Toots Hibbert, ska and reggae giant: “Right now, someone else has that number”

Paul Bond
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The much-loved reggae pioneer Toots Hibbert died last week at 77 in hospital in Kingston, Jamaica, awaiting COVID-19 test results. He had been in a medically induced coma following respiratory problems. He was due to begin a new tour, promoting an album released in August.

Hibbert was singer and songwriter with the Maytals, once described as “the Beatles to [Bob Marley’s] the Wailers’ Rolling Stones.” He was widely respected and liked as a person as well as admired for his work. That he was one of the most important international ambassadors for reggae owed much to his personal integrity.

Frederick Hibbert was born in 1942 in the rural town of May Pen, Jamaica, then still a British colony. His parents were Seventh-Day Adventist preachers, and Toots’ first musical experience was singing in chapel every day. His singing was encouraged, and he developed his harmonic sense. He later adopted Rastafarianism.

His mother died when he was eight. Three years later, when his father died, he was sent to the capital, Kingston, to live with his brother John, who nicknamed him “Little Toots.”

At 18 he married Doreen, who survives her husband. They moved to Kingston’s Trenchtown, where Toots worked in a barber shop.

Jamaica’s popular music during this period cannot be seen outside of the move towards the island’s independence, finally achieved in 1962. Resistance and hostility to British imperialism was channelled behind a bourgeois nationalist movement that was to agree a mutually acceptable independence platform with Westminster.

An upsurge of national pride that accompanied breaking free of the colonial authority finds expression in the swagger and self-confidence of the period’s popular music. Toots Hibbert’s song writing, which belongs with the very best of it, was first recognised at the inaugural Jamaican Independence Festival Popular Song Competition in 1966.

Toots had made himself a four-string guitar, which he played in the barber shop. In 1962, Ralphus “Raleigh” Gordon said to him, “Teach me how to sing.” The following day, Nathaniel “Jerry” Matthias joined them: “We sit under a tree, and everybody start to sing. I teach them harmony. I teach them how to write song. And they teach me how to grow up.”

This harmony trio became the Maytals. They were quickly picked up by local producer Clement “Coxsone” Dodd, who began recording them. The Maytals by now included instrumentalists, but Dodd also recorded them with the house band at his legendary Studio One, Tommy McCook’s Skatalites.

Dodd and saxophonist McCook were among the champions of the new ska, or blue beat, sound. It was an exciting blend of influences, setting brass-heavy American rhythm and blues and jazz over an offbeat rhythm.

Toots shared those influences, identifying his singing—and himself—with Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson and Otis Redding: “I started to sing and people would tell me I would sound like Ray Charles or Otis Redding, so I figured these guys are my brothers.” His singing had the same soulful quality.

The Maytals’ early recordings for Dodd laid the vocal groundwork for ska, but it was not lucrative. “Payment” for their debut was lunch. Even when they became successful, session fees were paltry, with Hibbert commenting ruefully, “It go on like that for a long time.”

The Maytals established themselves with local hits for Dodd and the other major Kingston producer, Prince Buster, and two early studio albums. A major step forward came when Hibbert’s “Bam Bam” won the Popular Song Competition in 1966. It was the first of many recognitions.

In 1967, Hibbert was arrested for possession of cannabis and jailed for 18 months. He always maintained the charge was trumped up. He did not even smoke marijuana at the time but took it up while he was in prison.

On his release, he and the band—now called Toots and the Maytals—took up where they had left off, with a vengeance. He turned his imprisonment into the hit “54–46 Was My Number,” and in 1969 won the song competition again with “Sweet and Dandy.”

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Many songs stand out. “Do the Reggay” (1968) was among the first songs giving the music its new name. A year later came the outstanding “Pressure Drop.” Its echoes of the grim realities of life in Kingston have led to its many covers, notably by the Clash. His songs continue to inspire other artists, with Amy Winehouse and the Specials both recording 1969’s “Monkey Man.”

Although his lyrics were not as direct in their commentary on social conditions as those of some contemporaries, Hibbert called them “a message of consolation; a message of salvation … we have to make it positive.” His former manager, Herbie Miller, said Hibbert always “fight for right, not for the wrong.”

The latest album, *Got To Be Tough*, features tracks like “Freedom Train” and “Struggle.” The title track comments, “Got to be tough when things get rough, You got to be tough and this is a warning, You got to be smart, living in this time, It’s not easy to carry on.”

Hibbert was at the forefront of the global spread of reggae’s popularity, initially through Jamaican expatriate communities. The Maytals were on the bill at the first major reggae festival in London in 1970, alongside Desmond Dekker and others.

Hibbert’s standing among Jamaica’s reggae musicians can be gauged by his appearance in *The Harder They Come* (Perry Henzel, 1972), the first Jamaican-produced feature film, starring Jimmy Cliff as Ivan, a young man seeking musical fame in Kingston. Ivan’s first visit to a recording studio brings the revelation of the Maytals singing “Sweet and Dandy.” “Pressure Drop” was also on the soundtrack album, released on Chris Blackwell’s Island Records a year later.

Blackwell, who founded Island in 1959 as a means of promoting Jamaican music abroad, first met Hibbert in 1961. In 1972 he encouraged him to compose “Funky Kingston,” and after the film’s release he signed the Maytals to the label. This was their launching pad as international ambassadors for reggae, with Blackwell booking them to support touring rock groups like the Who.

Bob Marley wrote “Punky Reggae Party” as a recognition of British punks’ embrace of reggae. Named punks included the Damned and the Clash, while Jamaica was represented by the Wailers and the Maytals.

Hibbert was determinedly an ambassador across musical and national borders, also touring Nigeria with Fela Kuti. The Maytals’ exhilarating *Funky Kingston* (1973) album fused reggae with funk inspired by Kuti and James Brown on covers of John Denver’s “Country Roads,” and Richard Berry’s “Louie Louie.” Hibbert’s voice soared through it all.

It is a testament to the man that when Matthias and Gordon decided to retire in 1981, it was an amicable affair. When he was awarded the Order of Jamaica in 2012, Doreen said, “I’m not surprised people still remember him. He’s a very nice person.”

An album exploring his Rastafarianism, *Spiritual Healing* (1982), was followed by a quiet period, but in the late 1980s he put together a new line-up of the Maytals. Studio albums followed: *Toots in Memphis* (1988)—inspired by his love of Redding—paired him with Stax’s house musicians, while 2004’s *True Love* featured big name guests like Willie Nelson and Keith Richards.

But the Maytals were primarily a touring band. Hibbert was a magnificent and charismatic performer. In 2013 he was hospitalised after a bottle thrown at the stage struck his head. The incident triggered memory loss and headaches, and he found he was unable to write songs. The anxiety and fear of crowds it left meant he could not perform for three years.

It is typical of him that he intervened on behalf of his assailant, writing to the presiding judge, “He is a young man, and I have heard what happens to young men in jail. My own pain and suffering would be increased substantially knowing that this young man would face that prospect.” Hibbert closes the song about his own prison experience, “Right now, someone else has that number.”

Thanks to Hibbert’s compassion, his assailant only received a six-month sentence.

When Hibbert finally returned it was with little loss of quality. Zak Starkey, who co-produced *Got To Be Tough*, said, “The power in his voice is beyond anyone I’ve ever met. And he has lived through all the generations of Jamaican music. He was at the forefront at the start, and he’s at the forefront now.”

Miller’s point rings true: “When you talking about solid and whose contributions are indelible to the world, I mean in every crevice of the world, Toots is one of them.”

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