Rastalogy in Tarrus Riley’s “Love Created I”

Darren J. N. Middleton

Texas Christian University

If art is the engine that powers religion’s vehicle, then reggae music is the 740hp V12 underneath the hood of the Rastafari. Not all reggae music advances this movement’s message, which may best be seen as an anticolonial theo-psychology of black somebodiness, but much reggae does, and this is because the Honorable Robert Nesta Marley OM, aka Tuff Gong, took the message as well as the medium and left the Rastafari’s track marks throughout the world.¹ Scholars have been analyzing such impressions for years, certainly since the melanoma-ravaged Marley transitioned on May 11, 1981 at age 36. Marley was gone too soon.² And although “such a man cannot be erased from the mind,” as Jamaican Prime Minister Edward Seaga said at Marley’s funeral, less sanguine critics left others thinking that Marley’s demise caused reggae music’s engine to cough, splutter, and then die.³

Commentators were somewhat justified in this initial assessment. In the two decades after Marley’s tragic death, for example, reggae music appeared to abandon its roots, taking on a more synthesized feel, leading to electronic subgenres such as

¹ This is the basic thesis of Carolyn Cooper, editor, *Global Reggae* (Kingston, Jamaica: Canoe Press, 2012). In addition, see Kevin Macdonald’s recent biopic, *Marley* (Los Angeles, CA: Magonlia Home Entertainment, 2012). DVD.

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dancehall, regga, and reggaeton. Music from this period features not only punched-up techno rhythms but sexual boasting, drug references, and anti-feminist as well as homophobic themes, popularized by artists such as Buju Banton, Admiral Bailey, Mad Cobra, and Yellowman. Listen to Shabba Ranks’s “Trailer Load A Girls” song, for instance, and the departure from Marley's message is indisputable.⁴

Reggae music’s engine did not die on May 11, 1981. At worst, Marley’s loss is an instance of the Rastafari’s vehicle idling too tough or too slowly, and it seems that across the years various musicians found a way to troubleshoot such idling issues. Only time and space precludes exploring how and why.⁵ Suffice it to say, just four years after Marley’s passing, The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences of the United States gave the first Grammy Award for Best Reggae Recording to the Jamaican vocal trio Black Uhuru; they were feted for their 1984 album, *Anthem*, which emphasizes Rastafari’s practical worldview or ‘livity’ in the broad context of Afrocentrism. Dancehall reggae’s ethical carelessness or ‘slackness’ did not disappear. But neither did Marley’s motifs of God- or ‘Jah’-inspired black unification and emancipation. At least four of Marley’s Rasta-identifying eleven children—Ziggy, Damian, Ky-Mani, and Julian—kept the engine running. In the thirty-four years since the first Grammy Award for Best Reggae Recording, for example, the Marley family has been

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nominated twenty-one times, receiving it on thirteen occasions.\textsuperscript{6} It is worth noting that “Nail Pon Cross,” the first single taken from Damian ‘Jr. Gong’ Marley’s eighteen-track album \textit{Stony Hill}, which won the 2018 Best Reggae Album Grammy, samples the infectious, electro-bass first heard on “Solidarity,” a song from the aforementioned first Grammy Award for Best Reggae Recording, Black Uhuru’s \textit{Anthem}. Times have changed, one might say, and yet they have remained the same.

New millennium reggae music now exists in an extraordinary world of post-Marley possibilities. Dancehall’s digitized and faster rhythms remain, and perhaps will for some time to come, but the lyrics have changed. This developing story, which should feature detailed chapters on artists such as Chronixx, Iyah Gift, Maki B, Protoje, and Rseanal D’Artillery, is one that others will come to show as well as tell in other venues. This essay is different. Here, I focus on how the Marley-inspired Rastafari-roots reggae of the 1970s may be heard in the words and sounds associated with Tarrus Riley, a contemporary Jamaican–American singer-songwriter, whose six albums since 2004 constitute a new cylinder at the core of reggae music’s engine.

This essay investigates Tarrus Riley’s role in the articulation of Rastafari religion, culture, and politics in Jamaica and other parts of the African diaspora. After sketching Riley’s biography, placing him within the context of reggae’s post-Marley possibilities, I focus on “Love Created I,” a song that appears on VP Records’ 2008 reissue of Riley’s 2004 album, \textit{Challenges}. With its own intertextual plays, addressing everything from Augustinian-Calvinistic theological anthropology to a 14th century Ethiopian legend cycle and from Robert Powell’s blue-eyed Jesus to Bob Marley’s “Jah Live,” Riley’s song upholds the criticality of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, the chanting down of the Babylonian condition of the Christian West, and the significance of InI consciousness for realizing Rasta identity. Through historical-religious-lyrical analysis, my work addresses how Riley’s “Love Created I” both chronicles and explains salient features of modern-day Rastalogy.

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\textsuperscript{6} For a full list of nominees and winners since the inception of this prestigious award, see: https://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards/winners-nominees/209.
BORN IN 1979 in New York City and then raised in Jamaica, Tarrus Riley is the son of legendary singer Jimmy Riley who, in the mid-1960s, helped to popularize the music of rock steady, which may best be seen as the parent of roots reggae as well as the child of ska. Rock steady proceeds out from an unhurried or gentler tempo to ska’s offbeat rhythm, an accent on the bass line, and lyrics about three things: love, the rude boy culture associated with Kingston’s settlements, and the then-growing Rastafari religious movement, which upholds the deification of His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah. Rock steady was in its soulful heyday in the months immediately after one of the most important turning points in Rastafari history, the Emperor’s state visit to Jamaica on April 21, 1966. Reports indicate that 100,000 Jamaicans greeted Selassie at the Kingston airport. Rasta elder Mortimer Planno, who influenced the University of West Indies’ sociological Report on the Rastafari movement in 1960, and who eventually taught Marley, disembarked from the plane with Selassie, and Planno seemed as surprised as the others in attendance when Selassie refused to walk down the red carpet rolled out for his arrival. To this day, Rastas mark the Elect of God’s act of humility with an annual ritual, ‘Grounation Day,’ and on his 2009 album, Contagious, Jimmy Riley’s son, Tarrus, looks back across forty-three years of Rastafari history and offers up a tuneful homage to this auspicious visit, entitled “King Selassie H.I.M.,” which is set over a Nyabinghi drum pattern (three drums


8 On this visit, see Leonard E. Barrett, Sr., The Rastafarians, with a New Afterword (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 158-160. On Planno and the Report, see Noel Leo Erskine, From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology, 59-84.
working in 4/4 time), and designed to underline Selassie’s mysterious, unparalleled divinity.9

Jimmy Riley went solo in 1969, three years after Selassie’s visit, and just as roots reggae music began to soundtrack the beleaguered lives of the poor Jamaicans who lived in Kingston’s corrugated iron shacks and wooden lean-tos. Some of this music restates the Rastafari themes—like black somebodiness—covered in the tracts of several individuals, among them Leonard Howell, the so-called first Rasta, who in the late 1930s founded ‘Pinnacle,’ the first Rasta commune, located high above Spanish Town, Jamaica’s former capital.10 Reggae, though, was more successful than literature. Erna Brodber writes:

The reggae music to the black man, disseminated in sweet rhythmic music more effectively than the writings [of Howell and others] of the 1930s, provided a space for argument and counterargument, for learning that there is something called a black man and for teaching the initiate how to be a black man. Reggae of the 1970s created a black space; it was an incubator for a kind of knowledge that needed to work its way out of the ground and into the minds of the young descendants of Africans enslaved in Jamaica. Not just chatter among the platters, the early reggae allowed meditation while you danced and even if you did not want to be black, you could at least understand why others would want to be.11

Bob Marley would go on to fill this black space. He would also situate Rastafari and reggae on the world’s cultural map, as many

know, yet there were other artists, trailblazers like Jimmy Riley, who connected a few of the dots on this map. Riley scored several hits in the 1970s and 1980s, and when Tarrus Riley became one of Jamaica’s in-demand artists in the mid-to-late 2000s, father and son often appeared onstage together. Like Marley before him, though, Jimmy Riley was undergoing treatment for cancer when he passed. He died in March 2016 at age 68. Tarrus Riley’s 2014 album, *Love Situation*, is a smooth tenor’s tribute to rock steady, covering songs that his father wrote and then made famous in the late 60s.

Although these days he is perhaps most famous for the 2015 hit single “Powerful,” on which he performs a duet with Ellie Goulding, an English singer-songwriter, Tarrus Riley burst onto the Jamaican reggae scene in 2004. His debut album, *Challenges*, stands out as part of what some now think of as a new millennium revival of the roots reggae that many fans believe died with Marley in 1981. Recorded at Marley’s famous Tuff Gong Studios and produced by the legendary Jamaican saxophonist Dean Fraser, *Challenges* displays an array of existential reflections and spiritual insights, held together by inventive intertextual references and striking meteorological tropes. Significantly, this long-playing experience reaches back into early ‘Rastalogy’ and explores certain dimensions of Rastafari livity, such as a belief in Jah’s sovereignty; a sense that reverence for His Imperial Majesty is the source and essence of wisdom; the desire to cultivate dreadlocks; the perils of associating with the wicked, ‘Babylon’ in the language of Rastafari; and the value of reconfiguring black identity in the form of agential or moral somebodiness.

*Challenges* made modest gains when it first appeared. Tarrus Riley’s second album, *Parables*, followed in 2006, and one of its wildly successful tracks, “She’s Royal,” created a growing demand for new material. While Riley’s fanbase waited for 2009’s *Contagious* album, VP Records satiated the public’s curiosity by re-packaging and re-issuing *Challenges* in 2008. Two bonus tracks surfaced. And one of them, “Love Created I,” is the focus of the next section. The song is six minutes long. Videos linked to the original song, and to the stripped-down version from Riley’s 2012 acoustic album *Mecoustic*, are available online.12 Because the next

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12 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmckcN0YPbg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmckcN0YPbg) and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yavxu81q3ZE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yavxu81q3ZE). The acoustic version carries a new title, “Marcus Garvey.”
section provides a religious reading of “Love Created I,” the lyrics are included prior to any formal analysis:

Blessed love, *Satta Massagana*
*Igziabeher, Negust, Negast*
*Kadamawe, Kadamawe, Kadamawe*

Give us the teaching of Marcus Garvey*
*Kebra Negast* means 'Glory of Kings’
Give I and I Selassie I and keep the guy
With the blue eyes for yourself

’Cause people without a vision perish like suicide
You tell me it’s not about color
Still you refuse to take the picture off the wall
All you do is trick the brothers, keep them confused
They don’t know who to call in this critical war

And you tell me of a paradise in the sky but that’s a lie
And you tell me, I was born in sin and shaped
In iniquity when love created I
Look how many prophets tried
To open our eyes, you can’t fool me

Look how they’re treating us
This new millennium slavery
I see them hiding the chains
And still beating us daily

And now we mentally poisoned to fight we black skin
And bleaching ah the in thing far out and far in, sin
You tell me it’s not about color
Still you refuse to take the images out your books

I know that’s not how we look, Kush
Don’t take offense when we shout black power
It carries us through, we been abused
Put yourself in my shoes

And no tell me of a paradise in the sky
But that’s a lie
Don’t tell me, I was born in sin and shaped
In iniquity when love created I
Look how many prophets tried
To open our eyes, you can’t fool me
*Kadamawe, Kadamawe, Kadamawe*

Look how they’re treating us
This new millennium slavery
I see them hiding the chains
And still beating us daily

And now we mentally poisoned
To fight we Black skin
And a bleaching ah the new thing
Far out and far in, sin

You tell me it’s not about color
Still you refuse to take the picture off the wall
All you do is trick the brothers, keep them confused
They don’t know who to call in this, yeah spiritual war

So no tell me of a paradise in the sky
’Cause that’s a lie and you tell me
I was born in sin and shaped in iniquity
When love created I and I

Look how many prophets tried
To open our eyes, you can’t fool me
*Kadamawe, Kadamawe, Kadamawe*

So don’t tell me of a paradise in the sky
’Cause that’s a lie, no, come tell me
I was born in sin and shaped in inequity
When love created I and I and I

Look how many prophets tried to open our eyes
You can’t fool me
*Kadamawe, Kadamawe, Kadamawe*
You can’t fool me, no
You can’t fool me, no

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“LOVE CREATED I” opens prayerfully, the almost breathless Riley deploying phrasing that belongs to His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I, a central figure since the Rastafari movement first emerged almost ninety years ago. The words are Amharic, the language descended from Ge’ez, which is the official language of Ethiopia, and they may best be rendered in the following way: ‘Give Praise to God the King, the First’: ‘Satta’ (Gave), ‘Massagana’ (Praise), ‘Igziabehr’ (God), ‘Negust, Negast’ (King), and ‘Kadamawe,’ which is the word-come-symbol-come-numeral (I or 1 or the First) that appears after the coronation name, Haile Selassie, meaning ‘Might or Power of the Trinity,’ for the former Lij Tafari Makonnen, who ascended to the Ethiopian throne on November 2, 1930.

The importance of this moment in African history did not escape Marcus Mosiah Garvey, one of the last century’s major political activists, and Rastafari can also be linked to his fervent desire to centralize race consciousness in the international struggle for black liberty from white privilege. Garvey mobilized blacks by valuing their personhood, inspiring their moral agency, and by urging them to picture God as well as tell their own stories in the context of Africa’s own unfurling narrative:

We, as Negroes, have found a new ideal. Whilst our God has no colour, yet it is human to see everything through one’s own spectacles, and since the white people have seen their God through white spectacles, we have only now started out (late though it be) to see our God through our own spectacles. The God of Isaac and the God of Jacob let him exist for the race that believe in the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. We Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God—God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, the one God of all ages.

Available in several online venues and forums, the lyrics may be viewed here: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/tarrusriley/lovecreatedi.html.
That is the God in whom we believe, but we shall worship him through the spectacles of Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{14}

Seeing God through the lens of Ethiopia was central to Garvey’s black nationalist teaching, and Riley craves this wisdom, as the first verse makes clear.

Garvey’s teaching takes up the topics of race and religion; this mix may best be seen in Garvey’s 1928 remark—Rastas often say ‘prophecy’—that diaspora blacks should turn their eyes upon the Motherland and look for the crowning of a black-king redeemer. Garveyites in Kingston, men like Leonard Howell and Archibald Dunkley, became animated when Selassie’s coronation occurred in 1930, and even more so when they heard about his claim to be a direct descendent of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba—a claim traceable to 1 Kgs 10 and to the \textit{Kebrə Negast}. Note that Riley’s first verse alludes to this latter text, which picks up where 1 Kgs 10 leaves off; the \textit{Kebrə Negast} (Amharic: “Glory of Kings”) is a fourteenth-century national myth or legend cycle concerning the Solomonic ancestry of Ethiopia’s emperors. The \textit{Kebrə Negast} has been labeled “the Lost Bible of Rastafarian Wisdom,” and Ziggy Marley, Bob’s oldest son, introduces the Gerald Hausman translation, which is freely available.\textsuperscript{15}

“Give I and I Selassie I and keep the guy / With the blue eyes for yourself” returns us to Riley’s use of “Kadamawe,” the Amharic word for first, which he intones at the song’s outset. The first person singular pronoun is used after Selassie’s name, and Rastas like Riley have developed a ritualized speech that fosters a theo-psychology of black somebodiness from this single ‘I.’ They deploy an inventive form of African English, for example, and this patois means that words such as ‘InI’ (we; you and I), ‘overstand’ (to understand; to comprehend), ‘downpress’ (to oppress; to overwhelm), and ‘reason’ (to converse religiously) come together to create a new lexicon of meaning. The ‘I’ in Selassie I signifies Selassie’s divinity. The ‘I’ also signifies the


divinity in all human beings. If divinity resides within the self, then the self may never lose its somebodiness, can never be viewed as a nobody, which is to say: The Rastafari vocabulary of faith works best as an anticolonial gesture toward Jah, the sacred ground and holy grammar of the claim that black lives matter. ‘I and I’ (aka: ‘InI’) is Rasta patois, aka dread talk or Iyaric, for the divinity that all women and men share; to get at one meaning for ‘InI,’ then, it seems instructive to think of namaste, the Hindu customary saying, which hints at how ‘the divine in me greets the divine in you.’

Rasta prides itself on promoting ‘InI consciousness,’ with or without the weed of wisdom, ganja, and the basic thrust of this consciousness is the robust awareness of one’s own divinity. Rasta is a theo-psychology of black somebodiness. Little wonder, then, that Riley uses ‘InI’ consciousness as part of his critique of traditional Christian doctrine, informed as it so often is by visual art, like Franco Zeffirelli’s filmic Jesus, played by Robert Powell, whose piercing blue eyes arguably carried the Italian director’s 1977 star-studded, six-hour-plus TV mini-series, Jesus of Nazareth. Keep the guy / with the blue eyes for yourself,” Riley protests in verse two, and at this point Western, white Christians represent his implied audience, those pew-folk somehow in deep denial about the link between the Son of God and the saga of race. “On the set [of Zeffirelli’s Jesus of Nazareth], a seamstress looked into his [Powell’s] eyes and exclaimed, ‘He is Jesus!’” For a cultural history of this film, see W. Barnes Tatum, Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years and Beyond, third edition (Salem, Oregon: Polebridge Press, 2013), 142-156.

18 Blum and Harvey, The Color of Christ, 256.
throughout many nations. A Caucasian Christ confuses black women, men, and children, Riley declares, and thus the act of taking down or, better still, replacing the image, is collateral damage in a “critical” or just war.

Riley’s challenge to Western, white Christians continues in the chorus of “Love Created I.” Other-worldly eschatology holds limited appeal to this-worldly Rastas, who tend to see salvation as repatriation to Africa, the black person’s Vine and Fig Tree, or else as rehabilitation, the Africanization of one’s proximate world. Although Rastas do not rule out the prospect of continued conscious existence after bodily death, they are apt to dismiss the idea of a “paradise in the sky” as a drug that dulls peoples senses to life’s messy verities. At this point in Riley’s song we hear an echo of Bob Marley’s own Rasta anthem, “Get Up, Stand Up,” which rails against the Christian “preacher man” who admonishes the world’s poor to look to the afterlife, even to Christ’s Second Coming, as the corrective to all that is wrong with existence. “But if you know what life is worth,” Marley says, “You would look for yours on earth.” Rasta affirms realized eschatology. We should acknowledge that the liner notes to Riley’s Challenges album give credit to “Robert Nesta Marley” for “Love Created I,” and reggae aficionados will recognize that Riley’s rhythm resembles “Jah Live,” Marley’s poignant denial of His Imperial Majesty’s death in late August 1975, at age 83.

Riley also pushes back against Western, white Christianity by attacking Augustinian-Calvinistic theological anthropology. Preachers may well set up their altar calls with diagnoses of the human condition as something marked by ‘original sin’ or ‘total depravity,’ but Riley takes this notion to be as psychologically ruinous as it as intellectually suspect. Women and men were not “born in sin and shaped in iniquity,” Riley declares. Divine love created humankind. And with such phrasing he seeks to challenge the traditional Christian doctrine of humanity and replace it with Rasta, which may best be viewed as a theo-psychology of black somebodiness. Clinton Hutton and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell elaborate:

Rastafarian psychology involves expressions of self-confidence, affirmation of one’s blackness and personhood, a rejection of Eurocentric

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19 Ibid., 12, 208-11, 224-225, 251, 256, 259.
understandings of black people and their cultures, and a longing for liberation and ultimate redemption of the black peoples of the world (especially the oppressed). Blacks exuding this psychology are characterized by a strong sense of purpose, pride in their African heritage, racial solidarity, racial sovereignty, and self-reliance.

The black somebodiness in Riley’s Rastafari message speaks of a “new millennium slavery” in verse three—an ominous time when black lives do not matter, and when, to paraphrase Marley’s “Redemption Song,” African-derived peoples are unable to “forward in this generation,” because they have not yet discovered how to “emancipate” themselves from “mental slavery.” Riley tells us that he sees how the agents of neo-colonialism, or modern Babylon, are “hiding the chains / And still beating us daily.” It is not difficult to picture what Riley has in mind—everything from industrialized capitalism’s control of the black labor force to sexually-exploited runaways and migrants, and from black male incarceration to the increasing militarization of law enforcement.

Slavery in the new millennium is a theme that Riley returns to in later recordings, and here we might mention his 2015 single “We Want Better,” which poses and then answers the “Wah gwan’ over Ferguson?” question by speaking of “Fighting against Babylon / as a hopeful Rastaman.” It turns out there is a lot fighting to be done, however, and much of it seems linked to what we might call the ‘poli-tricks of black self-loathing.’ If we return to “Love Created I,” then we notice how Riley laments how global capitalism, the modern label for Babylon, dehumanizes the souls of black folk by persuading them to negate blackness by craving whiteness. “And now we mentally poisoned to fight we black skin / And bleaching ah de in ting far out and far in, sin.” Riley’s alluding to what has become known, in Jamaica and elsewhere, as the ‘Snow White Complex.’

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21 See https://theundefeated.com/features/why-are-some-jamaicans-bleaching-their-skin-to-get-lighter/. Also see: https://www.marieclaire.com/beauty/a27678/skin-bleaching-epidemic-in-
men in the dancehall reggae scene, this complex involves the rush to use chemical products to arrive at a drastically lighter complexion. Riley dismisses skin bleaching as dangerous, or “far out,” and he derides it as a neo-colonial imposition. Trying to lessen the concentration of melanin is “far in” or “foreign,” Riley complains, and although this toning practice, as some call it, is part of the current Jamaican narrative, it is nothing short of sinful, according to Riley. Speaking in a lecture series on bleaching at the University of West Indies, Riley recently doubled-down on his belief that the egregious practice displays evidence of mental enslavement. Skin bleaching destroys the black psyche, because its less-than-subtle message is that whiteness is beauty, beauty is transcendental, and thus blackness is opposed to divinity. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that in verse four Riley circles back to the color of Christ after questioning any attempt on the part of Jamaican blacks to self-identify based on a reaction to Western, white culture. “I know that’s not how we look, Kush,” Riley states, ending on an allusion to the ancient and beautiful kingdom in Nubia, which was at its zenith shortly after the Bronze Age. Reaching back into the past, to the African kings and queens of the Blue Nile and the White Nile, located in today’s Sudan and South Sudan, Riley also calls his listeners into the future. “Don’t take offense when we shout black power / It carries us through, we been abused / Put yourself in my shoes.”

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Tarrus Riley’s “Love Created I” is a revivalist hymn to Rasta-inspired black somebodiness, a conscious reggae anthem that praises Africa’s ancient wisdom and beauty, which is instantiated in Ethiopia’s holy emperors and books, heralded by the continent’s many prophets, including Marcus Garvey and Bob Marley, and alive today, as Rasta, the sprightly but often suppressed source for morally configured black identity in the Third Millennium. “As

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[22] jamaica/. Even Vybz Kartel, imprisoned dancehall reggae star, has released a song based on a product, ‘cake soap,’ which he believes bleaches the skin in safe ways. See https://www.thefader.com/2011/05/25/vybz-kartels-cake-soap-now-available. Deejay Bounty Killer’s song, “No Cream to Mi Face,” is a musical retort to Kartel.

long as there is Babylon, there must be Zion,” observes Emily Raboteau. To which we might add: And as long as there is Zion, there must be Zion singers, singers like Riley, young and talented artists whose hearts find no peace until they rest in the Love that created I and I and I.

Bob Marley would be proud.

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