

Jamaica moves to reclaim reggae

For decades the sound of Jamaica has been reggae, the infectious, uniquely syncopated music that transformed the small Caribbean island into a cultural powerhouse.

However, the genre's success has taken it far beyond its roots and now many in Jamaica worry that reggae lovers abroad are forgetting the motherland where it was born. "Reggae was given to the world by Jamaica, so nobody can or ever should discourage anyone overseas from making this music. But we think there should be acknowledgement that reggae was created in Jamaica," said Michael 'Ibo' Cooper, a musician who is chairman of the Jamaica Reggae Industry Association (JARIA). Around the world, music festivals celebrating the sounds made famous by reggae patron saint Bob Marley and followers who developed the faster, brasher derivative of dancehall, are more likely to be headlined by bands from places like California or France than by native-born Jamaicans. Aside from albums by the late Marley or his progeny, few of the top-selling reggae CDs or downloads come from Jamaican artists.

Brainstorming To get a stronger foothold in the information age, Jamaican officials and reggae industry insiders are brainstorming ways to better capitalise on Jamaica's exuberant music culture and help protect what some claim is local intellectual property. After years of only piecemeal support, the government increasingly is viewing reggae and other cultural enterprises as a hoped-for economic engine on the island. Officials are hashing over the creation of a certification mark to designate "authentic reggae" - a sort of 'Good Housekeeping Seal' - to encourage the use of Jamaican musicians, producers and merchandise. They also hope to defend Jamaican reggae by having the United Nation's culture organisation add it to a global list of "intangible cultural heritage", such as Argentina's tango and China's Peking opera. The Paris-based agency said the island's government has yet to apply for inclusion on the list of more than 280 cultural traditions.

Rob Bowman, a music professor from Canada's York University who has researched intellectual property and Jamaican music, said that while population numbers mean reggae's biggest markets always will be overseas there's no reason why more revenue streams from foreign commerce shouldn't flow back to Jamaica. "With few exceptions, these styles of music cannot be authentically replicated by non-Jamaicans. As such, these styles of music represent intellectual property that is, for all intents and purposes, already a part of Jamaica's branding," Bowman asserts in a World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) consultancy report for Jamaica.

Hip-hop inspiration A country of fewer than three million people, Jamaica has had remarkable success originating influential musical forms such as ska, rocksteady, reggae, dub and dancehall. Musicologists say production innovations and the discovery of 'toasting' (reggae deejays chanting over a beat) directly inspired hip-hop. A cross-pollination of Afro-Caribbean folk music and American R&B, reggae first was introduced to Europe by Jamaican migrants settling in Britain in the late 1960s. Its popularity exploded in the 1970s with the rise of Marley and other Jamaican Rastafarian stars, whose music influenced British groups like The Clash, UB40 and The English Beat. Jamaican music later shaped US bands like No Doubt and Sublime.

Eric Smith, CEO of the New York-based reggae label, Easy Star Records, said American bands are succeeding now due to their strong "do-it-yourself" ethos and online marketing, a key to making it in independent music. Unlike some earlier non-Jamaican reggae artists who adopted island patois and themes, they use the genres to highlight their own US culture, not Jamaica's.

Better opportunities "While we certainly need to respect, understand and celebrate the unique and rich history of Jamaican music and do whatever we can to support it, there is no practical way to stop anyone else from tapping in and drawing something from the culture," he said. Few Jamaicans argue there is any troubling cultural appropriation going on with foreign artistes who embrace their music. Still, local musicians want better opportunities to make money and reach audiences abroad playing the island's top cultural export. Just like everywhere else, Jamaican performers have scrambled to offset losses from plunging CD sales when consumers simply download music for free. And while dancehall reggae stars like Sean Paul and Beenie Man have notched international hits over the years, other current Jamaican acts have had difficulty building fan bases overseas due to difficulty securing visas, among other issues.