

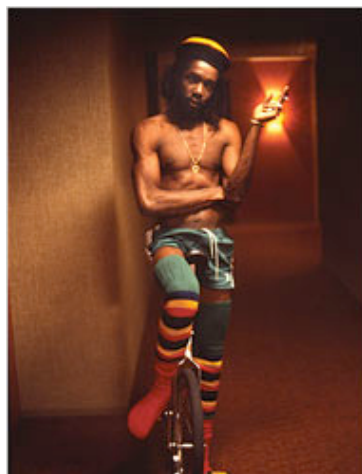



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Hope You Like Jamming Too

By BAZ DREISINGER
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We're more than a beach. We're a country." So a Jamaica Tourist Board ad campaign stated in the 1970s, as tourism became the bread and butter of the Caribbean and [Bob Marley](#) secured international fame. Promoting the radical notion that there was — gasp! — culture in resortland proved a smart strategy; today Jamaica is to the Caribbean as Starbucks is to coffee: the brand name that inspires fervent fidelity and chronic visits. To cite the current Jamaica Tourist Board motto, which has “cult” written all over it, “Once you go, you know.”



The Americans Roger Steffens and Peter Simon did go, and indeed, they know. Simon, a photojournalist who has documented Jamaican music since the 1970s, and Steffens, a music journalist famous mostly for being reggae's No. 1 fan (his cache of memorabilia is known as the Reggae Archives), share their addiction in “Reggae Scrapbook,” a dazzling homage to the music and its birthplace. Simon's magnificent photos are interspersed with his and Steffens's text — historical morsels,

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From "Reggae Scrapbook"

Peter Tosh, photographed by Peter Simon.

REGGAE SCRAPBOOK

By Roger Steffens and Peter Simon.

Illustrated. 152 pp. Insight Editions. \$45.

interviews with reggae greats, frontline reminiscences about the music scene — and replicated goodies from the archives: concert handbills, autographed records, album covers, fliers promoting reggae shows in places as far-flung as Israel and Germany. Their work is evidence that fandom has all the trappings of religion: here are holy artifacts, testimonials, even lists of places to worship (i.e., global reggae festivals).

The book is, above all, fun. Turning page after oversize page, ogling colorful collages and wondering what treats were in store next — Reggae stickers! An envelope of marijuana-themed postcards! — I felt like a keyed-up kid with a new toy. Simon's photographs, many of them previously unpublished, include evocative shots of the Kingston ghettos and country villages that fostered Jamaican music, and potent portraits of stars like Toots Hibbert, Bob Marley and [Jimmy Cliff](#). (My favorite: the former Wailer Peter Tosh on a unicycle, sporting thigh-high rainbow-colored socks and taunting the camera with spliff in hand, as if to say, "You looking at me?") The book also covers the contemporary reggae scene, an exhilarating mélange of sacred and profane. On one page is the Rastafarian artist Buju Banton, foot resting on speaker, face glazed with sweat, eyes closed in apparent spiritual ecstasy; on another is Passa Passa, a weekly early-morning Kingston street party where the line between dancing and sexual gymnastics is very, very fine. Jamaica is photogenic — but that's an understatement. A bad photo of the island is like a bad photo of a supermodel.

Steffens and Simon might have produced yet another reggae history, delineating how ska slowed down and became rocksteady, which begat reggae, which eventually fathered contemporary dancehall. Jamaican musical history is alluring because it's a spot-on microcosm of Jamaican national history. The birth of an independent music scene precisely paralleled the birth of an independent Jamaica in 1962 — as if the postcolonial era demanded a homegrown soundtrack. From Prime Minister Michael Manley, whose 1972 campaign was doused in reggae, to Prime Minister Edward Seaga, whose promotion of Jamaican music in the 1960s had earned him the nickname Ska-aga, Jamaican politics and music have been bedfellows.

But, happily, the authors shun such a project; a scrapbook evokes the sound and spirit of reggae more than a linear narrative ever could. Jamaican music, like all Caribbean music, is a collage of

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sounds and influences that brings dry academic terms like “creolization” and “hybridity” to vibrant, audible life. Ska, for instance, fused Cuban rhythms, Trinidadian calypso and American jazz and R&B with Jamaican folk music like mento, itself a blend of African and European strains. Jamaicans transformed sundry scraps into treasures, creating the aural equivalent of a scrapbook: postcolonialism with bass.

Scrapbooks, too, are unabashedly personal, while histories and photo essays set store by objectivity. And that, ultimately, is the authors’ coup. “There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera,” Susan Sontag wrote, a point supremely applicable to a tourist wonderland like Jamaica. The camera lends power, marking the line between subject and object. When “Through Jamaica With a Kodak,” by the Englishman Alfred Leader, was published in 1907, a legacy of well-meaning objectification of the Jamaican native was born, and it lives on today in cliché-laden photography of “Jamaica, mon”: think of Rastafarians enshrouded in marijuana smoke, looking authentically divine and divinely authentic.

Back in the 1970s, a popular cruise line came up with a scheme to give Jamaican coffee-factory workers, whom tourists ogled and photographed as if they were in a zoo, Instamatic cameras with which to snap their onlookers right back. Steffens and Simon combat the power dynamics inherent in picture taking by other means: personalizing their project and thus making us persistently aware of their positions as viewers and visitors, not omniscient truth-tellers. “There are no facts in Jamaica,” they write. No, Jamaica is the land of versions, so they give us one: a hyperpersonal, very contagious celebration of their love affair with reggae and Jamaica — beaches, country and all.

Baz Dreisinger, an assistant professor of English at John Jay College, is the author of the forthcoming “Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture.” She writes about Caribbean music and pop culture for The Los Angeles Times, The Village Voice and Spin.

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