

The Gazette

Saturday, August 4, 2007

Celebrate Jamaica's freedom by firing up these films

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Byline: JEFF HEINRICH
Column: Around the World in DVDs
Source: The Gazette

Jamaica is a beautiful country, but it can also be a dangerous place to live.

Since gaining independence from Britain 45 years ago Monday, the Caribbean island has gone through several waves of violence, and now it seems to be happening again.

Parliamentary elections have been called for Aug. 27, with the long-ruling People's National Party looking for a fifth straight five-year term. The race against the opposition Jamaica Labour Party is shaping up to be the tightest - and toughest - in the nation's history.

The campaign has been marred by several shootings; so far, five people have died. There have also been ambushes of official motorcades and a firebombing. Police and soldiers have been unable to quell the unrest.

Here are some movies on DVD that were filmed in Jamaica and whose themes are oppression and rebellion, exemplified by Rastafarians and the nation's best-loved cultural export, reggae music.

The Harder They Come (Jamaica, 1972) The archetype of Rasta outlaw movies, with a famous soundtrack propelled by the film's star, Jimmy Cliff. He plays a country boy who comes to the city to make it in the music business. Jamaican director Perry Henzell's tale of gangstas, guns and ganja became an international hit. Restored in 2006, the Xenon Pictures DVD comes with a remastered CD of all the original songs.

Rockers (Jamaica, 1978) In the same vein of *The Harder They Come*, *Rockers* has been described as a "graduate course" in reggae. Leroy (Horsemouth) Wallace plays a drummer-for-hire and a peddler of records who seeks revenge when his motorbike gets stolen. The special-edition DVD, restored with DTS and 5.1 Surround sound by Music Video Distributors, includes a (much-needed) glossary of Rasta patois.

Land of Look Behind (U.S., 1982) A documentary about the funeral of reggae's biggest superstar, Bob Marley, who died of cancer in 1981, and about the down-to-earth rural Rastas behind the legend. Subversive Cinema, a U.S. distributor, released the fine-looking DVD in January; among copious extras, it has a commentary track by director Alan Greenberg and his frequent collaborator, the great Werner Herzog.

Life and Debt (U.S., 2001) Another documentary, this one uses a reggae soundtrack as background to an enlightening look at the impact of globalization on modern Jamaica. Bracketed by the arrival and departure of a planeload of deluded tourists who think they're in paradise, Stephanie Black's film puts the blame for Jamaica's ills on the International Monetary Fund. The New Yorker Video DVD comes fully loaded.

And, from the year Jamaica became independent, here's a calypso crime cocktail that will leave you shaken, if not stirred:

Dr. No (Britain, 1962) Yes, the accents are wrong: Americans stand in for Jamaicans, Brits imitate Chinese. But the first-ever James Bond movie has the advantage of real-life locales (on author Ian Fleming's adopted island, where the Bond character was born), plenty of shoot-em-up action, and easy-on-the-eyes stars (Sean Connery and Ursula Andress). And not a Rastaman in sight. The Fox DVD has a bonus disc that spills over with extras.

Jeff Heinrich
Columnist ("Around the World in DVDs")