

Bob Marley: Legend

My Jamaican 55

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This is the final in our daily entertainment series highlighting 55 Jamaicans who broke down barriers and helped put the country on the world stage. Each day, one personality was featured, and it culminates today, Independence Day, August 6.

FROM early 1976 when he began recording the Rastaman Vibration album, to September 1980 when he suffered a career-ending seizure in Central Park, Bob Marley had a demanding, breakneck schedule.

The album was released in April 1976, two years after rock star Eric Clapton's cover Marley's I Shot The Sheriff went number one in the United States. That helped put Marley on the road to international acclaim.

Four years later he was on his most ambitious tour of the US when faith stepped in at Central Park. In eight months (May 11 1981) Bob Marley was dead from cancer at age 36.

Since going solo in 1974, Marley had become the face of reggae. He was on the cover of Rolling Stone and Time magazines; every major rock publication in the US ran a feature on the Rastafarian wonder.

Thirty-six years after his death, Marley is even more in demand. It is estimated that over 500 books have been written about him, the latest released in June. His music is covered or sampled by countless artistes; there are Marley documentaries and theme parks; merchandise abounds, from shoes, T-shirts, to mugs, caps and coffee.

Stephen Marley, one of his sons, scoffs at talk of commercialising Marley, who was cast as an anti-establishment hero.

“Robert Nesta Marley was a businessman...right ya so (the Marley Museum, his former home) was a record shop, studio, pressing plant; everything in one shop!” he told the Jamaica Observer in February. “Bob used to have him van wha' deliver records an' him did a think 'bout PA system. Gong was a businessman.”

And a brilliant singer/songwriter as well whose prolific recording and social impact played out in the last four years he was active.

April 1976 saw Marley kick off a three-month world tour to promote Rastaman Vibration. In December, he was named headliner for the Smile Jamaica peace concert in Kingston.

Two days before the show he was shot while rehearsing at his St Andrew home. He performed at the event but left for The Bahamas, then the United Kingdom where he recorded the epic Exodus album which was named Album of the Century by Time Magazine.

In 1978 Marley was back in Jamaica for the One Love Peace Concert. The following year, he performed in Zimbabwe to mark that country's independence, and transition from white-ruled Rhodesia.

For Marley, 1980 would be the year he made the mainstream break in the US, especially among a black audience. But with cancer ravaging his body, it was not to be.

He was given a state funeral and entombed in his birthplace of Nine Miles, St Ann. He first left that rustic rural area for Trench Town in Kingston in the late 1950s and returned permanently as an international icon.

Ironically, those who knew the young “Robbie” Marley in his Trench Town days did not consider him the best of the community's array of singers. Certainly not in The Wailers, the group that would bring him stardom.

But his talent as a songwriter was crystal-clear to people like Danny Sims, an African-American impresario who met him at a Rasta 'Grounation' in Trench Town in the late 1960s.

“There was just something about him. Bob had that special thing... There was never any doubt in my mind that he would become a superstar,” Sims told the Observer in a 2003 interview.

The classic Wailers line-up (Marley, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer) recorded outstanding sides for Sims and Lee “Scratch” Perry before hooking up with Island Records in 1972. This association yielded two brilliant albums — in *Catch A Fire* and *Burnin'* — before acrimony resulted in the departure of Tosh and Wailer.

The split did not harm their careers. Marley's *Natty Dread*, *Live!* and *Rastaman Vibration* albums were sensational. They found favour with the rock community in Europe and sections of the US. His militant message won over the pop elite, including Roberta Flack, Stevie Wonder, Carlos Santana, and George Harrison.

It also inspired a coloured cricketer from South Africa named Omar Henry who lived in the UK around the time Marley was recording *Exodus*.

Henry spoke to this writer at Sabina Park in 1992 when he toured the West Indies with South Africa on their historic return to Test cricket.

“I discovered the Legend at a time when apartheid was at its peak and there was a lot of foolishness and hatred in my country. Bob Marley's music gave me a sense of hope in those dark days,” said Henry.

Marley spread that hope far and wide. He made triumphant tours of virgin markets of Australia, New Zealand and Japan, but US success eluded him.

He earned that recognition in death. In 1994 Marley was inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame; received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2001; the same year he was given a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Grammy Awards.

Legend, the 1984 compilation album containing 14 of his songs, is a catalogue monster with worldwide sales of over 28 million copies.

As with most pop icons, Bob Marley is not without controversy. He did not leave a will which resulted in a messy legal affair over his estate, worth over US\$30 million at his death.

The Marley Foundation, located in Kingston, feverishly oversees use of his image which earns millions annually. Marley consistently makes Forbes Magazine's 'Top Earning Dead Celebrities' list, raking in US\$21 million in 2015.

Most of Marley's children have followed his path into music with great success. Ziggy, Stephen, Damian, Cedella and Sharon are Grammy winners; Julian and Ky-Mani have solid careers.

Ziggy, his eldest son, said in a 1998 interview with the Observer that there was a time when he felt pressured to fill his father's shoes. That stress eased when he realised that is impossible.

“When mi listen to Gong song dem mi sey to myself, 'No other man can write song like dat.' Is like di great works in history, how yuh can do dem over?”