

Marley: Last days man, myth & legacy

National Library of Jamaica

In the summer of 1980 Bob Marley had completed a successful European tour on which he had broken attendance records set by Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones and the Beatles.

Turning his eyes to conquering the elusive North American continent where reggae had never found roots, Marley decided that the European momentum, plus a hand picked stateside crew would help to establish reggae in North America.

In addition, his record contract with Island Records being up, he was shopping for a label distribution deal in which ("big bucks"), six or seven figures, could be discussed.

Arriving in America

The various elements of the touring party arrived in Miami prior and up to Sept. 14th. On the 15th everyone met in Boston. For the group it was a night of revising plans, renewing old acquaintances and trying to measure up to the skipper's challenge.

Because of the complexities involved the idea was to play every state at least once. To go to the 600 - 1000 seater venues to test the markets.

The Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles and Madison Square Gardens in New York were the major arenas targeted to be played because of the traditionally strong support which could have been expected from the West Indian and College communities.

A couple of major acts had shown their willingness to use Bob as an opening act, the first being the Commodores due to the pressure applied by super jock and Programme Director Frankie Crocker. To understand Crocker's influence, WBIS a Black station, became the #1 station in America due to Crocker.

The first time a Black station ever became a #1. Crocker programmed over 20 stations simultaneously and as the number one programmer everybody followed his example. Consequently he was in a position to call the shots. He loved reggae, he was a fan of Bob Marley, he "owned New York Radio" therefore Marley made the bill as an opener irrespective of who did or did not like it.

To their credit the Commodores, prior to the date, were prepared to offer the position if any became available for the rest of their tour. Stevie Wonder with whom Marley had appeared previously and who was friend and fan, offered dates when his tour would start, a month or so later. Then there were white acts, who could use Bob's cross over audiences who chose to wait until results started coming in.

According to Stevie Golding's diary and my memory, the first show in Boston on Sept. 16 was sold out early.

By G. Fitz

There were some problems with the sound, but overall the show was good.

We drove to Providence the next day to another sold out venue and another good show.

First reggae act to tour

On the 19th Bob opened for the Commodores, then the number one show group. For the first time a Reggae artist had a charted record (Can This Be Love) and was touring in support.

Though Island Records did not have enough product in the market place, the radio blitz caught the imagination of a lot of the young people who did not know who Bob Marley was.

The Commodores rented the B.G.'s set, valued in excess of half a million dollars but Bob went on with only a back-drop and no rehearsals. David and Goliath?

Before it was over people were walking out on the Commodores. By noon the next day everyone who was anyone in the music business was bidding in the Bob Marley sweepstakes and any of the deals offered would have made Bob Marley an instant multi-millionaire for life.

On the street the word was out about the dread and on the 20th some scalpers were getting \$150 for ten dollar tickets. It's difficult to remember which arrived first the line or the night.

Backstage was a who's who in New York and in show business circles. Security, drum tight. There a tenseness an indescribable excitement in the air. You could almost touch it.

Coming in from the cold

The skipper was at his best, those who knew sang

along, the others stared trying to memorise the words.

A hush preceded the crescendo applause after "Redemption Song", "Coming In From The Cold" and "Can This Be Love" almost became a theme.

After singing two songs with Commodores Dionne Warwick came backstage to meet Bob.

After a night of celebration and little sleep (there was a lot to celebrate), while jogging in Central Park the following morning (a Sunday) Bob experienced a seizure which frightened everybody. There were suspicions which required immediate medical confirmation.

The show and Bob's Health are on the line.

Final performance

On September 23rd Bob Marley looking fit, though sad, made his final performance, standing room only, at Pittsburg Stanley Theatre.

Reggae meteor launched and extinguished, while its celestial light had just begun (Yu A Go Tired To See Me Face).

The tour was cancelled, Bob went to Miami where doctors confirmed the Mellonoma diagnosis. In spite of this multi million dollar offers still continued.

In dying Bob Marley made reggae an important word in the North American market.

It is true that not a lot of our acts are signed by the major North American companies, (for one reason or the other).

But Marley broke down a lot of the walls and petty prejudice the music use to receive. More people listen to reggae now and experiment with it than ever before.

The musical Messiah in the Gregory Isaacs and Dennis Browns who we have expected to pick up Marley's mantle, have found that mystical musicians, reggae rhythms, a heavy load.