

"Equal rights — everyone is crying out for peace, no one is crying out for justice — I don't want no peace, we all need equal rights and justice — right here in Jamaica." (Peter Tosh)

Marcus Garvey words come to pass/Marcus Garvey words come to pass/Can't get no food to eat/Can't get no money to spend. (Burning Spear)

Time tough, everything is out of sight

It's so hard

Time hard,

Everything is going higher and higher.

(Toots and the Maytals)

Jamaicans have lived with inequality, injustice and above all, fear, throughout their country's chequered history. None more so than the followers of Selassie I, the ones still thought by many of their countrymen to be mentally ill, the ones held up as bogeymen by mothers to bad children. The Rastas.

Yet out of all conflict and misery comes some good. Rastafarians make up the major percentage of Jamaica's best writers, poets, artists, craftsmen, and above all, musicians. Rastafari is their identity, their dignity, their culture. They vent their suffering, their frustrations, through the urgency and vitality of the most significant music the world has heard since the Blues. In reggae, Jamaica has found its voice.

When it comes to picking the great voices of reggae, everyone mentions Frederick 'Toots' Hibbert. His voice remains unsurpassed, and in over 20 years of performing, changes in musical trends have not affected him. In fact, he has breasted musical evolution, not only keeping pace with it, but also claiming, with some justification, to have assisted it. He thus remains a respected figure both as a pioneer and an innovator.

Toots' dialect is not always easy to understand, but there is plenty of it, so you just tune in and pick out the meaning where a literal translation is not possible. He is a garrulous, swaggering

figure with an impish sense of fun, like a Third World version of Hasek's Good Soldier Schwejk. Modesty is not one of his strong points, but beneath the unabashed self-promotion there is deep reverence for things spiritual and compassion for his fellow man.

Toots was born in the country town of May Pen, west of Kingston, in the 1940s. He moved to Kingston around 1961, where he teamed up with Raleigh Gordon and Jerry Mathias. This trio first named itself the Vikings, then changed it later to the Maytals, a name Toots says "don't mean nothing." The trio survived until just recently, when Mathias married an American girl and dropped out. Toots says he can come back anytime.

All three had a strong church background and the testifying gospel style of singing has always been a feature of the Maytals sound. Anyone who saw *The Harder They Come* will recall the church scene and the electrifying singing of the congregation, reaching orgasmic intensity. The Maytals blended this fervour with the almost equal passion of the American R&B music they were hearing on the radio at the time. Toots takes up the story:

"I used to listen to Ray Charles and a lot of American singers, y'know? Little Richard, Wilson Pickett, lot of singers. Everyone tell me I gotta sing, everyone encourage me. In those days, was a lotta fun. You want your name to go on record, you want your record to go over the air, people been askin' about you, you singin' good sounds.

"In Kingston, there was some people called Music City. They started to record me. First producer was Coxson (Clement Dodd). We record lots in them days, two track studio in little house, not professional, like now. But Coxson, he is the one who taught us the recording business."

Toots may have some fond memories of Dodd, but there is

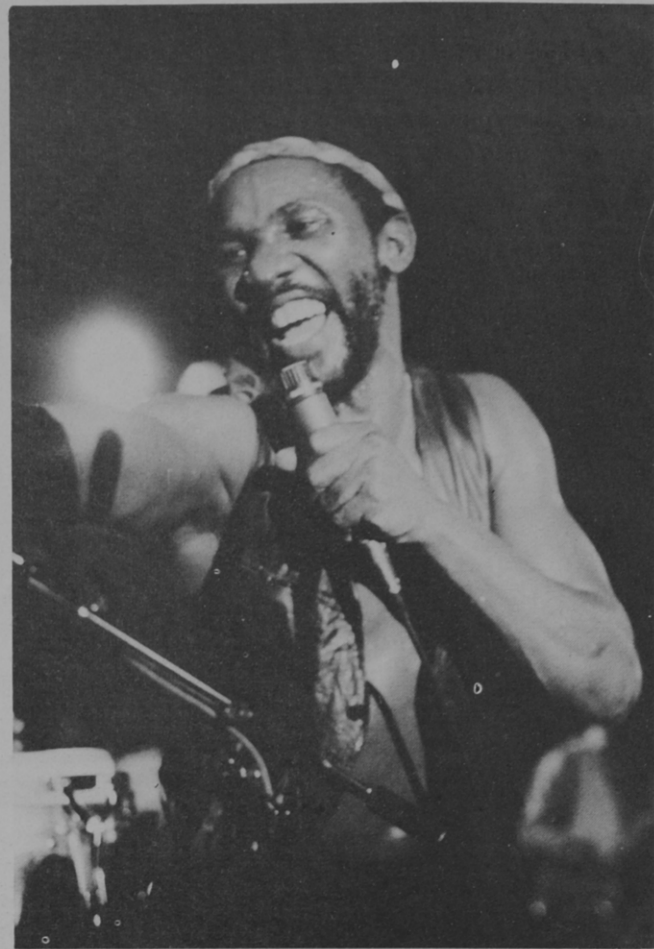


Photo by Murray Cammick

NEVER GET WEARY YET TOOTS by Duncan Campbell



Photo by Kerry Brown

Toots' vocalists Audrey and Pam.

little doubt that the man exploited the Maytals for every penny he could get and they saw very little. Their first single for Coxson was called 'Victory', but by the time they quit his studio, they were singing a song called 'Broadway Jungle', celebrating their freedom from Dodd's clutches. Many other musicians tell similar stories of being paid peanuts by Dodd and other 'heavy' producers, and being threatened with violence, even guns, when they complained. Toots is philosophical about such things now. He sees them as part of growing up.

"When you jus' start to do some t'ing you don't really understand, y'know, before you become professional, you must have to go through some changes. I didn't get a lotta money but I wouldn't call it a ripoff, because here I am. I can get more than I used to get, y'know? Before you have a manager, before you learn how to run your business properly, you have to be some- thin' within yourself, go through a lotta t'ings, just to fulfill your work."

After Dodd, the Maytals recorded several hits with Prince Buster, then went to Byron Lee's Dynamic Sounds studio. In 1966, Toots was busted for selling ganja and spent several months in prison. From this experience emerged '54-46 Was My Number'. Its original version, which appears on *In The Dark*, tells how Toots was allegedly set up:

You believe I would take something with me
And give it to the policeman
I wouldn't do that
So I was innocent, what they done to me,
They was wrong...

That 'Give it to me one time, etc', which is used as a crowd participation piece these days, is actually a counting of the strokes of the cane, still used as a punishment in Jamaican jails.

The late Leslie Kong was the Maytals' next producer, of hits including 'Monkey Man' (and the follow-up, 'Monkey Girl'), 'Peeping Tom' and the classic 'Pressure Drop'. This was a time of evolution for the music, as ska became the slower, meditative beat of rock steady. The sound was essentially transitory, with its peak period being between 1966 and 1968. The musicians and producers began experimenting again, speeding up the rhythms and adding more bass. The sound was harder, more aggressive, but more accommodating to the body. You could find your own rhythm, set your own pace and dance happily all night. It caught on quickly and all it needed was a name.

"I am the first person that put 'reggae' on the air, with a record I called 'Let's Do The Reggay'. The word is coming from way back, it is, like, Jamaican slang, a joke, y'know? It come from the slang word 'streggay', which we take and change to 'reggae'."

'Streggay' is actually a low sexual term, a kind of jokey proposition the rude boys used to shout at the girls.

The big change for Toots and the Maytals came around 1971, when they were signed to Island records. Chris Blackwell polished up their sound, produced *Funky Kingston* and put them on tour outside Jamaica for the first time.

Sweetwaters, January 29: Reggae was made for the great outdoors and the big crowds. Toots' experience shows in the
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