

Exploring history and culture in urban landscapes: the Kingston experience

by Andrea Hollington

To see things with different eyes, we followed an unconventional tour guide with decades of "Kingston experience" to delve into landscapes, soundscapes and foodscapes in various neighborhoods of the city, searching the roots and routes of urban history and culture, music and street art, people and places. And Matthias' Kingston tour took us to places beyond the usual. Our guide's intimate and profound knowledge and his connection to the people facilitated a day of encounters and experiences.

We met Matthias in up in the hills at Skyline Drive in Jackshill, full of anticipation of a day in Kingston, where we would get more insights into the urban landscapes of the inner city. Not set as a usual sight seeing program, we would spend the day exploring stories and histories of music and culture, connecting with different people of Kingston - from living legends to grassroots people. It was still morning, and we started with a spectacular view of the city.



Kingston: view from Skyline Drive, Jackshill

Driving into town, we first stopped – and Matthias stressed that this was the only “real tourist stop” – at the National Stadium and caught a glimpse at the statues of the great athletes of Jamaica. Athletics are important in Jamaican society, starting in schools with training and competitions and promotions through scholarships. The National Stadium is also the place where the famous “One Love Peace Concert” took place in 1978, where Bob Marley joined the hands of the two opposing politicians Edward Seaga and Norman Manley. On our way to Downtown we passed by the hidden place of Viva, one of the most famous juice makers of the island, to refresh ourselves with cold and delicious fruit juices before stopping at Fleet Street. Fleet Street hosts the street art project “Paint Jamaica” which aims at making the impoverished neighborhood of Parade Gardens more colorful and thereby also lifting the stigma of the inner city space.



Street art “Paint Jamaica” at Fleet Street, Parade Gardens

After this our tour took us to Law Street, visiting the living legend Bongo Trevor, a 90-year old Rastaman, who is not only the president of the Ethiopian World Federation in Jamaica, but also one of the 13 Rastas (in fact the only one still alive) who was received by Emperor Haile Selassie during his visit to Jamaica in 1966. Bongo Trevor, a very kind and hospitable person, showed us his yard, which he turned into a small museum with numerous historical documentations and artefacts of Rastafari history.

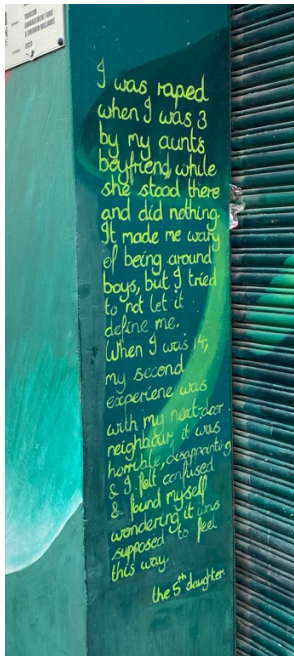


Tour guide Matthias with Bongo Trevor



Bongo Trevor's collection

Another street art project we visited in Downtown Kingston is the art district in Water Lane. This place has existed since 2017 - founded by an initiative called "Kingston Creative" which hires artist to paint the decaying streets of this Downtown area. This initiative aims at making Downtown more attractive to tourists as well as locals, and also hosts street events every month. The Water Lane art district comprises numerous fantastic murals and street art which feature many themes regarding Jamaican culture, history, literature, daily life and music.



Street art Water Lane art district

Also located in Downtown is the famous Orange Street, a historically important street which hosts several old recording studios and record stores from the early days of reggae music, including Augustus Pablo's record store "Rockers International" and Prince Buster's among others. The historic landscape featuring the early history of Jamaican music production is partly decaying but still tells the story of the prime of analog music making and the history of Ska, Rocksteady, Reggae and other musical

developments. This area was the home of many renown figures of Reggae music, including Dennis Brown, Augustus Pablo, Junior Delgado and Yami Bolo. Here, we also had lunch at the small vegan restaurant Ibo Spice offering Rastafari inspired cuisine like the breadfruit burger.



Augustus Pablo's record store



Matthias at Prince Buster's



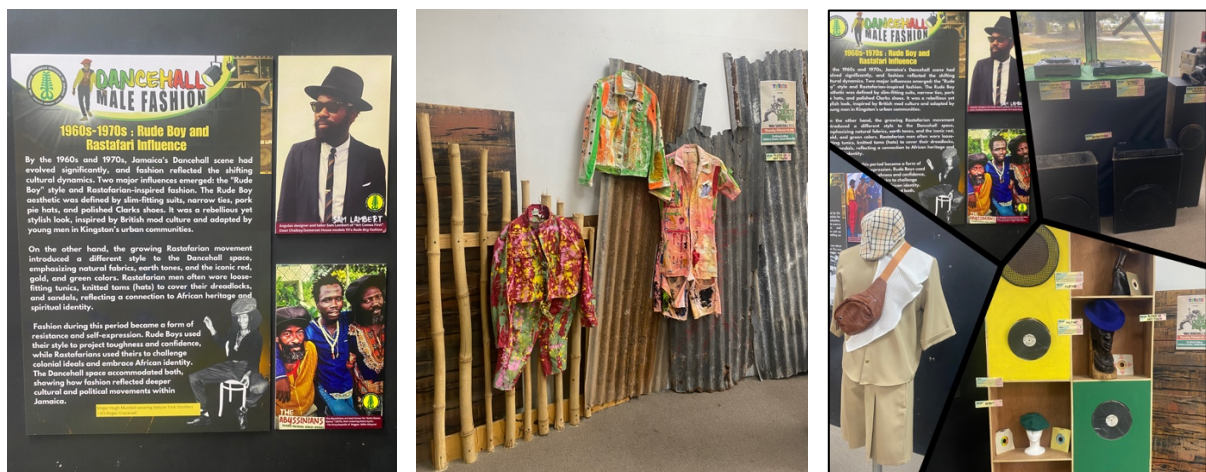
Entrance to Ibo Spice Restaurant

Another significant place of music history in Downton is Randy's Music (Randy's Record Mart), a record shop and recording studio which played a pivotal role in the development of Ska, Rocksteady and early Reggae. The location in Downtown Kingston became a hotspot for musicians in the 1960s and 1970s and released many popular songs and albums. The record shop still operates today, and visitors can see a lot of old equipment used in analog music productions in the second half of the last century.



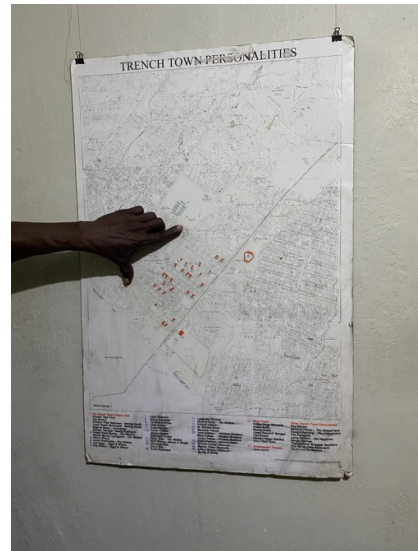
Randy's music: equipment for analog music production, Matthias explains how records were produced

Another significant institution is located Downtown: The African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica, a division of the Institute of Jamaica. This small institute close to the National Gallery hosts a research unit and library and sometimes organizes exhibitions. We visited the exhibition: Dancehall Male Fashion and learned about the various clothing styles which emerged accompanying the development of Jamaican music throughout various epochs. This exhibition featured iconic items such as Clarks shoes and mesh marina and also featured an interactive blackboard where visitors could engage with Dancehall expressions and slang.



Exhibition at the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica: Dancehall male fashion

After Downtown we moved on to Trench Town – most popularly known as the place where Bob Marley grew up, started music and formed the Wailers with Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer. It is a ghetto part of Kingston that has brought forth many popular and important personalities of Jamaica (especially musicians, but also politicians and athletes). The Trench Town Culture Yard, Jamaica’s first inner city heritage site, turned the old government yard into a museum that honors the live and early activities of Bob Marley and the Wailers and also shows the living conditions of poor people in Kingston’s inner city communities characterized by communal housing with small rooms and shared spaces and facilities, built by the Central Housing Authority.



Trench Town personalities



Bob Marley's first car at the Trench Town Culture Yard

As the evening approached, we made our way to St Andrew Park, near Half Way Tree, to experience one of the renowned music sessions in the yard of the world-famous guitarist Earl "Chinna" Smith. The charismatic Rastaman has played with music greats like Bob Marley and the Wailers, Jimmy Cliff and Lee "Scratch" Perry among many others and appears on more than 500 recorded albums. Experiencing a grassroots music jam session which included friends, family and visitors, we could witness making music as a community practice involving kids and learners on a par with experienced musicians.



Chinna in a jam session passing on some skills to a young visitor

Leaving the musical yard, we passed by the famous Devon House to taste the well-known I-Scream (according to National Geographic among the top five ice creams worldwide) before we finished off an eventful day at Kingston's night market, a community space which combines locally made arts and crafts with culinary gems and music. Showcasing only Jamaican-made products and services, the Night Market ties in with the cultural legacy of the space in Hillcrest Avenue, which was the home and work space of renowned ethnomusicologist and anthropologist Olive Lewin, and takes place every Tuesday.

Our tour guide Matthias has been visiting and spending time in Jamaica since 1984, and living permanently in Kingston for the last 14 Years. Being an active musician and music teacher himself, he plays with Micah Shemaiah and the Dreadites and teaches music at primary schools. His exhaustive knowledge of Kingston and Jamaican music and culture, as well as his many and deep connections to people turned the city tour into a vivid experience with lots of things to learn, people to meet and explorations for all senses. The KingstonExperience can be found online, on Facebook and Instagram and reached via whatsapp: +1(876)8566340.