

## **Rastafari Regal Livity Exhibition Opening in Montego Bay**

Sam Sharpe Square holds a prominent space in Montego Bay town centre. Occupying no more than 100 x 30 metres in total, the Square comprises an area of cobblestone preserved from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A plinth of standing figurines in dramatic poses is at one end of the square. The scene depicts Jamaican National hero Sam Sharpe convincing enslaved Africans to rebel against the colonists during Christmas 1831. Sharpe's rebellion was quelled within months. He and hundreds of his fellow freedom fighters were captured and hung in the very spot where this memento stands.

Sam Sharpe Square, a hub of constant activity, is surrounded by municipal buildings, superstores and street vendors. Everyday hundreds of townfolk congregate, young and elderly, to debate and reason, to perform, or simply chill. The square is both a people's parliament and grassroots meeting-point.

Its opposite end fronts the Montego Bay Cultural Centre, a historic building now housing the acclaimed exhibition of Rastafari: *Unconquerable*. Today a second exhibition graces its foyer: *Ras Tafari: The Majesty and the Movement*, a UK 'import', created by London-based ensemble, Rastafari Regal Livity (RRL). Researched and produced in the UK, the RRL exhibition traces the story of Emperor Haile Selassie I's four-and-a-half year exile in the British city of Bath during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1936-41). The Emperor's narrative is interwoven with the rise of the Rastafari movement in England from the 1960s onward.

This evening the buzz in Sam Sharpe Square has an edge to it. Among the circling hawkers, the impromptu dancers, the endless milling crowds there is a heightened sense of expectation. The word is out. The new Rastafari exhibition opens tonight. A PA -system echoes across the evening hubbub reminding ones of the start time: 6.30. The elder Rastas ignore the announcement and continue their reasoning. They dun know. That's why they are here. Though sceptical of the venue their interest has been ignited by the visiting UK team who have been in the streets the past few days, fly posting, meeting ones and ones, and handing out promotional material.

The opening night lived up to expectation. A spacious upstairs hall in the Cultural Centre was the setting for a rich presentation. The stage area was tastefully decked out in yellow and green drapes against a black background. At 7pm resident curator Dr Kim Harris opened proceedings. A slow trickle of latecomers continued to arrive throughout the program. As is traditional, the Rastafari drum-chant came first, courtesy of Rastafari Indigenous Village. Speeches of welcome followed. In his address the Mayor, Councillor Glendan

Harris, noted that the occasion proved a point of arrival for the movement. Rastafari could now operate at the highest level of the cultural establishment on a par with other citizens. The life and vitality of the movement was evident in this.



Curator Kim Harris gave a powerful spoken-word performance that included song, poetry and invocation.

Members of the UK team Dr Robbie Shilliam and Ras Shango Baku enlightened the audience regarding the inspiration behind the exhibition: the need to document and reflect on the impact of Rastafari on British and world society.

Ras Jabulani, a visitor from Zimbabwe travelling with the UK team, lit up the gathering with a reggae performance of seasoned brilliance.

British journalist/historian Derek Bishton formally donated an iconic photo of Rastafari legend Nathaniel Hibbert to the Centre.

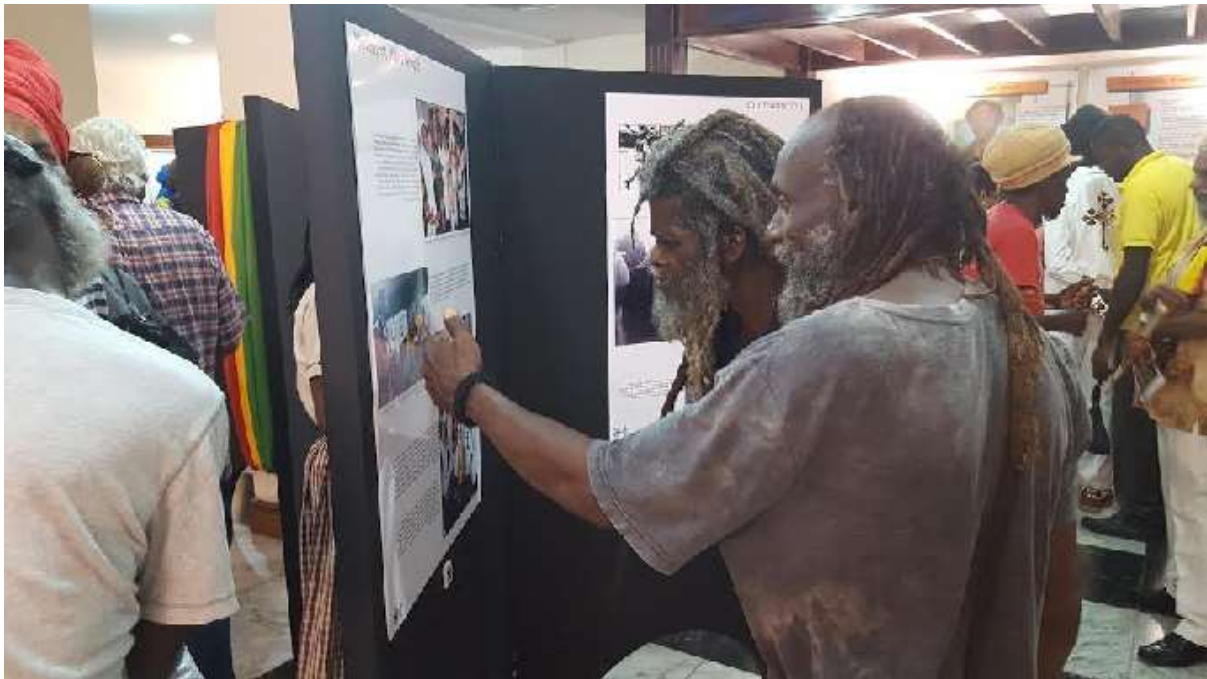
More chairs were brought into the hall as the audience increased.

Marcus Goffe of the RMC (Rastafari Millennium Council) and the 50th Anniversary Visit Organizing Committee emphasized that this was the opening event of a nationwide program to honour the Emperor.

A final vote of thanks from Ras Cos Wadada, co-Director of RRL, put a seal on the event. He stressed the importance of unity as the answer to Rastafari's long pursuit of Reparation and Repatriation. It was left to Centre Director Mrs Valerie O'Bryan to invite the near full-house audience to view the exhibition downstairs and partake of light refreshments provided by the Centre.



The mainly Rastafari gathering was enthused by the exhibition. The viewing lasted well over an hour. The opportunity for ones to come together, socialise as a community and exercise ownership of their town's facilities, was fully enjoyed. Dr Bonner of the National Museums of Jamaica and Dr Lyndsay from the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Gender Affairs were also high in their praise of the exhibition. Rastafari Indigenous Village provided catering as well as a small marketing stall, which included open display and sale of high-grade herb. RRL archivist and video producer Ras Ray-I was on hand to capture all aspects of the reception.



At the close a rousing Nyahbinghi session was held outside the Centre – an energetic hour of drumming and chanting in praise of the Most High. All ones who attended this exciting opening event will long savour its memory.

The RRL exhibition *Rastafari: The Majesty and The Movement* was first shown in Ethiopia in 2014 at the Museum of Addis Ababa. It was the British component in an international tribute to the Emperor. Since then the exhibition has toured several British cities with growing success. Its present run at the Montego Bay Cultural Centre ends on 30<sup>th</sup> June. Then it will transfer to UWI and other Rastafari venues in Jamaica throughout 2016.

Meantime the RRL team will reproduce the work at the Black Cultural Archives in London, Britain's major Black heritage centre between June and September 2016.

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