

Mikey Dread: Still at the Controls

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By Travis Fristoe

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Mikey Dread doesn't need anybody's introduction or vindication. A living, humble legend of roots reggae and heavy dub, his work as producer, DJ and performer remains classic. "I already know my value in reggae and rock music, but people try to undermine me," he says with a righteous confidence.

He is also still a practicing force in music, directly responsible for the sustaining legacy of reggae. His production work on the Clash's *Sandinista!* triple-album is just one of many interesting stories he can tell. And now, Dread has a Gainesville home base! The Dreads relocated from Miami to Gainesville because his wife, Monika, is going to dental school here.

Dread will give a free talk 2 p.m. Nov. 12 titled *Dread at the Controls: Mikey Dread and the History of Reggae Music* at the Alachua County Library's Headquarters Branch. May we all appreciate.

When I read that you were living here, I knew I had to find a way to show my respect and get the word out.

I appreciate it. I thought I was moving somewhere where nobody would know who I was. I thought they wouldn't be into reggae. Or they'd know Bob Marley, but not Mikey Dread.

How long have you been in town?

January 2005. But I do more things outside of Gainesville.

Like touring?

Touring, traveling, computer work. I haven't met that many people yet. People can be weird — like, "Who's this Rasta trying to talk to me?" Here in America, it's kind of weird.

Tell me about the Dread at the Controls radio show back in Jamaica? Did you just do it for a few years (1976-78)? Was it hard to get local music played on JBC [Radio]?

[I did it for] three years. I was 22, 23. I didn't go there to become an on-air person. I was a transmitter engineer. I studied electrical engineering at a university. I watched what the DJ's were doing — playing music, cueing things, talking on the air. So, I kind of persuaded them to go 24-hour, because radio used to sign-off at

midnight. They gave me a late-night show, thinking nobody hear me. So I played reggae like I played at the Sound System. People loved it. I became popular.

Reggae wasn't really being played on the radio before this?

No. The programmers all studied in England and wanted to keep those formats. The problem is that they weren't targeting the real Jamaican audience that was listening. They weren't playing the roots music.

I brought open-mindedness for the dread because I had to go away from their norm and create a new identity for reggae and the Jamaican music industry. In the mid-to-late '70s, Bob Marley and Burning Spear and a lot of others were coming up, making new headways, but it wasn't getting out.

That's hard to believe that they weren't seen as national treasures.

Hard to believe now! I just started playing all the stuff I could find that people wanted to hear—all the new vinyl... Even stuff that wasn't released yet. Bands and labels and producers knew that if they gave me the music, that I'd put it on the air.

So the legends about recording a reggae song, and having it lacquered and on the radio within hours are true?

Things happened fast there. Now, in the computer age, we have more producers, artists and musicians. Now, you can make these beat, have it go 'beep-beep' and call it dancehall. The quality might not be all there, but they get the idea out. Those kids did it themselves. I might not be the biggest dancehall fan, but when I think about them, I'm glad that they found something to keep themselves occupied. They found an outlet, an occupation. Maybe they found themselves. The rest of it is history...

We, the old timers, we gotta support the youth. I don't support them when they take a certain position like violence. Like with South Africa. You might not like what was going on there with the apartheid. But you don't make a song that says, "*Kill all the white men.*" You sing "*Free South Africa*" or "*Support Mandela.*" We don't encourage evil and awful things to other people.

Of course, people can do whatever they want. But that's not real reggae. We make music so people can know themselves and unite under one umbrella and know the value of the Earth. One people, working together! We want to overcome that paradigm. I know we can't eradicate it. The ugliness — I document it, and move on.

The hierarchy will always exist as long as life goes on. But we can educate ourselves, better ourselves and care for the children. You don't have to have a shirt that says Ph.D. on the back of it...

We are in a college town...

People can judge. Let them judge. In Jamaica, the radio didn't focus on real Jamaican music. Programming was focused on *Billboard Magazine* or *Cashbox Magazine*. Maybe they'd play some safe reggae, something you'd feel at a birthday party. But I always play the real roots. And I had the artists come in and introduce

the song and give a one-liner. What they now call sampling. A lot of hip-hop groups like to use my samples. Like Public Enemy and "*Welcome to the Terrordome*." Eric B & Rakim used part of my radio show. So me know the hip-hop people were listening. But it's all copyrighted.

As we move from vinyl to CDs, do you still have a record collection?

Yeah, of course.

Do you think vinyl will last?

Yeah. I come back from Europe and see all my vinyl recordings for sale. I should've saved more of my records! I sign people's records every tour — and my hand always gets tired. They keep coming and coming. Here, maybe people just want to put it on a player, but I know that Europe loves the vinyl. I do still press vinyl, but it's expensive.

So how did the Clash get in touch with you?

I went to England to promote this album here (points to my copy of his first album). When I go back to Jamaica, there's this message asking me to go back to England to work with the Clash. But I don't know the Clash, I don't know their songs, I don't know rock. So I tried to tell them that I'm not the right person, but they keep begging me. They sent a ticket. They say, "Just come meet us. If you don't like us or don't think it'll work, then you can go home." So, I say alright.

I went there and they were cool. I didn't know they were popular. You know, them punks, they don't dress up like a fancy suit and tie. I see them in their ripped clothes and think, "I'm going to have to help these guys."

So we went to the studio and they play this "Bankrobber" song, and they play it really fast, really rock-n-roll. I couldn't hear what Joe was singing. I say if we're going to work together, we have to put some reggae in there. Like cooking. I couldn't make them some Japanese food without them knowing the ingredients and the process. But with my cooking, I know they might not like yam or yucca, but they probably know rice, so I use rice. I made them get a keyboard player — Mickey Gallagher from Ian Dury & the Blockheads. Because reggae needs a piano in there. So we did it, but the record company didn't want to put it out.

Was it too out-there for CBS?

Yeah, I don't know. Maybe they think it wasn't a good direction for their group. But a German division had a copy of the song, and they put it out and it sold like wild, which forced the English company to put it out rather than lose sales to the imports. So they had me back to do some dubs.

The Clash was always there for me when I needed something. Later on, it became a problem when they had different people around them, and they ask me to prove that I had a hand in producing something. We have a case going on right now about my recording share, my producing share and my performing share. Epic or Universal or whoever, they decided after the fact that I didn't write nothing or appear anywhere.

I say, "Are you stupid? You don't hear my voice on there?" I came when the Clash asked, helped them get that sound, and now you want to disrespect me because I'm a black man from Jamaica? I know my rights. That's the only down side to this whole friendship. But maybe in Gainesville, I find a good student who knows about intellectual copyright law! Maybe a lawyer would like a big project like this.

While we're clearing things up, I'd read somewhere that the Clash wanted 'Bankrobber' to sound more ska. Is that true?

Nah...

Did the Clash ever play in Jamaica?

Yeah, but not with me. Either before or after we work together. I took them to Jamaica to record though and it was like chaos. They wanted to go to the ghetto where I record. When we went there, nobody white had come there before. So everyone came out of their house to see them. I couldn't even see the band, there were so many people around. The people wanted to hear who was trying this reggae sound, because everyone else use local musicians. Most of the leaders of the ghetto would ask if we needed beer or anything. And they'd get some cases of beer, wait outside and party. Another man say he want to wash their car. Someone else say that they watched the car. And so on. Everyday was like a new incident and more people to pay. So we got out and went to New York instead, but then got overrun with rock-n-rollers.

What did you think of their cover of Eddy Grant's "Police on my Back"?

Ehh...it was alright for them. You have to understand that during soundcheck, the sound would be beautiful. But once the show started and the punks dancing like mad, it got ripped apart. You couldn't do that in Jamaica — jump on someone, spit all over the stage.

I like the Clash more than [I like] UB40. I set up the mix for "Red Red Wine" for them. They asked me to remix for a b-side and it went to Number 1. And on the TV and radio in 1984, they say, "Mikey Dread is the best producer." They then signed me to their label for my album *Pave The Way*, but I have never seen or received a royalty statement from UB40 saying how much records they sold or how much they owe me since 1984!

I try not to believe that the British whites want to rip me off. I help them, then it's the same bullshit. I know that song went big because of my producing. I say this without any pride, without any ego. My professionalism in the studio made that sound. But the bands that made it and they never come back around and offer me any respect.

Same with Seal and the song we did together for the soundtrack to "50 First Dates." I did a duet with him of the Echo & the Bunnymen song "Lips like Sugar." Then Seal puts it on his "Best of..." album. *[laughs]* I know there is a version with Seal alone. But he used the one with Mikey Dread!

Most of the stuff I do for the major industry works. That's what I'm proud of. The Clash stuff keeps getting re-issued, re-formatted. And I hate to think of my children growing up not knowing that their father contributed to these multi-million selling songs. I don't want them saying, "I know my daddy was a fool—what happened?"

But I'm happy to be here. I'm just trying to stay abreast of the industry since there's a demand for my stuff. I'd given up on this stuff, gone back to school, started working 9-to-5... I've got about 60 albums worth of material waiting, from the '70s, '80s, '90s and now, and there's still music I want to make. Anytime I get money, I go back to the studio and record.

If the right company doesn't come with the right offer, I put it out myself. Whether I sell five a week, or month, or a year. I sell them cheap on my website, I do it myself.

I tried to learn all the different aspects of it so I wouldn't be stupid when I had to ask somebody something: The broadcasting aspect, the studio, finding the right musicians, writing the songs. Same with buying a hard-drive and recording the song. Sometimes it's like a medical decision — you gotta cut here or here. I learn from King Tubby. Like on "World War III," I put a rewind at the beginning of the song and it start again. But when I released it in England, everyone try to bring the record back to the shop thinking it was a mistake!

I also want to make a real reggae documentary. Talk to the musicians and get their stories in their words. Maybe I know the story already, but I want them to tell it in their voice. I believe in the preservation of the arts and cultures. Like the libraries. When I was younger, I read so many books from the library in Jamaica like "Electricity for Beginners" and wiring books. It helped me a lot. My friends were playing soccer or cricket, but I was trying to get things done. I could fix a radio and amplifier. Running off of batteries in my house.

What do you think of the Jamaican restaurants we have in town?

I've been to Reggae Shack. But I mostly do my own cooking. I don't fancy going to restaurants. As a youth, growing up in Jamaica (whether you a boy or a girl), your mother teach you to cook. Take care of your own clothes, too. You can't grow up thinking someone else is going to do these things for you.

As you play reggae outside of its roots in Jamaica, what's the biggest misconception?

Big misconception is that all reggae artist think the same, or that they should think the same. With promoters and payment, especially. But the artists are getting educated. I learn the industry before I get involved with anything. The other misconception, particularly in America, is that reggae is just what's advertised. Big reggae stars in Jamaica — some never get an interview, never get a recording contract. But I know who they are because I've been playing their music since way back in the day. People might not know the importance of King Tubby.

People think reggae is just Bob Marley, and that it stops there. Which is like saying Elvis Presley is the only American rock-n-roll. There's this barrier — but we play

freedom music. We play equality — no big man run things here. We work as a family. Bob made it real and international in terms of his music. Also, though, there's the money that his record company had to spend on him and promote. I know from my work with the Clash that PR matters a lot. You can be great and nobody knows about it. There could be a wicked singer in your church and only the churchgoers know.

It seems very rare for people to stay in the music industry without getting burnout, cynical or swindled...

With a contract, I *never* sign it without an attorney seeing it. You could sign away your rights! With Trojan Records, I crossed out a part on the contract that applied to future formats (CD, DVD) and royalties because that didn't apply! [At this point, Mikey Dread hands me a gift bundle of his solo CDs]. With these CDs, I got the rights back. And put them out on my own label, like I used to do. If the world loves me and wants me back, it'll happen. I'm waiting on the right moment. And the right moment means they gotta pay me just like major artists. At the same time, I play for free for the right charity.

One last question, why do you think the punks are attracted to reggae?

Punks and rasta—they have something in common, it's called resisting society.

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