

TOOTS' FROM PAGE 14

Winston Wright has plenty of his own stories to tell, but just doesn't get much chance to tell them. He is genuinely surprised to be asked for an interview. Wright is now 42 and has been playing since he was 21. He was born in St Thomas and started playing harmonica in high school. He later took up piano and played organ at the St Gabriel Church. His first group was the Mercury's of Clarendon, who played a brash mixture of gospel and R&B. He later recorded several albums as a member of Lyn Tait and the Comets, and spent three years as a member of the house band that backed the West Indies and Federal label recording artists. Up till 1970, he was a member of the Supersonics, a highly influential band led by the great sax player, Tommy McCook. Wright, Hux Brown, bassist Jackie Jackson and drummer Paul Douglas have been a regular session group since the early 1970s under such names as the Dynamites and the Sheiks. Apart from backing Toots, they are on call as individuals for session work. You name them, Wright has probably played with them. He's also worked with just about every producer, from Lee Perry and Prince Buster, to Harry Johnson and Joe Gibbs.

Top bands like the Roots Radics or Sly and Robbie's Taxi are seldom out of work. But business at home for the musician is not so good these days, for a variety of reasons.

"The work is not as regular as five or six years ago, because the cost of living is high," Wright explains. "Acetate is very expensive so music production has dropped to around 60 percent of what it was five years ago, which is a bad drop for the industry."

"I might be in the studio every other day, but then a week might pass with nothin' and I must get somethin' to do. But the recording money isn't bad, so when you make an LP, you can sit on that money for maybe a week. You have two dollar, you have fe know how to pinch it, same with 20, same with a thousand. You don't throw it away."

Most of the big names in production are still there, though some are not as prolific as they once were. King Tubby, the original dubbing master, ekes out a living with voice, rather than music production. Clement Dodd remains a shadowy figure, probably because of his reputation. Lee Perry's Black Ark studios are long closed, after he had a nervous breakdown, destroyed his equipment and left for the United States.

Wright was one person who was there when the transition was made from ska to rock steady. The way he tells it, the musicians called the shots and the public adapted to their ideas. It was an exciting period.

"It was a natural change and we actually did the change. We were with Tommy McCook in the last era of the ska. We went into Duke Reid's studios and we started to change the music. It got a little bit slower, we put spice into it. Is not the people that change the music. Music change the people."

"Duke Reid and Coxson were responsible for the change in the sound, but half that responsibility still lie on the musicians, because it was really the musicians who did it, y'know. The producer, he doesn't know about music, he can't tell you to play this, cut down that part. He can't dictate, it was solely the musicians. Even to this day."

Wright's favourite producers are Lee Perry and Bunny Wailer ("There is something in them you can take out and put into the music").

The musician's lot, same as the Rasta's lot, is still not an easy one. As Toots says: "If you smoke, you get trouble. If you don't smoke, you get trouble. Same t'ing." Wright says Jamaica is still a very divided society, very class conscious. Also very drugs conscious.

"As an entertainer, if you go with the herb, some people look down on you, some people love you. As an entertainer, you have to level yourself to other people, high society and middle class people."

Live concerts in JA are still rare occasion. The two main events are the annual Sansplash and the World Festival, both of which are financed by foreign concerns. There aren't many other opportunities to play live.

"Basically, the time change. Ten years ago you could keep dances filled, but nowadays, only quarter filled. I dunno, it might be the generation change, time change, buildings go, the cars come. There's not a lotta entertainment, like years gone by. You used to be able to go to clubs, hear good music, go



Winston Wright



Raleigh Gordon



Toots, Hux Brown, Carl Harvey — Mainstreet Feb 2.

into the hills, hear good music. But through the years, a lotta those things cut out. That's why they start up the Sunsplash, to get people back into the music business, get people to know one another, vibrations moving."

Discos are the major musical outlet now, and the DJs are the new stars. Artists like Yellowman, the newest toasting sensation, can catapult themselves to stardom overnight with one single. Interestingly, Toots' manager also handles Yellowman, and is currently negotiating a major recording deal for him. But as Wright points out, for every Yellowman there are a dozen others who try for years and never make it.

Jamaican musicians have become more strongly unionised in recent years, with the aim of protecting their interests and getting the money that's due to them. Copyright is a very fragile and much-abused thing. A single backing track can be reused several times. The original vocal is stripped off by the producer, a dub version can be made under a different title, or a toaster can do a new vocal track. The one who usually pockets the profits is the producer, who puts his own name on the writing credits, and the musicians who had the original idea sees nothing.

Wright quotes a prime example from his own experience. In 1969, an instrumental called 'The Liquidator' was released. It was a big hit in Britain as well as Jamaica. The artists were listed as Harry J's All Stars, and the writing credit went to producer Harry Johnson. Wright was outraged when he saw this, since the tune was actually written by him. When he tried to have it out with Johnson, the producer threatened him with a gun. Wright was not the only one to be intimidated by such tactics, nor was Johnson the only armed producer. Three years later, a Memphis songwriter stole the same chord progression, note for note, and wrote a number one hit for the Staple Singers, 'I'll Take You There'.

Says Wright: "I never got so much as a cuppa tea outa that." A hard lesson was learned.

"Just a month ago, some guys from the United States came down to Jamaica, and the local musicians had a big convention at the Sheraton Hotel, to learn about copyrights. Before, you had producers ripping off artists, giving them a dollar and keeping the rest. So there comes a time when everybody realise what's happening, everybody travel now, they know what other musicians get. So now the Jamaica Federation of Music is working on that, opening a copyright office, get contacts with London and let everybody know what's happening."

"Like, you maybe record an album, it sell nothing in Jamaica, that's what the producer tell you when you ask why you get no money. But he knows that it is number one in Europe, or is selling big in America, or even here in New Zealand. But before, only the producer know that, so he get the money."

Things is better now, people travel, they know when their records are selling. But it take a long time."

Mainstreet, February 3: The place is packed tonight, and the air is stifling, despite the newly-installed fans. This crowd is out to get smashed and fall over. They know Toots only by his best-known songs, and the majority are more interested in the booze and their own conversation. Some of the dancers down front are getting aggro, and Toots tries to calm things down when a can is thrown. There was no time for a proper sound check because the drug squad raided several hotel rooms in the afternoon. In the end only Winston Wright is charged with possessing cannabis. He is discharged with 150 dollars in costs the following day. All this puts a strain on the band, and the sound isn't a patch on the previous night. Hux Brown's rhythm guitar, so vital, is inaudible for much of the time and the bass and drums are too heavy. The highlight is 'Missing You', performed for the first time on this tour, mainly to calm people down. It's lovely, but for this bunch, Toots might as well have sung the fire regulations. Verdict: They had to really work for their audience the night before and the results were far superior, because the people were more receptive.

Kensington Stadium, Whangarei, Feb 4. A late start and a rather shaky one, as Toots was suffering from travel sickness. The sound crew did wonders with the acoustics, in a place designed for basketball.

It must also be said here and now that support act Herbs are at a peak and are playing the best damn music of their career. You'd be a fool to miss them.

Shows like this are seldom seen in the far North, and while the audience was receptive, it was initially not very demonstrative. Many remained seated and few danced, as though overawed by the occasion.

Toots, who wasn't looking well at the start, pulled himself together and ended up giving a personal best performance. Extras this time were a dangerous rendering of 'Two Timing', with an extended instrumental section, and the old ska hit 'Chatty Chatty'. The audience finally warmed up, especially the local dreads. Toots stripped himself to the waist and danced himself silly with the help of some citizens, including the local leader of Black Power. He milked the end to 'Reggae Jam' a little but the applause from the audience was rapturous. Verdict: eight out of 10.

As I talked with Toots, one of the greatest tragedies of recent times was unfolding in the news. Two million Ghanaians and other people classed as illegal aliens were being expelled from Nigeria, because that country's economy was being strained to the limit. They were going home in whatever way they could, in unbelievable conditions of starvation and filth, mostly to countries which did not want them, are just as poverty-stricken, and can offer them no better future.

"People who have a lotta money should really look into the matter and help the people who need help. That's what I say, when I have a lotta money, I'm gonna do that. I just started to sing again after not singin' for a long time, but in those times when I used to sing, I didn't get a lotta money. But in the future, I'm gonna get a lotta money. I'm gonna do t'ings for myself and others. If I was a rich man, I would do a lotta t'ings for the people in Africa, people in England, in the States, everyone who need help."

"Time will come when everyone will have charity. I believe that. All the younger generation, they listen to reggae music, they gonna learn to have charity. Charity cover a multitude of sin."

*I woke up early one morning
Then I went down to Spanish Town
To look for a friend of mine
Then we started t' have a little talk
About everything
About the situation
And this is what he said
Famine, famine, famine
Famine on the land
I say the cost of living getting so high, high, high...*
Duncan Campbell

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