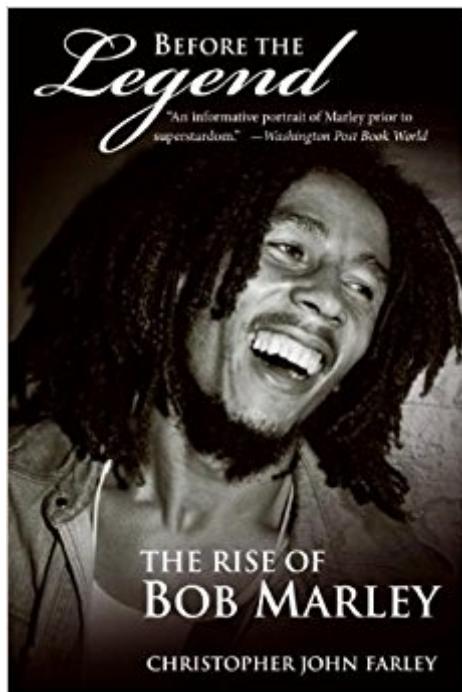


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Before The Legend: The Rise Of Bob Marley



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

Paperback: 224 pages

Publisher: Amistad; Reprint edition (May 22, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0060539925

ISBN-13: 978-0060539924

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.5 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 17 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,620,954 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #87 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Reggae #8082 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies #29864 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature

Customer Reviews

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.

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 Copyright 2006, The Washington Post. All Rights Reserved.
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This book contains no new information, as promised, and you'd be much better off to read Timothy White's *Catch A Fire*. I read White's book, loved it, hoped to get more. Very disappointed by Farley's account, which takes the reader on so many of his tangents of self indulgence, that it is distracting and incoherent at times. We get to a point, as a reader, where we are thinking, "What is he talking about now? Where are we?" He takes us on trips through his academic past, relaying every possible association in his literary knowledge and rock-world experiences, and we end up knowing more about Farley than we do Marley in the end, and trust me, Marley is far more interesting. And he makes bold claims too, such as the "evidence" that Bob Marley really wasn't half white, and was

less white, because of some ambiguous information on the marriage record that no one in the family can verify. Rather than suggest it was a mistake, he makes quite a leap instead and we as the reader are left saying, "So what?" But perhaps what is most disappointing to me is that I was promised more. I was promised access to the Red X Tapes, and conversations with Bunny Wailer that he claims only a black man was able to arrange, and what did it yield? Nothing. No new information. Nothing at all.

This is a wonderful book to read to gain a clear understanding of Bob Marley's start in life. He struggled ten years before finally catching a break and meeting producer Chris Blackwell who did a great job marketing his music. This book is fresh, direct and easy to read. Contains a few new interviews that add to our overall understanding of Bob Marley's efforts. Clear and concise writing. I do wish the author had kept going because his narration is very good. He stops after the Catch a Fire album. Very well balanced and compares favorably to the book "Catch a Fire." I highly recommend this book. Good job, Chris Farley.

Extremely well written and researched!

This book tells the life story of Bob Marley before he became a legend. It has more information than any of the other biographies I have read and I find the information more credible and objective than what I've read in other biographies by his promoters/handlers, family or wife.

The author is just incredibly good at his craft.

This is truly a well written book. From the moment I received it I did not put it down until I finished it. Thanks to the wonderful writing of Mr Farley. I look forward to his other books as well as more info on Bob Marley.

The book is a bit difficult to get into in the beginning but once you get past the speed bump everything else is smooth sailing. Good book but so far the best is Written by his Widow. Rita Marley.

I got wind of this book when an excerpt was published in - of all places - the Wall Street Journal. It turns out the author, Christopher John Farley, is an editor at the Journal, which probably explains

how it ended up being excerpted there. Bob Marley is really the great popularizer of Reggae in Europe and the U.S., going back to the late 70's and early 80's. He was the rage when I lived in Jamaica from 1977 to 1979. His album "Exodus" was a hit at the time. Marley died in 1982 of brain cancer, at the age of 37. The cancer may have been induced by the vast volume of ganja (that's marijuana) he ingested in the form of giant spliffs in the prior 15 or 20 years. Since his death, his popularity has grown exponentially. The album "Legend", kind of a "Bob Marley and the Wailers" greatest hits album is one of the all time bestsellers worldwide. And "Exodus" was named the "album of the century" by Time Magazine. In fact, the book is very good, very enjoyable. It takes you from Marley's birth in 1945, discusses his family, the fact that his mother was black but his father was mostly white, his life as a poor boy in Kingston, and his musical aspirations. The author Farley was born in Kingston himself but raised in upstate NY and attended Harvard. He interviewed all the major people who are still living and knew Marley well. And there is an extensive bibliography. There's a whole heap of stuff about Jamaican culture, about the influence of slavery on the culture, and the author paints a nuanced picture of life in Jamaica in the 50's and 60's. Marley was very much a man of his culture. A sincere Rastafarian, married at 21, at least seven children by four different women. Able to survive by his wits in a culture where many of the artists and producers carried guns as a matter of course. Marley spent a good deal of time in the U.S. In fact he was a member of the UAW! He worked for several years in Delaware in a car parts factory. This all before the big breakthrough in 1972, when he produced on Island Records (through Chris Blackwell - Island Records was a British label) his first big album, "Catch a Fire". So the book is a fine looking glass into Jamaica, its culture, and the group, Bob Marley and the Wailers. There were a number of people who moved in and out of the Wailers, but the two who were there the whole time were Peter Tosh (shot dead in his own house in 1987) and Bunny Wailer who is still making music in Jamaica. The book inspired me to get an early album of the Wailers. A collection of ten of their early songs, the "Millenium Edition". Good, but a rough album, in the sense that the songs were all produced in Jamaica, without exactly state of the art production facilities. More importantly, they lack the rock influence, which was probably crucial to driving their popularity overseas. I also got another copy of "Reggae Bloodlines" a great book from the late 70's - great text, great pictures - off, second hand. I am surprised this book wasn't in Mr. Farley's excellent bibliography. Brigid and I are fans of Marley. In April 2005, while visiting Jamaica, we stopped in the tiny village of Nine Miles to see where Marley was born. We were on our way from Runaway Bay on the north coast to the town of Mandeville where we had met and been married in 1979. There's a museum and a kind of shrine there, where he is buried. We didn't go in but simply had a look in the gift shop and chatted to the

museum "guides." It's an interesting trip if you want more out of Jamaica then just beaches and Red Stripe beer.

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