

The Cool Ruler - Gregory Isaacs

15 July 1950, Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies. Reggae superstar Gregory Isaacs has seldom looked back during a career that has gone from strength to strength, and while many rock stars like to toy with an 'outlaw' image, Isaacs is the real thing - the ultimate rude boy reggae star - who shows no signs of slowing down.

Like so many other others before him, Isaacs began his career doing the rounds of Kingston's producers and entering various talent competitions, before recording with Rupie Edwards' Success Records in the early 70s. He set up his own African Museum shop and label in 1973 with Errol Dunkley, in order to gain artistic and financial control of his own work. He continued to record for many other producers during the rest of the decade to finance his own label, notably Winston 'Niney' Holness, Gussie Clarke, Lloyd F. Campbell, Glen Brown, Alvin 'GG' Ranglin and Phil Pratt. His early recordings were romantic ballads crooned in the inimitable Isaacs style, cool, leisurely, and always sounding vulnerable or pained by his adventures in love. However, these translated effortlessly into social protest or 'reality' songs as the decade progressed and the preoccupations of reggae music shifted towards songs with a more cultural emphasis. By 1980 Isaacs was the number one star in the reggae world, touring the UK and the USA extensively, and his live appearances resulted in frenzied crowd scenes, with audiences eating out of the palm of his hand. He had by this time signed with Virgin Records' Front Line label and was gaining a considerable name for himself outside of the confines of the traditional reggae music audience and, even though he had recorded many classic sides for outside producers, he still managed to release his best 45s on African Museum (and subsequently Front Line). His pre-eminence during this period was confirmed by the mantle of 'Cool Ruler', chosen for him by critics and fans after the title of his 1978 album. A new recording contract with Charisma Records' Pre label led to the UK release of two further classic albums, though Isaacs was never less than prodigious even by Jamaican standards. He was, however, beset by personal and legal problems in the mid-80s and was even jailed in Kingston's notorious General Penitentiary. His spell inside left him short of money and he proceeded to record for anyone and everyone who was prepared to pay him. Because of his name, he was inundated with offers of work and the market was soon flooded with Gregory Isaacs releases on any number of different labels. Incredibly, his standards did not drop, and he generally recorded original material that was still head and shoulders above the competition. In the latter half of the decade, virtually every week saw the release of yet more Isaacs material, voiced with current hot producers such as Jammys, Red Man, Bobby Digital and Steely And Cleve, among others; in so doing, he took on the youth of Jamaica at their own game and won. The quality level slackened during the 90s, although 1995's Dreaming and 1997's Hold Tight showed glimpses of the old Isaacs' magic. Rumours abound about Isaacs' rude boy lifestyle - but he would claim he has to be tough to maintain his position within Kingston's notorious musical industry. Certainly the reasons for his lofty seat in the reggae hierarchy are purely musical - a combination of his boundless talent and his uncompromising attitude. Despite recent lapses, the anticipation of more high-quality releases is not merely wishful thinking, but a justifiable expectation, inspired by his high standards. It is very difficult to see how anyone could now take away Isaacs' crown - his legendary status and reputation in the reggae business are truly second to none. Source: The Encyclopedia of Popular Music by Colin Larkin. Licensed from Muze.