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Reggae Fans Get Up, Stand Up for a Birthday

By MARC LACEY

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia, Feb. 6 - If he had been onstage, Bob Marley would have waved his graying dreadlocks in the air and beseeched black people to continue struggling. In that lilting voice of his, he would have sung of love, of unity, of his beloved Ethiopia.

But Marley was only a memory, albeit a powerful one, at the celebration of the 60th anniversary of his birth on Sunday in the sprawling central square of the Ethiopian capital. So his wife, Rita, his sons, including Ziggy Marley, and numerous other admirers did the singing for the late reggae great, as tens of thousands of people jumped and gyrated to the trademark beat at a daylong concert entitled "Africa Unite." Also performing were the singers Lauryn Hill, formerly of the Fugees; Angélique Kidjo from Benin; and Ethiopian entertainers singing their versions of reggae.

It was a curious scene. Meskel Square, the spot where giant portraits of Marx and Lenin looked down on Ethiopians during the country's Communist days, was decorated with likenesses of Marley. Among the revelers were beggars, prevailing on all the idealists to give them something to eat.

Ethiopia is regarded as the promised land for Rastafarians, the dreadlocked Jamaican spiritualists who gave Marley so much of his inspiration. That special status comes despite the poverty of the place, the regular bouts of starvation, the sicknesses that fell so many Ethiopians. Indeed, many here mock the Rastas.

Nearly a quarter of a century after Marley's death, Rastas and other reggae lovers have flocked here from all over the world in recent days to remember him and his powerful litany of lyrics. The Marley fans came from Jamaica, the birthplace of Rastafarianism, and from other countries that have fallen under reggae's spell. Besides celebrating, one of the goals of the gathering was to win over the many people in this conservative Christian and Muslim country who view Rastas with deep suspicion. The concert was organized by the Bob and Rita Marley Foundation, a philanthropic group that works in Ethiopia. It was the first time that the birthday festivities had been held outside of Jamaica since Marley died of cancer at 36 in 1981.

The Ethiopian government sanctioned the concert because it saw the influx of so many visitors as an economic boon. But the arrival of the Rastas was unnerving for some locals, who have trouble grappling with their marijuana use and the belief among many of them that Haile Selassie, the country's deposed emperor, was more deity than man.

"This is our pilgrimage country," said a man who calls himself Jah Eliejah Adanjah, an aging Rasta from the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe who was setting foot on Ethiopian soil for the first time. "The feeling is so strong that I can't find words to express it."

Rita Marley gave an indication of the deep ties Rastas feel toward Ethiopia when she said last month that she planned to dig up the singer's remains in Jamaica one day and rebury them in his spiritual home of Africa. Her

remarks drew fierce criticism in Jamaica, Marley's birthplace, but she said it had been her husband's lifelong wish to reach the promised land.

In the raucous, celebrating crowd were some Japanese Rastas who said that Marley's message of black empowerment appeals to anybody who is rebellious inside. "I feel the songs as much as anyone else," said Chihiro Nakamori, 25, of Kyoto, who had fledgling dreadlocks hanging from his head. "When I smoke the herb, I connect with another world." Many Rastafarians believe that smoking marijuana is a sacrament approved by the Bible.

There were Ethiopian Rastas, as well, young people in dreadlocks who said Marley's music spoke to them but that some Rasta beliefs did not. One group of them chewed khat, a popular stimulant here, instead of smoking marijuana.

Rastas named their movement after Haile Selassie, who was known as Ras Tafari before becoming Ethiopia's emperor in 1930. The movement, which came of age at a time when Africa was under white rule, deified Selassie, a black emperor who symbolized an independent Africa. Ethiopians are extremely divided on the merits of Selassie, a man who gave the country's image a boost on the international stage but ruled in an authoritarian manner.

Before he was deposed in 1974, and murdered the following year, Selassie set aside land for those in the black diaspora who sought to help develop Ethiopia. Hundreds of Rastas responded and settled in the remote village of Shashemene, where they continue to worship him.

But the presence of Rastas in their midst has not calmed the concerns of some Ethiopians, who see the way of life of Rastafarians as a bad influence for their children. "There's a hidden agenda here," said Dr. Henok G. Hiwot, an Ethiopian who speaks to parents about dangers young people face if they adopt a Rastafarian way of life: "This is a Bob Marley celebration, but we fear they're trying to attract Ethiopians to their culture. We don't want that."

Critics of Rastafarianism had a message for the many visitors: find another promised land.

During the concert, members of various Protestant churches slipped quietly through the crowd handing out pamphlets that attacked the deification of Selassie by Rastafarians. It was a risky enterprise, as the authorities had detained eight young people who were caught with the pamphlets on the eve of the concert that the government had endorsed.

Many, though, saw no harm. Abuna Paulos, the patriarch of the influential Ethiopian Orthodox Church, of which Selassie and later Marley were members, delivered the celebration's opening prayer. "The church's task is to preach any time to anyone, no matter their hairstyle," said the gray-bearded patriarch, calling Marley his "spiritual son."

At scholarly discussions leading up to the concert, Marley's lyrics were deconstructed and applied to present-day problems. Azeb Mesfin, the wife of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, spoke of how the Marley hit "No Woman, No Cry" inspires struggling women in Africa. When it comes to AIDS, which is taking the lives of so many Africans, she referred to another Marley song: "We should 'get up, stand up' and defeat this terrible scourge," she said.

The revelers who turned out in the beating sun to soak up Marley's music were similarly adapting the lyrics to their own lives. Wouhib Bayou, 29, an Ethiopian who says he finds most Rasta ideology compatible with his Muslim beliefs, said "Waiting in Vain," one of Marley's love songs, perfectly captured his frustration with Ethiopia.

"When you see other countries on TV and you see how advanced they are, you long for that kind of wealth,"

he said. "I'm waiting for that right here in Ethiopia, but I'm waiting in vain."

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