

'Family Man' leads The Wailers in keeping Marley's memory alive

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He speaks slowly and with a voice as deep as the bass grooves for which he's famous.

Methodical ... contemplative ... serene. All are hallmarks of a spiritual leader, which is what Aston "Family Man" Barrett is these days. More so than a musician, he's the keeper of the flame -- the man who carries a torch for his old friend, reggae legend Bob Marley, and still holds it aloft for the rest of the world to see.

"This, this is everything to me," Barrett told The Daily Times this week. "That's why I came up with that name -- 'Family Man' -- because I'm everything from the bandleader to the bass player to the musical arranger to the producer. I'm the on who put the band together.

"But more than that, we all have to work as a family. We have to keep the unity -- as a body of people, we have to keep together, and that's the role of 'Family Man.' And from that, the name has become a legend."

He laughs, a rich and warm sound that's equal parts self-deprecation and pride. Don't mistake it for ego, even though the man might be allowed a bit of that as well -- after all, few musicians working today can claim to have had such an influence on popular culture as Barrett.

He first met Bob Marley in 1969, when Marley's band -- The Wailers -- recruited Barrett and his brother, drummer Carly, from Lee Perry's Upsetters. Together, they would stay with Marley through his most creative and internationally acclaimed years. With Marley, they've sold more than 250 albums worldwide and toured incessantly; it's estimated that 24 million people around the globe have seen The Wailers live.

When Barrett's brother died in 1987, Aston was handed the mantle of keeping the Wailers tradition alive. It's more than just maintaining and leading a band -- it's keeping alive the dream of peace and love as popularized by Marley's brand of spiritually tinged reggae.

"By taking care of everything, by saying that I am the bandleader or the caretaker, I am the 'Family Man,'" he said. "We keep the spirit of Bob alive through the reggae music, and we all work at it. We're just ordinary people who do extraordinary work, and we do it by working and living together. Thy will must be done by all means, no matter the crisis."

Thursday, The Wailers will return to East Tennessee to headline the Sundown in the City free concert series. It's a different sort of performance in that the group will perform "Exodus," the classic 1977 album credited to Bob Marley and the Wailers, in its entirety.

"It carries the message of roots, of culture, of reality," Barrett said. "We always wrote lyrics and set music according to the time. What we heard on the radio and saw on television and read in the papers were signs of the times. Bob came up with it when we were talking about people moving."

"So I said, we're going to write it down and say it the way we see it, in the reggae style. So we sat down at an acoustic piano and started humming and singing, and we arranged the horn section around it and took it from there. It's very spiritual and positive, something that we could do with the music so that the people who come to the nightclubs can hear it and be there and feel like they're in church also."

He laughs again -- rich, warm, vibrant. He's a 62-year-old man, and his voice tells of a man whose soul is even older -- because of his experiences, and because he shares a part of it with a departed friend who inspired millions.

"If you listen for the original message, it never changes," Barrett said. "Some people are the leaves, and some are the branches, but we are the roots. The original road markers."

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