

Jamaican festival: three strange nights

BY STEVE POND

Montego Bay, Jamaica

The Jamaica World Music Festival drew a three-day total of more than 45,000 rock, soul and reggae fans to the new Bob Marley Performing Centre over Thanksgiving weekend. Though the crowd fell far short of the 75,000 people initially expected, the promoters of the event, Denver's Feyline Presents, happily promise another festival at the same site next year. And the fans who did show up got to hear a varied—and sometimes baffling—musical lineup.

"This is one of the strangest combinations of groups in history, but the shit's working," shouted Rick James to the 20,000-plus fans on Sunday, November 27th, the festival's final day, which included back-to-back sets by Joe Jackson, Rita Marley, James, Squeeze, the Clash and Peter Tosh.

Indeed, where else could you hear the Clash rip into "Police on My Back" and "Guns of Brixton" at four in the morning while a fatigue-clad member of the Jamaican military sat nearby with a rifle slung over his shoulder? Where else could you listen to the B-52's bounce through "Dance This Mess Around," only to be tapped on the shoulder by a dread-locked local asking, "Is this the Grateful Dead?"

But the low turnouts on the first two days of the festival—only 10,000 on Thursday and 15,000 on

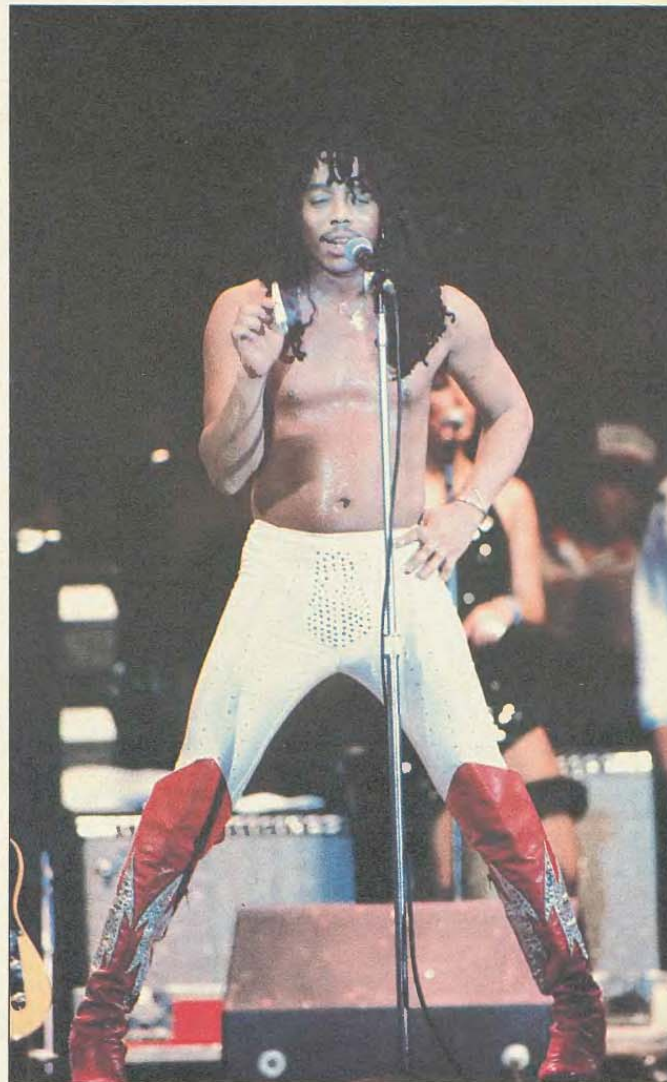


The concerts were held at the new Bob Marley Performing Centre (top left); Marley's widow, Rita (above), and Rick James both performed.

Friday—meant that promoter Barry Fey lost about \$300,000 on the show, which cost \$2 million to produce. (Fey, however, says he expects to recoup some of that money from video deals.)

If the twenty-odd private investors who financed the festival don't see any profit, it may largely be due to the ticket prices: in the U.S.,

only three-day tickets were available, at a cost of \$100, while in Jamaica, tickets cost about twenty-five (U.S.) dollars per show. Some 6000 "travel packages" (tickets, airfare and lodging) were sold to Americans prior to the show at prices ranging from about \$300 to nearly \$1000. Fey said another 1000 or so Americans in Jamaica



bought three-day tickets, and the remaining 25,000 tickets were sold to Jamaicans. By the last night, especially, the crowd was looking half-American and half-Jamaican.

That's a more even mix than many of the musicians were expecting. The night before the festival started, members of the Clash, the English Beat and Joe Jackson's band sat in the bar at the thoroughly Americanized Rose Hall hotel and made bets on how many Jamaicans would be willing or rich enough to attend. Jackson himself opened his show with a curt, "It's really nice to be here playing to all of you sunburnt American tourists."

But that's what the Jamaican government wanted out of the World Music Festival. As racial tension and violence hit a new high in the past couple of years, Jamaica's reputation as a tourist center declined. But the current adminis-

tration, led by Prime Minister Edward Seaga, has launched a concerted campaign to lure tourists back to the island. Their slogan is "Welcome Back to Jamaica," and this festival was a crucial step.

Some musicians, though, objected to the festival's political undercurrent. "This is the right-wing realignment festival, isn't it?" asked English Beat lead singer Dave Wakeling. "The Ronald Reagan-Edward Seaga 'stop-talking-to-Cuba-and-give-us-back-our-tourists' festival. And this Bob Marley business"—Seaga dedicated the Marley Centre the first day of the festival—"is a way of defusing his power, turning his sincerity into a marketable commodity."

The idea for the festival originated with the Jamaican government. "Back in May, I had lunch with one of the government ministers," said Fey. "I'd never heard of the Reggae Sunsplash festivals

Chrysalis in trouble

Chrysalis Records, one of the few remaining independent labels, apparently has become the music industry's latest casualty. At press time, the company's president, Sal Licata, had resigned, and the financially strapped label was said to be preparing to close its Los Angeles headquarters and dismiss the bulk of its fifty-five employees. In addition, Terry Ellis, Chrysalis' chairman, was negotiating a deal whereby the label would turn over some of its functions to a larger company, reportedly CBS. The final outcome of Ellis' negotiations could range from a distribution deal that would keep the Chrysalis

name alive and a small New York office to a liquidation of the label's assets and catalog.

Ironically enough, the developments came as Chrysalis was enjoying its first Number One single in a year and a half, Toni Basil's "Mickey." In addition, Pat Benatar's latest album, 'Get Nervous,' was in the Top Ten. But there were signs that all was not well. Blondie's latest LP, 'The Hunter,' failed to go gold (sales of 500,000), and such old-line acts as Jethro Tull and Robin Trower have been declining in popularity for the past couple of years. Plus, in what seemed a last-ditch move, the label warned radio stations not to air the Benatar LP without interruption, lest listeners tape it rather than buy it.

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The Clash backstage (top); 'comedian' Joe Jackson onstage

they have here, but when he talked about having an international music festival, my hand shot up from the back of the class."

Fey told the Jamaicans that the site of the Sunsplash festivals was too cramped to accommodate a large-scale festival, so the government okayed the estimated \$500,000 it will take to finish the eight-acre Marley Centre, which is located on the Calypso Drive peninsula in Montego Bay. Eventually, the site will be grassed and landscaped, but for this year's festival, it simply consisted of a long dirt rectangle measuring about 400 by 1200 feet. It was surrounded by fencing, rimmed with concession stands selling everything from curried goat to Kentucky Fried Chicken, and fronted by a stage and a building housing the backstage offices.

The stage itself was provided by Feyline. Allied Van Lines trucked it from Denver to Miami at a cost to Feyline of \$124,000, and from there it was shipped by "railroad boat" to Jamaica.

The Jamaican location was enough to lure bands to the festival, despite smaller-than-usual paydays. "This is not a big moneymaking gig at all," said Beach Boy Carl Wilson. "It just seemed real different."

Even Dave Wakeling played down his band's political objec-

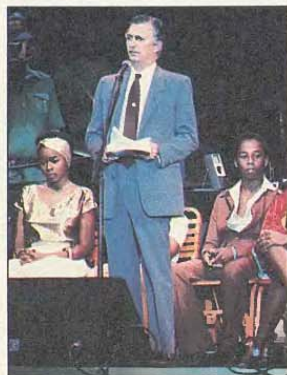
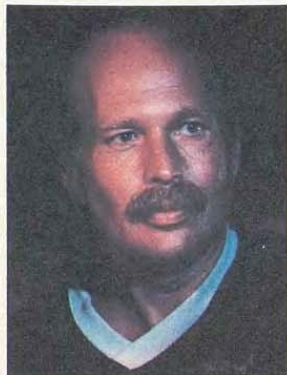
tions. "To me, Jamaica is a bit like the Holy Grail," he said. "We're doing this for transportation and lodging and twenty dollars a day, just because we wanted to see Jamaica."

The festival began at about eight p.m. on Thanksgiving, when Seaga dedicated the center with a prolonged eulogy to Marley that ended on an enthusiastically received note: "May you lively up yourselves and for these three days, at least, may you forget your troubles and dance."

With that, a dozen doves were released, most of which immediately settled in the lighting structure above the stage. The Wailers then took the stage to launch the three nights of music, all of which commenced in the early evening and ended after dawn. Throughout the shows, the Jamaican deejays who served as emcees added an element of humor, introducing Joe Jackson as "the comedian of music" and dropping broad hints all weekend that the Rolling Stones might show up (they didn't, of course).

The first day was almost a warmup—a low-key show whose flashiest moments came during sets by the B-52's and Gladys Knight (like most of the black American acts, Knight received a bigger hand from the Jamaicans than did the New Wave bands).

MUSIC



Promoter Fey (top); Edward Seaga

The Grateful Dead capped things with a two-and-a-half-hour show that ended at about seven in the morning, leaving only loyal Dead-heads in the audience.

Things picked up the second night, when the English Beat kicked things off with a lively set that earned them the festival's first encore. "I think the Americans liked the music and the Jamaicans liked the dancing," said bassist David Steele afterward. Both

Michael Rose of Black Uhuru, who performed the second night



Aretha Franklin and Black Uhuru went over exceptionally well. Even Skeeter Davis, a country singer who has consistently had hits in Jamaica since the Sixties, found her tepid set greeted with surprising enthusiasm.

The final show was by far the best attended, and perhaps the strongest musically. Bob Weir's band, Bobby and the Midnites, opened. Next, a grinning, lollipop-sucking Joe Jackson, introduced while he was still in a backstage bathroom, ran onstage for a well-received set. Rita Marley and Peter Tosh pleased the reggae contingent, Rita bringing her children by Bob onstage for "No Woman, No Cry." Rick James turned in a typically flashy set, and the Clash tore through a show long on their reggae and dub material ("Armageddon Time," "Bankrobber"). And Squeeze performed their final show in front of an initially indifferent crowd that finally called them back for their last encore ever. "We didn't plan on making our last show one like this," said songwriter Chris Difford after the set. "It blew in on the wind. Like our career."

Next year, Fey says, he'll probably schedule the show for the week between Christmas and New Year's, or over Labor Day weekend. "The day before Thanksgiving is the busiest travel day of the year in the United States, and we had lots of people who couldn't get here because of that.

"We had heard all kinds of stories about this place," Fey continued, "but there was not a single medical or security incident. I'll definitely be back." ○

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