

Damian Marley's Reggae Cruise 'Welcome to Jamrock' Sells Out

Less than a month after its lineup of top tier Jamaican acts was announced on his Facebook page, Damian Marley's inaugural Welcome to Jamrock Reggae Cruise has sold out all of the 2,300 available cabins aboard the Norwegian Pearl cruise liner, Damian told Billboard.biz in an exclusive interview.

So named for Damian's 2006 Best Reggae Album Grammy Award-winning "Welcome to Jamrock" (Universal Motown/Tuff Gong), which peaked at no. 7 on the Top 200, and its blockbuster title track which reached no. 55 on the Hot 100, the Welcome to Jamrock Reggae Cruise will sail from Miami to Jamaica, October 20-25, 2014, docking for daytime excursions and beach parties in the island's resort towns, Montego Bay and Ocho Rios. The enthusiastic, globe-spanning response to the cruise — cabins were purchased by reggae fans from Asia, Australia, Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas — signifies reggae's broad-based, continual appeal, despite the genre's persistently modest sales. "Reggae doesn't traditionally move a lot of numbers but it is loved the world over and this cruise is a testament to that; we haven't done any marketing except announcing the lineup in late September, and it sold out," Damian told Billboard.biz on the phone from his Miami studio. The lineup features Damian and his older brothers Stephen and Julian Marley; dancehall superstars Sean Paul and Shaggy, contemporary roots singers Tarrus Riley, Jah Cure, and Etana; sing-jay Busy Signal, Jamaican-American sibling band Morgan Heritage and the roster of acts from the Marley family's Ghetto Youths International imprint: Wayne Marshall, Black-Am-I, Christopher Ellis (son of Jamaican rock steady legend, the late Alton Ellis) and Stephen's son, Jo Mersa Marley. Also on board will be renowned UK selector Sir David Rodigan and three veteran reggae sound systems Jamaica's Stone Love and Renaissance Disco and Japan's Mighty Crown.

The proliferation of successful American and internationally based reggae acts over the past few years and their dominance on the Reggae Album chart prompted Damian to choose acts coming from the music's birthplace for the inaugural Jamrock cruise, which will be an annual event. "Reggae's root is Jamaica, and it seems that the world is losing a bit of that history so we were very strict in having most of the lineup for the first cruise be of Jamaican heritage," Damian stated. "We are very excited to have a reggae success story and another platform to present artists that we think so highly of," added Damian's manager Dan Dalton of Red Light Management. "There has never been a fully chartered cruise ship devoted to reggae so this will be like a festival with sound systems playing, a rock steady lounge or dub lounge, an 80s dancehall club, a multifaceted Jamaican musical experience." Marley and Dalton envisioned the Welcome to Jamrock Reggae cruise several years ago and shared their concept with Brian Edelman of William Morris Endeavor (WME), longstanding booking agent for Damian and Stephen Marley; Mike Rosenfeld, head of WME's newly developed Cruise Division was also recruited to help spearhead the project. Noting the success that genres such as country and jazz have had with theme cruises in recent years, the team believed chartering a ship and taking reggae to the Caribbean Sea would be an easy sell, but they encountered many challenges in securing financial backing. "We were repeatedly told that the typical reggae fan doesn't have enough disposable income to afford a cruise and that reggae events don't sell out tickets in advance and because a lot more goes into chartering a cruise ship instead of renting out a club or an amphitheater, it's more expensive and a greater risk," Edelman explained. "There are tiers of pricing depending on the view, the level of the cabin on the ship, interior or balcony, the number of people who will stay in the cabin and because there are so many variables, cruise promoters like Flying Dutchman have the proprietary software that enables them to easily ticket the passenger, which cuts through another layer of complexity like buying a ticket through Ticketmaster," offered Rosenfeld. Rosenfeld has put hundreds of acts on cruise ships and says the Jamrock cruise is among the fastest-selling he has seen. "We just had the third annual Backstreet Boys cruise, which sold out in about the same amount of time and a year in advance, but the Jamrock cruise sold out after just a few posts on Facebook. The vast majority of the world doesn't know this cruise exists because no traditional marketing or advertising was done, so we have barely scratched the surface of the potential for this market." According to Edelman 48% of the cabins sold were purchased by reggae fans from outside North America, representing 40 countries, with an age range evenly split among 25-50 years old. 170 people are on the waiting list should cabins become available for the 2014 cruise, and over 200 are on the waiting list for the 2015 cruise, the dates for which have not yet been announced. "I work in the live side of the business, I have been to events all over the world and this is the most globally diverse event I have ever been a part of," Edelman acknowledged. "We are also trying to get a few promoters to come on board, to draw attention to reggae from a business perspective, to open people up to taking more risks with our music," Damian acknowledged. "The cruise will provide great exposure for our Ghetto Youths acts, but it is a broader mission to give exposure to the genre and show there is more that we can do to get the music out there besides putting out records."