

A long time in coming

To his thousands of fans, Dennis Brown will always be the Crown Prince of Reggae. However, many of his admirers in Jamaica may argue that as far as national recognition is concerned, he has not got royal treatment.

Tomorrow, October 17, Brown, arguably the most prolific hit-maker in reggae history, will receive the Order of Distinction. It comes 12 years after his death from respiratory failure at age 42.

Interestingly, Brown is buried at National Heroes Park, where four prime ministers are interred. Pan-African giant Marcus Garvey and folklorist Louise Bennett-Coverley are also buried there.

The push for Brown to get Jamaica's fifth-highest civic honour was led by the Dennis Brown Trust, an organisation established in 2000. Its members are music industry veterans Junior Lincoln and Colin Leslie; Joan Higgins, Brown's former publicist, and spokesperson Lance Cowan.

Cowan said that Brown was approved for an OD by the National Honours and Awards Committee at the third time of asking. The first application, submitted in 2001, was rejected on grounds that the awards are not given posthumously.

"At the time we didn't know otherwise, but we kept persevering and thankfully, things have worked out," Cowan said.

Brown is not the only groundbreaking Jamaican artiste to receive belated national recognition. Alton Ellis, Ken Boothe, and John Holt, whose careers started in the ska and rock steady eras of the 1960s, received ODs in the last decade. So, too, Burning Spear, a leader of the roots-reggae revolution during the 1970s, and influential producer Bunny Lee.

Born in west Kingston, Dennis Brown was a child star who first recorded in the late 1960s for Derrick Harriott, the man behind Lips Of Wine, his first hit song. Moving on to Studio One and producer Clement 'Coxson' Dodd, Brown had even greater success with No Man Is An Island and If I Follow My Heart.

Brown recorded hit songs for the next 25 years for various producers such as Winston 'Niney' Holness, Joe Gibbs, Sly and Robbie, and Willie Lindo. In the early 1970s, Holness and the Soul Syndicate Band worked with the teenage Brown on roots songs like Westbound Train, Cassandra, and No More Will I Roam.

Lovers rock star

His association with Gibbs heard him moving into more commercial lovers rock territory, scoring with Ain't That Loving You and Love Has Found Its Way. The latter was recorded while Brown was signed to the major American company, A&M Records.

Brown was also an understated producer. Artistes like Junior Delgado and George Nooks recorded for his DEB label, which operated out of England.

The Dennis Brown Trust was formed 11 years ago with Lincoln, Leslie, Higgins, and Cowan as its core members. Tommy Cowan, Brown's former manager, and singer Freddie McGregor, his close friend, have also been involved.

One of its primary functions is funding the secondary education of five students who passed the Grade Six Achievement Test from Central Branch All Age, the school Brown attended.

Brown's widow, Yvonne, is expected to accept his award at King's House tomorrow.

A tribute dance and show is scheduled for the Chasers Café following the ceremony.