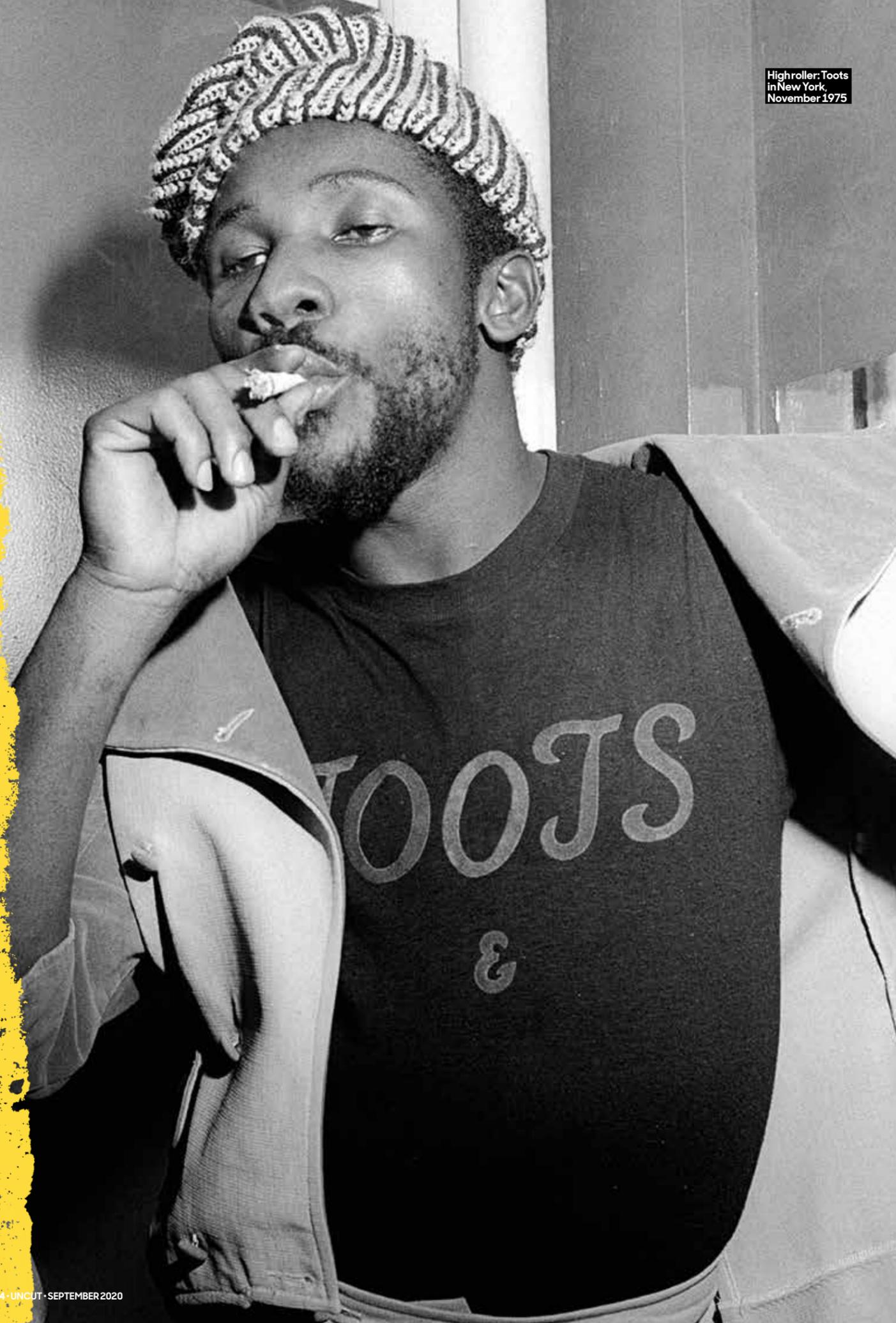


Highroller: Toots
in New York,
November 1975



"I STILL FEED ON MY ENEMIES"

He has survived false imprisonment, "deep-down scams" and a stage name he hates. But how did **TOOTS** - with **THE MAYTALS** in tow - make the journey out of Kingston to become one of reggae's first stars and beyond? "You have got to be tough," he tells Graeme Thomson. "Don't just give up in life... believe in what you believe in."

Photo by ALLAN TANNENBAUM

"It's a good day," pronounces Frederick "Toots" Hibbert breezily, calling *Uncut* from his studio in Kingston. "Is good here all the time." It's precisely the kind of blunt positivity we've come to expect from the man who has been fronting the mighty Maytals for the best part of 60 years, a man whose songs - vibrant, righteous, urgent, joyful - are

synonymous with the golden age of Jamaican music.

Alongside Jimmy Cliff and Desmond Dekker, Hibbert was part of reggae's first international wave. The youngest son of a Baptist minister, he grew up singing gospel in his father's church choir. With its echoes of Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett and Ray Charles, his soulful voice is one of music's most evocative sounds, encompassing all the sweetness and sweat of his homeland, from chapel to dancehall, lush countryside to febrile inner city.

Hibbert made the same journey in his teens as his great friend and contemporary Bob Marley, moving from the rural outlands - in his case, the town of May Pen - to the Kingston ghetto of Trench Town. There he formed The Maytals in 1962 with "Raleigh" Gordon and "Jerry" Matthias.

Working first with producer Coxsone Dodd at Studio One, and later Prince Buster, Byron Lee, Leslie Kong and Warrick

Lyn, The Maytals blended ska, reggae, soul, blues and R&B with soulful three-part harmonies. In the late '60s and early '70s, they defined the era with the genre-minting "Do The Reggay", jailbird's lament "54-46, That's My Number" and the karmic curse of "Pressure Drop" - alongside "Monkey Man", "Time Tough", "Pomp And Pride", "Funky Kingston" and dozens more classics. In their prime, The Maytals were a bigger deal than The Wailers. Their record of 31 No 1 hits in Jamaica has never been equalled. "I was on top of the moon, man, in those days," says Hibbert. "But we still didn't get paid."

Signing to Island in the early 1970s, they became Toots & The Maytals and appeared in the classic rude boy film *The Harder They Come*, featuring twice on the hugely successful soundtrack album. They toured with The Who and the Stones and proved a key source for the punky reggae ska revival: The Specials covered "Monkey Man", The Clash "Pressure Drop". Ever adventurous, Hibbert has since recorded with Willie Nelson and Jim Dickinson, and even had a swing at Radiohead's "Let Down". Every step, he says, has been guided by a powerful sense of destiny. "People over here say, 'Hey Toots, you're a star, man!' I say, 'No, I'm a son.' You know what I mean? It was the call of the Almighty. He blows in me. I have different talents from other artists."

At 77, the man Ziggy Marley calls Uncle Toots is still burning bright. He was last seen in these parts touring with The



Toots Hibbert (centre) flanked by bandmates Henry "Raleigh" Gordon and Nathaniel "Jerry" McCarthy, 1973; (below) an early Maytals publicity shot and "close friend" Bob Marley



New best Maytal: Toots with Pete Townshend on tour with The Who in Providence, Rhode Island, Dec 13, 1975

WHO ARE YOU?

Toots & The Maytals support The Who in '75, resulting in "Boo! Boo! Boo!"

THE Maytals opened for The Who in arenas and stadiums on the first leg of the band's mammoth North American tour at the tail end of 1975. It proved a tough assignment. Reviewing the Houston show, *Rolling Stone* reported that the group "left a less knowledgeable audience confused by their mixture of reggae and R&B. Some sort of preparation for this greatest of all reggae singers is in order." The lack of preparation, says Hibbert, was the precise problem. "The first time I toured with The Who they were booing me - 'Boo! Boo! Boo!' - because they didn't advertise that I was going to sing with The Who. In those days, they wanted to give The Maytals as a surprise for the audience - but we got the surprise, because they booted us! It was rough, man. After a while, we went back, people knew that we were going to perform, and they cheered us. Oh Lord, we could hardly get off the stage that time. They loved us. After that, we toured with a whole lot of great people: The Rolling Stones, Willie Nelson, Bonnie Raitt. I also was with Eric Clapton, too, in England. He always turned up to my shows!"

Specials in 2017. Now the latest iteration of The Maytals are back with a new album, *Got To Be Tough*, the first since *Flip And Twist* in 2010. It's a lively, engaged affair, largely self-played and self-produced, with assistance from Zak Starkey on guitar, Sly Dunbar on drums and Cyril Neville on percussion. There are characteristic calls to keep your eyes open and your ear to the ground, as well as a punchy reading of Marley's classic "Three Little Birds".

The album title is a manifesto of sorts. Hibbert was struck on the head with a bottle thrown by an audience member at a concert in Virginia in 2013, an incident which left him shaken but unbowed. As we shall see, he has been through worse and survived: false imprisonment, "deep-down scams", not to mention being saddled with a stage name he hates. "When The Maytals came in, we had to go through a lot of different vibes before we be what we are today," he says. "I keep telling people that: 'You have got to be tough. Don't just give up in life. Be strong and believe in what you believe in.'"

From "Pressure Drop" to new tracks like "Just Brutal" and "Got To Be Tough", I always think of your best songs as short, sharp sermons. Has the writing process changed over the years?

All my songs tell a story. A true story. Things just come to me and I write. An intelligent spirit came to me from the Lord, and we have to make sure that all of my words in my songs are permanent, intelligent and good to the ears of the people - children, big people, all people: my family, my friends, my musicians, the whole world. That's how it is, and how it has always been. My vibes are coming from my spirit.



Your version of "Three Little Birds" has an energy that turns it into an almost completely different song. Why did you cover it? It's a good song! Me and Bob were very close friends, and bredren. There are quite a few of his songs that I'd like to sing one of these days. I just asked his son, Ziggy, "Let's do this song for your daddy," and Ziggy said, "Yes, Uncle Toots." He call me Uncle Toots! I went home, I played all the instruments, as usual, and then Ziggy go to California and he came in on top. I put a different effort into it, between reggae and R&B.

Can you remember when you first met Bob? I can remember it, but I don't know the date! I met him in Trench Town, in the '60s. When I first came to Kingston, after a while I live in Trench Town, and I get to meet Bob and Bunny [Livingstone] and Peter Tosh, and a lot of great people like that: Alton Ellis; Bongo Herman, the conga player; Byron Lee; "Chicken Scratch" Perry! Scratch is different, is all I can say. He has remained the same. He makes a lot of jokes, he makes you laugh, he makes you think. He's a good friend. I go with these people, and it was quite nice. I didn't plan it, but me and my friends, "Raleigh" Gordon and "Jerry" Mathias, three young boys, we started playing. We started with my compositions, we taught each other great things, and then I create the name The Maytals. I compose that name and I still have it. There was no Toots at the time. Toots is my nickname. I don't like it when people call me Toots these days. My brother gave it to me, but he has died now.

So, what does Toots mean? It mean nothing! It mean a laugh. You know: [high camp voice] "Hey, Toots!" I don't like it, but I have to like it, because it's part of my career. Friends call me by my spiritual name, Naya, but

all my friends accept Toots as my career name all these years. My name is Toots & The Maytals on stage. Everyone who appear on stage with me, they share the name Maytals with me. I'm more than one person, I consider.

Are you still in touch with the original Maytals? Raleigh died a few years ago now, but Jerry is still living in Brooklyn. I talk to about the old days when I see him. The only time I see him is when I go to Brooklyn and visit him. He's still going strong.

You were making your way at the same time as The Wailers, The Skatalites, The Upsetters, The Pioneers, The Heptones. Was there rivalry? That was just musical. It was exciting. But you know, the spirit that Bob has is very clean. I wrote a song [on 1972 album *Slatyam Stoot*] called "Redemption Song", and Bob listened to it and said he wanted to write one like that. I said, "Yeah man, go ahead Bob." We had a good thing going ever since we met.

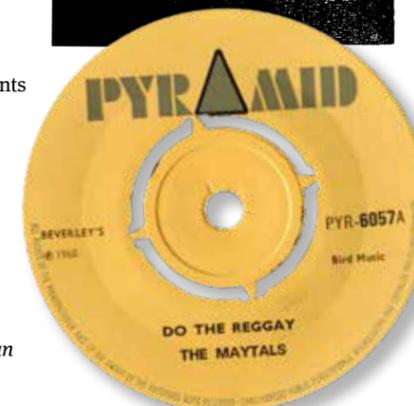
Your voice is so distinctive and soulful. What were your influences growing up? My voice was developed going to church with my family. I love singing; singing was what I thought I should do because it was born in me and I grew into it, straight from the church. We never talk about it, but my parents already know what I'm going to be.

The story goes that "54-46, That's My Number" is titled after your prisoner ID, when you were wrongfully jailed in 1966 for possession of marijuana... [Laughs] Well, I've never really been to prison, you know. It was just politics. I never smoked weed in those times. I never do nothing like that. I was just finished leaving school, but I won this festival [the inaugural Jamaican



"PEOPLE GET JEALOUS AND FRAME ME FOR WEED"

TOOTS HIBBERT



Independence Festival Popular Song Competition] with "Bam Bam" and people get jealous, and frame me for weed. I got the chance to meet some people, one of them was Chris Blackwell, and after the festival I was supposed to go away on my first Europe tour, but then some kind of musical politics came in. They couldn't do nothing else than what they did because they didn't have goodness in them heart for me. It was politics. I never go to prison. They bring me to a special place, where I have my own clothes, I got my own food from my home, I got my guitar, I got all the comforts that I have at home. When you go to prison you don't have those comforts.

It was a kind of house arrest? Yeah. Politics served me out, for 30 pieces of silver. They get to hold me back from my success. It's a long story. So, what did I do? I wrote a song about it. I still have to feed on my enemies who did it. It was three persons. I can't call no names, but I think they all die now. They were in the music industry, or something like that. But I have a good mind for them.

The Jamaican music industry seemed fairly rough and ready back then. Well, we never used to get paid. All my good songs, all we get sometimes is three shillings for three of us, sometimes five shillings, sometimes 10 shillings - sometimes we got nothing. We just have to sing some more. There was a criminal element. Even now, it's still there.

You popularised the term reggae with "Do The Reggay" in 1968. Some people say you invented it. I never invented it. Something like reggae was playing in Jamaica long time, but nobody knew what to call the beat. Some people called it blue beat, or boogie beat, all different names, and then I came up with the word "reggae". I realised



Pressure cooker at Montreux Jazz Festival, Switzerland, May 7, 1981



talking to him. Again, I can't call no names! I wrote that song about that moment because he didn't pay me my money. It felt just like another song to me, I didn't think it was going to be so great. All these songs were No 1 in Jamaica. I had, like, 31 No 1 records in those days, on the two stations – RJR and JBC – which no other artist ever get to do.

“Pressure Drop” has been covered by everyone from The Clash to Robert Palmer. You’ve recorded versions with Willie Nelson, Eric Clapton and Keith Richards. Do you have a favourite? I just make it out to be a very nice thing to happen to reggae and Toots & The Maytals. It was a good thing, to meet other great artists and to make sure we are one family – black or white, we don't care. Keith? He's an amazing writer, musician, creator, producer. He's everything that is great in music.

The Maytals performed “Sweet And Dandy” and “Pressure Drop” on *The Harder They Come*. Internationally, was that a game changer for you? I think I was on top of the moon, man, in those days – but we still didn't get paid. Up until now, I still don't get paid for that performance in the [film]. But I love it, man, because of the fellow who stars in it: Jimmy Cliff. It was one of the best adverts for Jamaica, with Jimmy and all these people who put it together. Jimmy is still my friend and my brother, and we still come together.

Chris Blackwell eventually signed The Maytals to Dragon, an Island subsidiary, around the time he signed The Wailers. Did you and Bob discuss the merits of Blackwell and Island? Chris kept listening to my songs. He's a great guy, and he's a great guy for listening to a record and telling you if it's going to be a hit or not. He have good ears! Me and Bob didn't get that close to talk about business. Neither Bob or myself, nor Bunny, we don't know what this contract means to our career. People never can tell you what a contract means, unless you get a good corporate lawyer, which we never knew in those days. We didn't converse about that.



I had to put the “rrrr” in the music! I had to let the people know the name of the music we play.

“Pressure Drop” is one of the lodestars of reggae. Do you remember writing it? I remember everything I wrote! When we have all these problems with money, like I told you, somebody was supposed to pay us our first one or two thousand pounds – but we never get it. I wrote this song which, instead of trying to fight this person or do him any harm, it said, “Pressure going to drop on you.” But he knew I was

At Island, you made a string of classic albums in the mid-'70s: *Funky Kingston*, *In The Dark*, *Reggae Got Soul*... It build up a career in such a dynamic way that I can never forget. The albums are all special, because I have to work them everywhere I go, but *Funky Kingston* is really special, yes. I think that is one of my best songs, also. It was conversed by me and Chris Blackwell. He told me, “Hey man, I want you to sing a song like [The Beginning Of The End's] ‘Funky Nassau’.” He keep on talking, talking, talking about this for about an hour. I said, “OK, Chris, I'm going to sit beside my two friends and take my guitar with me”, and I actually planned it. In five minutes' time I go in the studio and we record it together. Jackie Johnson, Hux Brown, all the musicians, we went in and did the song – one time. We didn't have to re-record anything, not even the voice. One time, that was it. Those are the times you just can't forget.

It's a very different way of working than nowadays. You played most of the new album yourself. I miss the old days. In the old days it would be my bass player, guitar player, keyboard

player, we would go in the studio and we would do it live. Everybody would have the feel, but I would always say, “Do it my way.” I miss that. On this album, I created the music and I produced it myself, with Nigel [Burrell] alongside as a co-producer. I played everything. Bass, guitar, keyboards, the kick drum, the arrangements – everything [apart] from blowing horns. It is the first time I have done a whole album like that. The Maytals live in various countries, and that's why I start to do things by myself, because it's hard for them to come down so many times. I play what I think I would ask them to play for me on these songs. But I have a good memory of how it used to be, that's why I can get the similar sound in the studio, and it's all right. I play my bass like Jackie [Jackson] would be playing it. In other words, I prefer the old times, and I still respect the new times.

“Monkey Man” was covered by The Specials during the ska revival, and you toured with the band in 2017. How was that? We did shows all over the place with The Specials, it was so nice. The audience are usually always with the rock'n'roll, [but] in those gigs, it was mostly ska fans, and the skinhead gave a good turnout! It was really, really crazy – but great.

Zak Starkey is head of your new label, Trojan Jamaica, and he also plays guitar on the new album. Do you know him well? Not really at all. Just enough for him to know Toots & The Maytals. I met him once, and we had a good time. When Zak came, he said he wanted to be a part of it – but there were no parts for anyone to come in, because I had played all the parts already. He just put his guitar on and respect what I done. Beautiful. He was very nice to work with. Anyone who played anything, I told them what to play. Sly Dunbar, too. Like you read a script and follow it. It was all good.

It has been 10 years since your last studio album. What took you so long? I was just trying to keep away from the audience for a while. It's just my style. I don't want to overdo nothing. Songs need to find the right time and the right company. You need the right people to do justice to a good song.

Was the hiatus related to the injury you received on stage in 2013? That was some time ago, quite a few years now. I get hurt very badly. I think

“I keep on doing this thing”: Toots in March 2017 and (below) Chris Blackwell and Zak Starkey



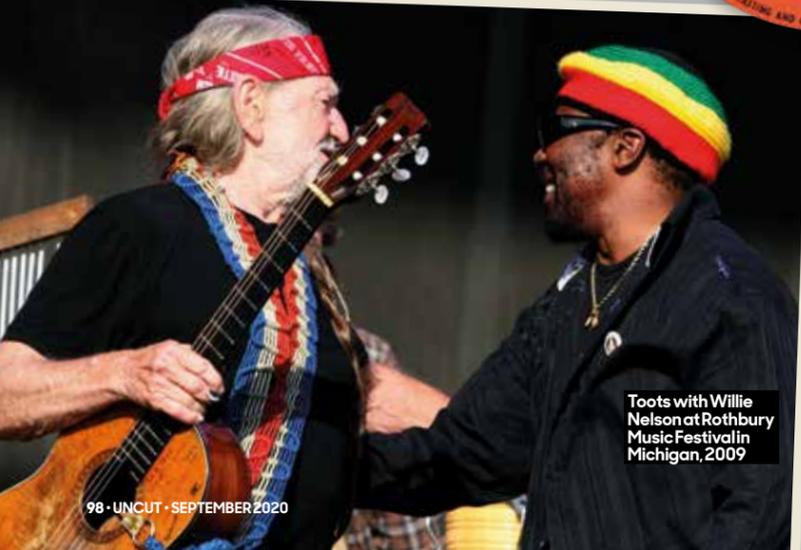
about it, but I try to put it aside – because I'm still alive. I never felt like stopping. I went there to sing a free show for all the students there. This guy, he was so happy singing the song with me, and then he went away and he just drink something that he shouldn't have done. He had something in his pocket, and he drank it. He didn't throw the bottle at me, it just happened that it catch me.

The perpetrator was sentenced to six months in jail, although you pleaded for leniency. He was a young student. I forgive all those people, but I don't forget.

What do you make of the state of reggae nowadays? Why is it less potent and popular than it was in the heyday of the '70s and '80s? I think the younger generation has to pay more attention to what all the elders did before. From The Wailers, Jimmy Cliff, all the great singers in Jamaica that were born before them. They should pay more attention to their writing, their lyrics, to see that we were the ones who captured the world. Reggae is not overtaking the world the way it was with Bob, but there are still a lot of great people out there.

The tour for *Got To Be Tough*, which was postponed owing to the coronavirus, was billed in the press as a farewell tour. Is that still the case? I never knew about that. I never tell nobody that. People have their own intentions, and they corrupt it in their minds, and corrupt other people. It was a scam, a deep-down scam, without me knowing anything about that. Unprofessional! I'm going to keep going all the time, man! You will see me again because I'm not going to resign for now. I keep on doing this thing. My audience don't expect me to stop. ☹

Got To Be Tough is released by Trojan Jamaica/BMG on August 28



Toots with Willie Nelson at Rothbury Music Festival in Michigan, 2009

TOOTS AND THE MAYTALS: BUYER'S GUIDE

SWEET AND DANDY BEVERLEY, 1969
The Maytals' killer 45s have been re-recorded numerous times, but *Sweet And Dandy* captures many of them in their original raw splendour, produced by Lesley Kong for his Beverley label at Dynamic Sounds. The title track later stole the show in *The Harder They Come*. **8/10**

FUNKY KINGSTON MANGO, 1975
A peerless slice of Afro-centric reggae-fied soul-funk. The 1972 *Dragon* LP is the original, but the 1975 US version is a more satisfying listen. Blending tracks from the '72 album and its follow-up, *In The Dark*, alongside “Pressure Drop”, it includes a customised version of John Denver's “Country Roads” and a searing “Louie Louie”. **9/10**

REGGAE GOT SOUL ISLAND, 1976
A more conventional stroll down the rocksteady road, enlivened by standouts such as “Rastaman” and “True Lovels Hard To Find”. Partly recorded at Island's Basing Street with Joe Boyd, it features Steve Winwood and Rico Rodriguez, and a rousing version of Van Morrison's “I Shall Sing”. **7/10**

TOOTS IN MEMPHIS MANGO, 1988
At the suggestion of Chris Blackwell, Jamaica's premier soul man heads to Ardent studios with Sly and Robbie to record the Southern soul songbook with Jim Dickinson and local A-list sessioners. The results feel like destiny fulfilled. **7/10**