



PHOTO BY FRANK MICELLOTAGETTY IMAGES

# TOOTS AND THE MAYTALS

## STILL IS STILL MOVING TO US

What traits must a music superstar possess? Charisma, the injection of one's heart and soul in every note, every song, every album, every concert and an unwavering commitment to one's craft are essential characteristics of a recording artist whose music stands the test of time.

These characteristics define the legendary career of Jamaican singer Toots Hibbert.

Over the years, Toots and the Maytals have inspired countless youngsters. Many, of course, became reggae singers because of the remarkable influence this band has had. From the Caribbean, to Africa, to the United Kingdom, to the United States, the Maytals have secured a legacy that can only be described this way: The band is part of the foundation of reggae (more on that later), and, like a fine wine, Toots has aged to perfection.

Casper Lomayesva, a Hopi-Navajo from Arizona and the frontman for reggae band Casper and the Mighty 602 Band, summarizes the sentiments of many when he says, "Toots is an awesome performer as well as an awesome guy.

"I have had the chance to see him on numerous occasions and he gets better with time. He kind of reminds me of James Brown with his style of dance and song. He truly is a pioneer," Lomayesva continues. (Others say Toots reminds them of the late Otis Redding, a fellow who sang soul tunes with unbridled passion.)

Casper has first-hand recollections of dealing with Toots in his element: live at a concert. Here's what he remembers about one recent memorable experience: "What I like most about him is his kindness. He always was very nice

By ED M. ODEVEN

and sincere when speaking to the crowd or an individual. I was back stage hangin' with him and the band one evening in Santa Cruz, CA.

"I happened to be the MC for the evening and I knew his manager, so I didn't need anything else. I belonged in the room with him. He had just finished his set for the night and the crowd would not let him leave. They were screaming at the tops of their lungs for an encore.

"Toots was sitting down attempting to dry the sweat from his face and head. I looked at him and asked if he was ready for one more song. I thought that maybe he'd say, 'Hell no, I'm tired.' But he smiled at me and said, 'Ya mon, let's do one more.'

"I happily took the stage to the screams of the people and screamed back 'Are

you ready for one more?' The rest is history. I recommend every human being to go catch one of his shows."

Since first bursting onto the scene in the 1960s, Toots and the Maytals have been making albums, touring and concocting new chart-topping tunes in musical styles that blend gospel, calypso, ska, funk r&b, rock, blues, country, you name it, Toots has incorporated that genre into his band's ever-expanding, diverse sound.

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Fast forward to 2004. Toots and the Maytals are touring again, playing new and old favorites while promoting their new V2 Records album, *True Love*, which is truly

an all-star collaboration. A Who's Who of music talent appears on the 15-track album: Willie Nelson, Bonnie Raitt, Eric Clapton, Bunny Wailer, No Doubt, Trey Anastasio, Ben Harper, The Roots, Bootsy Collins, and the list goes on.

A few highlights: Willie Nelson, for instance, duets with Toots on the album's opening track, "Still Is Still Moving to Me." Bonnie Raitt offers her music talents on "True Love Is Hard to Find." The always-popular "Pressure Drop" features Toots' moving vocals and a whimsical wah-wah guitar backing by the great Eric Clapton. Not to be overlooked: "Reggae Got Soul" with Ken Boothe and Marcia Griffiths, "Careless Ethiopians" with Keith Richards and "Take A Trip" with Bunny Wailer.

This album gives the Maytals a chance to reintroduce their talent to fans, both new and old. "It was nice to show that I have many different ways of doing my music," Toots says during a postconcert interview in April at the Orpheum Theater in Flagstaff, AZ. "It's good that it was permitted to be done this way, because everyone is like one big family," he continues. "They know my style, they love my songs, they have my records at their home. Some of them, we never met before—but when they hear my records it's like, 'Yeah, man! I've been listening to Toots and the Maytals long time.'"

Some of the band's younger fans, however, still comprehend the mass appeal of the Maytals in the 21st century, a time when dancehall reggae dominates the airwaves, not so-called traditional reggae. "[Reggae] touches all our souls," says Eric Gonnie, a 23-year-old Arizonan, "even though it has the stereotype of smoking weed. But it's more than that. It's all about resisting that oppression/government, ghetto poverty. It's really fighting the system, having a voice about what's really happening." Which is why the Maytals are one of Gonnie's favorite bands, he says.

"[Their music] is expressing important issues that we need to hear as humankind," he continues. "It's good music. We need to hear messages like that more often."

From the get-go at the Maytals' Flagstaff show, concert-goers are on their feet, shaking their hips, bopping their heads and delightedly singing along to numerous classic hits, including "54-46 Was My Number," "Funky Kingston," "Monkey Man" and "Sweet and Dandy." Wearing blue jeans, a denim vest and a black headband, Toots, born in 1945 in May Pen, Clarendon, takes center stage—and doesn't relinquish it. As he performs, Toots' joy is hypnotic and contagious. The crowd can see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice. In turn, they feel the same way. That's what reggae music does to you.

"[Performing] really moves me a lot," Toots explains. "The energy comes from me to the audience, and the audience gives me back the energy. So we equal the energy. That's why my show is so dynamic. It gives you something to remember."

This two-hour set is a microcosm of Toots' five glorious decades in music.



Now an elder statesman of reggae, Toots—the man who's widely credited with coining the term reggae with the Maytals' 1968 hit "Do the Reggay," which was named after a popular dance at the time—fully comprehends his place in music history. And he's still honored to be a prominent figure.

"From that time until this time, myself and Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff and all those great reggae writers, real reggae singers [have popularized the music]," he says. "I sing reggae, I sing r&b, I sing soca, I sing calypso, I sing country. I create music, and I'm a musician; a lot of instruments I play.

"I'm doing this album because people should really hear the real reggae roots, and also with the presence of these great

r&b and classic singers singing my reggae songs with me. This is what I want to do to let the youth of today learn about real reggae music, and it can go a far way. With r&b roots and reggae roots together is what we did."

This has been a special year for Toots. Call it a career revival of sorts. *True Love* is the best-selling album of his career, with nearly 80,000 sold at press-time, and logged 10 weeks on the *Billboard* Top 200 chart. Long-time fans have renewed interest in the Maytals. Others, meanwhile, are discovering the band for the first time.

If that wasn't enough, Toots and the Maytals made their first-ever appearance on "Saturday Night Live" in the spring. That was a thrilling experience, according to the band's leader. "It was wicked," he says with a good-natured chuckle, "wicked good."

After that show, Toots received thousands of e-mails from fans around the world. Their message: We love the new album.

Not surprisingly, he shares their admiration for it. After all, it is a career-defining record that's part retrospective, part futuristic. Toots was asked what this album means to him personally.

"It's a joy, a lot of fun," he says, resting after the high-energy, jam-packed show. "All of my friends in America, some very great songwriters, took time to sit down with me and sing my songs with me. It's a great pleasure to work with these great people, including my producer Richard Feldman.

"It's the tradition. It's everything," he concludes. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime thing. It's a good thing. It is 'True Love.'"

*Ed Odeven is a sportswriter for the Arizona Daily Sun and an avid postcard collector.*



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