

Celebrating 50 Years of the Music of Jamaica



By H.E. Angella V. Comfort, High Commissioner of Jamaica

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"Reggae is the heartbeat of Jamaica....a unique music that springs from the creative imagination of a diverse people..."

This quotation is taken from the Official Proclamation by the Government of Jamaica in 2007 declaring February as Reggae Month to pay special tribute to the riveting musical art form for which the country has become renowned the world over.

These words remain true today as Reggae continues to capture the world's attention, especially among avid music lovers.

The decision was taken to recognise February as "Reggae Month", particularly as it is the birth month of Robert Nesta (Bob) Marley, who is perhaps Jamaica's most famous Reggae icon, and is generally recognised as the King of Reggae, as well as Dennis Brown, who is fondly known as the Crown Prince of Reggae. The decision also referenced several other Reggae music legends, such as the great Peter Tosh.

Each February, several activities are staged throughout Jamaica aimed at highlighting the important impact of Reggae on the social, cultural, religious, and economic development of the country, while providing entertainment for Jamaicans and tourists from all walks of life and age groups. Many repeat visitors to the Island emphasize that the music encapsulates their "feel good spirit" and affords them "peace of mind and inner tranquillity". With events ranging from an inspiring Church Service, the Grounation Discussion Series, the Global Reggae Conference and the Jamaica Reggae Industry Association (JaRIA) Reggae Symposium, to the hosting of Street Concerts, the Reggae Films in the Park series and the Reggae Month Exhibitions, there will be Reggae activities to suit everyone.

This year, Reggae Month is being used as a vehicle for "Celebrating 50 Years of Reggae". Reggae has its historical roots in "Mento" a traditional folk music which emerged as the popular music of Jamaica in the 1930s. Between the 1940s and the mid-1960s, Jamaican music evolved to produce "Ska" and then "Rock Steady" and ultimately, by the late 1960s, "Reggae".

As such, the Reggae Gold Awards in Jamaica will be staged this year in celebration of Reggae's 50th Anniversary and the Government of Jamaica has plans, as recently announced by the Honourable Edmund Bartlett, Minister of Tourism, to establish an International Reggae Music Museum in the capital city of Kingston as one of the tangible projects to result from Reggae Month 2019. This is most fitting for Jamaica's capital city

which was officially designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a "Creative Music City" in 2015.

The celebrations this year take on added significance given the historic decision taken at the 13th Session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Republic of Mauritius in November 2018, for Reggae to be inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. As a result of this landmark decision, Reggae music joins a list of more than 300 cultural practices that will be protected and promoted. Reggae, it has been determined, is now an international cultural treasure which was created in Jamaica and is worthy of protection.

Jamaica gave birth to Reggae but its strong Afrocentric rhythms and beats are indicative of its roots on the African continent. The evolution of Reggae was strongly influenced by Rastafarianism, a religion whose ties to the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and "Mamma Africa" in general, are well known. Reggae's lyrical focus on self-worth and equal rights and justice made it a natural ally to those who felt themselves marginalised in their own countries and provided inspiration for the politically conscious, particularly as part of the struggles for self-determination and independence.

Reggae also has a softer side which emphasizes a sense of spirituality, and of relationships and connections between human beings. As the popularity of Reggae grew worldwide, so did the impact of this sense of humanity and "oneness" on the international stage. It therefore came as no surprise to many that on the eve of the new Millennium, the Bob Marley classic, "One Love", was named by the British Broadcasting Corporation as the Song of the Century, and "Exodus", the album which includes the song "One Love", was named by TIME magazine as the Album of the Century.

Indeed, such is the ongoing international popularity of this song that, notwithstanding the usual diplomatic protocols and formalities, at the end of Jamaica's presentation at the UNESCO Meeting in Mauritius, the distinguished representatives of the other participating countries accepted the invitation of the Honourable Olivia Grange, Jamaica's Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport, to join Jamaica's delegation in the singing of the chorus of "One Love".

Jamaica may have given birth to Reggae, but over the past five decades its popularity and influence has permeated all corners of the globe to such an extent that in many ways it no longer belongs to Jamaica. To quote Jamaica's Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport: "Reggae is no longer ours, the world has taken it as their own..."

Fifty years ago, the founding fathers and pioneering mothers of Reggae worked long and hard to propel this "big music from a small Island" and it has grown exponentially in a short space of time. Today, visitors to Jamaica are attracted to big Reggae festivals promoted annually in the Island, including Rebel Salute in January and Reggae Sumfest in July, which all have days of electrifying performances from talented local and international Reggae artists. Reggae enthusiasts visiting Jamaica will also be happy to know that there is a recent proposal to return Reggae Sunsplash on the Island's entertainment calendar.

At the global level, Reggae music is showcased annually, including at the well-known "Rototom Sunsplash Festival" in Spain, the "One Love Jamaica Festival" in Japan and Reggae indabas and seminars in South Africa. The collaboration of Reggae musicians with a variety of other international artistes and the fusion of Reggae music with other genres of music and traditional cultural art forms globally, ensure that the popularity of Reggae, including in South Africa and on the African continent remains at an all-time high. As we celebrate Reggae this month, we pay special respect to South Africa's late

multi-award-winning superstar and Reggae icon, Lucky Dube, who promoted the music with distinction across Africa and at the international level.

As we celebrate 50 Years of Reggae, the anticipation is that a number of Reggae artistes will seek to include tours to South Africa and across the continent in their performance and entertainment schedules.

Reggae music may be the heartbeat of Jamaica, but without a doubt it is also Jamaica's gift to the world. The Jamaican High Commission therefore wishes to take this opportunity to wish one and all a very Happy Reggae Month. One Love.