at the US market. It reflected not only her desire to succeed outside her own shores, but her musical roots as well.

"My history consists of soul songs. I was known in Jamaica first of all as a soul singer before I started to do reggae music. Singers like Aretha Franklin, Dionne Warwick, the Supremes, had a lot of influence on me. Those were the songs I used to perform when I first started singing."

The soul influence pervades on four tracks recorded at Philadelphia's Sigma studios. To me, Mowatt has always resembled Aretha in vocal style, yet the results in this vein are only average. Perhaps she tried to sing soul for the wrong reasons. Yet her cover of Otis Redding's 'Try A Little Tenderness' was brave, and valid.

"I think this song also needs a woman's interpretation. I know a lot of women out there have the same feelings that the song is expressing. It relates to a human situation. So I feel that in these times that we're living in, it would be nice to share this song with my sisters."

Mowatt doesn't consider herself a 'reggae artist', even though that's the way she's classified in the USA. She says she's comfortable in other formats, yet it's when she's performing reggae that *Love Is Overdue* works best. She mashes up UB40's 'Sing Our Own Song', because the lyrics impressed her so much ("They relate to the African people, especially the people in South Africa"). Of

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IT'S THE Pagan AD AND THIS TIME IT'S A HALF PAGE...



Rhythm Cage

12" & 7" debut single release
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Pacific Pop - as seen on Ready To Roll - If you don't hear it, ring your local FM station folks!



SPINS + NEEDLES

National Student Radio compilation - buy one for Mother's Day - It'll make yer front lawn curl!



WARRATAHS

new single "MAUREEN" 7" off the ebouromously successful 'ONLY GAME IN TOWN' album - watch out for the video. Putting fiddling back into country!



HOLIDAYMAKERS

"SWEET LOVER" 12"/7"/cassingle
A soulful little octet from Wellington with a debut release that defines 'groove' - watch for the video - See 'em live soon!



Shona Laing

'SOUTH' - features the singles "SOVIET SNOW", "GLAD I'M NOT A KENNEDY" & "DRIVE BABY DRIVE" - soon to be released in USA - a classic album/cass/CD!

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