



Curiosity & Communion

Jane Cornwell joins Jason Wilson and his band Ashara for a trip across Jamaica, tracing the silver threads that tie Ayrshire folk song to a one-drop reggae beat

It's carnival time in Kingston, Jamaica, but the street parades and roadblocks have not kept a smartly dressed crowd from making its way downtown to Courtleigh Auditorium for the Bring Back the Love charity concert. A former Jamaican prime minister introduces a six-piece band, whose set of originals and covers soon have all 400-odd of them clapping and singing along.

'Uh-oh, from a little cottage in Negril', they chorus, swaying to Tyrone Taylor's reggae favourite, as lead vocalist Jason Wilson smiles from behind his keyboards. Around him, musicians on guitar, sax, bass and drums weigh in, while out of left-field, a tin whistle passage folds in some lilting Scottish folk.

A Scottish-Canadian group playing reggae in Jamaica might look, on paper, like sacrilege. But Ashara were born in the Caribbean immigrant heartland of Downsview, Toronto, locally dubbed the most multiracial square mile in Canada,

where Wilson – the son of parents from Ayrshire, Scotland – grew up. "By 13, all I wanted to do was play reggae," he says. "The other stuff, the jazz, global roots and Scottish folk, happened later. My best friend Richard Harvey's parents came from Jamaica in 1966, the same year as my mum and dad. His brother OG Harvey fronted [pioneering Canadian reggae outfit] Messenjah, and his other brother Carl Harvey was guitarist with Toots & The Maytals for years." A grin. "Now Carl plays in Ashara."

Wilson talks me through it on a trip that begins in Jamaica's second largest city, Montego Bay in the west, takes in a warm-up gig in the quieter town of Negril, before crossing the island – with a pit stop at the leafy final resting place of Peter Tosh of The Wailers – to Kingston on the south coast. Personal reasons mean Carl Harvey can't be here in Jamaica with Ashara – a sextet that sometimes swells to seven or eight – but

PHOTO: LEMMON GROOMS

he's all over their second album (and Wilson's tenth studio recording) *Auld Acquaintance*.

The 11-track release is a tribute to many of the artists the 56-year-old has worked with – from reggae icons Jackie Mittoo, Sly & Robbie and UB40 to English fiddle hero Dave Swarbrick, Scottish singer-songwriter Dick Gaughan and, well, Alanis Morissette. The liner notes are filled with the stories behind the choice of each song. A pre-fame Morissette recorded a duet with Wilson's band Tabarruk in 1994, then performed alongside him at Toronto's Bamboo Club – so, on the album they play a reggae-fied 'Hand in My Pocket'. The choice of UB40's 'I Would Do For You' came from Wilson's early discovery that his cousin, Michael Virtue, played keys with the Birmingham band – Wilson would subsequently open for them in the UK and Canada. And their take on Jackie Mittoo's 'Soul Bird' honours the Studio One great (who recorded the first reggae music produced entirely in Canada) and his mentorship of Wilson.

These and other stories pulse beneath a winning sound that doesn't just blend jazz and Scottish influences into a 4/4 reggae foundation of choppy guitar skanks, melodic basslines and one-drop beats, over which Wilson's fine tenor dips and soars; it's a sound rooted in experience and passion, curiosity and community. Wilson is a professor of history, a bestselling author of eight books (including a tome on Canadian reggae) and the only musician nominated for both a Canadian folk award and a Canadian reggae award – he won the latter. But his musical origins can be reduced to a single venue: Jessie's Jazz Cafe. His mum's basement.

"It's where we've always rehearsed," he says, "and where, over the years, people like [Aswad's] Brinsley Forde have stayed between tour dates." Wilson was the Canadian bandleader for Forde, who has in turn guested on Wilson's records and even produced a BBC Radio 6 Music documentary about Wilson's career.

"Musicians from UB40 have rolled spliffs there. Jessie's is a character in the story," continues Wilson, whose yet-to-be-published memoir, *Evading Fame and Other Noble Pursuits*, also places Jessie's at its core. "When Vinnie [Vince Reel], our



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drummer, suggested we record the album in the basement, it made sense."

Wilson has performed in Jamaica four times before, including in 2005, when he was promoting his Juno-nominated "reggae-noir" album *The Peacemaker's Chauffeur*, and both Pee Wee Ellis and Ernest Ranglin joined him onstage at Kingston's Jazz on the Green festival. But this is his first visit to the island with Ashara, and his first headline show in the capital. Early in our trip, Wilson tells me the thought of bringing his Scotland-meets-Jamaica-in-Canada sound to the Caribbean has made him nervous.

Over rum punches at Drifter's Bar – a ramshackle venue and hotel on Negril's One Mile Beach, run by Luddy Samms, formerly of US vocal group The Drifters, and his Glaswegian wife, Lady Jan – Wilson tries to be optimistic. "I know we're a curiosity for some, but Jamaicans are very open-minded musically, so I'm sure we can win them over," he tells me. "Reggae has always been broadly known for its do-overs."

Colourful characters seem to revolve around Wilson. Ashara's tour manager, Blair Moody, did the marketing for the Jamaican bobsleigh team during the 1988 Calgary Olympics (the athletes allegedly trained at home on hospital gurneys – their unlikely journey inspiring the film *Cool Runnings*), before going on to manage Canada's best-known reggae outfit, The Sattalites. Negril-based Jamaican trumpet player Patrick Tenyue turns up to sit in at their warm-up show at Drifter's, which also sees Samms (whose crudely painted portrait adorns an outside wall) weigh in to sing a number.

At soundcheck, as the band test the equipment with the familiar strains of Tyrone Taylor's 'Cottage in Negril', the sound engineer flashes a grin. "My dad wrote that song for my mum," he says, making Wilson double-take. ("What are the chances?" he says later.)

The show at Drifter's goes well, despite the initial incongruity of hearing Wilson-penned originals such as the ▶

Jason Wilson & Ashara playing Courtleigh Auditorium in Kingston, Jamaica. Opposite: Jason Wilson and Marcus Ali; Below: Laurel Tubman, Maurice Gordon and Michael Shapinko

