



Fire in Babylon Discussion Guide

Director: Stevan Riley

Year: 2010

Time: 87 min

You might know this director from:

Everything or Nothing (2012)

Blue Blood (2006)

FILM SUMMARY

Cricket remains a mysterious sport to the untrained observer. With matches that go on for days, a dapper dress code, and an intricate rulebook to follow, cricket prides itself on its exclusivity. The British military sailed their wickets and bats across the ocean and selectively chose which ex-slaves they would train and discipline through their civilized sport. FIRE IN BABYLON shows how the locals, previously viewed as slovenly savages, took the tools they were given and mastered their former masters.

The 1970s and 80s were a time of great change in the West Indian political environment, and the transformation of the West Indian cricket team from a gang of calypso jokers into the greatest team on earth served as a reflection of the social climate. Under the strong direction of Captain Clive Lloyd, the West Indian cricket team endured vigorous physical training with a focus on producing fast bowlers. The hard work paid off. Eventually, the cricketers gave their fellow countryfolk, as well as minorities worldwide, a reason to hold their heads high.

In FIRE IN BABYLON, the color, pulse, sound, and emotion of West Indian society is transcribed on the screen. Through interviews with the cricketers themselves, Director Riley maintains a quick-fire pace loaded with facts. Rasta music takes center stage with West Indian musicians performing cricket-inspired songs and Bunny Wailer enthusing about the political and spiritual force of cricket. FIRE IN BABYLON delivers a fastball adventure down the memory lane of post-colonial cricket.

FILM THEMES

With political change underway in the post-colonial Caribbean, calypso cricketers shook off the negative implications associated with their laid-back style and proved to the world that they could not only match, but overcome the masters who had controlled them for too long.

A VOICE FOR THE REPRESSED

Achieving independence from British rule is a very recent development in West Indian political history. Jamaica led the way in 1962 with St. Kitts and Nevis following 21 years later in 1983. During these politically dynamic times, the successes of the West Indian cricket team became the successes of the region. By showing the world they could overcome their former rulers at the very sport they taught them, bestowing it with an art and beauty it had never known before, the cricketers gave sound to the suppressed, pride to the impoverished. Victory on the field was a victory in the hearts of the people. The celebrations reflected the confidence of a newly independent generation.

A UNIFYING FORCE

The West Indies is not comprised of a single nation, race, or culture. With many accents, varying cuisine, traditions and multicolored histories, creating a team that would play together as one was a huge task. Under the leadership of Clive Lloyd, a complex and very fragmented team became molded into one united team, with cricket as the binding agent. Regardless of where they came from, Lloyd inspired them on to a common goal, not just in winning a game, but in overcoming years of repression and subjugation. Eventually, the West Indian cricketers went from calypso to champions.

DOMINATING THE DOMINATORS

Cricket was originally brought to the West Indies by the British military. When they weren't playing an all-white match on a civilized green, they used the sport as a means to "discipline the nigger," to pass on the ways of the British blue-blooded aristocracy. The West Indians took the sport, learned its rules, took their own poetry onto the field, trained their bodies away from the pot-bellied Old World elite, and beat their former masters at their own beloved sport. The West Indies taught the British that they could not only play by their rules - they could rewrite them.

GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

For a poor man with a family to feed, the offer of \$100,000 to play the sport you love is hard to pass up. Such was the dilemma faced by members of the West Indian cricket team during the South African rebel tours, when they were asked to play during the time of apartheid. While some members took the money (only to be banned by both countrymen and sporting federations alike), many players understood the powerful message they would communicate by choosing morals over money. Thanked by leaders including Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, these brave sportsmen fuelled a fire that went on to burn apartheid out.

“My bat was my sword at that time, and it’s people I wanted to put it to.”

Vivian Richards

“It was like slaves whipping the asses of masters.”

Bunny Wailer

“What our politicians could not achieve, we did. When we were playing, how we got on that field, we put aside all the differences and issues which the islands had.”

Vivian Richards

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How much did you know about cricket before watching FIRE IN BABYLON? Have you ever watched a cricket match?
2. Have you ever been treated as a minority?
3. How is racism apparent in your community?
4. Do you feel that modern-day professional athletes are interested in using their fame to bring about change, or are they primarily interested in the astounding salaries they receive?
5. Why do you think the director of FIRE IN BABYLON chose to interlace the music so intricately into the film’s narrative?
6. Do you believe that racism can ever be a thing of the past? What factors keep it alive and rampant?
7. What is your experience of the West Indies? Have you ever traveled to any of the Caribbean islands? Do you have any West Indian ancestry?
8. Do you believe that sports should be made safer, so that the risks of fatal injury are lower for professional athletes? Why do so many sports, cricket included, involve the high risk of severe injury?
9. Are sports a constructive way to express negative emotions (such as anger, repression, jealousy, insecurity, etc.)?
10. What are the advantages and disadvantages of team sports? If you have played a team sport yourself, can you reflect on your personal experiences?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- FIRE IN BABYLON was the joint winner of the UNESCO Award at the Jamaica Reggae Film Festival in 2011 and was nominated for 3 other awards, including Best Documentary at the British Independent Film Awards.
- The film title, FIRE IN BABYLON, was director Stevan Riley's way of uniting Rastafari music and the sport of cricket. In his words, "Babylon, in Rastafarian speak, refers to systems of oppression or prejudice, wherever it resides. And the fire is the West Indies team, their style of play—it was a righteous fire that was going to stamp out prejudice by example."
- The first mention of cricket in the West Indies was in 1806. The British military took the sport to the Caribbean, and the white elite used the sport to exhibit their loyalty to the British Crown.
- The West Indian cricket team is one of 10 elite international teams that play at the Test Match cricket level, the highest level and longest form of the sport. Other teams are England, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, and Bangladesh.
- The current West Indian cricket team includes players from Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guiana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Anguilla, Montserrat, British Virgin Islands, Sint Maarten, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
- The earliest definite reference of cricket dates back to 1598, although there is speculation that a similar sport was being played as early as 1300.
- The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. Slaves in the West Indies were freed in 1834 but were indentured to their former owners until 1838.
- Sir Vivian Richards, popularly known as Viv, is regarded as one of the greatest batsmen and best players in the history of cricket. Born in Antigua and Barbuda in 1952, Richards is highly respected for refusing to accept a "blank check" offer to play for a rebel West Indies cricket team in South Africa in 1983 and '84 during apartheid. A stadium in Antigua is named after him.
- The West Indian cricket team is colloquially referred to as The Windies.
- The International Cricket Conference (ICC) issued an international suspension on South African cricket tours in 1970 due to the South African regime of apartheid. Several private tours took place in the 1970s, and the South African rebel tours, a series of seven cricket tours, took place between 1982 and 1990. Players who were involved in the rebel tours were banned by their national federations. West Indian cricketers, who were poorly paid at the time, were paid between \$100,000 - \$120,000 for the two West Indian tours of the South African rebel tours, which took place in 1982-83 and 1983-84.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to be inspired by its story.
2. Learn more about [Peace Jam](#), which educates youth on how to end injustices across the globe.
3. Read "A History of West Indies Cricket" by Michael Manley for an in-depth look at the sport in this region.
4. Stop racism in its tracks. Race is not a chosen trait and is not a valid reason for bias of any kind. Educate yourself on the roots of racism, and prohibit racial slurs from being used, however mild they may seem.
5. Be encouraged by ideals, not dollar signs. Cricketers and other athletes played a big role in ending apartheid by refusing to play in South Africa, regardless of the large sums of money offered.

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.