

THE BIRTH AND GROWTH

REGGAE

Archives, story and photos
by "Ras RoJah" Steffens

Way back in the summer of 1973, an extraordinary and revealing article appeared in *Rolling Stone* by a gonzo journalist from Australia named Michael Thomas. Under the heading "The Wild Side of Paradise," in vivid mad-cap prose, Thomas told a brief history of this new Jamaican music called "reggae," and alerted American readers to its manifold mysteries and pleasures. I cut it out and put it in a manila folder – and now, looking back – I recognize it as the unwitting start of Roger Steffens' Reggae Archives.

I never set out to build a collection that would grow to fill six rooms of our home in Los Angeles, plus a basement storage space at a museum design firm in Pasadena, not to mention the dozens of cartons stored in our garage and bedroom closets. Need I say I am married to the world's most patient wife? Without Mary's active connivance, none of this would ever have happened, for she has taken virtually every step of the reggae trod at my side, meeting Bob Marley and Sunsplash throughout the '80s and running tech for me in worldwide "Life of Bob Marley" multi-media presentations as far afield as the bottom of the Grand Canyon, Martinique and Guam, from Auckland to Alberta, Perth to Paris.

I've always been a writer and a lecturer, two interests abetted by my training as an actor, so whenever a subject interests me, I begin to keep a file on it, in case someday I might like to write or speak about it. Beginning in Berkeley that summer, I added the occasional newspaper or magazine article to the folder, alongside fliers from the nascent



Chinna Smith, Ras RoJah and Kiddus I By Mary Steffens

Bay Area reggae scene. One of them, advertising an amazing eye-and-ear-opening triple bill of Inner Circle (with Jacob Miller), Big Youth and Dennis Brown at Winterland, is contained in removable form in our new book, *Roger Steffens' and Peter Simon's Reggae Scrapbook*, confirming in Marley's words, "what goes around comes around" – even if it takes 35 years.

In those heady birth years of America's interest in Jah music, whenever one could connect with someone else who heard the heartbeat call, it was like finding water in the desert. People like San Francisco's ardent proselytizer,

OF ROGER STEFFENS'

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"Duppy Doug" Wendt, and Santa Cruz's longest-running reggae apostle, Lance Linares, would often cross paths at Trench Town Records/Kingston Records on Fillmore Street, run by an old spar of Marley's from Yard, named Ruel Mills. He was the promoter of that Winterland show, and brought many other early touring acts to the San Francisco Bay – and need I add, for little or no recompense. In those early days the refrain was, "if you're into reggae for money, then you don't really know what a gwaan." Same as it always was.

In 1976, a year after we moved to Los Angeles, Mary and I went to Jamaica, primarily to find records. We arrived as a National State of Emergency was declared by a defiant Socialist Prime Minister, Michael Manley. When we arrived in Kingston, traveling down deserted midday streets with soldiers on the prowl and tanks on the crossroads, I thought I was back in Saigon during the Tet Offensive. One of the music's stars picked my pocket in Tuff Gong within minutes of our debarking from a minibus. Bob's own store had not a single one of his records for sale – neither did they have any of Peter Tosh's, and only a pair of Bunny Wailer's. The major stores, a block away on Parade, looked exactly like that scene in Jeremy Marre's peerless 1977 documentary *Roots Rock Reggae*, with dozens of folks vying for control of the stores' turntables. A few seconds

of a record was all that was proffered and one had to make up his mind based solely on records' intros.

Much of the music we had been looking for, no matter how recent, was unavailable, and I came home quite frustrated. So it was the local stores that stoked my jones. A sublime grounation album, *Dadawah*, by Ras Michael and the Sons

of Negus, which we went to 12 of the island's 14 parishes trying to find without success, was available in several copies at the sparsely stocked Trench Town Records back in San Francisco. British reggae imports could also be found in large quantities at places like Leopold's, Rasputin's and Tower in Berkeley, allowing my vinyl collection to grow by leaps and bounds.

In '78, I met Hank Holmes, a reclusive collector who had put together over 8,000 roots records without ever leaving Los Angeles. Perturbed by the absence of reggae on the air in the City of Angels, within a year, we found ourselves



Carlos Santana and Ras RoJah By Devon Steffens



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on the local NPR outlet, KCRW, eventually spinning four hours of commercial-free reggae beats every Sunday – many folks considered it their weekly church. The show became an on-air seminar where we all learned together as a constant parade of the form's prime creators, starting with Marley himself in November of '79, told their musical his-tories and (often) their particular versions of the Rastafari creed. Each of these programs was taped off the board, and these masters grew to include 1,400 hours of broadcasts of the weekly *Reggae Beat* program, another 184 hours of our syndicated *Reggae Beat International* show heard on 130 stations (including the Voice of America, Africa service), and a couple of hundred television shows for the L.A. *Reggae* series produced and directed by my indefatigable Trinidadian partner, Chili Charles.

In the early '80s reggae started to gain real traction in CA, and jocks up and down the Coast eagerly shared material, usually by cassette, for their shows. A few actual LP promotion copies made their way to us – but the old adage was increasingly true: "what they send you, you don't want; what you want, they don't send you." So we ended up buying almost everything we played on the air – resulting in listeners' tapes of our purchases being traded avidly. I believe that the deep interest in the true Rastafarian conscious music among many of us CA reggae radio pioneers helped develop a market here that is significantly different from other parts of the country such as Miami and New York, which have a much deeper dancehall affiliation. Today, a local L.A. spot in Echo Park called the Dub Club, attracts a



Rasta Man shoes

largely Hispanic crowd who seem to know all the lyrics to lesser-known talents' music – folks like Kiddus I, the Melodians, the Abyssinians, Ranking Joe and others who play to full houses. Chuck Foster, who succeeded me on the *Reggae Beat*, when I left in '87, is still on the air Sunday afternoons on the Pacifica outlet, KPFK, strictly roots stylee, influencing new generations.

In '84 I was asked to chair the newly formed Reggae Grammy Screening Committee. Lots of new sources of music came my way and we ended up having to move to a new home to house all the stuff that was arriving

daily. Magazines like our own *Beat* sprang up, demanding space. What started as a small collection in a walk-in closet now began to fill a dining room in which we never ate a meal and a back room in which a new thing called a personal computer (or poisonous confuser, as Tosh woulda seh) began vying for space. A file cabinet was now filling with clippings, alphabetized by artist and topic. I would return from Jamaica each year with a suitcase full of print and vinyl and a new format called a CD. Eventually, as Mary's hips became bruised by having to navigate through our "house of piles," we had to move once more, to the current location of the "ark-hives," on a hilltop overlooking the city. Hundreds of people are drawn each year from all over the world, asking for private tours of the stuff.

Just what is the stuff? Well, here are some current figures, each of them obviously approximate: **9,000** records, a third of which are autographed by the artists; **5,000** CDs; **2,000** hours of video; more than **10,000** hours of cassettes; **25,000** photographs which I have shot over the years and countless **thousands** from others; drawers and boxes filled with **thousands** of fliers and posters; more than **1,000** books and magazines; a virtually full 40-year run of *Rolling Stone*, which documents reggae's penetration into the musical mainstream; **3,000** reggae business cards and an equal number of buttons and badges; more than **1,000** t-shirts; paintings, sculptures and other collectibles; plus **120** cubic feet of clippings. If it's hard to get your head around that last figure, visualize cartons (each one being one foot wide, one foot tall, and one foot deep), lined up from home plate to first base – and 20 feet beyond!





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The heart of the Reggae Archives is, of course, the Bob Marley collection, which contains virtually every recording ever made by Bunny, Bob and Peter. Almost all are signed by one or more band members, including Cherry Green and Beverly Kelso from the early days of the Wailers on Coxsone, plus Coxson himself (he told me the “e” was added if it referred to his label), Lee Perry (who signed “Small Axe” thusly: “I Upsetter write this song. I am the small axe. Bob wasn’t even there when I write this song”). There’s an autographed cymbal from Wailers drummer Carly Barrett, the one he played on “No Woman No Cry.” A poster from the Greek Theater in Berkeley in ‘78 is signed by Bob, his entire band, the Melody Makers, his mother and sister, the I Threes – a total of 37 of those closest to him, with names like Ky-mani Marley still being added to this day. Other original Marley posters come from Trinidad, New Zealand, Milan (his biggest show, for 110,000 people) as well as the Apollo in Harlem. There are two hand-painted beaded curtains from Saigon, one with a decidedly Chinese-looking Bob and dozens of art works – gifts from Carlos Santana and others. Stamps, coins and medals honoring Bob around the world, seven Ukrainian nesting dolls, and...well, you get the idea. There’s not enough space here to outline them all.

Rasta culture is very much in evidence too. Among the major artifacts is an envelope with a cachet seal postmarked at the United Nations the day that Haile Selassie made his historic “War” speech, signed by His Majesty, and newspapers and magazines from significant events in his life. One of only 26 copies pressed of *Selassie Is the Chapel* is autographed by its lyricist, the late Morfino Planno, and by Dermot Hussey, the veteran Jamaican broadcaster, confirming that this is the actual copy he played on the JBC the day Bob passed. The highest recent bid for the record, sans autographs, was \$3,800. Another item that seems to have an extravagant value is a pair of custom-made red, gold and green Nike sneakers made to wear when I emceed concerts, one of only two in existence, with “Rasta” and “Man” printed on the heels.



Lee “Scratch” Perry signed LP of “Small Axe”

One of the more intriguing aspects of the physical layout of the Archives is a large closet which holds tens of thousands of slides. As the door slides back, a banner with Marley’s wedding picture becomes visible. I invite visitors to “push Bob’s elbow,” an exhortation that is sometimes met with a fearful expression, as if they’re afraid the floor might fall away beneath them. But when they do give it a shove, four “secret” rooms appear, beginning with the Reggae Decompression Chamber, off which is the Reggae Cave, the Reggae Library and the large main room of the Recording Archives.

To help fill all these areas, friends in the reggae world have been extraordinarily generous with me. If they find something of Bob’s that I don’t have, most often folks will just give it to me “for the museum.” It’s been my goal for the past 20 years or so to find a way that all of this “stuff” could go to its rightful home, Jamaica, so that its people can see the incredible lengths to which its culture has penetrated. Currently, I am weighing several options that would lead to institutionalizing the collection so that everyone could enjoy it, helping to ensure that Jah message is carried on by future generations.

Meantime, the collection grows daily. I’m able to share some of the many hundreds of hours of video and film of the reggae prophet through my *Life of Bob Marley* multi-media shows, and have adapted much of the L.A. Reggae material for presentations at The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and last winter’s Global Reggae Conference at the University of the West Indies in Kingston. This summer, Loose Caboose band leader Ras Jahn Bullock and I will conduct a July 4th weekend seminar at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY. In November, there’ll be three days showing films of Bob and Peter Tosh at *High Times’* 21st Annual Cannabis Cup in Amsterdam.

My dearest wish is that the collection go to Jamaica, be kept intact, and – while scrupulously respecting all rights of the creators – be made available to the public. As a potential part of the project, I’ve shot more than 1,600 pictures of people around the world wearing Marley clothing, which would make an impressive wall in the museum, one on which fans could come and see themselves, with the name of their location printed on each picture.

The goal of reggae music is nothing less than the spiritual and moral transformation of the planet, and each of us in our own way must help continue to “forward the reggae vibe everytime.” I’m proud to have played a little part in that revolution, and hope that what I leave behind will be enjoyed for many generations to come. ☺

An actor, author, photographer, broadcaster, producer, poet, lecturer and archivist, Roger Steffens has been involved in reggae since 1973. He lectures internationally on the history of reggae and especially on The Life of Bob Marley. His five books include the recent coffee table compilation Roger Steffens’ and Peter Simon’s Reggae Scrapbook. He is the narrator of an Oscar-winning documentary; the reader of Bill Gates’ recent book on tape; a bronze-star Vietnam vet who worked with refugees for 26 months in-country; the co-founder of the Saigon chapter of Mensa; a principal voice in L.A.’s Museum of Tolerance; the man who turned Paul Simon on to Ladysmith Black Mambazo; as well as a poetry reader on the road with his award-winning one-man show, Poetry for People Who Hate Poetry. For more information check out his website www.reggaesupersite.com or contact him at rasrojah@aol.com.
