

TUNE INTO ENGLISH

# Bob Marley and the Wailers Redemption Song



Il talento di Bob Marley ha portato il reggae alla fama mondiale, e l'artista giamaicano ha saputo usare la sua notorietà per valorizzare la storia e la cultura della sua isola.

Considered a last testament<sup>1</sup> by Jamaican reggae-icon Bob Marley, Redemption Song was one of the last songs Marley recorded. Diagnosed with cancer in 1977, Marley knew that he did not have long to live and wanted to urge<sup>2</sup> his fans to continue in the fight against oppression. Marley spent over a year working on the lyrics. His wife Rita later said that his writing at the time "dealt with<sup>3</sup> his own mortality... particularly in this song."

The track was released in 1980 and blends<sup>4</sup> reggae with folk. This was unusual for the time; after a previous attempt to record the song with his band, the Wailers<sup>5</sup>, music mogul<sup>6</sup> Chris Blackwell, the boss of Island Records, advised

Marley to perform the song alone on an acoustic guitar to address<sup>7</sup> his audience more intimately. Marley opens the track by recalling<sup>8</sup> his people's origins in slavery, then emphasising how God has helped him move forward in the fight for equality. The second verse begins with lines from a 1937 speech by Jamaican civil rights campaigner Marcus Garvey, pleading<sup>9</sup> for freedom of mind. Referring to the looming<sup>10</sup> danger of nuclear war and the assassination of public figures, the verse also draws on<sup>11</sup> a prophecy from the Bible. The song is listed among The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time by *Rolling Stone* magazine. Despite Marley's death in 1981, his message of freedom and hope lives on<sup>12</sup>. ☺



UPPER INTERMEDIATE B2

GLOSSARY

- 1 **testament:** testamento
- 2 **to urge:** esortare
- 3 **to deal with:** affrontare
- 4 **to blend:** mescolare
- 5 **to wail:** gemere, piangere
- 6 **mogul:** magnate
- 7 **to address:** rivolgersi
- 8 **to recall:** ricordare
- 9 **to plead:** supplicare
- 10 **looming:** minaccioso, incombente
- 11 **to draw on:** fare uso di
- 12 **to live on:** perdurare
- 13 **almighty:** onnipotente
- 14 **bottomless pit:** pozzo senza fondo
- 15 **whilst:** mentre
- 16 **spelling:** ortografia

Bob Marley performs with his band the Wailers in Los Angeles, 1976

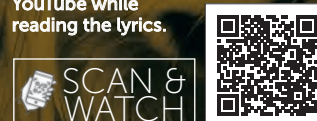


**old pirates:** the English have been described in literature as originating from "a horde of Baltic pirates". The British colonised Jamaica for almost three hundred years.

**bottomless pit<sup>14</sup>:** this refers to the holding area where slaves were kept in Africa before being transported west.

**Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery**  
**None but ourselves can free our minds:** Jamaican civil-rights campaigner Martin Garvey's 1937 speech "The Work That Has Been Done" contains the line "We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst<sup>15</sup> others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind."

Scan this QR code with your smartphone or tablet and listen to the official song on YouTube while reading the lyrics.



Old pirates, yes, they rob I

Sold I to the merchant ships

Minutes after they took I

From the bottomless pit

But my hand was made strong

By the hand of the Almighty<sup>13</sup>

We forward in this generation

Triumphantly

Won't you help to sing

These songs of freedom?

'Cause all I ever have

Redemption songs (x2)

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery

None but ourselves can free our minds

Have no fear for atomic energy

'Cause none of them can stop the time

How long shall they kill our prophets

While we stand aside and look?

Some say it's just a part of it

We've got to fulfill the book

Won't you help to sing

These songs of freedom?

'Cause all I ever have

Redemption songs (x3)

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery

None but ourselves can free our minds

Oh, have no fear for atomic energy

'Cause none of them can stop the time

How long shall they kill our prophets

While we stand aside and look?

Yes, some say it's just a part of it

We've got to fulfill the book

Won't you help to sing

These songs of freedom?

'Cause all I ever had

Redemption songs

All I ever had

Redemption songs

These songs of freedom

Songs of freedom

**they rob I:** Marley was a Rastafarian, a religious and political movement originating in Jamaica in the 1930s. Rastafarians say I and I, meaning we or us.

**we forward in this generation:** Marley omits the verb to move here; the phrasal verb to move forward means to make progress.

**atomic energy:** this song was written towards the end of the Cold War when nuclear war was a constant threat.

**fulfill the book:** this is the American spelling<sup>16</sup> of the verb, spelled fulfil in British English. The book refers to the Bible.

Fergal Kavanagh runs the website [www.tuneintoenglish.com](http://www.tuneintoenglish.com), the web's largest free resource for learning English through pop music.

