

# New book explains the man behind the Marley legend



Bob Marley, the man the world came to know through his reggae genius, remained a personal enigma even to those near him. A new book based on 10 years of research tells of the man and the religious-political milieu from which he came.

*By*

By JOHN HANCHETTE  
Gannett News Service

Everyone living in the Caribbean — and anyone who traveled extensively in the region in the last decade — knows how powerfully the name Bob Marley rings throughout the islands.

Marley is, with the exception of a few sports heroes and political figures, about the only figure whose name triggers instant and universal recognition at nearly all levels of Caribbean society.

Bob Marley was not only the undisputed titan of reggae music, but the Third World's leading political visionary. When he died at 36 of metastasized foot cancer in May 1981, 2 million mourners attended his wake.

The driving rhythm of reggae has become even more popular since Marley died. But to even those who love his music Marley remains largely a mysterious Jamaican Rastafarian.

"Catch a Fire: the Life of Bob Marley" explains the man behind the legend.

Timothy White spent 10 years

## Review

researching the book, during which time he interviewed the reclusive Marley about half a dozen times, more often than any major rock writer. And he talked to not only the customary Jamaican sources such as Prime Minister Edward Seaga, but also "country soothsayers, backwoods preachers, ghetto thugs" and many others.

White found Marley's mother in Wilmington, Del., where she granted him four long interviews and made herself available for months of follow-up phone calls.

The family also gave him access to personal papers and photos, and this in-depth information allowed White — in a New Journalism style he has used frequently in Rolling Stone magazine articles — to write the book in a narrative way that reads like fiction.

He recreates the scenes that helped create Marley — down to what his mother said to him and what his grandfather thought about him in the tiny Jamaica village of his birth.

White's book thus includes not only a biographical treatment of the musician as a fascinating individual in his own right, but the most complete popular explanation of the Rastafarian religion to date and a finely drawn treatment of the economic and political upheaval during Jamaica's struggle for freedom from its heritage of colonialism.

In the process, White nails down the essence of Marley's popularity in Jamaica: his aura of personal mystery.

"No one who was connected with Marley," writes White, "no matter how closely, had a complete picture of the man. His countrymen esteemed him for his inscrutable nature, for his unfathomable behavior. They marveled that he was able to rise from wretched poverty to become one of the most renowned figures ever to emerge from the Caribbean."

Marley was the son of a poor Jamaican villager and a white British Army officer who was brought up in Kingston's "Trench Town," — one of the hemisphere's most crime-

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ridden ghettos, a place that makes South Bronx look like Beverly Hills.

He grew up as a "rude boy," an alienated street tough known for his cool street demeanor. But when Marley turned as a youth to the popular island reggae music, it became clear he was a flat-out genius.

Marley made the reggae medium. Extremely prolific, he also gave the music two lasting distinctions. One was an ability for carrying narrative and political message through his immense talent as a storyteller — turning ghetto street life and

struggle into pop lyrics.

The other was Marley's use of reggae's unique rhythmic base to create a pastiche of calypso, rhythm and blues, jazz, West Indian folk music and American soul songs. It was innovative, and original.

Marley's work became more and more politically oriented, with emphasis on ending oppression and human suffering, and the influence of the Rastafarian religion made his pacifist approach stoic and mysterious.

White's book is nicely written and the pacing is superb in spots, but he chooses to quote Marley and associates in the Jamaican patois. Every other

page or so is peppered with paragraphs that someone unfamiliar with the dialect must study to determine what is being said.

This is a minor quibble, however. The book as a whole holds together as an excellent biography and enlightening contemporary work on the connection between music, society, and politics.

*The writer is a national correspondent with Gannett News Service in Washington.*

*"Catch a Fire: The Life of Bob Marley," by Timothy White (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 379 pages, \$16.95 hardbound, \$10.95 softbound.)*