

Natural Myst

BY KAREN BENJAMIN
Photos by Gilles Chateau



NINE MILES, Jamaica—We came to a dusty crossroads on the way to reggae superstar Bob Marley's birthplace in Nine Miles, St. Ann Parish. A.C. pulled the Lada to a stop. "This one always fool me," he said. "Best to stop and take a stock. Always try the water before you jump in, right?" And then I saw, against the backdrop of rolling hills and green pastures, a tall and ancient black man. He stood motionless, leaning on his long staff and surrounded by a few goats. There was no mistaking him for Bob Marley, who passed on in 1981, but he embodied the spiritual calm that I had come to seek out, that aspect of the heart that Bob had called "truth from an ancient time." I had loved Bob's music for years but I had not yet experienced the secrets of his Jamaica. As each turn of the road added life to the lyrics I had heard so often, it was clear how perfectly his music fit the scene that unfolded.

Coconut and banana trees waved and bowed to us as we drove along the road from Ocho Rios towards Walker's Wood. As we wound our way up and around through the fragrant hills of Jamaica's Garden Parish, the sugar cane in the fields and the bamboo alongside it flaunted their green in a dance with the breeze. Vitality, or naturality, or to quote Bob again, "the natural mystic" was everywhere and in everything. It is a quality that I saw reflected in the lavish confusion of botany and rhythm of rural routines. It was also in the knowing eyes and the proud posture of the many people we passed as they walked along the dusty road.

All of us in the car—my husband Nigel, our 2½-year-old son Ian, and A.C., our local guide—were united in our love for Jamaica and in particular for Bob Marley's music. Nigel and I had come "to put back what we lost," as A.C. would have said. Ian had been calmed as a baby with reggae music. He was right at home here, in a country where children are everywhere and anywhere, anytime, and adults who are used to children are everywhere too. It was the cassette we had been

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car. He looked at my sleeping son in the back seat for a moment, then turned to put me under intense scrutiny. A chill went down my spine, but I couldn't move or even look away. He finally straightened up, and cut the air with his cutlass in one swift motion. "Go right," he said, "The left is a serpent to Bob Marley." As the car sped away, his voice still ringing in my ears, I had to look back. He was standing motionless, his right hand raised. "What did that man say?" Ian asked me, as he rubbed his eyes and struggled to sit up. A.C. answered him before I could say anything. "When the man say serpent, he was giving us a caution, like a warning, about the way to go along the road. There's a good way and a not so good way, seen?" Then he looked at me. "Nothing to worry yourself about, Miss. No bad snakes in JA. No monkeys either!" He was laughing again. "Only monkeys is in the zoo. The problem is weeds. Too many bad weeds in the garden. Seen?"

We passed some people carrying bundles and wearing their baskets like crowns on their heads. I was captured by their motion and their posture. "They walk like kings and queens," I said to A.C. "They are," he replied, and the road dipped suddenly, as though in a nod of agreement. It spun a corner out of nowhere before it led us forward again. "Humble people crowned with victory, you know? King Alpha and Queen Omega," he continued, "'guarding the palace so majestic, guarding the palace so realistic,' just like Bob wrote. It's all here." The road jumped like a lion over a gully. A.C. looked back at me. "Coming from the root of King David through the line of Solomon..." I know I still looked puzzled. "Ah," he said, shaking his head sadly. "Everybody know Bob Marley, but nobody know Bob Marley. . . ."

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listening to that was the magnet that had brought Nigel and A.C. together on Music Avenue in Ocho Rios.

Now, facing this gaunt old man etched against the sky, we fell silent in the shaky little Lada, and A.C. turned the music down low. The rays of the hot sun shone and flared off the enormous blade of the machete in the old man's right hand. Time evaporated into the emptiness of the blue sky like morning dreams on rising dew. I couldn't help but think of the Africa of ancient times in the fullness of this man's stately presence. "Two thousand years of history could not be wiped away so easily" was something Bob had written. I could see now what he meant.

As A.C. asked the old man the way, he moved closer towards the

He looked back at the sinewy road which bucked and plunged through the green.

The closer we came to Nine Miles, the more something struck a chord within me that had been still for too long. The timeless and lofty majesty of Bob Marley's Jamaica is far removed from the hedonistic beach scene of Negril on the west coast, or the desperate hustle of Ocho Rios on the north side. We had tried both out, but the three S's—sea, sand and sun—had failed to satisfy my soul the way that these hills somehow did.

The river on our left wound around and got lost in a dense dreadlocked mass of vines and trees. It re-emerged again playfully, in a splash of those impossible tropical flowers that the hummingbirds love. As I stared out the window at the shimmering view, I remembered that Bob Marley had called this Rainbow Country. Before that, the Arawak Indians had called it Xaymaca, which means "land of wood and water." This is generally considered the root of the name Jamaica. But there is another theory. I have heard it said that the Spaniards, who left many names behind them here, were the ones to name it Jamaica, supposedly after a district in Palestine in the time of the historian Josephus, the 1st century AD. A.C.'s cassette played on and I heard these words anew: "Cause just like a tree planted by the river of water, that bringeth forth fruits in due season—everything in life got its purpose, find its reason, in every season." The Biblical language of the lyrics, mixed up with the winding road and the sun and the green fields and the golden light, carried me further back into another time. "It is the Holy Land," I thought.

Ian brought me suddenly back into the here and now when he announced: "I have to go pee." Such was the urgency in his voice that we lurched to a quick stop. The two of us walked down a dirt track that was a red slash in the green.

As I listened to Ian watering some kind of monster tropical leaf, I realized how strangely still it is up in these Jamaican hills. A few notes of music floated by, probably from a radio far below in the valley. I couldn't be sure. Once we thought we heard some far-off voices, and I wondered if anyone down there could hear us. But the valley seemed empty. It was odd that there were not the warbles and twitters, nor the buzzes and chirps that I ex-

pected. It was too quiet. John Crows (what Jamaicans call the turkey buzzards) soared and floated silently above the still valley. They sailed and dipped in the breeze like black silk kites; they surveyed the scene below with the quiet and patient objectivity of undertakers. The silence was eerie. Abundance covered up an undefined emptiness. Full of shadows and shades, the still life laid out in front of me echoed back my own life. Something was missing, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. By now the sun was a golden blaze overhead, but the air remained fresh. There were probably hundreds of shades of green in that lonely valley, highlighted by the bright yellow fruit of Ponderosa lemon trees that hung like heavy globes from the branches. The sun shone like a searchlight over the dark green shadows, chasing them away from one spot, only to find them skulking somewhere else. Suddenly, I felt a little cool in the breeze.

As Ian walked back ahead of me to the car, he shuffled his feet in the blood-red dust of the track, saying "the dirt is red, the dirt is red" in a singsong chant that got louder and louder until his shoes *were* red and we were back at the dusty car. A.C. handed me a bunch of leaves. "Leaf of life and spirit weed," he said. "And smell this. This is pimento." As we started on our way again, I bruised this leaf between my fingers, and the smell of allspice filled the hot oven of the car, the way the appetizing smell of spice cake fills a kitchen.



We drove through Golden Grove and then Bonneville. I think. My sense of direction was gone somewhere along with my sense of time. When I asked A.C. where we were, he just sang along with Bob: "Life is one big road with lots of signs/So when you're riding through the ruts, don't you complicate your mind." We passed a trio of round, shiny country girls who looked like mahogany angels and answered A.C.'s cat calls with happy waves and shy smiles. "You see, Miss," he explained, "these girls are unspoiled. You bring them to the city, and suddenly, they're asking for Kentucky Fried every night. And it just progress from there!" School boys in a gang of brown khaki that seemed vaguely military kicked

a soccer ball along the road. Women swayed lightly along. But anchored down with things on their heads and babies in their arms or hanging onto their skirts, they were the ones who looked at us the most wistfully, as we drove on through, up and up. As we got closer to Nine Miles, I was beginning to understand why they call reggae music the heartbeat of the people.

We stopped again to let Nigel photograph a couple of kids. Braided tightly against disorder, they were clean and pressed from head to toe. I looked at Ian, streaked with red dust, blond hair tousled, and was amazed at the contrast. "It's simple," A.C. explained patiently. "They get whipped if they get dirty. Their mothers don't have any washing machine." We drove on.

"You think it's the end, but it's just the beginning," Bob warned from the tape. And just like prophecy, shortly after that we wheeled around one last dizzy turn and found ourselves, hot and dusty, at Nine Miles, the place of Bob Marley's birth and the place where his body now rests in a white cement mausoleum that looks like a chapel.

We parked the Lada in front of the store owned by Bob's mother. By the time we got out, a swarm of people had already descended upon us. Like mosquitoes in cottage country, they were hungry. They buzzed all around, seeking any weakness. We were surrounded in an ever-tightening circle of children, animals and anyone and everyone who had something to sell us. The rhythm of the day had changed, abruptly. From something mellow and sweet, it became a discordant clamor that jarred my nerves and set my teeth on edge. A.C. had escaped and wandered off to the gates. Finally, we settled all accounts. Then the gates across the road that led up the hill were swung open with a clang. Most of the crowd had scattered away and we started up the hill.

This was May 11, 1989. On this day, nine years before, Bob Marley had died of cancer in a Miami hospital. All of Jamaica turned out to witness the motorcade that carried his body back home to the hills. Thousands had danced here on this hill, a throng of red, gold and green, all gathered to pay respect to the King of Reggae. Judy Mowatt, one of Bob's backup singers, describing the scene in the movie *The Bob Marley Story*, said, "It was more

like a jubilee than a funeral."

But now the hillside was quiet. The man who was leading us up the hill smiled, and gestured with a long stretch of his arm. "Bob gave us respect when he wrote 'I was born in the country right on top of the hill—I still remain, I know I still, I will.'" He pointed to a small garden, where flowers flamed like a sufferer's heart and vegetables and herbs were growing in a mix of color that vibrated in the bright light. "We've had to carry water for this," he said. "It's been dry lately."

The two-room house where Bob had spent his early childhood, and later on some of his best songwriting times, looked freshly painted in red, gold and green, a contrast to the white of the mausoleum. The mausoleum and the little house are very close together, Jamaican style.

"You really love Bob Marley?" asked my new guide as I looked greedily around. "My one regret is that I never met him, and I'll never get a chance to interview him," I answered. "Have no regrets, Miss. Bob

himself would always say, 'When one door is closed, another is open.' And the Bible says, all we have to do is seek and we shall find. Seen?"

I looked around. We were on top of the great green world. A.C. was with Nigel, who was taking photos, in awe of the light. Ian was busy picking up bottle caps from the yard, and dropping them as he tried to stuff them into his pockets. From up here, it seemed certain that all things were possible. I remembered a definition of paradise as the place where all the elemental forces of being are at the disposal of the soul that believes in the supremacy of the good.

Interrupting my thoughts, the man took me over to the huge pear tree that dwarfed the back of the mausoleum. "Bob's tree that," he said. "Navel string bury yah." He was referring to a West African custom that is still practiced in many parts of rural Jamaica. The umbilical cord of childbirth is planted, like a seed in a hole, and a fruit tree is planted along with it. The tree puts forth roots in the com-

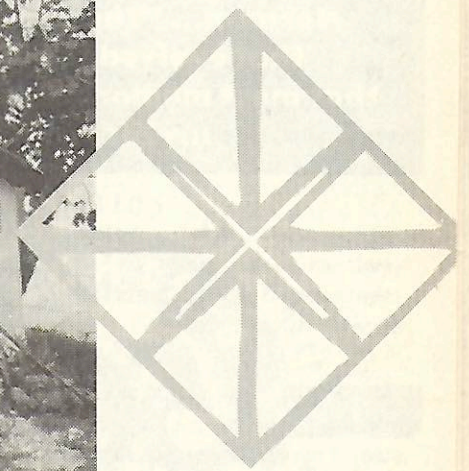
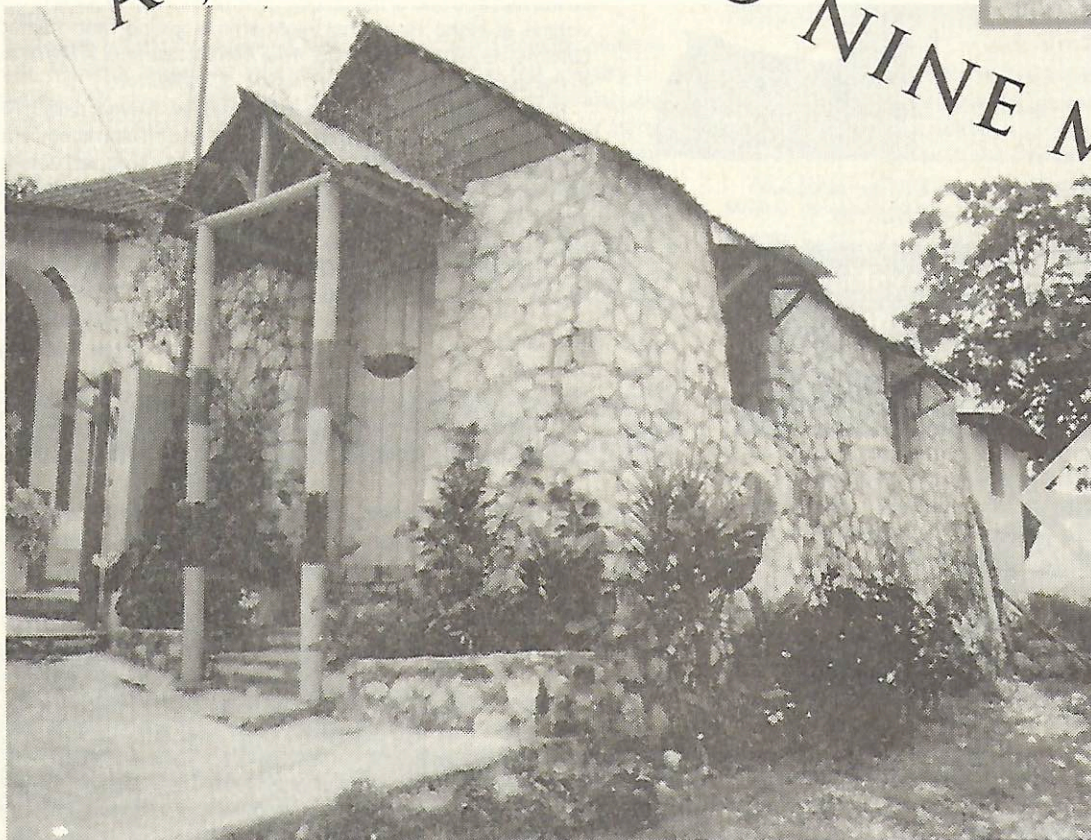
munity, connecting the child to the land so that he always has a claim to that community into which he was born. The man stopped me beside a round, smooth rock, which had also been painted in red, gold and green. "Check what it say," he said. Written on the rock were the words "Bob love Jah and Live." "Why don't you touch it?" asked the man. The biggest and blackest spider I had ever seen scuttled over it, and disappeared around the other side, somewhere. "Touch the rock," he commanded. More insistently, "Touch it!"

I realized that if I wanted to see the mausoleum, or anything else, I had to touch the rock, so I traced the bright letters with my finger. Bob love Jah and Live. I made a note to check the lyrics to "Jah Live," the song that Bob wrote in 1975 in

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answer to critics of the Rastafarian faith in life. The sky darkened suddenly as a cloud passed over the sun. A dusty gust of wind ruffled the pages of my notebook and swirled around the rock. We walked around the mausoleum and the wind followed me, stuck in my hair. I looked up and a drop of rain hit my forehead. The sun had disappeared, and the sky was suddenly black and thick. The man looked at me strangely, with that same unsettling scrutiny of the man at the crossroads. He said severely, "This is a blessing."

Big splattering drops of rain began to spit on the dust and splash at our feet and then started to fall seriously. But Ian was arguing just like a two-year-old in front of the doorway about taking off his shoes. "NO!" he shouted. And then a blinding flash of lightning and a simultaneous crash of thunder made us all jump through the doorway, settling any argument and forcing us into the shelter beyond. The rain began to beat down so furiously that the man closed the door, shutting off the streaming world outside. The thunder rumbled dreadfully, like a lion outside a tent. Rain pounded on the roof so loudly that Ian covered his ears and stayed quiet as a lamb in my lap. Water splashed against the door and we heard it rush down the hill to spill over the top of the world and wash the red and green countryside in a bangarang that didn't let up for 30 minutes.

The pear tree scratched a rhythm at the back. The rain was slowing its pace to match it as I walked around the solid block of granite that contains Bob's body. I rested my hand on the stone. It felt smooth and cool. But I was amazed to feel it vibrate along with the drumming of the rain and the scratch-scratch of the tree. Then I realized that it matched my own heartbeat as I recalled Bob's lyrics: "Feel it in the one drop, as it beats within, playing a rhythm. . . . It's beating within; feel your heart, playing a rhythm. . . ."

A friend later explained it: "Got plugged in to Radio Zion, heh? It's the music that we hear within. So now you just have to listen to it. Can't ignore these things, no, star. And there's no going back." The weather grumbled away, leaving a wet, drippy peace behind. We opened the door onto a fresh new world where raindrops glistened like teardrops on the green. Moist sounds filled the air. The smell of water rose in steaming mists from pools and puddles. The red dust had turned to red mud, which oozed through Ian's toes as we walked back down the hill. A rooster crowed. Ian laughed.

There was a whole different crowd of people sitting on the front steps of Cedella's store when we came back down. They came forward to us, softly, taking our hands, and saying "One Love." "One Blood." "One Heart." Smiling quietly, shiny eyed, they sat on the steps, listening to nature's cup run over. "Come back for Bob's birthday!" said someone, and everyone agreed, "Yes! come back for the birthday! February 6, man! Then you'll really see something, yes, Jah!"

We were quiet on the way back to Ocho Rios. The day was done. The light was turning into twilight, the time of in-between, when lines of definition are blurred and indistinct. Soon, little flickers of light began to flash off and on, on and off, in the growing darkness along the roadside. In an instant, the rhythm of the light was matched with a chirping, croaking, trilling chorus of the insects which had stayed hidden all day to join in the nightly hymn to life. ☒



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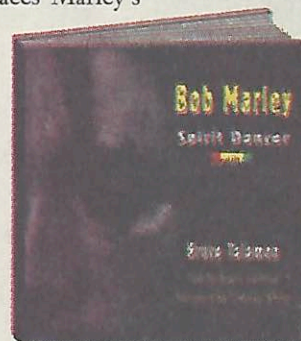
Bob Marley: SPIRIT DANCER


Photographs by **Bruce W. Talamon**

Text by **Roger Steffens** Foreword by **Timothy White**

Bob Marley: Spirit Dancer is the long-awaited photographic tribute to the music superstar, the only reggae artist to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Filled with 90 spectacular photos, many never seen before, the book is a stunning collaborative effort by Talamon and Steffens, two of the world's foremost Marley authorities. These powerful images provide unprecedented visual access to the performer, while the biographical text traces Marley's life from his youth in Jamaica and the early music of The Wailers to his worldwide acceptance and the poignant months preceding his death at age 36.

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