



Before the Legend: The Rise of Bob Marley

By Christopher John Farley

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Bob Marley was a reggae superstar, a musical prophet who brought the sound of the Third World to the entire globe. Before the Legend: The Rise of Bob Marley goes beyond the myth of Marley to bring you the private side of a man few people ever really knew. Drawing from original interviews with the people closest to Marley—including his widow, Rita, his mother, Cedella, his bandmate and childhood friend, Bunny Wailer, his producer Chris Blackwell, and many others—Legend paints an entirely fresh picture of one of the most enduring musical artists of our times.

This is a portrait of an artist as a young man, from his birth in the tiny town of Nine Miles in the hills of Jamaica, to the making of his debut international record, "Catch a Fire." We see Marley on the tough streets of Trench Town before he found stardom, struggling to find his way in music, in love and in life, and we take the wild ride with him to worldwide acceptance and adoration. From the acclaimed journalist, Christopher John Farley, the author of the bestselling AALIYAH and the reporter who broke the story on Dave Chappelle's retreat to South Africa, Legend is bursting with fresh insights into Marley and Jamaica, and is the definitive story of Marley's early days.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Christopher John Farley was born in Kingston, Jamaica, and raised in Brockport, New York. He is a graduate of Harvard University and a former editor of the *Harvard Lampoon*. He is the author of the bestselling biography *Aaliyah: More Than a Woman* and the novels *My Favorite War* and *Kingston by Starlight*. He is also the coauthor of *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues*. He has worked as an editor and pop-music critic at *Time* magazine and is currently an editor at the *Wall Street Journal*.

From The Washington Post

In the proverbial mega-bookstore stocked with multiple biographies of John F. Kennedy and the Beatles, there's more than enough room for *Before the Legend*. At the end of the millennium, *Time* magazine voted reggae pioneer Bob Marley's "Exodus" (1977) the most important album of the 20th century, and similarly the BBC designated his humanist anthem "One Love" as song of the century. Yet precious little literature exists charting Marley's ascendancy in worldwide pop culture. Armed with new revelations (both personal and musical) about Marley's past, author Christopher John Farley attacks his subject precisely, with the best of intentions.

The subject provides Farley with a lot to unwrap. Musically, Bob Marley popularized reggae, performing concerts across the globe as a guitar-wielding cultural ambassador from the Caribbean; spiritually, he introduced the Rastafarian religion and its sacraments of marijuana smoking and dreadlocks into world consciousness; and politically, he voiced the plight of the Third World -- although Marley himself remarked, "I don't think of Third World. To me, I am of the First World." Rather than a complete life history of the singer, *Before the Legend* examines the period from his birth (Feb. 6, 1945) in the Jamaican parish of St. Ann to the release of his breakthrough 1973 album, "Catch a Fire."

Along with entertainers such as Alicia Keys, Lenny Kravitz and Halle Berry, Marley has long been included on a list of African Americans who have one black parent and one white one. But *Before the Legend* rebuts the long-held belief that the singer's father, Norval St. Claire Marley, was white. A "wedding certificate for the marriage of Robert Marley [Bob's paternal grandfather] and Ellen Bloomfield [his paternal grandmother] lists him as 'white' and her as 'colored,'" Farley writes, revealing a discovery destined to wipe Marley from the above-mentioned list. "Later generations of the Marley family were unaware of Bloomfield's racial designation. She may have passed for white. Bob Marley would face grief all his life for being the offspring of black and white. . . . The truth was, the 'white' side of his family was racially mixed all along."

Marley's parentage is no small matter. His enduring belief in his biracial background created much of his inclusive outlook on life and influenced the lyrical content of tunes like "One Love" and "Buffalo Soldier." Farley -- a former reporter at *Time* magazine currently working for the *Wall Street Journal* -- brings his investigative skills to bear here, digging deeper than former Marley biographers to unearth this crucial detail. This information, gleaned from Chris Marley, a great-nephew of Bob Marley's father, is extremely significant to the singer's legacy.

Farley delivers one other notable achievement in *Before the Legend*: scoring previously forbidden access to the so-called Red X tapes, clandestine autobiographical recordings made by the late Peter Tosh, Marley's former band mate in the Wailers. In addition, Bunny Wailer (the other founding member of the original

Wailers trio) made available to Farley more than seven hours of similar audio recordings. The problem is these tapes don't seem to reveal all that much about the early days of Marley, Tosh and Wailer that isn't available elsewhere.

Before the Legend is meant as an informative portrait of Marley prior to superstardom, and here Farley does succeed. The narrative explores all the points expected of a biography of its scope. Its subject, born Nesta Robert Marley, was raised in the Jamaican village of Nine Miles with no electricity or running water, a pile of stones for a stove, and an outhouse in the back of his mother's one-room stone hut. By the time the guitar-playing Marley was a teen, the invention of sound systems ("crude, rickety contraptions, usually made up of belt-driven turntables perched on homemade amplifiers") led circuitously to the creation of ska music ("We figured we would try the downbeat on the second beat," explains record arranger Ernest Ranglin), which in turn led to reggae. Enter Bob Marley and the Wailing Wailers, the requisite record-industry shadiness and an eventual savior in Island Records' Chris Blackwell.

Farley's dry writing style ultimately reduces the impact of his book. A typical passage: Marley "did not break-dance, and he wasn't known for spraying graffiti tags on Kingston buildings. But his music was composed of songs from the streets. He was born, as an artist, in the same cultural mix that gave birth to hip-hop." Farley's point is accurate, but its obviousness is made all the more banal by his colorless presentation. He would have benefited from dipping into the creative well he used for Kingston by Starlight, his novel published last year.

In 2003, the cultural critic Greg Tate's *Midnight Lightning: Jimi Hendrix and the Black Experience* examined the lack of appreciation for the heavily scrutinized Hendrix among blacks. Farley could certainly have profited from a similarly unique take on Marley, perhaps by offering a biography with a pointed perspective instead of another rote life history. As it stands, *Before the Legend* -- though instructive -- fails to significantly improve on existing books such as the late Timothy White's seminal *Catch A Fire: The Life of Bob Marley*.

Reviewed by Miles Marshall Lewis

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