

"The Legend," Norma Fraser

Reggae's Fraser
tours the world
from Eugene.



Blues artists of all stripes consider Eugene a haven, but many reggae artists call Eugene home too. Eugene has welcomed Jamaican-born Norma Fraser for four years.

In 1961, Producer Clement "Sir Coxsone" Dodd signed the then 19-year old Fraser to his roster at the legendary Studio One recording studio. Fraser recorded a hit song with Lord Creator of Trinidad called "We'll Be Lovers," which charted at number one in Jamaica for more than a year. In 1967 the talented singer released her second hit song, "First Cut is the Deepest." Fraser went on to record at Studio One with Bob Marley and the Wailers, Ken Booth, The Skatalites, Delroy Wilson and other legendary reggae performers.

Dodd's death last year has renewed interest in the music released by his famous studio. As one of Dodd's earliest successes, Fraser charted before Dodd signed the young Bob Marley. Marley's future wife Rita hung around the studio, and Fraser and the Marleys became close. In fact, Fraser taught Rita how to sing. "Rita was not a singer but would show up at the studio grounds often," Fraser said. "She asked me to teach her how to sing and I did. She then latched on to Bob Marley and would do some backup oooh's behind them."

She's still friends with Rita, who calls Fraser "The Legend," and has recently renewed her friendship with Bunny Wailer. "Bunny Wailer and I have been corresponding with each other almost daily and we have been catching up on news since we haven't seen each other for many years," Fraser said.

Fraser remembers the young Bob Marley as a serious person not prone to showing off like so many of the other Studio One artists who achieved fame. "Bob would ponder deeply about the plight of the human condition in Jamaica and worldwide," remembered Fraser. "His worldview at that time was vast and he had not yet traveled out of Jamaica. He wanted to help change things."

While Marley's career with the Wailers

heated up, Fraser's zeal for the music business cooled. Though Fraser had chances to strengthen her career, she turned them down. "He (Marley) came to my parent's house in Jamaica in the '70s to persuade me to sing with his group," Fraser said. "At that time I became disillusioned with the 'business' and wanted out."

Two decades passed before Fraser accepted the intrusions into her personal life that come with being a renowned singer. She has played more shows in recent years, including yearly gigs in Japan, and has a month-long European tour planned for summer. In July she'll perform in Ghana as part of their "Republic Day" festivities.

Fraser released *C'mon, Baby*, her most recent record, in 2001. She wrote all of the material herself. This fact alone sets her apart from her male reggae peers, who traditionally limit women to the role of backup singers and strongly discourage women from songwriting. "I abhor and detest the overt chauvinism displayed in reggae in the past and even today," she said. "My views are not embraced."

There seems to be this culture of acceptance, i.e. 'God made man to control the world and women' and they end with the phrase 'Jah Rastafari' as if that seals and explains it away."

Fraser feels her educational background has helped her overcome some of this sexism. "I have a M.A. degree [in gerontology and psychotherapy] and no longer listen to the 'label' pundits who wanted women reggae singers to only sing 'sweet' songs."

Fraser's melodies certainly are sweet. *C'mon, Baby* is 40 minutes of tropical beat pleasure. Most tracks groove at an easy reggae pace, with a couple of ballads for good measure. Though the beat slows down sometimes, you don't mind because Fraser's voice sounds so good. While Fraser doesn't stretch too far for rhymes and rhythms, the CD winds its way from ska to pop, rewarding the listener from the beginning with uplifting lyrics and a feel-good aura. Let *C'mon, Baby* be the soundtrack to your next summer BBQ and your guests will get the tropical mood instantly. **EW**

NORMA FRASER & THE INSTIGATORS

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