Building a ‘Reggae Scrapbook’

IN THE late 1960s, American journalists Stephen Davis and Peter Simon embraced the counterculture that swept the United States.

But gradually they were turned off by the commercialism of rock and roll, the music that inspired the anti-establishment movement.

Their faith in music was soon restored by a Jamaican beat called reggae.

Davis and Simon travelled to Jamaica in February 1976 and stayed for two months. They chronicled their journey in the critically-acclaimed book, ‘Reggae Bloodlines’, which was released the following year.

Simon, now approaching his 60th birthday, took the photos for that book. He is currently in Jamaica working on ‘The Reggae Scrapbook’, another tome on Jamaican pop culture.

Unlike 30 years ago when it was difficult shopping such a project, Simon said publishers Random House literally begged him to make reggae the focus of his 13th book.

"Back in '76, I was begging for a deal – it took an article we did in the New York Times (on reggae) and it spawned some interest," the slim, bespectacled Simon told The Sunday Gleaner last week.

"Reggae was not a common name in the United States, hardly anyone knew how to pronounce it.,” Simon, who is accompanied by his son, Willie, and assistant, Dan Landingham, lives in the fishing community of Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts.

WRITING ON BOOK

Along with Jamaican photographer, Roy Sweetland, he began work on the book immediately after arriving here on January 9.

They visited recording studios and video shoots where they photographed some of the hottest names in contemporary dancehall/reggae, such as Beenie Man, Anthony B, Sean Paul and Taurus Riley.

With dancehall taking off in the United States in the past six years, Simon believes ‘The Reggae Scrapbook’ will do well when released there in November.

"It’s a much bigger industry now, the music is much more accepted now and the kids really love it,” said Simon. "My son, he’s 20, and his group of friends like reggae more than anything.”

When Simon and Davis came to Jamaica 31 years ago, they were shocked to see the reggae stars they discovered through the film, The Harder They Come, struggling to make ends meet in a country torn apart by Cold War politics.

The two met at Boston University in 1966 and share similar backgrounds.

Simon is the youngest of four children for Ben Simon, co-founder of the respected publishing company, Simon and Shuster. He is also the brother of Carly Simon, one of the biggest pop acts of the 1970s.

He and Davis were part of the student rebellions that played out on American college campuses in the 1960s when the Civil Rights revolution was in full swing.

Both went on to work for Rolling Stone magazine.
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Turned off by the growing corporate influence on rock music, the duo found solace in the raw energy of reggae.

“We were on Martha’s Vineyard listening to reggae and we looked at each other and said, ‘there’s gotta be a book in this’”, Simon recalled.

They pitched a feature story on Jamaica and its music to editors at the New York Times, which was eventually published in its travel and leisure section.

“Once our story was published in the New York Times, it legitimised, at least in the U.S., the term reggae”, said Simon.

CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS

With an advance payment from Doubleday Books, the two made their way to Kingston in 1976. During their eight-week stay, Simon and Davis rubbed shoulders with reggae’s big names: Marley, Big Youth, the Mighty Diamonds and the Revolutionaries, house band at the hot Channel One studio.

They also interviewed Michael Manley, Jamaica’s charismatic and controversial socialist Prime Minister. Reggae Bloodlines was a minor hit and continues to sell fairly well.

Simon said he lost interest in reggae after Marley’s death in 1981, although he did host a reggae show on Boston radio. He returned to his rock and roll roots, producing a photo book on psychedelic icons, The Greatful Dead, as well as I and Eye, a retrospective of his work as a photo-journalist.

Reggae Bloodlines won approval from artists and fans for its accurate depiction of the rough-and-tumble reggae scene in Jamaica. Thirty years on, things have changed with dancehall artists living as big as their pop counterparts up north.

That transformation, Peter Simon hopes, will help make The Reggae Scrapbook a major seller.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

TOP: Peter Simon (right) and his son Willy.