

## The power of art (or was it love?)

By [Robbie Dale](#)

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Last week saw what would have been the 60th birthday of Bob Marley. The occasion was marked by a concert in Addis Ababa's Meskal Square, an event that attracted thousands of fans from around the world. The importance of this event, however, had little to do with the quality of music that Bob Marley and his band The Wailers produced in their distinguished career.

Now, for those of you confused by the mention of the Ethiopian capital in the opening paragraph, let's have a little history lesson... When in 1930, Haile Selassie (born Prince Ras Tafari Makonnen, hence the term Rastafarian) claimed the title 'Emperor' of Ethiopia on his succession to the throne, it was the fulfilment of the prediction of a Jamaican radical called Marcus Garvey. Garvey, who had been delivering messages of black self-empowerment for some years and had also initiated the 'Back to Africa' idea as a leading figure in the Universal Negro Improvement Association, had prophesised the coming of a great black king. With Salassie's coronation there sprang a movement encompassing both religious (post-Christian) and political ideas that took root most prominently in Jamaica. The movement - Rastafarianism - holds Selassie to be the embodiment of the Rasta faith, and sees Africa (and in particular, Ethiopia) as the true Promised Land.

Since 1975 the Rastafari movement has exploded throughout the world, a phenomenon that can largely be attributed to the success of Bob Marley. Aside from his more famous hits, tracks such as Africa Unite (which gives it's name to the event held this week in his honour) point to an underlying message behind Marley's work, one which goes much further than the free and easy sprit that reggae and Rastafarianism are usually associated with.

When I came across reports of the Africa Unite event on the internet, I was struck at once by the sense of what this concert was about. It was not simply a charity concert, although monies raised went to those in Ethiopia who need it most. Nor was it a tribute to the music of Bob Marley, although the inclusion of his work gave the event a vibrant sense of celebration. No - this was an event about the power of art and its ability to unite a race of people. It was about recognising the importance that the music of a successful artist can have in spreading a message into otherwise impenetrable spheres - a feat Bob Marley didn't fail to notice himself. In fact, the event bought to a head the notion that the power of the Rastafari faith can be utilised to bring about such a colossal event as the unification of Africa. That is beautiful.

Of course, other areas of history point to the importance of mobilising ideas that stem in a large part from art. If we go back in time we know of many stories of civilisations using stories and legends as a means of communicating certain desirable qualities. Indeed, in The Republic Plato seems to say that art can only be of use in a perfect society as a means of portraying that which is good to the young - i.e. stories of bravery or courage. In a more modern context, we know of Soviet Russia's programme of state art and therefore enforced censorship of art thought likely to cause anti-governmental feeling. If such things continue to happen throughout the passage of time, one must wonder whether there is some truth to the idea that the creative arts hold such an incredible and robust power over people, that they can rival, and even shatter the basis of political design.

Some will say that charity concerts held in aid of various causes are missing the point, even if they do make plenty of money: They suggest that it's a sad and desperate world when people need a material incentive to care. Maybe such a world is reason for sorrow, but I'd like to think that rather than replacing the sentiment, the music, sculpture or prose does its best to enhance it.

Think about the poignancy of your favourite piece of music and what it means to you. I bet the chord it strikes is its ability to invoke a reaction, a memory of a time you love maybe. Its not really about the music, the words or the melody - it's about how it works as a catalyst, what it represents. And the idea of representing the repatriation and unification of a race through music, and people sitting up and noticing, is one I can't fail to be drawn to.

Campus has recently been buzzing with the annual Battle of the Bands competition which must have featured around 100 original songs performed by acts throughout the event. I wonder if any of them thought about taking the time to fully utilise the power at their disposal.



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