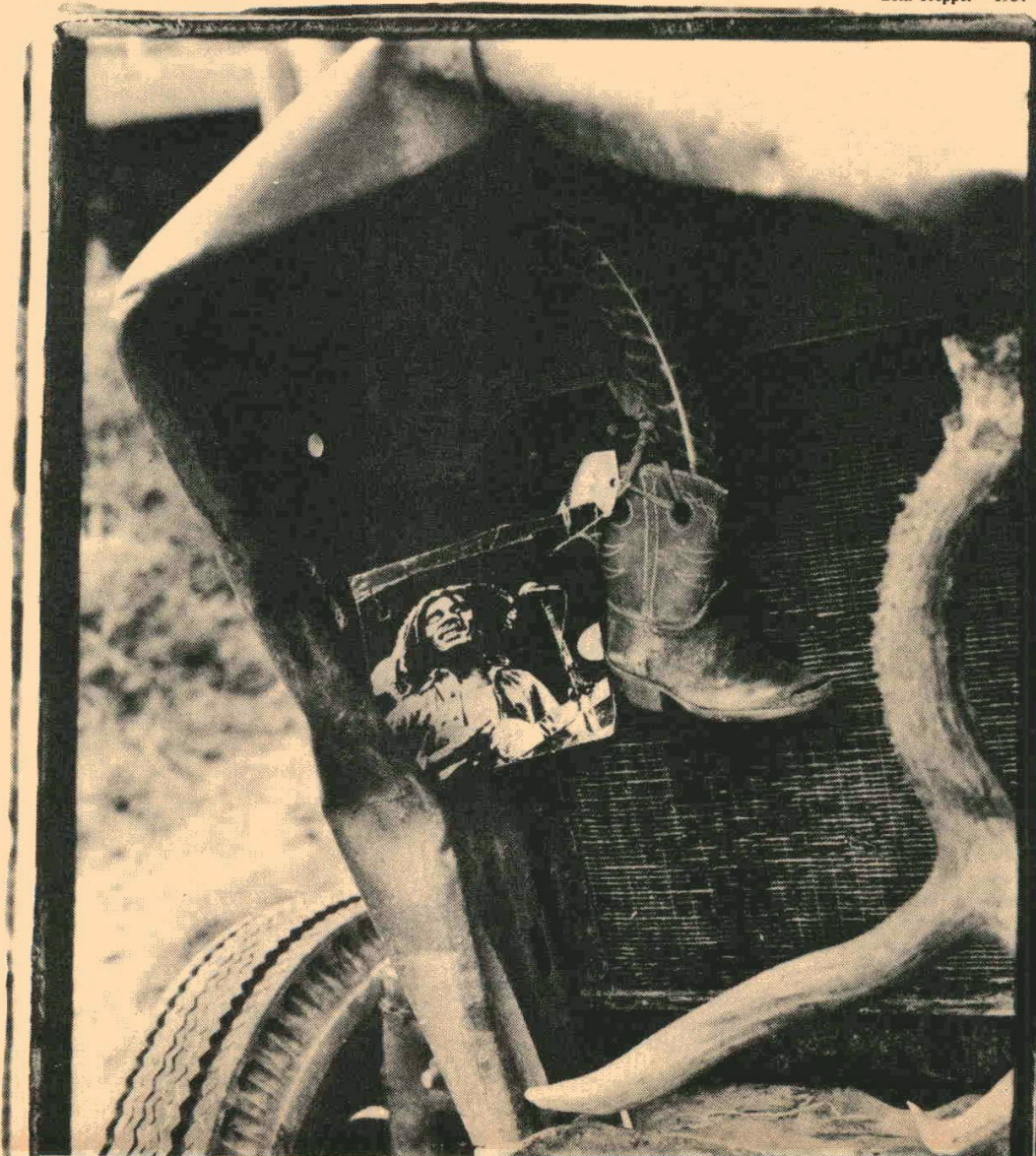


There are the Elders who will tell you they have never been to the top. They are not interested; life is good down here in their canyon. The children follow you, clinging to your skirt, playing with your hair, the golden color of which they may never have seen. They are curious: they want candy, they want your earrings. They want you to be their pen-pal. Their bare feet and Bob Marley t-shirts are covered with dirt and sand. The teenagers want to show you the healing waterfalls. They are macho, they rule the territory. Black Uhuru pounds out "Sinsemilla" from the ghetto blaster. Two miles down the dirt path, one asks you for a spliff. When you cautiously reply you have none, he whips one out with a sly grin. You notice the graffiti on a nearby rock along the trail—it says "Ganja #1." "We," insist the youths, "are the true Rastafari." You have to pinch yourself—this is not Jamaica. This is the most remote Indian reservation in America, and it's at the very bottom of the Grand Canyon.

Close up of Marley "shrine" on tractor grill.

Beth Trepper © 1984





**W**e don't know much, just bits and pieces. But what we've been told is astonishing: Somewhere in the midst of the United States of Babylon, where the White House is playing politricks with the capitolists and the kids are sneaking Whip-its behind the video arcades, there is a Spartan sect of some 400 citizens which has completely adopted the Rastafarian culture of Third World Jamaica. To the Havasupai (commonly known as the Supai) Indians, Bob Marley reigns supreme among the radical heroes of time, along with Geronimo and Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé. His lyrics can be heard above the tribal drums during the religious ceremonies. Jah lives. Peter Tosh is wanted dread and alive. And Shagnatty, Arizona's premier roots reggae band, has been asked by the Havasupai Tribal Council to give the very first live band concert ever to be heard at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.



**W**hen did the Supai discover reggae? How can it be that there is a greater awareness of its music and culture among our country's greatest homegrown minority than among the middle-class teens hanging out on the Santa Monica boardwalk or the record stores in suburban East coast shopping malls?

It goes like this, one Supai man tells me: This Jamaican tourist guy comes down the trail twenty years ago and marries a Supai woman. He has brought reggae tapes. The music is catchy; it spreads like wildfire through the village. They go back to Jamaica and return with more tapes. Now they live somewhere in Phoenix. That's it.

No, no. Some remember when a trio of "sophisticated" Indians came over from California (no one knows from which tribe they came) and blew their Supai brothers away with Bob Marley tapes. After that, one Supai began collecting reggae albums he'd bought in Phoenix, Flagstaff and Kingman, and took them around door to door in Supai Village, starting a trend.

Others say it has always been here.



**T**he brochure at the Hualapi Hilltop parking lot reads, "This is the point where visitors begin their trek into the ancient world of the Havasupai. The visitor will leave his car and his familiar world at Hilltop and descend by foot or horseback along a winding, eight-mile trail down sheer cliffs and through rugged, dry canyons. Please leave your liquor, drugs, weapons and pets at home and enjoy the canyon."

Cassi-I is worried about her Hammond. As Logga, Sticky and Ras Dan unload the rest of the equipment from the Shagnatty bus, several Indians help assemble the instruments and amplifiers into the large rope net which will be attached to the bottom of the helicopter. There has been a tremendous storm the previous day and today's overcast sky keeps away the dry August heat. However, the pilot warns that, should an adverse wind pocket hit the chopper mid-air, he will be forced to release the net. It's either him or the cargo. Cassi-I is *real* worried about her Hammond.

While the chopper is being loaded, I stroll across the parking lot to where a group of young Supais have settled nonchalantly on the hood of my pickup truck. Their eyes are fixed on one boy who expertly twirls a lariat this way and that, in what must be a classic western tradition.

"Gettin' ready for the competition," one Indian explains. "This weekend is Annual Havasupai Peach Festival," which, I

# SKANKING WITH THE SUPAI

Photos & Text By

**BETH TREPPER**

am told, consists of a rodeo, arts and crafts show, Miss Havasupai 1983 beauty contest and a gala celebration of the peach harvest. Looking around at the surrounding cactus, I find it hard to believe there could be lush fruit trees down in Supai. Jumping at the chance, I change the subject.

"Do you like reggae music?" I ask the boys.

"Yeah, we listen all the time!" one replies anxiously. "We listen for twenty years!"

"Twenty years?" I ask skeptically.

"Twenty-five," he corrects himself.

"I have tapes!" another says proudly. "You should see all my tapes!"

"Why do you like reggae?" I ask, anticipating a lengthy, emotional explanation.

"Dunno," says the boy next to me. "Guess it's a habit."



**B**y noon, after the fourth load has been flown away into the depths of the canyon, the net left to the mercy of the wind pattern, we begin our journey on foot, for we have opted to hike rather than fly. It is at once an adventure of intrigue. Most of the band members have never even seen the Grand Canyon, let alone its half-dozen well-maintained trails along the South Rim, where on any given day one may pass a steady flow of hikers from Tokyo, Paris, Cleveland or nearby Flagstaff. Yet we now find ourselves some forty miles northwest of these tourist trails on perhaps the most isolated and primitive trail the Grand Canyon has to offer. The Yellow Brick Road begins as a mere four-foot wide descent of treacherous switchbacks, and Oz is one hell of a long way off.

One of the women giggles nervously. "Man, this is sure going to be a test of my acrophobia!" she says, gazing down at the spectacular drop-off. Just then, the sound of hooves makes us jump aside as a young Supai rides by on horseback, guiding a train of seven pack mules down the narrow, rocky path. It might be food they carry, with which to stock the little general store in Supai Village. Or it might be the mail; Supai has the

**CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE**



only pack train mail left in America. As we head towards Supai to make history, we may just have seen a piece ride by.

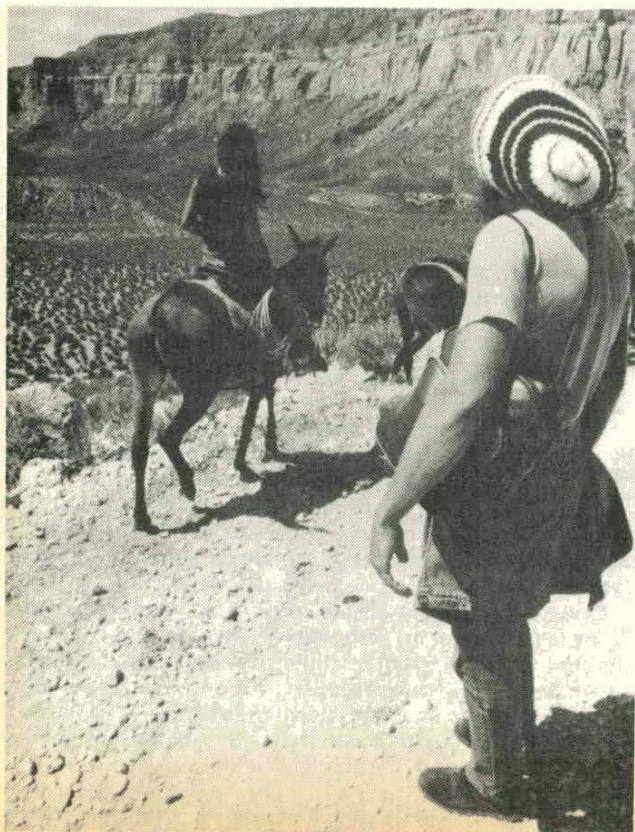
About a mile or so down at the base of the switchbacks, the trail levels out to a wide plateau, from which we get a broad view of the canyon. Way off in the distance lies Havasupai. Again, it is difficult to imagine that there really does exist a Shangrila within this dessicated canyon.

What seems like endless miles later, we stop for a welcome lunch break. The trail now winds through a narrow, deep gorge filled with huge boulders and a small, trickling stream. It is very shady, the steep cliffs blocking out the sunlight, but overhead we can see ominous thunderheads moving in. We try not to worry, though we've been told the concert is to be held outdoors tonight. Fortunately, the band's manager, Howard Green, arrived in the village this morning to supervise the landing of the equipment. Hopefully, there are tarps or a covered stage down there. Each of us is left to quiet reflection when suddenly the sound of a cantering horse slices the silence. An obviously intoxicated Supai teen comes screeching to a halt in front of us.

"You the band?" he asks, somewhat suspiciously. We nod. "Jah Rastafari!" he shouts, extending his arm. We offer him cheese and trail mix; he asks us for ganja. The Rasta vernacular catches us by surprise. Ras Dan passes a spliff.

Then, staring directly at me through bleary eyes, the youth asks, "Hey, camera lady, you want ride with me?" I don't know which is the lesser of two evils—my excruciating blisters or a roller-coaster horseback ride with a drunken Supai. Not wishing to abandon my colleagues (!), I opt for the foot trouble. Besides, hadn't we seen a little wooden sign, "Supai Village—two miles," somewhere back there? *Anywhere?* Our

Young Supai boy with pack train. (Logga, the bass player steps aside.)



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Indian friend grunts and rides off.

Back on the trail, we meet a group of backpackers, on their way to the Supai campgrounds two miles north of the village, designated by the Tribal Council as the only place in the canyon where tourists may camp. Visitors must purchase a permit from the Council, as only a limited number of persons may enter the canyon at one time.

"I can't believe it," one of the hikers says. "We come down here to go camping and we hear there's gonna be some kind of rock concert tonight! Can you believe it? In the Grand Canyon?" It must be the dreadlocks that give us away.

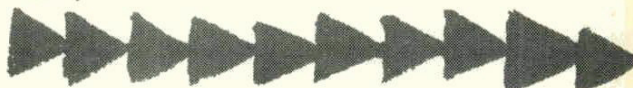
"Oh," she hesitates, "are you the band?"

"Reggae," I correct her. "It's a reggae concert."



"If there's a place in America that's like Jamaica, it's Supai," says Tom Nicas, a teacher in Peach Springs, Arizona, eighty miles southwest of the Hilltop parking lot and home of the Supai's "linguistic cousins," the Hualapai. "Supai's got water," Nicas points out, "it's got a Third World population and it's isolated."

Though reggae music runs rampant on the Hualapai, and—interestingly enough—on the Hopi and Navajo reservations, it is among the Havasupai that the Rasta culture seems the most entrenched. "That whole Messianic type of thing blends well with the Indian culture in a lot of ways," Nicas says. "It articulates the poverty they feel. Jamaica may be even a little more primitive than Supai, but their living conditions are not that far removed." As in the Kingston ghettos, the people of Supai are plagued by poverty, unemployment and chronic alcohol and drug abuse. The Indians are misunderstood; they are outcasts. They are a humble, yet fiercely proud people. They know there is a life beyond their "Trenchtown," but it's a lot farther than calculated miles. So they get by. They seek refuge in the turquoise waters and beautiful falls, which have the sacred healing powers of the Gods, of Jah. They grow their own crops and pray for rain. They dance for the harvest and sing reggae for their souls. By the time the little children are six years old, they can weave a basket and roll a spliff with equal mastery.



We've hiked nearly four hours. It's not as much fun anymore. But gradually we notice a change. The yucca and prickly pear become more scarce and soon give way to the most lush foliage imaginable—cottonwood, acacia, mesquite, wild grapes, wild celery and thick grasses. This isn't Emerald City—we have reached Zion.

As we enter Supai Village, the tiny houses and rich meadows more closely resemble a quaint Welsh hamlet than any preconceived image of an Indian reservation. But something is decidedly different.

We pass a bungalow, from which emerges the unmistakable voice of Bob Marley. Running to the window, a Supai boy proudly holds up his tape deck and cranks the volume as we walk by. "Rastafari!" he shouts. Several younger children run out on the porch, dancing to the beat. They are all wearing Bob Marley T-shirts. And enormous smiles.

"Look over there!" someone points out. On the side of an outdoor commode are scrawled the words "Jah Love." We look at one another in amazement. This is *bizarre*—where are we?!

By the time we reach the center of town, which is merely the center crossroads of two dirt paths, we have heard Marley, Jimmy Cliff, Peter Tosh and Black Uhuru. Virtually every house





Supai waitress in café. (Photo of Tyrone Downie below Shagnatty album on wall.)

is skanking with the distinct backbeat of reggae music. Is this the Supai's way of welcoming us or does this go on all the time? Children follow us, the older ones wave, some shouting "Jah!" and raising a defiant fist of power. We feel like celebrities, yet we feel like one of them. There is an immediate bond that needs no questioning.

Howard meets us, assuring us the equipment has arrived safely and is being stored at the schoolhouse across the way. He has met with Clark, the chief of the Supais, and plans are set to begin the concert at 8:00 pm. Relieved, we head towards the little café for a feast of orange juice, Indian fry bread and Navajo bean tacos. It's about as I-tal as we're going to get—no one in this tribe is skinny. The cherub faces and rotund bodies reflect the severe pork and starch diet upon which the Supais feed. As we pass the school by the café, something catches my eye. The bleachers by the basketball court are brightly painted—red, green and gold.

The café is the hub of the village, the social gathering place. Howard has opened a box of Shagnatty records, and a group of plump, giggling schoolgirls gathers around, matching the faces on the album jacket to the ones seated at our table. A scratchy Heptones tune fills the room.

As I go up to the counter to order, I notice, between the soft ice cream machine and an ancient photograph of Indian settlers, an autographed photo of Tyrone Downie. It says, "I love Supai Rastafarians."

Cedella Booker loves to tell of the time she and Tyrone Downie visited Havasupai in 1982. "Oh, 'twas beautiful, mon," she told me in the kitchen of her sister's home in Wilmington, Delaware this year. "Ev'rybody down deh, dem jus' love Bob so much."

A chance meeting, not long after Marley's death, between

some Supai Indians and Chris Blackwell of Island Records resulted in the special trip. Blackwell was in a record store in Las Vegas when several Indians came in and bought a stack of reggae albums. Fascinated, Blackwell asked where they were from. When they said the bottom of the Grand Canyon, Blackwell knew this merited further investigation. Shortly thereafter, Blackwell, Cedella, Downie and Bob's cousin Gloria flew down for a one-day visit to "the other Jamaica."

"Dey took us to de Falls," said Cedella, "an' dey wanted me to sing for dem. But, my lord, child, I couldn't even 'ear meself t'ink, de water it come a rushin' down so!" Not wanting to disappoint her hosts, for the entire tribe had gathered around in anticipation, Cedella simply took one of the children's blasters, stuck in a tape of her son, hung it in a nearby tree—and started dancing. "An' soon, all de people, dem start a dancin' wit' me!"

Later, Tyrone borrowed the piano in the schoolhouse to play some classic Wailers tunes and was treated to a surprise. The Indians played *their* version of reggae for the visitors. "It was so joyous to see 'ow dem love de reggae music," Cedella said.

Later that afternoon, when the group of visitors had landed back at Hualapi Hilltop, someone pointed upward. There in the midst of a flawless sky, was a brilliant rainbow, horizon to horizon. Blackwell's photographer quickly raised his camera. Instantly, the rainbow vanished.

"Bob didn't want his picture taken?" I asked Cedella.

"No, mon," she shook her head quietly.

A half-dozen Indians have shown up to help move the equipment from the schoolhouse to the field, where the Supais have built a good-sized wooden stage. Just as we're wondering how the things will be transported, a young boy drives up on an enormous, ancient Ford tractor with a flat-bed trailer attached. It's noisy and dirty and appears on its last leg.

But this is not just any tractor, we are told. It is the sole source of mechanized transportation on the reservation. This tractor is used for virtually everything—it carries the lumber, the peaches, the food staples. It carried Cedella and Tyrone. And now it will carry Jah music.

I walk around to get a better look at this trusty steed—and stop short in my tracks with a gasp. There, nestled inside the front grill between a child's weathered cowboy boot and a bleached deer antler, is a ragged black and white photograph of Bob Marley, the King of Reggae. A closer look reveals the word "Rasta" scratched on the metal beside an eagle feather. Knowing from Indian folklore how sacred is the feather, this "shrine"—more than any of the other truly amazing signs and symbols we have seen on our trip, portrays the high esteem in which the Havasupai hold Bob Marley and his teachings. As trite as it may sound, I am moved to tears.

Setting up.



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## WHAT REGGAE MEANS TO ME

by Tom Nicas's 6th Grade Class Peach Springs School

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

**"It is the black people who sing it. It sounds good. They sing because they remember their slavery days. Some of the people who live in Jamaica have been shot down by the cavalry. Some of the people been causing wars against each other. Some sing about the wars in Jamaica or all over the world. Some died cause of hunger. Some died from slavery. Some died of disease and disarmament. Like I say their is no cement that can hold the world together. Love is the only hope. That's what reggae means to me."**

—BYRON

**"Reggae is music that sounds like African music. Reggae gots soul. Trenchtown is a ghetto where people go to when they have no money. Jamaica is a place on an island. Some people think it is a awful place but it is not. I think it is a nice place."**

—NETTIE

**"They are still treating us like we are still slaves . . . and the white people are trying to take our land away . . . but Jah children are on the move to another creation, but please share the land. I know it is hard but try and live together. It is a sad feeling to see black, white, brown people fighting for survival."**

—RICHARD

**"Why people like reggae music? Because it has class. That is not all. It has good sounds. The people that sing reggae are good . . . How Bob Marley died? He died of cancer when he was 36 years old. Trench town is where there is no food or water and where there is little shacks. Trench town is like a ghetto. All bootied up. No money no food or water there is no jobs."**

—GERALD

**"Bob Marley was the only friend in Jamaica cause they were black like him and smoke marijuana."**

—DANNY

**"S**hagnatty Havasupai!" Ras Dan shouts and starts the insistent beat of the drums. Instantly, the field is alive with dancers. The littlest ones crowd the stage, the older ones check to make sure their blasters are recording the music. Clear in the back of the field, the Elders sit silently. It's difficult to know how they feel about all this; they don't say much, they observe.

Everyone has come to the event—for many, their first concert ever—decked out in their finest Marley T-shirts. The most popular one is the Wailers 1978 Kaya World Tour shirt. When one child gets a certain design, the others want it too. They are proud of their reggae merchandise and cheerfully pose for a photograph.

A group of little girls run up and grab my arm, pulling me over to dance in front of the stage. When I stoop to take a picture, they tug on my cornrows and kiss my cheek, then run off again to dance with their parents. Their unassuming love clouds my eyes again.

Sometime in the middle of the first set, a Supai youth jumps up on stage, grabs the sticks out of Sticky's hands, and starts beating on the various percussion. Somewhat jolted, Sticky joins in on the congas. This Indian is great, I think to myself, then laugh—why shouldn't he be—after all, isn't he just playing an inherent tribal beat?

Suddenly, another Supai is on the stage, this time motioning to Shagnatty to ease up a bit. Curious, the band obliges. Ras Dan stops singing and leads into a haunting dub. The Indian walks up to the mike and starts *toasting*. And it's not in Yellowman rap—it's in Supai.

More Supais jump onstage, beating their drums, chanting and dancing. It's beginning to resemble some sort of avant-garde theatre troupe or the cast of "Hair"—army fatigues, fringed leather vests, dreadlocks and cowboy hats. And Bob Marley T-shirts. The crowd goes wild. Everyone is caught up in this phenomenal marriage of primitive ritual and ageless rhythm.

Back in control again, Shagnatty carries through the night with ethereal melodies and socio-political messages. "Jah kingdom come, I say, Babylon, your kingdom fall down..."

The music swells, echoing in a natural call-and-response from one cliff to another throughout the canyon. "Go down, Babylon..."

To the Supais, this is rebel music, an escape from oppression. Unlike their Jamaican Rasta brothers and sisters, the Indians don't want to go back to the promised land; they want it to come back to them.

The elders remain motionless and observe.



**O**ne of the teenagers has brought us a basket of peaches. Some of the older ones help dismantle the wires and pack up the last of the amplifiers. It is their last chance to hear the tapes we've brought. If they gave us their addresses, maybe we could send them more tapes sometime? Or just write?

The helicopter is ready to load the passengers. Too much hiking, too much dancing, way too many blisters—thank Jah for modern technology. As I prepare to board the chopper, a little girl tugs at my skirt. I bend to kiss her and give her my earrings, asking if she enjoyed our visit. An emphatic nod leads me to my last question, my final attempt.

"Why do you like reggae music?"

She looks up at me, her dark saucer eyes grinning, as if I should already know the answer. She shrugs her shoulders and smiles.

"Peace," she says.

★  
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