

rock'n'



RICK JAMES GETS BEACHED

The Jamaica World Music Festival was staged last week — but was it an international rock spectacular or a right wing propaganda event to boost an ailing economy?

LAST YEAR the ultra-slick adverts began appearing on American television "Come back to Jamaica!" they sang, while kindly grandmothers held out fruits, couples strolled on quiet beaches, and a general vision of unspoiled and untroubled island paradise was offered.

The implied message was clear: now that Michael Manley's Socialist government was out and the right wing party of Prime Minister Edward Seaga

was in, the kooks and crazies were in jail and Jamaica was once again a safe place to spend Yankee dollars.

Tourism had once been a mainstay of the Jamaica economy and a main source of badly needed foreign exchange, but during the Manley years tales began to circulate in the travel industry about gun-toting rudies, and hotel beds went empty. The year before the 1980 election was the worst, as Americans read news reports of supporters of Manley and Seaga resorting to street gun battles to settle debating points. Revenues from tourism dropped more than 30 per cent. Jamaica had a problem.

Seaga's first order of business was putting the country under manners. By '81 the government felt things were back under control and the Come Back To Jamaica campaign began, but aimed at middle-aged tourists. Something else had to be done to popularise Jamaica as a holiday spot for the 18 to 34 year olds, those with large incomes.

And this turned into a two-fold plan. First, the Jamaican government would finance a performance centre in Montego Bay (traditionally the island's tourist town); then they would take bids from promoters to organise an international music festival.

Unlike the annual Reggae Sunsplash, this festival would concentrate on foreign acts. It would draw a world audience and establish Jamaica as a hip and safe place for upwardly-mobile music fans.

The government, however, had more than money invested in the scheme: the centre and festival were to show the world that Jamaica could pull off a major logistical undertaking, and that the Jamaicans now had a government that worked.

Advance publicity was heavy. Three days before the event the *Daily Gleaner* ran a long front page story on it, along with a photo of Barry Fey — whose Denver-based Fayline Productions won the promotion contract — shaking hands with the Prime Minister.

In the end, the site — dubbed the Bob Marley Memorial Performance Centre — was just about ready at the last minute, though the ground was never really cleared of rocks and stones, and the promised parking lot turned out to be an adjacent road.

But the Jamaica World Music Festival — one of the more incongruous publicity stunts

staged by a Third World country since the Shah invited the Warhol crowd over and floodlit the Persepolis — became a reality.

Feyline's idea was to import everything, the entire technical infrastructure of a rock festival from wiring to crew, and create a little island of American efficiency in this sea of "soon come" tranquility. But it could never work successfully. For one thing, the island's phone system completely broke down under the strain; Air Jamaica's flights were running five hours late all week; and that Jamaican nonchalant pace kept asserting itself. One or two hour gaps between bands were not uncommon.

THE BOB Marley Memorial Performance Centre is simply a fenced-off field on the end of a peninsular that juts out into Montego Bay. At one end is a concrete platform for the stage, at the other are groups of concession stalls run by the locals. This is the best rock festival food ever! Curry goat, jerk chicken, patties, Red Stripe beer. In between the stage and stalls is space for about 40,000 people.

Thursday, opening night, only about 9,000 have shown up, and the place looks embarrassingly empty. The programme opens with the politicians and their speeches. We hear from the Minister Of State For Culture, the Mayor of Montego Bay, the Prime Minister himself, and the Minister of National Security And Justice, who goes on at length about Bob Marley as a cultural ambassador to the capitals of the world.

The first music is from the Wailers, with lead guitarist Junior Marvin stepping into the singer's role without great distinction. In fact, the Wailers sound shockingly nondescript until they bring on the I-Threes to do 'Rastaman Vibration' and 'Exodus'.

But it is, surprisingly, Grateful Dead followers The Deadheads who provide an outstanding visual presence. They are everywhere, and every one of them in uniform — long hair, beards for the boys, and T-shirts, either tie-dyed or emblazoned with Dead designs.

Deadheads have been known to travel to the Pyramids to see their heroes, so it's no surprise to see them here in force. These Deadheads are young, and one can only assume they have heard about the glory days of Owsley acid and six-hour Dead concerts from their older siblings and decided to keep up the tradition. Whatever one thinks of the Dead musically, one has to admit that these Deadheads are a pop cult phenomenon to wonder about.

Jimmy Cliff has seemed to be wandering aimlessly for so long I'm not expecting much from him. But he comes on with a band that's big, tight and powerful, and he projected a militant and purposeful stance. Now I'll check for the man all over again. His voice is still clear and sweet, and now he's got some good songs like 'Treat The Youths Right' to use it on.

In the dressing room after the set I ask Cliff what he thinks about the political implications of the festival, its use as publicity for the government.

"I'm not here as a political thing," he replies. "I'm here as an African Ambassador. This festival can be good for the image of Jamaica. But I don't see how the poor people come into it."

"I just got back from Zimbabwe. And the OAS was having its meeting in Libya, and the Vice President of the US was there... what's his name?"

Bush...
"Yeah, Bush. He thought him really in the bush."

Glady's Knight And The Pips are a typical large American soul show band. The lady has a fine voice, but the songs she sings with the most conviction are the oldies like 'Midnight Train To Georgia'.

The Dead begin with 'Sugarree'. So are they awesome, man? Garcia really is a fascinating guitarist, and although he steers clear of rock clichés, he stays within his own well-defined mode. Sometimes inventive, his tone is a unique and rich vibration. But the rest of the band really are the most boring old farts imaginable. Their beat is a dull, sexless plod, devoid of any physical life.

After 20 minutes of a very old sounding 'New New Minglewood Blues' I get some sleep.

ON FRIDAY afternoon the press descends on the Rosehall Intercontinental where most of the bands are staying. Down by the pool, Rick James surprises everybody by

STORY: RICHARD GRABEL

roll imperialism

Interrupting an interview being conducted by MTV (a cable music network) to ask some questions of his own.

"I would like to ask you a favour and that's whether you'd like to say: this is not a black festival, this is a mixed festival in a black country. But the thing I want to know about video, cable, is why don't they show more Rick James videos and other black musicians' videos? How come we don't see it? So I would like to ask you to keep some of those questions... Maybe tomorrow."

Over on the other side of the pool, someone asks Stacy Lattisaw — very young, very cute and very vacant — something vaguely political.

"Oh gee, I don't know. I never thought about that. I decided to take part in this festival because I wanted to see Jamaica. I've never been here before."

I get on a coach with The Beat for the ride to the gig and talk to Dave Wakeling, who seems to have it well sussed.

"The whole thing stinks really. Probably it's one of the more mercenary we've agreed to do. I mean, we were so keen to see Jamaica. I was desperate to see some old friends that live here, and also I wanted to get on the beach and see some sun. If it was in Newcastle or New York we'd probably refuse on moral grounds."

"There's obviously this Reagan-Seaga right wing alignment. The US says, OK, you can have the tourists back but don't talk to Cuba and give us the bauxite."

"But if you take it to any extreme there's not a rock promoter in the world to whom you could say, OK, I'm going to work for him because I feel 100 per cent morally aligned with him. So I don't think it's any huge crime."

"But it's not what the cosmetic advertised version says it is, honouring the memory of Bob Marley. If anything, it's a way of taking away the threat that the memory of Bob Marley might kindle."

CLASH ONSTAGE



JAMAICA WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL

THERE ARE a lot more people the second night, and especially a lot more Jamaicans.

The Beat go on first, and do a rousing, rocking set. The Jamaicans take to them right away, with Roger skanking around the stage and the rhythms being so close to home. To me, 'Doors Of Your Heart' is still their greatest moment, where the conflict between idealist aspiration and the hard vexation of reality is most poignantly expressed. But the whole set is great, and The Beat get the first encore of the festival.

Back at one of the food stalls I meet Rose. I take her to be about 18. She turns out to be 22 and a mother of three. She and her boyfriend live in the hills and grow a bit of herb, and she's here helping her mother run the concession. I ask her what she thinks of the festival.

"You mean for me or for Jamaica?"

For you.

"Well, for me it's an experience. Because we locals don't get to see all these acts usually. But I'll tell you the truth: I really love my Jamaican acts. Because I am from the ghetto, and only those acts from the roots really express our feelings."

"Upperclass Jamaicans, they're very snobbish about Jamaican music. They'd

rather hear the foreign music, soul and all that. You know why? Because the roots music tells the truth, and them don't want to hear that."

Rose comes up towards the front with me to watch Aretha Franklin, who does an amazingly listless set, practically sleep-walking. She projects a smug attitude that suggests that she should be thankful the Queen Of Soul has deigned to perform for us. Rose doesn't say anything until the end when Aretha does 'Jump To It'.

"This is sweet," she says then. "It has that movement in it, like our music, so you can dance and feel something."

A few numbers into Black Uhuru's set, Michael Rose pulled off his tam and shook out his locks, and every Jamaican in the place went AWOAH! Seeing them on their home turf made me realise what cultural icons they have become, and seeing them at this festival proved that they can convey their power even to a non-reggae oriented white rock audience. Even from way in the back of the crowd, the Sly and Robbie rhythm team were strong enough to shake the ground, and the three singers' visual projection telegraphed

through the air.

Backstage, while Skeeter Davis sings some lame standard-issue country music, I talk with Puma Jones.

"It's a great event for music," she says. "Because music creates a common language for the people, and this really proves it. I can't think of any occasion when there's been music from all facets, from African to American to European, come together on a stage like this. And it's perfect that it happens in Jamaica, because Jamaica really did reach out its hands to the world, and it's set a pace that obviously will be continued."

Don't you think Jamaica needs more medium-sized venues for Jamaican artists, rather than glitzy places like this?

"Well, they are about utilising the resources, and they've realised that music is one of their greatest assets. So, we'll see. But it's good to have an international stage in Jamaica."

Isn't it all a big advertising campaign?

"It is. It's like, there was nothing to stop it from happening, you know. So we just have to live with it. And I mean right now the reggae business in Jamaica really does need resources. It needs opportunity to be pushed at a standard. We couldn't have done it without, you know, some happy medium in the western hemisphere."

The Beach Boys come on and play their hits. They are slick and accomplished. I'm surprised at how fresh they make things like 'I Get Around' and 'Fun Fun Fun' sound. But I'm not feeling nostalgic, and quickly lose interest.

Yellowman comes on in the dark and ends as the yellow sun is rising. He is a phenomenon in the Jamaican music business, and I'll deal with him in a separate story. By this time it was mostly Jamaicans left in the audience, and Yellowman had them in his hand.

NEXT DAY it's drinks by the pool with Kosmo Vinyl. The Clash are one of the few groups not allowing themselves to be video taped and filmed by the promoters. Why?

"We told them to fuck off. Why? That's what I asked them. There's no across-the-board appeal here. So what are they going to do? Split it up into two lots and put us in with Joe Jackson and The Beach

Boys? What for?"

Don Letts didn't come down with you to shoot this?

"Now, there'd be nothing to shoot. A few Rastas backstage, some palm trees, a big boring rock and roll stage. And we don't know, maybe there will be four or five thousand people out there tonight. At the end of the day I'd say no big deal."

At the end, the last night finally drew a big crowd, maybe 20,000 people. You'll excuse me for missing Bobby And The Midnighters and Joe Jackson, but the road traffic kind of merged with the parking lot along the side, and everything stood still, and we were late.

It is Squeeze's last gig, they said, and they don't seem up for it at all. They get one of the worst receptions of the whole festival, and deservedly so.

Rita Marley is mostly boring, with a few exceptions: her new single 'Harambe' is catchy, and I heard it in record shops all over town, so it should be a hit. And 'My Kind Of War' is a fine song. But when she brings on her children — The Melody Makers — it was instant love. Ziggy Marley has his father's gestures and mannerisms, and at 13 he seems completely at home on a giant stage, which I guess comes from having grown up watching his father do it. And he's got a voice. That kid is going to be a star.

Rick James doesn't go over too well. The Jamaicans are suspicious, and the white Americans most indifferent. And though his band can rock, his act is all strutting and posturing, and ultimately tiresome. But the lighting the split bit in 'Mary Jane' is funny, and the Jamaicans are yelling "Peter Tosh style".

Earlier in the day Kosmo had been boasting about how The Clash are the only band in the festival that would rock and roll. So I decide I'll be hard on them, and that if they are going to impress me they'll have to do it from way back in the crowd. And they did! Fast and furious, hard and strong, awoah and boom!

The Clash are the only foreign band to relate their set musically to the fact that they were in Jamaica. I watch the Jamaicans around me. Their interest picks up when they hear 'Police On My Back', and with 'Guns of Brixton' they're skanking. With 'Armageddon Time' they are shouting "AWOAH!". Once it's established that these white boys know

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PHOTOGRAPHY: JOE STEVENS

increase sentences ("they maintain control through a system of sanctions but there's a lot of setting women against each other — they tried it with me my first day there").

Despite the fact that she's sleeping badly since leaving

fortunately that refers to the cell and not to me. What was bad was that I'd been taken there before breakfast and not told why or how long I'd be there."

Helen: "This is the way they actually inflict real terror in prison — they move you

JWMF

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something about their music, they are ready to pay attention to The Clash's rock and roll as well, and stuff like 'One More Time' and 'Clampdown' knocks them out. "Anger can be power" was heard and understood.

The Clash took their chance and made it mean something.

Peter Tosh is the best I've ever seen him. He's less self-involved than usual, more communicative, dramatic without that overblown staginess he often affects. His band, however, aren't particularly hot.

Sometime around 8am Tosh ends with a half-hour harangue.

"This commemoration is a commemoration of Bob Marley, who only used to

represent reggae music. Well, if this building here and this place here is in commemoration, we want to hear reggae music on the radio here 24 hours a day. We're tired of funky, and I don't want to be hypocritically looked over. And on my radio station they're listening to the American chart, what kind of bumba clot is that?"

IF YOU like rock festivals, and if you had the money and the stamina, the JWMF was a good deal for the punter. It was one of the few festivals that really earned the name, providing a round-the-clock atmosphere of interest and involvement. The days were beautiful and at night they kept you entertained till morning. The food was good and cheap, the facilities well thought out, the sound the best I've heard at a

"Militancy is taken up by women only after much trial and disappointment; but with women, as with men, it is not a weapon easily laid down."

— Sylvia Pankhurst in a letter to Lloyd George, July 21, 1913.

large outdoor gig. And in the mish-mash of a something for everyone programme there were moments of inspiration.

But for the Jamaican government, the JWMF is a step in a weird direction. A 40,000 capacity venue requires this type of multi-star mega show to make sense. That means it also requires foreign capital to finance the operation, foreign technicians to run it, and foreign acts to draw a foreign crowd. Jamaica gets a quick infusion of foreign cash, but no foundation on which to expand its own industry and support its own talent.

This means it perpetuates the common Third World syndrome of dependence on foreign resources and perpetual debt.

Rock and roll imperialism! We have met the colonialisers, and he is us.

But of course that's show biz.