

JAH in the Caribbean

In April 1966 His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia visited the Caribbean. Between 18th and 25th April He toured Trinidad, Tobago, Barbados, Jamaica and Haiti in what must have been an exhausting itinerary for the world's foremost statesman, then aged 74.

The Caribbean visit was in response to an invitation by Trinidad and Tobago's PM Dr Eric Williams, who had visited Ethiopia in 1965. The Emperor saw fit to add the other islands as part of a whistle-stop shuttle through the region in an era of emergent independence for formerly colonized States.

Thronging crowds lined the streets to catch a glimpse of the Conqueror of Fascism at every stop-point along the route. The Emperor addressed Parliaments, met religious and community Heads, as well as greeting thousands of ordinary everyday people on this historic tour. His message was consistent throughout. In Trinidad He spoke of the need for representatives of the people to be guided by more than the narrow self-interests of their own constituencies. He urged all to embrace the new realities of international accord and fraternity. In Barbados, during an unscheduled two-hour stop he paved the way for the nation's accession to independence later that year. His tour of Jamaica has become legendary in the Rastafari movement.

Thousands of the faithful had amassed at Palisadoes airport the night before His arrival. They had traveled on foot, by cart, bicycle, car and any means possible from every nook and cranny of Jamaica to welcome the Messiah, the Lion of Judah, their God and King Ras Tafari after whom the movement is called. On Thursday 21st April as sun glinted on the white aircraft coming through lowering clouds, a deafening roar went up from the huge crowd. All semblance of official protocol broke down as thousands rushed onto the tarmac to engulf His Majesty's plane. The flag-waving, chanting multitude blew horns, beat drums, lit hundreds of ganja-filled chalices; some feared the aircraft would explode with its propeller still spinning!

For almost half an hour the plane sat silently like a strange white iron bird in the midst of this frenzied exuberance. Some press reports stated that the Emperor wept, overcome by the ecstatic welcome. A leading Rastafari spokesman Ras Mortimo Planno was eventually summoned by loud hailer to mount the steps of the aircraft where he silenced the crowd and made a pathway for the Emperor to disembark into the reception area. From there He was whisked away for the opening ceremony of His visit, pursued by runners on foot, bicycles, cars, trucks, and all manner of vehicular transport. The teeming crowds would become a feature of His four-day tour of the island.

In His [address to Parliament](#) His Majesty stated that Jamaicans were blood brothers to the Ethiopians. With remarkable foresight He extended an invitation to Jamaica to join the Organization of African Unity and thanked all for the massive support Ethiopia had received in her hour of need in the war against Italy. No visitor to Jamaica before or since has ever been accorded the welcome given to His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I.

On the final leg of His tour in Haiti President Duvalier stated: "We understand Your Majesty's main objective in visiting developing countries is to settle disputes, promote love and at the same time, to accomplish the goal of African Unity. I can say, even your ancestor King Solomon the Wise, did not show as much struggle and effort in his life, as you did." His Majesty was awarded The Necklace of the Order of Jean-Jacques Duvalier the Great. He, in turn, presented President Duvalier with the order of the Queen of Sheba medallion.

Most historians, researchers and analysts of Rastafari might agree that the movement would not have survived to become a global community without the Emperor's historic visit to the Caribbean. The persecuted, maligned and marginalized 'cult' had been threatened with genocide three years earlier in the 'Bad Friday' pogrom of an independent Jamaica. Similar attacks followed throughout the islands. Today the green, gold and red emblem stands predominant among individuals, groups and communities in every nation on earth. Dreadlocked worshippers, adherents and sympathizers are numbered in millions, sharing a common commitment to the earliest mantras of Peace and Love, Equal Rights and Justice for one and all. The Rastafari ethos is embedded in the hearts and minds of common people and grassroots societies everywhere, by men and women of diverse and disparate origins gathered under the overarching rainbow of One Love.

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