

'Overstanding' Rastafari

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— Sequoia

From its emergence out of Jamaica to the forefront of the music world in the early 1970s, reggae has constantly grown in popularity and is now one of the most influential styles in the industry. But more than just a type of music, much of reggae is based on the Rastafari way of life.

Rastafari, or Rasta, is deeply rooted in Christianity, and the music is often filled with Biblical references. Along with the lifestyle, Rasta carries a distinctive hairstyle and even its own language dialect.

Eugene has its own growing Rasta community consisting of native Oregonians, people from Central America and various islands in the Caribbean, and from all over the United States.

Alton, a native of Jamaica, has been in Eugene for about six months. He is a member of More Time, a local reggae band. Sequoia, originally from Trinidad, is bassist for the Reggae All Stars. He came to Eugene four years ago and married Suz-I, an Oregon native.

All three emphasize that their views of the Rasta lifestyle don't necessarily represent the feelings of all Rastas.

The Rasta dialect is based on an idea of "word, sound and power," Sequoia says. "Rastaman believe in positive vibrations. We try to keep all those things we consider bad out of our language. Like instead of saying 'dedicated,' we're not dealing with no dead nothing. I don't 'dedicate' nothing to nobody. I 'life-dicate' it."

"Instead of saying 'sincere,' Rasta try to stay away from sin. We say 'I-sere,' because 'I' is God," Sequoia says. "We take out all the 'dead' and 'sin' and 'no.'" The language is basically Jamaican, he says, with very little pronunciation of the letter H.

"'I-man' is how Rastaman refers to himself, while 'I and I' is I-self and everyone else in the world — all my brothers and sisters," he says. "It's also I and the spirit of God within I. The Scriptures say, 'I will give you a new language in the last days.' This is our new language."

Unfortunately, Sequoia says, Rastas often have to adapt their language so people can "overstand" them. "Too many people 'understand' when they need to 'overstand,'" he explains. If you're "under" something, he says, "it might fall on you. That's a heavy burden." If you are "over" it, he says, you can see it much better.

The music is the vehicle of the language, and people now are beginning to realize reggae is as contemporary and complex as any other style, Sequoia says. Groups like Steel Pulse, Third World and Black Uhuru, and musicians like Bob Marley and

Bunny Wailer, Jacob Miller, Judy Mowatt, Rita Marley and Puma Jones concern themselves with such issues as world history, Babylon, one world church, hungry kids, famine, "legal murder called abortion," bombs and pestilence — world concerns, Sequoia adds.

"The music is only a vehicle for the message," Suz-I says. "Reggae is a type of music, but not all reggae is Rastafari music."

"Roots reggae music is psalms, like King David wrote. The psalms are songs in the Bible. It's just like the music in the Christian church. That's why you hear 'Jah' all the time," Sequoia says. "Jah," from Psalms 68:4, is the name used for God.

"Roots reggae music is the way we worship God; it's our chant to God, for help, for deliverance from this world as we know it," Sequoia says, "from mental slavery and from being minorities in a land that don't belong to the majorities themselves, and to free the brothers in South Africa."

The music doesn't even deal so much with the politics as with social issues, he adds, "but it's more the way we praise Jah."

The image of a Rastaman causes separation from the rest of the world, Sequoia says. "There are no jobs for you, in a place like this, especially. A Rasta is a bum as far as they're concerned. A cultist, a madman... We're just people, just everyday man and woman with families, just worshipping God."

Alton says there are true Rastafari and Dreads, those who just dress and wear their hair like Rastas. The Dreads are what give Rasta a bad name, he says.

"A true Rastafari will sit upon the hills and just chant music, grow food, grow herbs, praise Jah and live away from the other world, other hurtness system," Alton says.

"A Rasta is a religious man, a man of reality. Rastafari is a lifestyle, not a hairstyle. The least of Rastafari is the hair. It's how we live; that's what's crucial," Sequoia says.

Alton says he wears dreads because of his religion and dislike of "Babylon barbers and scissors and razors and all those things."

"If I have my hair on, it's like a part of my beauty, my strength, my religion. The more I let it grow the more it felt nice to me, the more it makes me more gentle. It makes me more strong in my belief," Alton says.

Some Rastas believe Samson was a dreadlock, explaining that he lost his strength when Delilah cut his hair. It also is believed John the Baptist was a Rastaman, and following the laws set in the Old Testament in Leviticus and Numbers, neither scissors nor comb were applied to his head.



Photo by Marty Schwarzbauer

Eugene Rastas Sequoia and Suz-I, seen in back from left to right, hold their two sons, Immanuel and Micah. On the right is Alton.

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