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Tribute to late reggae great Mittoo

By ERROL NAZARETH - Sun Media

TORONTO - "He made me a better keyboard player in 30 seconds."

That's keyboardist Jason Wilson reminiscing about reggae icon Jackie Mittoo's magic touch.

And it was a magic touch, indeed.

Widely considered one of the architects of reggae, rocksteady and ska music, Mittoo began playing keyboards when he was just four. And by 15, he became the musical director at Studio One, the legendary Jamaican label that was operated by Clement (Coxsone) Dodd, one of reggae's most prolific producers.

Shortly after hooking up with Dodd, Mittoo formed one of the most influential ska bands in history, The Skatalites.

To get an idea of his talent, consider this: Dodd stipulated that Mittoo would be paid only if he delivered five new rhythms every week!

"I believe that," says Wilson, who was a close friend of the prolific songwriter. "He's the creator or co-creator of so many classic rhythm tracks like ram jam, pass the kutchie and dream song that are continuing to be reproduced by reggae and non-reggae artists. I can't even begin to list the people that Jackie collaborated with."

Wilson says one of the reasons he admired Mittoo was because he elevated the role of keyboards and organ in reggae.

"He helped popularize the idea that you could have multi keyboard parts on a single song," Wilson says. "For instance, he was big on clavinetts and string pads and then he'd have a rhythm organ and then, of course, he'd have a lead organ. So, you'd have five or six keyboard parts and he was a pioneer of this.

"Jackie opened up the palette for keyboard players and I am a direct beneficiary of that."

A fearless experimenter himself, Wilson relishes telling me how Mittoo improved his playing.

"I was doing an organ shuffle on a song called Angel and I was flailing about wildly and he came up behind me, grabbed my elbows and brought them into my body," he says. "Suddenly, I was making one tenth of the mistakes I had been making."

To acknowledge Mittoo's genius, several local heavies will honour him at Lula Lounge next Thursday. Joining Wilson will be trumpeter Nick (Brownman) Ali; Jo-Jo Bennett and Fergus Hambleton from The Sattalites; Mittoo's widow, singer Carol Brown; Carl Harvey, musical director for the legendary Toots & The Maytals; David Madden, who played with Bob Marley in the mid-70s; and respected reggae keyboardist Bernie Pitters.

Judging from this lineup, there'll be a whole lotta soul, jazz and reggae on tap. And it's certain that if the keyboard virtuoso were alive and in attendance, he'd be mighty proud of how his legacy was being continued. And that's because Mittoo, who moved to Toronto in 1968 and lived here until he passed away in 1990, embraced all those genres and pushed reggae's limits.

Asked what he hears when he listens to Mittoo, Wilson says, "I see where he was going," before relating an anecdote.

"I was 19 and visiting him in Wellesley Hospital and I remember telling him I wanted to push the envelope," Wilson says. "I was getting some resistance from some of the old-school reggae guys here, but I wanted to push the boundaries and I knew Jackie was already doing that.

"He grabbed my hand and said, 'So, wha' dem a go do? Make E minor soun' different?'"

"What he meant was that as much as reggae purists will try to stay the course, they will never be able to change the fundamental sound of E minor," Wilson says. "Only the few, brave innovators like Jackie ever tried to step outside of those boundaries and the genre as a whole is better for it.

"And that's what it's all about," he adds. "It's not about being culture vultures but artfully trying to bring different elements into reggae and no one did it like Jackie. He was untouchable.

"When he told me that, I thought, 'Okay, Jackie Mittoo just told me it's cool.' I'm ready to do anything I want to do."