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Reggae and Revolution

CATCH A FIRE
The Life of Bob Marley.
By Timothy White.
Illustrated. 380 pp. New York:
Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
Cloth, $16.95. Paper, $9.95.

By JON WIENER

BOB MARLEY shaped reggae, the music from the slums of Jamaica whose elusive, unrushed lyrics and rhythms proclaim the possibility of revolution. Marley's songs were saturated with social realism. Their themes ranged from consolation for the suffering to fierce cries for freedom; they were incisive yet lyrical. When Marley sang "Get Up, Stand Up," hundreds of thousands of Jamaicans did, and millions of others around the world listened. Only one other musician had similar political and cultural authority: the early Bob Dylan. But Dylan — and Mick Jagger and John Lennon — moved in and out of radical politics; Marley held fast to his commitments until his death in 1981 at the age of 36.

Marley's life and career, especially his formative years, are authoritatively documented in Timothy White's "Catch a Fire." As a teen-ager, Marley belonged to the first generation of third world youth that grew up in the culture of the transistor radio. The Marleys had a neighbor who owned one; he hung it from a clothesline in the communal courtyard and kept it tuned to a Miami rhythm and blues station. Inspired by the hit recordings of Sam Cooke and other black artists, Marley at 16 went into a studio and made the first recording of his own music. He got halfway home with it before realizing that no one he knew owned a phonograph.

Mr. White makes it clear that Marley and his group, the Wailers, engaged social issues from the beginning. In 1964, their first smash hit, "Simmer Down," urged the island's "rude boys" (street toughs) to stop their gang wars. The song shocked respectable Jamaicans and amazed the ghetto, because the Wailers sang in the jargon and style of the underclass, at a time when pop music portrayed Jamaica as the place "down the way where the nights are gay." Outfitted in gold lamé collarless suits and pointy black shoes, the Wailers gained local fame doing romantic American rhythm and blues songs along with their own slum records.

Within five years, Marley began to establish a new and indigenous music of the Caribbean islands, one that was free from the domination of the mainstream commercial sound of the United States' recording industry. He helped turn the parochial "riddims" of Jamaica's shantytowns into an expression of the suffering of poor people throughout the world, making music that could "interpret, explain, and beat back the planet's moral turpitude and racial oppression." How Marley achieved this work of cultural liberation is the subject of "Catch a Fire."

Mr. White emphasizes Marley's adherence to Rastafarianism, a millenarian offshoot of Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement. Marley used the Rasta philosophy to link his identity to the history of Afro-

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Drawings by Howard B. Lewis

American slavery. In the Rasta theology of liberation, a black God will redeem His people by bringing them back to Him, in Africa. Garvey spoke of the Biblical "Ethiopia" as the black Zion. Rastas regard Haile Selassie (whose given name was "Ras Tafari") as the symbol of God on earth. As part of their religious rites, Rastas smoke the herb "ganja" or marijuana, citing Psalms 104:14: "He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man." They also refuse to cut or comb their hair; their long twined "dreadlocks" represent the flowing mane of the African lion, which is in turn a symbol of Selassie, the Lion of Judah.

In the early 70's Marley began combining his Rastafarian beliefs with radical politics. In 1972 he worked for the election of Michael Manley, socialist and trade union organizer, as Prime Minister of Jamaica, and Manley won. Marley's music also flourished during this time. In the next four years, Marley and the Wailers released four albums and became an international sensation. They toured the United States, Europe, Africa and Japan, always remaining open to diverse musical influences: "People like I," Marley said in 1975, "we love James Brown an' love your funky stuffs. . . . We dig inta dat American bag." In London the next year he heard the punk band The Clash, admired their angry attack on race and class oppression and wrote a song about the affinities between punks and rastas, "Punky Reggae Party."

Marley maintained his ties to Prime Minister Manley through the 1976 election campaign, and two nights before a scheduled rally with Manley seven gunmen attacked Marley in his house with a barrage of automatic weapon fire. Marley and his wife, Rita, were hit but escaped serious injury. They defied their would-be assassins and appeared at the rally. Mr. Manley greeted them as 80,000 supporters cheered. Marley

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sang for 90 minutes, re-enacting his dance in and out of the path of death with triumphant laughter.

After the assassination attempt, Marley left Jamaica and declared his withdrawal from what he called "commercial politics." His records lost some of their compelling energy and drive during the next two years. But he returned to political music in 1979, singing about the independence movement in Zimbabwe and the attempt to kill him ("Ambush in the Night"). He declared his support for "the struggle for a truly free and independent Jamaica," Mr. White writes, separating himself from Mr. Manley and calling for "a black, Marxist government."

A YEAR later Marley was dead of cancer at 36. His body lay in state in the National Heroes Arena in Kingston, where thousands of mourners gathered. His dreadlocks, which had fallen out during radiation treatments, had been sewn into a wig and set back in place. One of his hands held a Bible; the other lay on his guitar. Both the Prime Minister and the opposition leader spoke, the Wailers played Marley's music, and his mother sang "Coming in From the Cold," an unforgettably moving song about "this oh sweet life" that Marley had written when he alone knew he was dying.

Mr. White interviewed Marley more frequently than any other writer and had the cooperation of his family and inner circle in writing this biography. Strangely, however, he devotes little space to Marley's albums. (To my mind "Natty Dread," released in 1974, fused music with social consciousness more powerfully than any other album of the decade; the book deals with it in three lines.) And Mr. White doesn't seem to know what to say about Marley's political engagements — his support for the socialist Manley and then his move toward a revolutionary Marxism. Because of Mr. White's extensive research, this biography — especially the rich accounts of Marley's youth, daily life in the Trench Town slums of Kingston and the rise of the Jamaican recording industry — is not only informative but also absorbing. ■

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