

Reggae, festivals bring bit of home to SF Jamaicans

Jamaica is getting ready to celebrate 50 years of independence from British colonial rule, but the party's already here. There have been a larger-than-usual number of reggae festivals in South Florida, and more are on the way. So are other cultural events, such as poetry readings, the Palm Beach Jerk and Cultural Festival in May, and a Jamaican flag-raising ceremony in Miramar in August. "Jamaica has declared the entire year a celebration, said Luther McKenzie, a production manager for the Icons of Reggae concert to take place Sunday in Lauderhill. Jamaica gained independence from Britain on Aug. 6, 1962, and things are expected to heat up as summer nears. With about 300,000 Jamaicans in South Florida, some of the events are expected to lure big crowds. "We look forward to the music, the arts and crafts, the dub poetry," said Sunrise resident David Harris, who immigrated about 20 years ago. "We even appreciate hearing the cliches that we use within our culture that are unique to us." McKenzie said when people come to some of these events, they get more than great music. "It's everything from the Jamaican jerk chicken to the man selling coconut water and vendors selling goat head soup," McKenzie said. "It's everything indigenous to Jamaica. Everything to leave you with the feeling like you're home." Promoters expect 10,000 people to attend the Icons concert at Central Broward Regional Park, which will feature artists such as Toots & the Maytals, Ali Campbells' UB 40 and John Holt. Their "songs bring people back 30 or 40 years. The audience usually knows the lines to every single song," McKenzie said. Zemroy Lewis, of the Code Red Band, which will perform at the Icons show, said this season has been busier than in years past. "This is the fourth major show that we're doing this year," said Lewis, whose band is based in Fort Lauderdale. Jamaican officials are using the anniversary to drum up tourism and investment, and they've unleashed a "Jamaica 50" campaign headed by consulates in South Florida, New York, Toronto and London. The kickoff took place last August, said Sandra Grant Griffiths, Jamaica's consul general in Miami, who said some of the events will highlight the contributions of Jamaicans in South Florida. She said it's no surprise this anniversary is being marked with several music festivals. "The music is specific to the culture, it energizes the community and it defines our cultural dynamics," she said.