

# The Root of Festival

Jamaica has a long track record of creative arts competitions. One of the first known was staged by the Institute of Jamaica in 1897 to commemorate Queen Victoria's 60th year on the throne.

Competitions were held annually in vocal and instrumental music, handicraft, poetry, architecture, essay writing and natural history research until 1907 when the earthquake intervened. In the early part of the 20th century, all-island elocution contests and music festivals coupled with the tradition of eisteddfod (i.e., local gatherings of music competitions) organised by Mico, the Jesuits at St. George's College, the Music Society of Jamaica and the Poetry League became popular. The year 1910 is worth special note as it marked the introduction of a young Jamaican named Marcus Garvey who represented his parish of St. Ann in elocution, placing third overall. In general these contests were judged by Englishmen and contained a decidedly English aesthetic.

In the 1930s, a decade of significant social upheaval and change on the island, Jamaica Welfare Ltd. was established and village competitions that included art, craft, plays, preserves and traditional dance, began. In addition, Mico graduates, exposed to music and art forms, took that influence with them as they began their teaching assignments around the island, contributing to the growth of a national art form. Yet, in spite of claims to be representative of the entire island, these contests remained largely Kingston-based until the 1946 Portland Festival. This week-long event, a spontaneous effort organized by local citizens that included bringing schools and adults together to allow for eliminations at the inter-school and inter-village levels, marked the beginning of a movement. St. Catherine followed suit in 1949, St. Ann in 1951 and Manchester in 1954.

In 1955, the movement evolved to include celebrations that were not only islandwide but year-long. For the first time parish level competitions led up to national competitions with national finals held in Kingston. The popular three-hour long Jamaica Bandwagon with its float parade organised by Eric Coverly was introduced. Co-ordinated by arts stalwart Robert Verity and presented in all parish capitals, the bandwagon took popular entertainment to the people at street corners and in the villages. Bennett helped organise arts celebrations in 1960 and 1962 as part of the Independence Festival, and went on to be awarded the Order of Distinction in 1977 for his outstanding contributions in the field of Jamaican theatre. By the early 1960s, however, no central organisational structure to ensure the repetition, growth and increasing Jamaicanisation of such events was yet in place.

That development came in 1963, when following the success of the Independence Festival, such an overall organisation was introduced. A small unit known as the Festival Office was established in the Ministry of Development and Welfare under Seaga's leadership, and in 1964, Hugh Nash, a man whose name would become synonymous with Jamaica Festival over the years, was appointed director. Nash held that post from 1964-67, in 1969, from 1974-77 and 1981-83. In 1983 he, too, was awarded the Order of Distinction for his contributions to the development of festival.

When asked to reflect on the development of festival, Nash vividly recalls the enthusiasm of the thousands of volunteers and the non-partisan nature of their involvement. Each parish was divided into Festival Zones with a committee for each zone charged with encouraging entries in dance, music, speech and the culinary arts. (It wasn't until 1966 that the popular festival song competition was added).

An important administrative strategy that began in the early years was the annual national evaluation seminar that took place in September each year to highlight what worked and what needed improvement. Nash recalls these sessions as full of creative energy, with cultural activists like Rex Nettleford and Dr. Joyce Robinson and himself sitting for hours with Mr. Seaga (sometimes on the floor surrounded by papers), throwing out idea after idea.

Nash explained that the timing of festival during the summer linked it naturally to efforts to stimulate travel to the island amongst non-Jamaicans and Jamaicans living abroad. It also nicely coincided with the annual Denbigh Agricultural Show which festival performers and queens often attended to add a cultural element to the proceedings.

When asked to reflect on the development of festival, Seaga feels that festival has in many ways lived up to his dream of "maintaining, preserving and developing our cultural resources, the unique natural, creative talents which belong to our people, having opened the doors for young people around the country in all fields of creativity and given them a means of expression."

## JCDC extends deadlines for Jamaica 50 song competitions

The deadlines for the 2012 Jamaica Festival Song and Jamaica Gospel Song competitions have been extended to Tuesday, January 31.

The Jamaica Festival Song Competition is widely recognised on the Jamaican musical landscape as a major stepping stone in the careers of many prominent Jamaican artistes who have moved on to achieve successful musical careers and great international recognition.

Today, the Jamaica Festival Song Competition is on a new mission to re-engage young, talented Jamaicans to create songs that invoke a spirit of celebration with international appeal and relevance for the celebration of Jamaica's 50th anniversary.

The Festival Song Competition can be described as the greatest mechanism for musical expression of national patriotism, born out of the merging of songwriters, singers and producers. The Jamaica Cultural Development Commission has brought creative musical products to the forefront of the Jamaican people since 1966 and will continue to do so with an even bigger 'bang' for this significant year in Jamaica's history.

#### Highlighting indigenous talent

The Jamaica Gospel Competition was introduced by the JCDC in 1987, as the commission pursued its vision of unearthing, developing and showcasing the best of Jamaican culture and extending this pursuit to the popular area of gospel.

The competition quickly became an iconic presentation of indigenous gospel music in Jamaica. Since inception, it has attracted numerous artistes, producers and songwriters of original gospel music each year.

The 2012 finalists in both the Festival Song and Gospel Song competitions will be involved in the production of musical albums and an opportunity to work with professionals within the music industry. In addition, finalists will also benefit from increased marketing and public relations support to be provided by the commission for the celebration of Jamaica's 50th year of Independence celebrations.

Over the years, the festival and gospel song competitions have been a part of the popular-music landscape through artistes like Ernie Smith, Lubert Levy, George Gordon, Toots Hibbert, Glacia Robinson, Bescenta, Kevin Downswell, Khago, Keron Ennis and Ieye.

Entry forms for the 2012 competitions, along with the relevant rules, are available at the JCDC Head Office located at 3-5 Phoenix Avenue, Kingston 10, all JCDC parish offices islandwide and online at [www.jcdc.gov.jm](http://www.jcdc.gov.jm). Source: Jamaica Gleaner