

Narrative for Reggae Sunsplash Archival Project

Digitization of Audio-Visual Recordings (1978 – 1994)

Reggae Sunsplash, considered as the godfather of all reggae festivals, was first launched in Montego Bay, Jamaica in 1978 by four young entrepreneurs who formed a company called Synergy Productions. The festival was a pioneering event coordinated with the Jamaica Tourist Board with the aim of attracting tourists during the off-season summer months. Synergy Productions set specific objectives that included showcasing the best reggae artists and using the highest contemporary production standards, creating a summer tourist season that would earn the island of Jamaica needed foreign exchange while providing income to the artists, the many entrepreneurs involved in the tourist trade and the arts and crafts industry, as well as the concessionaires, farmers and street vendors. The organizers hailed the 5-night festival that started at dusk and went through the night until dawn, as “Reggae Sunsplash, the biggest reggae festival in the history of the World.”

Reggae Sunsplash became the industry benchmark and the venue where all reggae artists aspired to perform. The impact of Reggae Sunsplash was so widespread that it attracted many international record labels seeking to sign new talent. Artists such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, Burning Spear, Toots & the Maytals, Jimmy Cliff, Bob Andy, Marcia Griffith, Black Uhuru and Culture laid a solid foundation along with Sunsplash regulars like Ziggy Marley, Dennis Brown, Yellowman, Gregory Issacs, Third World, Steel Pulse, Shabba Ranks, Cobra, Patra, Shaggy, Buju Banton, Garnet Silk and many more.

Due to the impact of Reggae Sunsplash there are now more than 100 annual reggae festivals and cruises worldwide and more than 20 festivals every year in the USA. The music has experienced several changes and stages from Ska, to Reggae, to Rock Steady and Dub, to Lover’s Rock, to Dancehall, the music keeps evolving and its impact on international music is now at a very high level. Current artists such as Drake, Rhianna, Justin Bieber, Nicki Minaj and Sia have all collaborated with Jamaican Dancehall artists and have enjoyed number 1 or made the top 10 hits on the popular Billboard charts. Note that Justin Bieber’s “Sorry” has a strong dancehall/reggae beat and went to number 1 on the Billboard chart and it had the longest run (3 weeks) of all his songs.

Reggae Sunsplash staged hundreds of artists during this critical period of the music’s development. We believe that it would be disastrous to have this valuable part of history erased by missing the opportunity of saving some of the best quality footage recorded during that time. The promoters invested heavily in getting the best Ikegami and Sony cameras with 4 – camera shoots to meet the broadcast quality industry standards to air the festival on MTV and distribute programs on pay-per-view in the USA. The current situation now is that a lot of this significant and valuable part of the history of reggae music is at risk because of deterioration of the Reggae Sunsplash festival analogue tapes over the years.

We are currently working with St. John’s University to integrate the digitizing and archiving of the Reggae Sunsplash footage into a student service learning program using the best practices in terms of cataloging and digitizing the 300 hours of footage with state-of-the-art archival techniques and making it available for streaming to both scholars and music fans.

Reggae Sunsplash Preservation Society
Archival project objectives in partnership
with St. John's University CPS and DLIS

1. Create lab working space to catalog and digitize analog tapes. There are around 250 individual tapes from 1978 to 1994 in Beta format (90%) and U-matic format (10%). Festival would run for 5 nights, with 10 artists per night for around 50 artists per year, with each artist doing 3 to 5 songs per set, for a total of around 850 performances with around 3,000 songs.
2. Prioritize tapes/performances in order of digitization significance.
3. With CPS create best practices procedures manual for digitization. Audio-Visual digitization best practices to be shared with DLIS for capacity-building as DLIS does not yet have AV digitization capacity, this is an emerging field.
4. With DLIS determine how to create metadata under archival best practices for digitized musical performances.
5. Give service learning opportunities to CPS students to digitize tapes in order of priority.
6. Give service learning opportunities to DLIS students for metadata creation.
7. Digitize and create metadata for all tapes/performances.
8. Determine best method for making digitized performances available free-of-charge to the general public and to musicologists, cultural historians and other interested specialists through streaming technology.
9. With campus museum create exhibit on Reggae Sunsplash archival project, with opening reception for students, faculty, press and festival artists in NYC area.
10. Create service learning opportunities for CPS students for development of social media around project results, including information about streaming access to performances.
11. Create three 30-minute television specials on the project including concert footage of the most historically-significant performances. These specials will appear on Brooklyn Cable Television, which is available New York City-wide and can be picked-up by public cable networks in the USA.
12. After digitization and cataloging film, to place the source materials on permanent loan with an archival specializing in music. Currently we are considering the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame museum, the New York Public Library music archive and the GRAMMY museum.