

Black Liberation, Culture, and Ritual: An Interview with Herbie Miller

Keisha Bell and Herbie Miller

Our bones form a track from the El Mina to Cape Coast to the ports of the West Indies and the Americas . . . Those moaning blues, those groaning gospel and spiritual [songs], the shouts and the hollers, those are the things that inform our culture today.

- Herbie Miller

In February 2025, I watched online from my home in Toronto as Jamaican historian and ethnomusicologist Herbie Miller addressed the Caribbean Military Academy's¹ Black History month celebration in Kingston, Jamaica. The one-time manager of Pan-African reggae artiste Peter Tosh spoke on the topic of music and black liberation, underscoring the emancipatory role of the performing arts in the Americas. Miller has had a long and distinguished career in the Jamaican cultural sector, with roles ranging from artist management, film composing, to music producer and entrepreneur. He founded the Blue Monk Jazz Gallery in Kingston which welcomed renowned pianist Monty Alexander at its opening. He has written and published extensively on Jamaican culture, music, and history and counted jazz luminaries such as Melba Liston, Randy Weston, and Max Roach as friends. A cultural historian, he currently serves as the musical director of the Institute of Jamaica and curator of the Jamaica Music Museum. Given the depth and breadth of his work, I knew that he would be the ideal person with whom I could delve into the subject of liberation and the performing arts.

Our conversation fittingly began with an exploration of what we mean by the term “art” in the context of Latin America and the Caribbean. Miller is clear from the start that the term is a Western colonial construction that has severed and dismembered into discrete parts—music, dance, drama, poetry, sculpture, painting, sports, food—what was once part of the everyday spirituality and celebration of our ancestors. Miller's framing of culture as ritual converges with theory explicated by Horacio Legrás (2022) which states that these cultural forms can be seen through the lens of *jouissance*. *Jouissance*, or enjoyment, unlike pleasure, is limitless and instinctual. In contrast, Euro-American scholars like Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan suggest that political and social order is established through the renunciation of instinct, connecting “art” to the temporary state of pleasure. Afro-diasporic and Indigenous cultural forms attempt to

¹The Caribbean Military Academy is the first military university in the Caribbean located at Up Park Camp in Kingston.

restore this state of jouissance.

What began centuries earlier on the plantation as instinctual responses to oppression morphed into cultural production through the post-independence 1960s and 1970s as the Black Power movement spread across the African diaspora. This was the height of Jamaica's "Roots Reggae" as a form of counter-cultural expression. Beyond the handful of artists who achieved global recognition at the time—Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Third World—Miller reminds us of the many whose music engaged with the social, economic, and political struggles of Black working-class Jamaicans.¹ For Miller, music is a "ritual performance" (Miller 2018, 37). In our interview, he draws a through line from slavery, through the Rastafari movement, to the early years of Jamaican independence into the present day and shows us how cultural products can reflect liberation struggles.

Keisha Bell (KB): Having heard you speak previously, I believe we both start from the position that emancipation did not achieve the full liberation of African diasporic peoples. How do you see music and the performing arts as a manifestation of the ongoing struggle for Black liberation in Jamaica and the Caribbean writ large?

Herbie Miller (HM): For me, the "arts," what we in the West call "the arts," is ritual in traditional societies on the African continent,[and] in places like the Pacific. In many ancient cultures, ritual comprises objects, song, and dance, and many other performative activities. I would extend that to include things like sports in the modern era. Cricket, let's say, to jump a couple hundred years, the West Indies versus England. That set of West Indians, between the 1920s and 30s, where the West Indies team was composed of either White West Indians who were descendants of the plantocracy, and a few African and Indian players descended from the plantation workers, you'll find that even in that eleven there's a hierarchy, and you refer to [White players] as "mister." When Frank Worrell² took over as the captain of the West Indies cricket team, he brought a level of participation beyond what the English and the rest of them saw: West Indies cricket being a swashbuckling game, a carnival-type thing. Worrell instilled in his guys that "No. The carnival is beyond swashbuckling," and so we have to apply ourselves in such a way that while it is entertainment like a festival on a savannah, or a carnival, it also conveys a level of historical and sociological information to uplift the people. By the time the West Indies team was led by Guyanese player Clive Lloyd³, you had a set of Black West Indians and Indo West Indians on that team who understood that this game of cricket is beyond bowling fast and licking six and four. We have taken this guerilla warfare to those who colonized us. And if we can properly beat them at this, we have won that battle in the war for total independence.

So we go back all these years and the role of the carnival, the festival, the ritual, that comprises song and dance and food; and, what that meant to the sustenance, the fortitude, the

¹ Link to a playlist featuring all songs mentioned in the interview is in the bibliography.

² Frank Worrell became the first Black captain of the West Indies team in 1960 after a campaign launched by C. L. R. James. <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2023/01/c-l-r-james-campaign-against-cricket-racial-hierarchy/>

³ Clive Lloyd became captain in 1974.

resilience, the commitment to maintain in a culture under pressure from outsiders, which would mean giving up your traditional spiritual way of life to an imposed Judeo-Christian way of life. What has that done to our people since that imposition has become the norm? And each time yuh think that the playing field is level, new rules reach yuh that set yuh back again.

How does song, dance, and ritual, kumina, pocomania and gerreh,⁴ the bamboula⁵ and these other things play into liberation? How could a people moan and groan and otherwise sing these dirges and yet signify (Gates 1988) from that hellhole of the dungeons in which they were captured and stored until shipment through the door of no return across the turbulent waves until they got to the New World? And those who didn't make it and were thrown over. And those who were thrown over because the customs vessel was out there to intercept the ship, knowing that after the banning of the slave trade, not enslavement, but the trade in humans, they were going to be searched by the customs. So what yuh do? Yuh throw them overboard. And then claim insurance and get it paid!⁶ And those groaning gospel and spiritual, the shouts and the hollers, those are the things that inform our culture today.

When you hear from the American south of Howlin' Wolf, and T-bone Walker, and B. B. King,⁷ and you hear from Jamaica, all of these mento singers, and these street corner shouters, and in Trinidad and across the New World, there's the equivalent of the blues and the gospel and the reggae and the samba and the bossa nova and the Pachanga⁸ and all of these things are embedded in our culture. How have we used it to continue to free ourselves?

On the plantations, for example, if an overseer was a drunkard and a good-for-nothing bum, nothing better than a rapist who could use his power to assault any one of the women, and in many cases, though not spoken too loudly, the men, our people would signal to each other. So when our people are on this plantation and they sing songs signifying to each other, "Here comes Charlie Brown, that good-for-nothing bum," in their own way. As one of my reggae friends said: "when you think it's peace and [safety], is a sudden destruction."⁹ "Fools dance to their own calamity," as Peter Tosh would say. And so while we're singing and dancing and carrying on, like the Jonkunnu celebrations¹⁰ back in Sam Sharpe's day, what they call the Christmas rebellion¹¹

⁴ Kumina emerged from spiritual practices of indentured labourers brought from Central Africa after the abolition of slavery in 1838. Pocomania is a syncretic spiritual practice that merges African spirituality with Christianity. Gerreh is an African-derived folk dance that is performed the second night after a death. <https://jis.gov.jm/videos/jamaican-traditional-folk-forms-gerreh/>

⁵ The bamboula is a West African cultural form. Many non-European cultures do not have separate words for music or dance, and so the bamboula is a rhythm and a dance form which found its way into ragtime and early jazz.

⁶ Miller is referring to the Zong massacre of 1781, where British slave traders murdered 130 enslaved Africans en route to Jamaica by throwing them overboard due to illness. The "cargo" was insured, and the ship's owners attempted to claim insurance after the fact. The insurers refused to pay, and the court ruled in favour of the owners. The insurers appealed the verdict, but there is no record of a second trial. See <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/collections/london-stories/zong-massacre-trial/>

⁷ US blues musicians.

⁸ Pachanga is a Cuban music and dance style that preceded salsa.

⁹ Bob Marley, "Rat Race"

¹⁰ Masquerade tradition that began in Jamaican antebellum period among the enslaved. <https://www.tryonpalace.org/education/african-american-history/jonkonnu#:~:text=Jonkonnu%2C%20also%20known%20as%20John,%2C%20Bermuda%2C%20and%20North%20Carolina.>

¹¹ Sam Sharpe was an enslaved Baptist deacon who organized a strike in December 1831 which spread throughout Western Jamaica and became known as the Baptist War.

the fools were dancing to their own calamity, because Sam Sharpe and his people had already planned what was going to happen at the end of Christmas—the rebellion would unfold. So, in a way you're using that masquerade, that festivity, that Christmas ritual, with the fifes and the drums, and the dancing, and the drunkenness, to cover, to mask, to camouflage what was going to come. If you read plantation history from a cultural perspective—the planning of the burning of the sugarcane fields—you'll see [resistance] in song, in dance, in those moments where the enslaved people could get together. Even Nunu, in that film called *Sankofa*, was this nice, pleasant, docile old African woman. She was the baddest slave on the plantation, because she had that because she had that “Mammy,” dumb and docile personality. But inside her belly, the revolution was boiling.

KB: Reframing cultural activities like sports, music, and dance as ritual moves us closer towards understanding the role of culture in black liberation. Can you speak about the performance of ritual in the post-independence decade of the 1970s? How did artists like Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Jacob Miller and Inner Circle, and Big Youth participate?

HM: I see those artists as a continuation of the [blues and mento musicians] we were just talking about, who we would not style as “artists,” or [their work] as art. Because that word is a Western-inflicted word on our rituals. The mask [hanging] on the wall is not a work of art. It's a work of the shaman, of the priest, of the smelter, in whatever medium they work. It had spiritual and magical meanings. In the seventies, some very unlikely persons made some extremely powerful songs. Individuals we don't necessarily associate with the revolutionary fervor of a Peter, or a Bob. Let's take a guy like [lovers rock artist] Gregory Isaacs. You don't associate Gregory with [revolution]. But Gregory has some songs that Bob and Peter would be proud to call their own. He has one him seh “The Border,” when he's talking about “I'm leaving out of Babylon, this place is not my home.” You have another singer like Ken Boothe—“Black, Gold and Green” [a song about the Rastafarian spiritual home—Ethiopia]; he has a song called, “Is it Because I'm Black,” and another called “Freedom Street.” The lyrics to “Freedom Street” go: “We're gonna walk, walk, walk, down freedom street.” We [normally] associate Ken Boothe with [love songs] “Puppet on a String” and “My Girl has Gone.” And why could a Ken Boothe do that? Because he comes through a tradition that Mortimer Planno¹² was a part of, teaching them about Rastafari culture. They were a part of that early days of Ethiopian World Federation¹³ though they might not have carried dreadlocks and chanted brimstone and fire and “kill cramp and paralyze,”¹⁴ that was not their kind of rhetoric.

But to come to the guys who were explicit with this, I mean, let's start with [Bob] Marley - “no chains around my feet but I'm not free, I know I am bound here in captivity.”¹⁵ Mental slavery him talking about. We free, run up and down and jump and dance and sing and prance, but is your mind free? He comes back later and says—taking up from the words of [Marcus] Garvey:

¹² 2nd generation Rastafarian leader active during pre-Independence Jamaica.

¹³ Pan-Africanist organization founded in New York City in 1937 with a view to encouraging solidarity across the diaspora and supporting Ethiopia during its fight against Italian invasion.

¹⁴ Bob Marley, “Revolution” 1974

¹⁵ “Concrete Jungle”

“Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery.”¹⁶

Of course, Peter Tosh was so explicit that he couldn't even mask it. “Yuh inna mi land, no school for black children, we're gonna fight against apartheid.”¹⁷ Don't care where you come from, as long as you're a Black man, you're African.”¹⁸ You can look at his body of work, I've written about it, look at some of my work on Peter Tosh [about] Paul Bogle's Revolution.¹⁹ Third World: “Them lick him with the whip and grandpa jump di riddim.”²⁰ Yes, that's why we sing and dance and skank the way we do, is like when the whip lick yuh, yuh find a funny move and a different vibe. It reflects all of that.

I remember showing *Sankofa* to some schoolchildren, and there were two parts where this one young girl in the class, the same time when they were flogging, every strike that the whip made, the girl grabbed her back and [flinched]. At the end of it, I called her up and said I noticed [her reactions]. And she said “Sir, every lick she get, ah feel it!”

I said, “How yuh mean?”

She said, “Ah feel it, it inside of me.” This is a young girl at elementary school, primary school. She knows nothing about cultural memory and all those things, but she is acting it out.

We come across things that happened hundreds of years ago, and you feel it. Burning Spear: “Do you remember the days of slavery?”²¹ “Do you remember.” Repetition, he repeats these things. He says “I remember.”

So, you're now directly responding to contemporary issues within a former slave colony that is still mentally on the plantation. The educational system, the church system, the few little parsons who might stand up as revolutionary within the church, dem get defrocked.

Your dreadlocks child is told she cannot come to school. They cite things about lice and health issues when you take care of your dreadlocks in such a way that it glistens in the sun. The way I see people with dreadlocks put in coconut oil and shea butter, and when yuh go school dem come to yuh with that? Oh, but the person whose hair naturally drops on their shoulder is fine? Something is wrong with these things. And these are the things why you hear them sing about ‘War inna Babylon.’²² We have to take on these things through music, through dance.

It's something that has come from the savannahs all the way through Gorée Island²³, through Cape Coast, through El Mina, across the Atlantic, landed us on this island, these islands, these pieces of a different North and South American continent. But the one thing that could not have been erased is that DNA, that which is inborn and for many of us we can regurgitate it, we can remember it, we can feel it, we can talk about it.

[Themes of liberation appeared in music] following the 1972 general election, when music

¹⁶ “Redemption Song”

¹⁷ “Apartheid” Peter Tosh

¹⁸ “African” Peter Tosh

¹⁹ Miller, Herbie. 2018. “Sound the Drums, Blow the Horns: The Creative Ethos of Paul Bogle's Morant Bay War and the Liberationist Ethic of Peter Tosh's Music.” *Jamaica Journal* 37 (1-2): 36-45. DLOC

²⁰ “Rhythm of Life”

²¹ “Slavery Days”

²² “War Ina Babylon” Max Romeo

²³ Island off the Coast of Senegal which was the largest slave-trading centre on the African coast from the 15th to the 19th centuries. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/26>

catapulted Michael Manley to a landslide victory. Songs like “Look deh nuh, Pharoah house crash.”²⁴ The former Prime Minister, Hugh Shearer, becomes “Pharoah.” What does Pharoah in the Bible represent?

KB: Enslavement.

HM: The man who enslaved the Israelites. So, you turn Prime Minister Shearer into the man under whose administration our most progressive thinkers are arrested and their passports seized.

KB: Like Walter Rodney.

HM: Well, Rodney was just the tip of the iceberg now, but a lot of people, especially at UWI, had their passports seized—all the guys who were part of the *Abeng*²⁵ newspaper—they were seen as persons to be careful of. Then anything with [the word] “black” gets banned. You cannot read black power literature. If it’s found in your possession, you are a subversive element. This is between 1968 to 1972.

KB: Because it was after this period that Manley was elected and he promoted an ethnic/cultural identity shift away from a “melting pot” towards the Black majority.

HM: ‘72 we started on that—remember you know, between [1962] and 1972, if I give you or anybody for that matter a ride in my car, and that person is found with a spliff, it’s a mandatory *18 months* in prison you know, no questions asked. So, these kinds of ole time slavery day business—where two or more are gathered, get rid of them—[also known as] the Rogue and Vagabond Law,²⁶ some of which are still enforced today. How police dogs in the ole days were trained to attack people who [appear] a certain way. The whole culture comes out of resistance to such “illegal legality.” And it still persists today, despite the negativity and the debasement that you find in so much of the music today. Not just Jamaican music, *wherever* it is. Music dat juss mek noise and mean nutten.

Say something! “Rastaman vibration, positive!”²⁷

I think by 1980, [it was] following the election of 1980— the slogan being ‘Turn them back’²⁸ — that we were really turned back. So what used to be a culture of dreadlocks, and [wearing] your colours, and the empress and the king man, the smoking of herb, whatever else them want to call it, the way in which the support for Southwest African liberation struggles, struggles in the

²⁴ “Pharoah House Crash.” Prince Buster and the All Stars

²⁵ A weekly Jamaican newspaper published from February 1-September 27, 1969. It emerged at a radical political moment in post-independence Jamaica where the black power movement was on the rise. It started in response to protests over the banning of Walter Rodney from the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies. (UWI Mona Library)

²⁶ A colonial law dating back centuries, used to force newly freed Jamaicans to accept low wages on their former plantations or risk arrest for remaining on the property. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1839/may/30/jamaica-second-measure>

²⁷ “Positive Vibration.” Bob Marley

²⁸ This was a campaign slogan of the JLP headed by Edward Seaga. The party defeated Manley’s PNP party in 1980. “Turn them back” meant ‘turn back’ the free education that the bauxite levy helped to fund.

Caribbean, alignment with countries like Cuba, Venezuela, Panama, who were under the heels of neo-colonialism, by the 1980s we lost that sense of our leadership; what used to be called “third world leadership” for which Michael Manley was recognized globally, by both those who were against him, and those who supported him. And what replaced it? Jeri curl, tight clothes, cocaine, everybody just got turned back.

KB: Do you think that music is no longer a site of resistance?

HM: It can be a site of the knee in your neck, it can also do that. Because there are those who don’t care what they do and don’t feel a responsibility to do the uplifting thing and say “Bwoy, watch here now, yuh don’t haffi mek your children listen to my music yuh know; but my music is X-rated music.” Yes, there is a place for X-rated culture, but it cannot be in the open domain.

But, the music. It’s all in the music. Without the music, you aren’t gonna get the dance, the poetry, and all of that. It’s all in there; the good, the bad, the ugly. As Marcus Garvey says whatever you do, you must do it for the uplift of the race. You and I would say perhaps for the uplift of humanity, like when Black Uhuru sings “Solidarity, everybody wants the same thing out there, everybody wants a good life, so why not solidarity?”²⁹ Music always tells our stories.

²⁹ “Solidarity.” Black Uhuru

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Discography

1. "Rat Race," *Rastaman Vibration*, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Island Records, 1976
2. "The Border," Gregory Isaacs and U Brown, GG's Records, 1977
3. "Black, Gold, and Green," Ken Boothe, *Black, Gold, and Green*, Trojan Records, 1973
4. "Is it Because I'm Black," Ken Boothe, Splash Records, 1972
5. "Freedom Street," Ken Boothe, *Freedom Street*, Beverley's Records, 1970
6. "Concrete Jungle," *Rastaman Vibration*, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Island Records, 1976
7. "Redemption Song," *Uprising*, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Island Records, 1980
8. "Apartheid," *Equal Rights*, Peter Tosh, Columbia Records, 1977
9. "African," *Equal Rights*, Peter Tosh, Columbia Records, 1977
10. "Rhythm of Life," *96 Degrees in the Shade*, Third World, Island Records, 1977
11. "Slavery Days," *Marcus Garvey*, Burning Spear, Fox Records, 1975
12. "Pharoah House Crash," *Wreck A Pum Pum*, Prince Buster and The All Stars, Melodisc 1968
13. "Positive Vibration," *Rastaman Vibration*, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Island Records, 1976

Keisha Bell is a Jamaican-born, Toronto-based pianist, composer, and arranger. She graduated with a Master's degree in music composition in 2021, releasing her first album, *Caribbean Yellow* in 2022. She has a wide range of musical influences and enjoys incorporating improvisational elements into her compositions, leaving room for performer interpretation. Dance, poetry, and Afrofuturist and speculative fiction have also informed her approach to music. Keisha is a doctoral candidate in ethnomusicology at York University. Her research on music and black placemaking in mid 20th century Toronto lies at the intersections of performance studies, Black Canadian history, visual culture, and archival research. Other research interests include jazz studies, postcolonialism in the Caribbean, and Jamaican Popular Music. She is a two-time recipient of the John Arpin Award in Fine Arts, and currently holds a SSHRC doctoral award.