



DOWNBEAT AND HEARTBEAT

COXSON DODD'S AMERICAN PROTÉGÉ CHRIS WILSON FORWARDS THE LEGACY

INTERVIEW BY ROGER STEFFENS

Chris Wilson grew up in Jamaica during the ska and rocksteady eras listening to the top sounds of producers like Duke Reid and Clement "Coxson" Dodd. He started working for Heartbeat Records in the early '80s and was instrumental in developing the relationship between Studio One and Heartbeat. Since then the company has released 60 Studio One titles including best-sellers like the Skatalites' *Foundation Ska* and the Wailers' *One Love* set. In November Heartbeat will release a compilation of Burning Spear Studio One sides named *Creation Rebel* which explores some of the greatest roots reggae recorded in Jamaica.

Roger Steffens: Chris, you were raised in Jamaica in the '60s. How did you first become aware of Coxson?

Chris Wilson: There was a man who worked in the yard for us and he would always get dressed up for the weekend and we always used to make fun of him. I kind of asked him why was he getting so dressed up, and his answer was to bring me a pile of records. Those were my introduction to Jamaican music. I was too young to understand the difference between Duke Reid and Coxson and the other producers. But I wasn't too young to know that this music was what I wanted to hear. And my parents also knew the Khouris and George Benson, and I went to school with Stanley Motta's sons. Their father had the earliest recording studio in Jamaica and released calypso records. So I knew there was something happening on the island. Independence and music. The first artist that I really liked was Eric "Monty" Morris. Just trying to find his records made me aware of the different producers like Coxson and Duke Reid.

I first met Coxson in December 1969. I went by Brentford Road after school looking for "Hello Carol" by the Gladiators which I'd heard at an uptown dance. I found out the name of the group and that it was on Studio One. I first went to other shops like Randy's and KG's, but it was out of stock, so I was forced to go to Studio One. When I went there they called Mr. Dodd to come out and meet me. I don't know why. He was amused at seeing me. I

"There's not one person who likes reggae, who works in the reggae industry, who plays on records, or who produces records, who doesn't owe their very existence to Mr. Dodd. He started it. Before him there was nothing, no labels, no Jamaican music, no Skatalites."

had my St. George's uniform on, and I'm sure they'd never seen a white guy in there before. He wanted to know how I had learned about the song and where I had heard it. I also told him that "Baby Why" by the Cables was my "theme song," and that anytime me and my friends heard it at a dance, we just had to get on the floor. I had also been following English music and groups like the Beatles, so I understood about producers like George Martin. But I hadn't really put it in a Jamaican context up until that point. But when I met Mr. Dodd I realized that here was a guy who basically controlled the music which I was a follower of, and there was something in his presence as a person that made him important. And maybe just that revelation changed the way I viewed Jamaican music. After that I was even more of a Studio One fan, and would always kind of keep in mind where he was as a person. I knew he had moved to Brooklyn for example.

Mr. Dodd and I started working together in 1981, but the first record that we did together, which was *Best of Studio One, Vol. One*, didn't come out until 1983. He hadn't worked with anybody else for quite a few years, and I think it took him some time for him to fully feel comfortable doing business with anyone. He had done a few records prior to that with Buddha and a few with Bamboo in England, and he had had really bad experience with the Wailers material that came out on Calla Records and became the *The Birth of A Legend* set, that he had no real involvement in. Nate McCalla had come to Jamaica to lease American product, and that's how they had met. And when he found out that Mr. Dodd had the original Wailers material, he made a deal for it and it became murky and McCalla ended up dead in the trunk of a car in Miami. Nate worked for Morris Levy at Roulette, and Mr. Dodd was the foreign licensee for the Roulette material.

Q: What was he like personally, especially during the '80s?

A: During the '80s, Studio One was just coming off a string of hits with Michigan and Smiley, Sugar Minott and Freddie McGregor. But after that string of hits ended, Mr. Dodd moved up to the States, and so things were quiet. But just him as a person—it was really fun to work with him, because it wasn't really work. I could ask him questions about all those many records

that he had put out, things that I collected. And he would tell me stories about what it was like to run dances, and his competition with Duke Reid, how Prince Buster was, what was Lee Perry like when he worked for him. There was just an amazing volume of information that no one ever really heard from him.

And so with my albums, I was trying to begin to explain to other people what Studio One had meant to people like me and Jamaica in general. Because Studio One was there from [Jamaican] independence, it was there through rock steady, it was there through the Manley years. It was a soundtrack to so many people's experiences in Jamaica. And to see this quiet, very gentle man, with such an incredible reputation for ruthlessness, but realizing that he wasn't that mythic person. He was just a person who loved music, and had overcome amazing odds to become the first black music entrepreneur in Jamaica when no one wanted to see a black person succeed in almost any field. He started pressing his own records because of the bias of the people who owned the pressing plants. He started his own studio because one day when he went to the studio to do a session, he found that his session had been given to a Chinese producer, even though he had booked and paid in advance for the time. He realized that you had to control your own destiny. He took Garvey's message to heart, and realized that no one was going to get anywhere under the conditions that black producers had to face in Jamaica.

Another thing that I respected in him was his friendship with musicians like Roland Alphonso, and how those relationships really were not just about music, but had come to represent an interaction between business and friendship that really allowed for music to progress at the time, during the ska era for example. You take a situation where Mr. Dodd recorded almost 100 tracks with the Wailers, and then you realize that in their entire career they never did a hundred songs for anybody else, because he was someone who was never tired of experimenting and trying to develop the artist to achieve greatness when other producers would, if the person didn't have hits, give up. There's artists like Marcia Griffiths and Ken Boothe that he spent countless hours develop-

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BOB MARLEY & THE WAILERS

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ing material, trying different things, until they finally enjoyed their first hit.
Q: What did you learn about producing from watching him work, and working side by side with him?

A: How he worked as a producer is something that many people have commented on over the years and there are even people who have discounted him as a producer. Nothing ever recorded at Studio One was recorded without his express approval. His big concern, with all of his material, was the bass lines and the horn sections. He was brought up listening to the top American bands of the '40s and '50s, and he had played most of the material in his dances in Jamaica himself. So he knew how to judge material in terms of how a crowd was going to respond to it. So when an artist went into the studio to record for Studio One, he had been auditioned, rehearsed and overseen by Mr. Dodd. And the musicians knew, and they knew that Mr. Dodd knew. So they weren't going to give him anything faulty or weak because they respected him and knew that he was aware of the potential of a song. And that's why today there are so many top Studio One hits being recycled constantly, because these were well seasoned.

I've heard him going to the studio and not saying anything if things were going well, but I've also heard him start saying "Jackson" and people almost instinctively knew that what they were doing was not meeting his approval, and they would try something new. And sometimes "Jackson" meant a lot, because it wasn't like ordering someone to do something, it was like someone who had a racehorse and knew how to make the horse run. He didn't have to punish the musicians to get what he wanted. And you ask any of those musicians—they always respect Mr. Dodd and his knowledge and his charisma.

Q: But what about you and him as people? You were in a most envied position, not just one of the only white people to ever get close to him, from the outside as it were—you were one of the only people outside of his immediate family that he trusted. What did that feel like, how did that manifest itself?

A: Mr. Dodd gave me my start in the music business. And I will always be grateful to him for seeing something in me and he knew I was an unabashed fan. And over the years we became friends. And sometimes it was not even about work anymore, or business. Surprisingly, we had a lot in common. We are both religious, and we both really like the same type of things, like recording equipment, American music. Can anyone really explain friendship? It just seems to happen. We just got along. I mean, people say he's difficult. I never found that. I just loved his personality and his style. He was one of the most incredible storytellers. But you never ever felt like writing it down, because it was always of the moment. To just sit there and write and try to remember everything he said, was just defeated the purpose of the story. He didn't like tape recorders. He didn't like interviews. But he loved Jamaican music, he loved everything about those dances that he used to hold, the competition, and he had a lot of friends from that period, that were still his friends, and they would get together and reminisce. You couldn't believe what you were hearing. Like the story about Busby, the badman, who was killed, and was a big Studio One fan.

I have memories of him working with Alton Ellis, and this was long after Alton had hits for Studio One. Mr. Dodd always loved Alton. You can ask Alton. He was someone who could always move around Mr. Dodd. Anyway, Alton was singing and Mr. Dodd was directing the session, reasoning and coaxing the performance. It was one of the few

things I bothered to record. It was in those sessions that Alton did "Joy in the Morning" which we put out. I also remember when I went to do an overdubbing session at Studio One in New York for one of the [Everton] Blender songs. The musicians were there but not the engineer so Mr. Dodd set up the session and ran the board until the engineer finally arrived. It was a privilege to have him do that but he didn't want us to have to wait around so he just stayed in. Blender also sang "We No Fear" in the studio in New York using the same microphone that Bob Marley and countless others had sung on. Studio One is just like that. Pure history.

Q: What was Mr. Dodd's attitude toward Bob Marley in those later years?

A: I remember Mr. Dodd telling me about running into Bob at the airport in Kingston in the late '70s, and saying that even after all those years, there was respect between the both of them. I think that Mr. Dodd really looked back at the years the Wailers were with him with a lot of fondness. Maybe the memory of some of their dealings wasn't that enjoyable. But the music certainly was. And funnily enough, I don't think that the Wailers left Studio One under a cloud of antagonism. I think that just like many other people, they moved



PHOTO BY ALTY BENJAMIN

"Mr. Dodd gave me my start in the music business. And I will always be grateful to him for seeing something in me and he knew I was an unabashed fan. And over the years we became friends."

—Chris Wilson, pictured with Dodd and Mrs. Darlington, Dodd's mother, at Studio One's 35th anniversary party in 1991.

"[Coxson was] this quiet, very gentle man, with such an incredible reputation for ruthlessness, but ... he wasn't that mythic person. He was just a person who loved music, and had overcome amazing odds to become the first black music entrepreneur in Jamaica when no one wanted to see a black person succeed in almost any field."

on. The Wailers themselves as a group had had a hard time adjusting to rock steady, and weren't having the hits they enjoyed while at Studio One. In any musical form, generally that means a change, but Mr. Dodd knew how great they were, because he was the first to see it in them. And when they came to Studio One and he heard them, they became part of his dreams, as much as they were part of their own dreams, and both as dreamers, they achieved greatness.

At first, Mr. Dodd felt that Junior Braithwaite was the better singer, because he had gotten some of those early, good songs out of Junior.

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proximity to the African continent, with its dueling guitars and talking drums echoing a 6/8 rhythm grafted off a King Sunny Ade classic. A big surprise is hidden in the album's final cut "Tabanka Assigo" where her voice soars anthem-like one last time. Of course you will find a *morna* or two here...what good Cape Verdean mix would be without it? [www.lusafrika.com]

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But he realized that Junior didn't have the fire and that Bob would work extra hard to find something to give him that was recordable. So at first glance, he didn't recognize Bob, but by the time Bob left, he knew Bob was a great singer, and he wanted Bob to be even greater, and that's why they did so many different styles of music at Studio One. He felt there was no better way to create a great singer than to explore all the different styles of music and create a very versatile singer. He didn't feel that way about Bunny or Peter, and only really noticed them in some ways after Bob had moved to the States. That's when he started to focus more on both Bunny and Peter, and got some great material from them. But at first they were in Bob's shadows, which in some ways is where a lot of people have always put them. But they did great songs at Studio One as well.

Q: What is his legacy?

A: When Mr. Dodd passed away, it was hard to envision Jamaica and its music without him. His personality was so overpowering and so many people in the business modeled themselves on him even while in competition with him, that not to have him there seems an aberration. There's not one person who likes reggae, who works in the reggae industry, who plays on records, or who produces records, who doesn't owe their very existence to Mr. Dodd. He started it. Before him there was nothing, no labels, no Jamaican music, no Skatalites—I mean, there is no comparison anywhere in the world with Mr. Dodd.

Q: Would Berry Gordy of Motown be an apt comparison?

A: Berry Gordy took existing business models and created one where he achieved greatness. There were other great producers, record company owners, record labels, already in existence before Berry Gordy. And there were many big-selling records before Berry Gordy. Before Coxson in Jamaica, there was nothing. I remember Mr. Dodd telling me, no one even knew how much money to pay somebody for a session, because no one had ever been paid before for a session. Bands were playing on the bandstand, but never in the studio, unless you did calypso. He just took his love for music and forged ahead. He didn't know what he was really doing, but he followed his instincts even though he was surrounded by people who didn't want to see him succeed, and he forged a legacy which is destined to never be equaled again.

I myself can't imagine never talking to him again, or never seeing him again. How often can you have a relationship with someone whose music changed your life, especially when you

were a child? I grew up with Studio One and as a man I worked with Mr. Dodd. I respected his relationship with his wife Norma, and his kids. There was so much to like and respect in him that on a personal level his passing is a great loss. It was an honor and a blessing to have known him. ★

NOCHES CALIENTES

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and percussion backed by a large complement of chorus voices. "Misa/Palo" is unique for its arrangement of Congolese-derived folklore and its inclusion of a 12-stringed semi-hollow-body guitar (liner notes meticulously document the widely varied instrumentation on all tracks). "Quise Hacer un Recorrido" is a *columbia* rumba featuring the voice of Juan de Dios Ramos Morejón and Jesus Díaz on the *quinto* conga. Extensive liner notes explain the significance and history of each tune and its musical form making this a must-hear for any and all who wish to learn Afro-Cuban folklore. Check it out at www.johnsantos.com.

Chanson Flamenca (Sunnyside) is an ambitious flamenco homage to the classic French song form the *chanson*. It immediately dives into a *cante jondo* (deep flamenco) stomp with the forceful voice of Ramon El Portugués interpreting Becaud's "Et Maintenant." His emotional voice soars to marching percussion, brooding guitar, castanets, piano and elegiac strings. Superb arrangements that graft the harder, raw edge of flamenco to the romantic, smooth burlesque of the *chanson* are mostly successful on this varied recording. Among the best cuts are a version of George Moustaki's "Le Méteque" by Guardiania, retitled "El Extranjero" and the rousing version of Gainsbourg's "Couleur Café." "Color Café" is sung with gusto by the raspy voiced Yeyé de Cadiz backed by an erotic female chorus and "olé" cat-calls, handclaps and rapid fire, percussive flamenco guitar. While there is enough musical substance and creativity to make this worthwhile by itself, what I would love to see is a concert by all these talented musicians and arrangers that would let them stretch out even more.

From south of the equator, the prolific compilers at World Music Network bring us another enlightening musical introduction, this time in the form of the *Rough Guide to Tango Nuevo*. Acoustic, raw and demanding a serious degree of musicianship, tango has earned its mystique as a dark and brooding force that requires one to lay bare one's soul. The 19 tracks here explore the corners and edges of the tango movement that stretches into jazz, folk, classical, rock and avant-garde music. From the quirky trio La Chicana to the prodigy diva Sandra Luna and various quintets, quartets and trios, the tango has as many forms as it has practitioners. "Balada Para un Loco" by Roberto Goyeneche with Adriana Varela sounds like a bohemian poet ranting as his stern lover masks her weariness in a melodious voice that counterbalances the madness. Patricia Andrade gives us a tango centered on the heavy bass drone of a piano thumping like an industrial tango for

an avant-garde dance performance. Drums enter the mix in a vaguely Afro-Cuban mode adding a spark to the Sonia Possetti Quinteto. And to add further confusion and elation we have the Django-tango of Juanjo Domínguez who sounds like he's channeling Django Reinhardt himself with cascading guitar riffs. A deep exploration of a heavy musical terrain, this collection is superb and as would be appropriate to its subject matter, a bit disorienting.

Nu Latin (Manteca) is an excellent collection compiled by Mambo Inn founder Gerry Lyseight in London and delivers precisely what its subtitle claims—"Fresh sounds of today's new Latin music." Exploring the full range of the Latin dance world it touches on hip-hop, electronica, salsa, ska, flamenco, Brazilian rhythms, jungle, soul and jazz. In particular are some harder-to-find tracks such as "Babalu" by Ska Cubana, the Yoruba BPM remix of Perez Prado's "Macome," and "I Will Also Remember You" by Oaktown Irawo featuring Omar Sosa. This double cd boasts 27 tracks and clocks in at well over two hours. From Africando to Orishas, Susana Baca, Ibrahim Ferrer and Orquesta Broadway, this collection includes some well-recognized and respected artists alongside remixes and lesser-known artists painting the Latin musical realm in broad strokes with bright colors. As the cd booklet states boldly, "Latin music is everywhere and mutating as it goes." And I might add that whether you've already heard some of the artists here or none of them it's worth a listen. ★

AFRICAN BEAT

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is picked up a little (as on "Yvon") it is with consummate good taste: the guitars are still fluid and the vocals remain musically sweet and controlled. There's even a bit of an '80s zouk/soukous feel on some tracks: "Koumbe Koumbe" benefits from an Antillean-styled female chorus and a zouk keyboard (one of the guest musicians is Antillean keyboard player Ronald Rubinel). In addition to that there is cocktail cha-cha-cha, soft hip-hop, and even a great example of Congolese gospel that closes the album. *Rumbalolango* is extremely accessible and commercial but it is far from being a lightweight and watered-down album. Luciana and Ballou Canta are largely ignored these days by the fickle Congolese record-buying public, but they are still two fine singers whose voices work very well together. Given some good distribution and a bit of publicity this album could be an international "world music" success—and it thoroughly deserves to be.

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Check out the www.africasounds.com Web site where Martin Sinnock's extended articles can be found, and www.TotallyRadio.com to hear his Internet radio broadcasts on *The Ashanti Show* "Viva la Musica" and *The Rough Guide* show.