

'Jah Lives', 40 years on



Michael Reckord

Gleaner Writer

THE FIRST documentary on the Rastafari movement made in Jamaica was celebrated with a screening and discussion at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, last Friday. Made in 1977, **Jah Lives** is a 40-minute, black and white film produced by the then Caribbean Institute of Mass Communication (CARIMAC), with the students involved supervised by lecturer and filmmaker Franklyn 'Chappie' St Juste.

The film got only one public screening on Jamaica Information Service (JIS) television, St Juste told the viewers in the multi-functional room, at UWI's main library. Then, it went into "hibernation" for many years. However, as a result of his mentioning its existence to an academic from Washington DC's Smithsonian Institute, the film was repaired and restored by the Institute and DVDs made. The original is now in the Smithsonian archives.

Calling **Jah Lives** a labour of love, St Juste said that it was the



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL RECKORD

Franklyn 'Chappie' St Juste, who led CARIMAC students in making the film 'Jah Lives' in 1977, speaks at last Friday's 40th anniversary screening of the documentary at the UWI, Mona.

first film made by CARIMAC after the teaching of film-making started there in 1976. "We wanted to do something that created a lasting impression and decided to make a film on Rastafari, because they had never had a voice to speak for themselves ... though there were external voices talking about them," he said.

Chuckling, St Juste said that he had a problem with the first 'reasoning' he and his students

had with one Rastafari group. "They decided we should share a pipe, but it passed me and the students involved, for we didn't want to have anything to do with it. After 20 minutes I started to feel sick and had to retire to another room," he said.

The majority of the filming took place in three locations – Bull Bay with a group there, Rockfort with the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari, and the hills above Bull Bay with the

Bobo Ashanti in the commune there. The film-makers also explored the movement's early history and the involvement of Leonard Howell, who is generally accepted as the founder of the movement in Jamaica.

ADDITIONAL PLOTS

I sensed some consternation when respected Rasta elder, educator, and author Teklah Mekfet rose to contradict the view that the movement began in Jamaica. He called the island a mere "outpost" of the true home of the movement, Ethiopia. Mekfet gave the 2010 Bob Marley lecture at the UWI and subsequently produced a book based on it, **Could You Be Loved: Rastafari-Reggae Bob Marley: Africa Scattered for Rhythm of Spirit of Oneness for the World**.

A UWI administrator suggested that Jamaica should create a "global pilgrimage centre" around Rastafari, as, because of the popularity of the movement worldwide, a lot of tourists and money would flow to the island, and that Rastafari belief system needed to be systematised and the liturgy structured. Moderator of the discussion, UWI lecturer Dr Michael Barnett, editor of **Rastafari in the New Millennium: A Rastafari Reader**, said that there were plans for additional plots at Pinnacle, near Sligoville, St Catherine, a site associated with Howell, to be designated a

national heritage site. One plot has already been identified by the Government and there is hope others would be, too.

Barnett added that Rastafari is a heterogeneous religion of "many mansions with different theological beliefs," and having it "streamlined" now was not possible. For example, he said, in the Nyabingi mansion, Haile Selassie 1 is the Almighty, the Trinity, while for the Bobo Ashanti, the Trinity comprises Prince (or King) Emanuel, Marcus Garvey, and Haile Selassie 1. In all the orders, Haile Selassie is deified, but his "placing" may differ from one to the other.

Commenting on the music in **Jah Lives**, which features (among other musicians) Stephen 'Cat' Coore and the late Joe Ruglass, musicologist Herbie Miller said that he is happy that the "conscious music" of the 1970s, which had changed in the 80s to become more commercial and self-centred, was coming to the fore again with artistes like Chronixx, Jah9, and Queen Ifrica.

St Juste said, "After 40 years, I would like to look at the current approach to Rastafari by the society, especially as we're talking about repatriation again ... and to see where the brethren are now."

A poem by dub poet Bro Fundah about a destructive revolution, either led or inspired by Rastafari, closed the function.