

# Rock Hall Salutes Reggae



*Mighty Diamonds entertain and educate with sweet harmony and conscious lyrics.*

## **Article by Patrick Malley Photos courtesy of Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum**

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio recently celebrated Black History Month with a salute to Jamaican reggae. It was a five-star event that was a big success and lasted the entire month. The event attracted Jamaican DJs, producers, entertainers, promoters and everything in between. Cleveland loves its rock and roll, but reggae has always been popular and very successful in a town known for some of the most avid music fans in the country.

When people think of Cleveland, one of the first things that comes to mind is the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Cleveland has a rich history of rock and roll, starting with the world famous DJ, Alan Freed, whose importance cannot be understated. Alan Freed is the man credited with coining the term "rock and roll."

Alan Freed burned his own trail as a hip DJ who championed black music played by black artists. In 1949, Freed moved to WXEL-TV in Cleveland and record storeowner Leo Mintz convinced him to emcee a program of rhythm and blues records broadcast over WJW radio. On July 11, 1951, calling himself "Moondog," Freed went on the air. His "Moondog Coronation Ball," held in the Cleveland Arena in 1952, is considered the first "rock" concert. Upwards of 20,000 fans – almost all black – crashed the gates and the dance had to be cancelled. Freed's audience began to include an increasing number of whites who heard him refer to rhythm and blues as "rock and roll." The phenomenon of "rock and roll" – one of the most important influences of the 20th century – was born.

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum opened in September 1995. In February 1996, as part of Black History Month, the Museum began an ambitious series of educational programs with "A Celebration of the Black Roots of Rock and Roll," a month-long program of performances, lectures, films and exhibits. Chief among the lecturers was influential rock critic Robert Palmer, who spoke of the impact of the blues on rock

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Founder of Island Records, Chris Blackwell

and roll. In 2007, in celebration of Black History Month, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame put the spotlight on Jamaican reggae, providing outstanding programs filled with capacity crowds. All of the events were free with a reservation and many events were booked to capacity. Despite freezing cold temperatures, crowds came down to the Rock Hall to be transplanted to Jamaica.

Originating from the island of Jamaica, reggae has had an enormous impact on rock and roll, most notably through Bob Marley's international influence. Artists ranging from Eric Clapton to Tom Petty, the Clash and Paul Simon fell under the sway of reggae's groove and brought its style into their work. Through the person of Kool Herc, Jamaican "toasting" and sound system traditions figured into the birth of hip-hop. It would be hard to tell the story of rock and roll without factoring in Jamaican contributions.

Like funk, reggae emphasizes the groove, but it was also through the music's lyrics that Jamaican recordings exercised a profound influence on popular music worldwide. Post-colonial life in Jamaica was brutal on the under-classes and played out in equally brutal race politics. The political climate has always influenced the deep sense of urgency of reggae lyrics and the politics incorporated into Jamaican music have never felt anything less than crucial. For many in the rock and roll world, reggae in particular provides a model of how politics and music can come together, and can spearhead social change.

Opening the month's programs was a lecture by Kenyon Professor Ennis Edmonds on the subject of "Rastafari and Reggae: A Marriage Made in Jamaica." This lecture focused on the Rastafarian lifestyle and how and why it gained acceptance and popularity in Jamaica. On another night, the Rock Hall presented a film series, "Jamaican Music on Film: An Evening of Reggae Cinema." *The Harder They Come*, *Countryman*, *Third World Cop* and *Dancehall Queen* were among the films screened.

The Jamaican reggae program adopted a Cleveland tradition by including Carlos Jones & the Peace, Love & Unity Syndicate's (PLUS Band) annual "Reggae Brunch" as part of the program. This is hands-down the best winter reggae party

in Cleveland! People wait in freezing temperatures around the Parkview Nightclub for an afternoon of reggae music honoring Bob Marley. Carlos Jones is a splendid reggae artist and has been voted the best entertainer in Cleveland. His former reggae bands were the best bands in the city, dating back to the 70s and 80s with I-Tal and in the 80s and 90s First Light. Carlos Jones and the Plus Band are a Cleveland treasure.

One of the big highlights of the spotlight on Jamaican music at the Rock Hall was the evening with Chris Blackwell, who was inducted into the Rock Hall in 2001. Rock Hall VP of Education and Public Programs, Warren Zanes, put the Chris Blackwell program together and did a marvelous job. He interviewed Chris Blackwell about his past and how he came to meet Bob Marley and start Island Records – fascinating stuff for any reggae fan! A whole book could be written about Chris Blackwell. Even though the discussion steered clear of any controversy, it was interesting to see Chris Blackwell interviewed. "Yes," he said, "there will be more unreleased Bob Marley material coming out soon."

Next up was a special Black History Month edition of "From Songwriters to Soundmen: The People Behind the Hits," with Mikey Dread, reggae star and Clash collaborator. Dread performed with his band and discussed his decades long career. An artist and producer, Dread helped launch many artists, from Earl 16, Edi Fitzroy, Rod Taylor, Sugar Minott, Junior Murvin and the Roots Radics Band, to the Clash, Japanese rock band Anarchy, and Izzy Stradlin (ex Guns 'n' Roses). In addition to his work with the Clash, Dread also recorded with UB40 and collaborated with Seal. He is currently touring and promoting his most recent release, "Rasta in Control." Mikey Dread and his band sounded fantastic! Their performance had everyone up dancing, something never witnessed before in this auditorium.

On the last Friday night of the month, the Rock Hall turned the big stage on the main floor over to one of the all time great harmony groups ever to come out of Jamaica, the Mighty Diamonds. Backed by Cleveland's Dub Flex, this was the largest event of the entire month. The Mighty Diamonds – Donald "Tabby" Shaw, Fitzroy "Bunny" Simpson and Lloyd "Judge" Ferguson



Roger Steffens interviews Toots

– formed in 1969 in the Trenchtown area of Kingston, JA, and, for the past 38 years, have been entertaining and educating the world with their sweet harmonies and conscious lyrics.

The second-to-last night of the program was a special night of rare films by Roger Steffens. With his documenting of reggae, Roger Steffens is to reggae music what the Smithsonian is to America's national identity. Roger shared his archival footage taken from his days at "L.A. Reggae," a long-running television program launched in 1984. An interesting fact is that Roger Steffens was the Rock Hall's first and most frequent speaker, and he still is. His show on this particular evening focused on reggae as a whole, in contrast to the more directed focus of his world-famous Bob Marley multimedia presentation.

Black History Month ended with a night people are still talking about. Roger Steffens extended his stay and interviewed the living legend Frederick "Toots" Hibbert. The people who were lucky enough to get in saw Toots sit on stage with a guitar and talk with Roger Steffens for what felt like the fastest two hours anyone could remember. Toots talked about his early days and his early hits, and he sang portions of about a dozen songs accompanied by his acoustic guitar. He told great stories about how he invented the word "reggae," and how 54-46 was not his prison number but a number he made up. He charmed the capacity crowd with his friendly smile and his wonderful nature. Watching Toots play and sing sent a chill up our spines and everyone was thrilled to be listening to his rich voice. We all want a Part III! Roger Steffens said, "It was the single greatest moment in my life-long association with reggae, along with touring with Bob Marley and the Wailers in 1973 for two weeks. Thank you Toots and the great folks at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame."

One of the great aspects of the entire month was that after each performance the guest speaker or entertainer would meet and greet anyone who came. People stood in long lines to get autographs or just shake a hand or say hello. Reggae music is powerful music and it means a lot to its audience.

One of the common threads in everyone's story was how they got taken advantage of financially. Many of the great reggae classics we all know and love are not even owned by the people who wrote them, and it is a crying shame it is such a common story. Artists like Toots acknowledged how some of these producers did give him his start and exposure, but even Toots' optimism could not hide the fact that the music business has always been dirty. Mikey Dread was less forgiving, suggesting that, using today's technology, musicians can start their own labels. After all, Jamaican music is about survival.

All told, February 2007 was a fantastic spotlight on Jamaican reggae at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The influence reggae has had on rock and roll is obvious, from the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, the Clash and Blondie to countless others. Inducted into the Rock Hall in 1994, Bob Marley was reggae's foremost practitioner and emissary, embodying its spirit and spreading its gospel to all corners of the globe. His extraordinary body of work embraces the stylistic spectrum of modern Jamaican music – from ska to rock steady to reggae – while carrying the music to another level as a social force with universal appeal.

Marley cannot claim to have had even one hit single in America, but few others have changed the musical and cultural landscape as profoundly. As Robert Palmer wrote in a tribute to Marley on his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, "No one in rock and roll has left a musical legacy that matters more, or one that matters in such fundamental ways."

Terry Stewart, President and CEO of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, had this to say: "The Rock Hall's tribute to Jamaican reggae music was one of our best programs in celebration of Black History Month since we first began in 1996. With contributions from



*Toots talked, then sang, then talked some more!*

Chris Blackwell, Toots and all of the other fabulous artists and speakers, there was something for everyone. Surely, attendees came away with an understanding of the origins, impact, influence and exuberance of one of the world's great musical art forms." ☆

*Packy Malley has been an active reggae promoter and DJ for over two decades and is the producer of the Mid West Reggae Fest, now in its 16<sup>th</sup> year. Packy began as a reggae DJ in 1986 and began promoting concerts the same year. He is co-owner of Malley's Chocolates in Cleveland, OH and deejays weddings on weekends.*

