

Live

Reggae Sunsplash '86 Montego Bay, Jamaica, August 26-30

Four days, 44 acts, encompassing all styles of reggae, from Lovers Rock to Roots to Dancehall, set against the background of the world's biggest party. The only word to describe Reggae Sunsplash is intoxicating, and it's more than just the strength of the local brew.

For the experienced Sweetwaters-goer, Sunsplash would be a familiar setting apart from the composition of the audience and the items on sale at the many stalls on the perimeter of the venue. Jarrett Park is a cricket ground in the heart of Montego Bay township. The stage is completely open to the elements (a mistake, as heavy rain proved on the final night), and a ticket costing about \$8 gives you almost 10 hours of virtual non-stop music each night. The party starts at 9pm and it's nearly dawn the next day when the headline act comes on. Those determined to see everything have little time for getting a suntan; daylight hours are precious for sleeping and the hardcore fans stagger bleary-eyed and breathless for bed.

The streets around the park be-

come a cauldron of activity each night, vendors' stalls hawking beer, sugar cane, snacks of every description, cheap jewellery and a host of dubious stimulants designed to trap the tourists and (hopefully) their Yankee dollars. Visitors soon learn that Jamaica values its own currency very little, and what may seem a reasonable price can become quite unreasonable when its value in local money is quoted, five times higher.

Many myths have been perpetrated about Laura Norder in Third World countries. While it's true that there were three fatal shootouts with the police in Jamaica during the seven days I was there, Montego Bay itself was peaceful enough, with only one fight during the entire festival. Jamaicans are vociferous and boisterous people, but verbal abuse seldom descends into fisticuffs. You even get used to the sight of police carrying submachine-guns, and the bigger risk is getting ripped off.

With a programme of such magnitude and variety, staging the performances becomes a major exercise in logistics. Most performers have to work with a "pool" band, ie: one backing group supports between four and six artists each night. Only the acts which are a band in itself or those who are headlining are accorded the privilege of using their own hand-picked musicians. Most of the stu-

dios in Kingston were tied up for a fortnight prior to the festival for rehearsal purposes. Yet despite the hasty preparations, the standard of musicianship remained uniformly high throughout the festival, while the performers themselves were frequently outstanding. What follows is a brief resume of the highlights of a musical banquet which produced very few lows.

The theme of Reggae Sunsplash '86 was anti-apartheid, and just about every artist had a statement to make against P W Botha. Strongest on opening night was Culture's Joseph Hill: "We gonna grow a tree of the international herb fe 'ANG 'IM!" Of course, the colie weed anthem followed, to a rapturous reception. The Culture show was typically eccentric, Hill frequently interrupting the music for tirades about Babylon and various other issues of concern. But Culture still fired on all four that night, with Hill at his best on 'See Them A Come' and some very promising tracks from a forthcoming new LP.

Freddie McGregor and Dennis Brown both played on Night One, Brown naturally topping the bill. The two are getting closer all the time in vocal styles, McGregor working harder, dancing better and smiling broader. 'I'm Ready' brought everyone to their feet, and hearing 12,000 singing 'Big Ship' was magic. Brown, billed as the "Crown Prince of Reggae", dressed

the part in an extraordinary gold sequinned cap with matching waistcoat, and could do little wrong. 'A Little Bit More' was bliss, and 'Bloody City' chilled to the bone. At sun up, he was still going strong and dipping into the oldies bin when fatigue overtook your correspondent.

Night Two was dancehall style, with about 20,000 packed into Jarrett Park and the pressure pushing up. Various posses squared off in support of their favourite DJs, such as Peter Metro, Early B, General Trees, Brigadier Jerry, Josey Wales and, of course, King Yellow. Yellowman has had a long road back from serious illness (cancer has been whispered), but appeared in good shape as he whipped up the crowd with his usual rudery and even acquitted himself well in a duel with Trees, his heir apparent. But the night belonged to a lanky beanpole named Eddie Fitzroy, whose hiccupping vocal style resembles a chipmunk with laryngitis. His songs though, are deadly serious, 'First Class Citizen' and 'General Penitentiary' evoking grim memories of the Gun courts, set up in JA during the 1970s for people convicted of firearms offences, some of whom never came out. Top of the bill was Sugar Minott, who turned in a brisk and very professional performance but stuck too much to one format and showed little of the versatility that has made him such a respected

singer.

Night Three was a more rootsy session, the crowd smaller and the atmosphere more mellow. I Jahman, a wiry little stick insect, drew a warm response with one of the festival's most intense performances. Now UK-resident, he remains a singer-songwriter indifferent to commercial demands, determined to follow a course set by himself and Jah. Wife Madge came on later for some sweet lovers duets and the feeling was most Irie. Enter Judy Mowatt, dressed and singing like a princess. Stunning and elegant, but still with an earthy edge, she could now give Aretha a run for her money. 'Working Wonders' and 'Wolf in Sheep's Clothing' were just two standouts in a brilliant set. The Mighty Diamonds were received as conquering heroes, and nobody wanted to let them go. 'I Need a Roof', 'The Right Time' and 'Pass the Kouchie', accompanied by hip-hop dancing, had the punters still screaming for more, 10 minutes after the trio had quit the stage. It just remained for Burning Spear to cap it all with a big, brawny, testifying set. His current band includes a multi-racial, all-women horn section and his half-scream, half whisper of "RASS!" carried across the park and out into the streets beyond. Spear is so Dread, he even got away with wearing a most outrageous pair of luminous knickerbockers. Unforgettable.

The final night saw the Wailers

Band prove conclusively that you can't live on a memory. The rhythm section is as potent as ever, but the material is mostly Marley, and Tyrone Downie just doesn't cut it as a vocalist, no matter how hard he tries to imitate his late boss. The response was a lukewarm as the performance. It was up to the Taxi Gang to make the night, Sly and Robbie responding with more than three hours of storming riddims. Ini Kamoze, a tall very handsome dread, brought squeals of delight. The Tamlins provided the slickest stage act of them all, lots of Philly-Motown dance steps and two falsetto leads which melted people's hearts. They finished with Randy Newman's 'Baltimore' and brought the house down. As if that wasn't enough, Gregory Isaacs came straight on, sounding as hot as ever, and enchanted the crowd with 45 minutes of classics, punctuated with shouts of "Bo! Bo! Bo!" (the usual exclamation of approval in JA) and firecrackers. Ex-Heptone Leroy Sibbles, now resident in Canada, kept the energy flowing with a similar greatest hits set, finishing with a singalong 'I Shall Be Released'. Star of the final night was Half Pint, a cheeky little sparrow in black leather who is JA's hottest property right now, with a No 1 hit, 'Greetings'. The show went well past the 7am curfew time, Half Pint still raging while promoters argued furiously backstage with

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