

Jamdown DVD(*Weinerworld*)

Not so long ago, it was very difficult and challenging to access films with reggae content. Today's internet generation kind of take it for granted that everything will eventually be available at the click of a mouse or the touch of a button, but the realm of reggae film has remained relatively obscure until very recently. Although viewing such works in the cinema remains the ideal circumstance by which we can experience such sensory perceptions of Jamaican life (if we are unable to be physically on the island), reggae on DVD is still the next best thing, and it is heartening that older films are now being made more readily available, as well as new works that shed different lights on this multifaceted subject.

One of the earliest reggae documentaries ever made, and certainly one of the most obscure, the film *Jamdown* is a long lost treasure, directed by the relatively unknown French filmmaker Emmanuel Bonn. In terms of its reggae content, the film's most noteworthy characters are the Congos harmony trio, as there is fantastic footage of them cutting their third album, *Image of Africa*, at Aquarius studio (including a glimpse of the enigmatic French bassist Philip Quilichini, working on 'Food For The Rainy Day'). There is also some intriguing footage of Toots Hibbert, running through his early ska works on an acoustic guitar whilst seated in the back of a car, as well as cutting an extended disco version of '54-46' in the studio. However, due to the film's reliance on candid scenes of everyday life, as well as its lack of narration, *Jamdown* has more in common with imagistic film works, such as Alan Greenberg's *Land of Look Behind*, rather than fly-on-the-wall exposés such as Jeremy Marre's *Roots Rock Reggae*, or Howard Johnson and Jim Pines' *Deep Roots Music* television series. Thus, for much of the film, there are wordless scenes of the rough city streets of downtown Kingston, contrasted by the glorious beauty of the countryside, and interspersed with testimony from unnamed ordinary Jamaicans, such as the market higgler that speaks of gender inequalities in Jamaican society, or the dread that tells a rambling tale of needing to flee from police. Later in the film, there are also some scenes of London street life, with testimony from young black Londoners about their views of the music, which ultimately reminds how generally 'underground' reggae was perceived to be at the time (though these London scenes feel like something of an afterthought, probably shot around the time of the Congos' live performance, some scenes of which are also featured in the film).

According to press releases, the bulk of *Jamdown* was shot in Jamaica in 1980, which, as many readers will know, was an election year—in fact, it was

the year of the bloodiest election in Jamaican history, with around one thousand citizens reportedly killed in election-related violence. As such, the street footage of the film seems to display an eerily fragile tranquillity that was soon to be destroyed, shattered forever in the orgy of bloodletting that has since become embedded in Jamaican society, as played out in the recent Dudus saga, and in an annual murder rate now over 1600 and counting. However, none of these aspects are commented on in the film directly, which could be seen as a strength or a weakness, depending on one's point of view. The closest we get is some grumbling from Watty Burnett about musicians not being paid what they are due, due to systemic corruption, which is not really the same thing, though is not entirely unrelated either. But overall, the film provides another tantalising glimpse of what Jamaica was like three decades earlier, for those of us who were not fortunate enough to visit her shores then.