

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940)

"Explanation of the Objects of the Universal Negro Improvement Association"

New York City - July 1921

In the wake of World War I, a fiery Jamaican named Marcus Garvey created the largest black organization in America as well as a popular movement for African American self-reliance, racial pride, and economic power. Garvey inspired millions of African Americans with the dream of a separate, parallel society built on black-owned business and industry. He also preached about the need for international unity among peoples of African origin.

Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was an ambitious, flamboyant, and doomed enterprise. From its Harlem office, the UNIA grew to hundreds of chapters in the U.S. and abroad. Garvey was a charismatic leader and an object of ridicule. He indulged a liking for parades and plumed military uniforms, which drew mockery from his opponents. He launched an array of business enterprises, including the Black Star Line, a shipping company. Bad management undermined Garvey's business schemes. The shipping line foundered. In 1923, Garvey was convicted of mail fraud for Black Star Line stock deals. He served two years in jail and was deported to Jamaica.

Garvey was deeply influenced by Booker T. Washington's example of self-reliance and moral uplift, but did not agree with Washington's accommodating stance on race relations. Rather than compromise with white Americans, Garvey urged blacks to abandon them. He railed against race mixing and openly distrusted light-skinned blacks (who often dominated leadership positions in rival organizations such as the NAACP). One of Garvey's most controversial acts was to meet with Ku Klux Klan leaders in Atlanta in 1922 to demonstrate his agreement with the KKK's view on miscegenation.

By all accounts, Marcus Garvey was a brilliant public speaker. He attracted much of his enormous political following with words. As a boy in Kingston, Jamaica, Garvey was captivated by raucous street debaters and the stirring cadences of black preachers. He practiced oratory at home, reading aloud from his school reader and watching himself in the mirror.¹ In America, Garvey scolded blacks for abetting their own oppression through moral lassitude. "Sloth, neglect, indifference caused us to be slaves. Confidence, conviction, action will cause us to be free men today," he proclaimed.²

The Liberty Halls that Garvey and his followers bought in a number of major American cities became the center of UNIA activity. Garvey's home base was the Liberty Hall in Harlem, where nightly meetings drew up to six thousand people at a time.³ In July of 1921, Garvey recorded two short speeches on a 78 rpm record at a studio in New York. One side was a version of the UNIA's mission statement, "Explanation of the Objects of the Universal Negro Improvement

Association," the other, a complaint about federal efforts to deny Garvey a reentry visa after a foreign trip.⁴

These are the only known recordings of the famous public speaker. Garvey's performance on the disc hardly sounds like the work of a stem-twisting orator, but bellowing into a lifeless microphone or a recording horn was nothing like exhorting a throng of excited followers. Many performers froze up-or at least stiffened-in front of the recording machine. The time limits of three to seven minutes on early discs and cylinders also made true oration difficult.⁵ Garvey's recorded speech is hard to hear at times. Early 78 rpm discs were prone to a high level of surface noise that competed with the music or voice being played back. Repeated playing made the problem worse as the surface of the disc wore away beneath the weight of a steel needle.⁶

The three-and-a-half-minute recording is less than a third the length of Garvey's complete membership appeal. Whether it was intended for mass production or simply to preserve Garvey's voice is unclear.

[Listen to the speech](#)

Fellow citizens of Africa, I greet you in the name of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League of the World. You may ask, what organization is that? It is for me to inform you that the Universal Negro Improvement Association is an organization that seeks to unite into one solid body the 400 million Negroes of the world; to link up the 50 million Negroes of the United States of America, with the 20 million Negroes of the West Indies, the 40 million Negroes of South and Central America with the 280 million Negroes of Africa, for the purpose of bettering our industrial, commercial, educational, social and political conditions.

As you are aware, the world in which we live today is divided into separate race groups and different nationalities. Each race and each nationality is endeavoring to work out its own destiny to the exclusion of other races and other nationalities. We hear the cry of England for the Englishman, of France for the Frenchman, of Germany for the Germans, of Ireland for the Irish, of Palestine for the Jews, of Japan for the Japanese, of China for the Chinese.

We of the Universal Negro Improvement Association are raising the cry of Africa for the Africans, those at home and those abroad. There are 400 million Africans in the world who have Negro blood coursing through their veins. And we believe that the time has come to unite these 400 million people for the one common purpose of bettering their condition.

The great problem of the Negro for the last 500 years has been that of disunity. No one or no organization ever took the lead in uniting the Negro race, but within the last four years the Universal Negro Improvement Association has worked wonders in bringing together in one fold four million organized Negroes who are scattered in all parts of the world, being in the 48 states of the American union, all the West Indian Islands, and the countries of South and Central



America and Africa. These 40 million people are working to convert the rest of the 400 million scattered all over the world and it is for this purpose that we are asking you to join our ranks and to do the best you can to help us to bring about an emancipated race.

If anything praiseworthy is to be done, it must be done through unity. And it is for that reason that the Universal Negro Improvement Association calls upon every Negro in the United States to rally to its standard. We want to unite the Negro race in this country. We want every Negro to work for one common object, that of building a nation of his own on the great continent of Africa. That all Negroes all over the world are working for the establishment of a government in Africa means that it will be realized in another few years.

We want the moral and financial support of every Negro to make the dream a possibility. Already this organization has established itself in Liberia, West Africa, and has endeavored to do all that's possible to develop that Negro country to become a great industrial and commercial commonwealth.

Pioneers have been sent by this organization to Liberia and they are now laying the foundation upon which the 400 million Negroes of the world will build. If you believe that the Negro has a soul, if you believe that the Negro is a man, if you believe the Negro was endowed with the senses commonly given to other men by the Creator, then you must acknowledge that what other men have done, Negroes can do. We want to build up cities, nations, governments, industries of our own in Africa, so that we will be able to have the chance to rise from the lowest to the highest positions in the African commonwealth.

1. E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 12.
2. Lawrence W. Levine, "Marcus Garvey and the Politics of Revitalization," in *Black Leaders of the 20th Century*, ed. John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 119.
3. *Ibid.*, 120.
4. UCLA Marcus Garvey papers, <http://www.isop.ucla.edu/africa/mgpp/sound.asp>.
5. Andre Millard, *America on Record*, 262.
6. *Ibid.*, 193-95; 203.