

## **From Jamaica to Africa: Sydney Salmon, repatriation and reggae in Ethiopia**

Andrea Hollington

**Jamaican born Reggae artist Sydney Salmon, who repatriated to Ethiopia from the USA 2001, is one of the most influential voices in the Ethiopian Reggae scene. His Imperial Majestic Band comprises members from different parts of the world and together they offer unique and diverse roots reggae music in an Ethiopian context. Following up with their story reveals interesting particulars and persons, connecting Rastafari, Jamaica, Shashamane and Bob Marley. *Jah Music* in Ethiopia.**

Reggae occupies an important position in the diverse Ethiopian music scene. Numerous Ethiopian musicians committed themselves to the genre or incorporate reggae elements into their music. While reggae as international and global music genre is widespread all over the world, its popularity in Ethiopia is also based on the particular relation between Jamaica, Rastafari and Ethiopia. In this regard, the presence of repatriated Rastafari in Ethiopia plays an important role. Sydney Salmon is arguably regarded as the most famous repatriated reggae artist in Ethiopia; with his Imperial Majestic Band he regularly provides roots and culture vibes in Addis Ababa. Apart from numerous concerts in Ethiopia, especially in Addis Ababa and Shashamane, the Jamaican-born artist toured many countries and performed in Kenya, Tanzania, Jamaica, England, Austria, Slovenia, several US-cities, Canada and in Italy at the infamous Rototom Sunsplash. In our interview he referred to his roots reggae style as “orthodox music” and “message music” influenced by Rastafari and his faith as a member of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, one of the large Rastafari mansions that is also represented in Ethiopia. After having grown up in Jamaica, Salmon moved to the U.S. with 22 years where he committed himself to the study and practice of music and where he became a member of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. After having released the song “Shashamane on my mind”, he put his dream, which was encouraged by his faith, into action in 2001 and repatriated to Ethiopia. There he founded a band and began to gain ground in the Ethiopian music scene. He reports, how his music has changed since his arrival in the Promised Land: “I do speak the language so I incorporate Amharic into my lyrics. I also incorporate the musical scales of Ethiopia into my music. But I keep the Jamaican Drum and Bass.” The members of the Imperial Majestic Band come from Jamaica, England, America and Ethiopia. Salmon acknowledges: “This combination produces a style that is unique and diverse”. So Salmon and his Band were able to built up a fan base over the years, which consists mainly of young Ethiopians, but also of repatriated Rastafari and the international public.

While major celebrations of Bob Marley’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in February this year took place in Jamaica, Sydney Salmon and his band honored the international reggae star at the Jams club in Addis Ababa. Ten years ago, at Marley’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, a huge concert was arranged in Meskel Square, Addis Ababa, in which several international artists participated. Under the name “Africa Unite” a range of activities took place, of which the concert on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2005 was the highlight. Here Sydney Salmon shared the stage with the Marley Family and the I-Three, Bob Andy, Youssou N’Dour, Angélique Kidjo, Lauryn Hill, Teddy Afro and some others and the Imperial

Majestic Band served as backing band for many of the artists from outside. Bob Marley himself, too, had visited Ethiopia and spent some time in Shashamane, where the piece of land, which Haile Selassie granted to the members of the African Diaspora, is located and which constitutes a center of repatriation for Rastafari. Sydney Salmon, though living in Addis Ababa, is also closely connected to Shashamane, as he has been performing at various events regularly and as he's a long-standing supporter of the JRDC (Jamaican Rastafarian Development community) school. In his song "We love Shashamane" feat. True Warrior he sings about the particularities, which constitute Shashamane and introduces the JRDC school in the corresponding video clip. True Warrior, who complements Salmon's song with a deejay part, is the son of the late Donald "Flippins" Leach, one of the pioneers and early repatriated settlers in Shashamane. He became a friend of Bob Marley during the latter's visit in 1978 and, among other things, helped writing the song "Zimbabwe" according to the oral tradition in the Rastafari community in Shashamane. Sydney Salmon ties in with this heritage with his music and lifestyle. He says that Rastafari is the message of his music, which deals with consciousness, realities of life, education, progress, love and God. To create awareness for these themes and to inspire the people is what he considers as his duty as a Rastafari artist. On the question what he likes most about Ethiopian culture he replies: "The love of peace. An Ethiopian will say *Salam* to you several times throughout the day. I love that love of peace." The artist has released a number of albums, the latest being "the ultimate Challenge" which can be found on itunes and other platforms. A number of the band's songs and performances can also be found on youtube. It is worthwhile to pay attention and listen to him and his band as this music is of an inspiring, cosmopolitan and heartfelt nature.