

Jackie Mittoo
Champion In The Arena 1976 – 1977
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I first run into Jackie Mittoo around the time that the recordings on this collection represent his current musical output. At this period during the late 1970s, his work is manufactured in the UK by Third World Records owned by the former sound system proprietor Count Shelly and within the previous two years the company puts out four new instrumental albums bearing Jackie Mittoo's name as well as assorted singles and 12" discomix sides.

The source of this liaison between the pair is Count Shelly's own close relationship with Jamaican producer Bunny Lee, who supervises these most recent Mittoo sessions and furnishes the rhythms for his display of keyboard virtuosity. At the time, Bunny Lee is at his most prolific as a producer and Third World possess a catalogue comprising over 60 albums, all but a dozen of which are Lee productions, including titles overseen by him with Johnny Clarke, Leroy Smart, Cornel Campbell, Tommy McCook, U Roy, I Roy, Dillinger, Dennis Alcapone, Clint Eastwood, Hortense Ellis, Winston Wright, Frankie Jones and a good deal more. Even more remarkable is the fact that all this music is made and released in the space of just a few short years.

As well as a record label, Third World also operates as a record store situated in Tottenham, North London, and is just around the corner from where I also live. Working as a reporter on current reggae runnings and filing a weekly page in the music tabloid Black Echoes, I'm a regular visitor to the store. Not only does the Count put out records every week and furnish me on a regular basis with tidbits of information useful for my column in the press, but his premises are also often a meeting place for artists visiting from Jamaica, especially when Bunny Lee's in town. One afternoon I walk in the store and the first person I see is Jackie Mittoo browsing through the record racks. Although our paths never cross prior to this, I recognise him immediately from his photograph and once introductions are made we fall into conversation.

Now Jackie Mittoo is someone I am extremely keen to meet from time. His dominant role in the production of reggae's cornerstone Studio One recordings already reaches my attention through conversations with artists and musicians who work with him, and a few years previous the Heptones lead vocalist Leroy Sibbles suggests to me that Jackie Mittoo and the Studio One sound are synonymous. And Sibbles should know. He is the bass player alongside Mittoo on many of the studio's sessions and is in fact taught to play this instrument by the pianist himself after arriving at Studio One as a singer. Well, after conversing with Jackie for a while I ask him what he's doing this particular evening and when he says just hanging loose, invite him back to my place for a chat and an opportunity to listen to some records. He welcomes the proposal and later that evening knocks at my door. Usually under these circumstances, I might ask someone of Jackie Mittoo's stature for a formal interview, but though he stays around until a subdued dawn light is breaking through the trees in the park across the road, I do nothing more all night than just take down a few notes. The way things go though, I am quite content simply to relax in his company. To say I find Jackie

Mittoo likeable is somewhat to understate the case. In fact, I can rarely remember ever feeling quite so irresistibly drawn to another human being. Jackie Mittoo seems animated by a tangible electric energy and there is a sense that by just being in his presence one can only expand. The overall impression is of a light-hearted approach though with serious intent, as if squeezing the most out of life's every moment, and a constantly inventive and enquiring mind.

During the course of the night, he speaks voluminously on a variety of musical topics as I spin vinyl items from the Studio One catalogue between whiles. Curiously for a keyboard player, he talks at length of the of the guitarists he admires, including Studio One associate Eric 'Rickenbacker' Frater, "a man with a picking style of playing", and the Dynamites' lead guitarist and bandleader 'Hux' Brown. He also speaks highly of the Jets' Trinidadian leader Lynn Taitt, who as a youth Jackie plays alongside in his earliest bands the Sheiks and the Cavaliers, and whom he describes as "a close musical friend". Another guitarist he mentions is Studio One sidekick Carlton Manning. He tells me that Manning's vocal trio Carlton And His Shoes are originally called Carlton And His Shades, but when their first recordings are pressed the printer misreads the name, and they proceed with the alternative reading thenceforth. He also tells me about the saxophonist Dennis Campbell, who he refers to as "Ska" Campbell and says that he plays on most of the Skatalites studio sessions but is rarely credited and describes him as "a retiring and softly spoken man who plays the main phrase accent that goes 'ohoh' on the tenor sax throughout the take", blowing a constant ska beat prominent on Skatalites instrumentals 'Addis Ababa', 'Don D Lion', 'Dick Tracy', 'FidelCastro' 'Christine Keeler' and many others.

Regarding the reggae industry's main men he speaks of Bunny Lee's "know how", Byron Lee's "business sense" and Coxsone's "commercial understanding". He relates his club engagements during the late 1960s playing jazz as the Jackie Mittoo Trio alongside Lloyd Siblings and Wayne Anton Williams and identifies a number of songs he writes or collaborates in writing, and credits himself with composing both Delroy Wilson's 'Trying To Conquer' and Marcia Griffiths' 'Feel Like Jumping'. When I spin Peter Tosh's 'I'm The Toughest', Jackie says "Coxsone write the lyrics for that with some help from Tosh and me, and I come with the melody." Most intriguing of all is his insight into the way rhythm tracks are built at the studio. "Coxsone have all the new albums from the US," he says, "and when they come over I usually listen to them, and if there's say a bass line on a record I like, I might get the guitar player to play this, and then take a piano phrase from another tune and use it as the bass riff." He tells me that Marcia Griffiths' 'Feel Like Jumping' comes together in this way, adapting melody lines from the Marvelettes' 'Don't Mess With Bill' and the Esquires' 'Get On Up' for the rhythm section and using a vocal scat from Maytals lead singer Toots Hibbert as the blaring opening horn part.

Born Donat Roy Mittoo in Browns Town, Jamaica on March 3, 1948, Jackie Mittoo is taught piano from the age of four and first performs in public when still a child. At the age of 13, he starts playing professionally with older musicians like Lloyd Knibb and Johnny Moore in bands such as the Vagabonds, the Rivals and the Sheiks and it is while sitting in with the house band at Federal Studios that he is first approached by Coxsone Dodd and asked by the producer to play on his sessions. When Dodd opens his new Studio One premises in 1963, he asks Jackie to help with the arrangement and development of songs and Jackie is soon the studio's musical director, supervising

virtually every session recorded there throughout the rest of the decade and into the next. "It is because the piano learns the melody," he modestly explains at our meeting. "Everyone knows I catch the song fast, because I have a good ear."

In June 1964, Jackie is one of the founding members of the Skatalites when Studio One's regular pool of session musicians adopt the name following a meeting held at the Odeon Cinema Theatre on Constance Spring Road. In addition to the keyboards player, also present on the day are drummer Lloyd Knibb, bass player Lloyd Brevett, saxophonists Tommy McCook, Roland Alphonso and Lester Sterling, trombonist Don Drummond, trumpeter Johnny "Dizzy" Moore, guitarist Jerome "Jah Jerry" Hines and singer Lord Tanamo. It is Dodd who wishes them to form officially as a band so they can accept live engagements, but initially is not able to find anybody willing to lead them. Guitarist Lynn Taitt is approached but as a Trinidadian expatriate feels he is not able to command sufficient respect and declines the offer. Tommy McCook also says no, though eventually he is persuaded to change his mind. During the forthcoming several months, the Skatalites release some two dozen singles including well known titles like 'Ball O'Fire', 'Dr Kildare', 'Beardman Ska' and 'Independent Anniversary Ska' for Coxson Dodd, 'Sandy Gully', 'Trip To Mars' and 'Latin Goes Ska' for Duke Reid, as well as sessions for Top Deck and Beverley's too. Many of these are released back to back with vocal performances from the likes of Joe White, Justin Hinds, Desmond Dekker and the Wailers, illustrating the way in which the producers of the era hedge their bets by appealing both to those who favour songs and others who prefer instrumentals. Perhaps their most famous recording is 'Guns Of Navarone' for Coxson Dodd, released in 1965 and a UK Top Forty hit for six weeks in early 1967.

As well as the personnel mentioned at the inaugural meeting, the Skatalites are supplemented on their recording duties by the likes of guitarists Lynn Taitt and Ernest Ranglin, by Richard Ace, Cecil Lloyd and Aubrey Adams on keyboards, Baba Brooks and Raymond Harper on trumpets and saxophonists Gaynair and Ska Campbell among others. Joining Lord Tanamo on live shows is the dynamic performer and Barbadian expatriate Jackie Opel, who until his death in a car accident is a singing sensation in Jamaica, as well as local lass Doreen Schaffer. Less than six months after forming, the group is shaken by the stabbing to death of singer and dancer Marguerita by her lover Don Drummond at their shared address on New Year's Day, 1965 and the trombonist is committed to Bellevue, where he dies in 1969. The Skatalites never recover from this blow, though they carry on under the name for a while longer before finally disbanding in August 1965, wrought by financial problems and internal strife.

The Skatalites are basically a showcase for horn players and Mittoo's keyboards generally play a supplementary or decorative role, with him taking a solo only rarely on a track like 'Hanging Tree'. Following Drummond's incarceration and Tommy McCook's defection to Treasure Isle to lead the Supersonics, the Skatalites regroup as the Soul Brothers and Jackie takes a far more active prominence. Between late 1965 and early 1967, the outfit releases some two dozen sides, again mostly as flips to vocal recordings, with the organ very much to the fore. There are also two Soul Brothers albums, 'Hot Shot' and 'Carib Soul', both released in 1967. It is around the same time too that recordings appear credited simply to Jackie Mittoo, culminating in 1967 with 'Ram Jam', an organ workout to the Heptones' 'Fat Girl' rhythm. Such is

the tune's popularity that a reggae club opens in South London operating under the Ram Jam name. Over the next six years, Studio One put out many dozen Jackie Mittoo singles and between 1967 and 1970 five albums: 'In London', 'Evening Time', 'Keep On Dancing', 'Now' and 'Macka Fat'. In addition to his solo outings, Mittoo also remains a key figure in the instrumental recordings of the Studio One house band as the Soul Brothers become the Soul Vendors, Sound Dimension, Brentford Road All Stars and other working names. Then there's his role in auditioning every singer who passes through the studio, the writing of songs, the arranging, producing and mixing of music, to create the largest and most comprehensive catalogue in the reggae field.

In the late 1960s, Jackie Mittoo relocates to Toronto, Canada, though he continues to make frequent and extended trips back home to carry on his work at Studio One's Brentford Road premises and in 1982 records another album for the set up, 'Showcase'. Meanwhile, in Toronto during the early 1970s, he is employed by the Canadian Talent Library and between the years 1971 and 1974 releases three easy listening albums for the project with 'Wishbone', 'Reggae Magic' and 'Let's Put It All Together', the title track from the first of these going on to become a local hit. In fact, he tells me that in Canada he is known only as an easy listening performer and for his contributions to reggae not in the least. And it is while living in Canada during the mid-1970s that Jackie meets up with Bunny Lee to conceive the recordings on this present set.

"I know Jackie long ago, from before I was actually in the business, when I use to go round with Derrick Morgan," Lee remembers. "When Jackie jus' started out, when 'im did come an' play with Skatalites, before them did even name Skatalites, as a school youth. Beca' them big man them, all Brevett an' all them man, jus' use to say, 'Shut up, bwoy!' when 'im talk, them used to cow 'im down. Jackie was cool an' good fun.

How he an' I actually start workin' now, he went to Canada an' he was there for a long time. I go Canada an' meet 'im again and say, 'Wait, wha' 'appen, Jackie! Wha' you up here a waste time, old man?' An' 'im was a very bitter man, because nobody mention 'im, an' all a these great work 'im do in a Jamaica. Me say, 'Well Jackie, the wors' t'ing them can say about a man, 'im dead, an' so you no a fe bitter. Me 'ave some rhythm weh me carry back from England, mek we go a studio, go do something, mek the people them hear you. An' we go a studio an' jus do an album name 'The Keyboard King'."

The opening track on 'The Keyboard King' entitled 'The Thriller' proves a popular sound system cut during the hot summer of 1976, at a time when few instrumentals are doing much at all in the dancehalls, and over the next few years Third World put out a series of Jackie Mittoo albums produced by Bunny Lee: 'Hot Blood' (1977) 'In Cold Blood' (1977) and 'The Original' (1979). An amalgam of the tracks on 'Hot Blood' and 'In Cold Blood' are compiled for a US release on Sonic Sounds entitled 'Showcase', while confusingly 'The Original' is also released in Canada on Mittoo's own Jackie label as 'Showcase Volume 3'. Bunny Lee takes up the story:

"The first session that Sly an' Robbie play for me was 'Winter World Of Love' with John Holt. Four man play that session. Chinna was shufflin' on the guitar. No

keyboard wasn't in those tune, y'know? Bo-Peep on the wah wah. It create a sound, y'know? 'Winter World Of Love', 'I Forgot To Say I Love You' an' a few more: Jackie do all of that on "Keyboard King". We do about five or six album together. 'Keyboard King' was the first one, then we do 'Hot Blood', 'In Cold Blood'. I do one called 'The Original Jackie Mittoo' with tune like 'Peenie Wallie' and 'North Of The Sun' at Harry J. Between Harry J an' Dynamic. One LP name 'Showcase', with tune that 'im do at Studio One, mek 'im jus' do over everyt'ing with Sly an' Robbie. We did that album in less than an hour at Dynamic Sound. Sly an' Robbie an' 'im, an' the Aggrovators, Chinna, Bo-Peep, Tony Chin. Less than an hour! Jus' pure one cut. The guy that did write 'Sideshow' for Barry Biggs was there, an' Barry Biggs try to stop the session. He wanted to start work, and the other guy say, 'Oh no man, these guys amaze me, don't stop it,' an' we get to do that whole LP.

"Jackie was brilliant, Jackie was great. If you call a tune from ten an' twenty years before, 'im go on the piano and jus' say, 'Ready gentlemen', an' work out the bassline, an' that is it, 'im play it back same way. Another great guy - he is also dead now - when you use the two a them together, is Winston Wright. Sometime we don't know which one a them better, but these two guys have great respec' fe one another. I keep some session an' Jackie Mittoo play piano an' 'im mek Winston play organ, an' man those session is knockout! Winston Wright play on 'Showcase' too, all some Johnnie Clarke tune, 'King In The Arena'. That set a session great beca' you 'ave two o' the greatest keyboard man in a Jamaica. Anytime the two a them meet, Jackie say, 'Boy Winston, you do good 'pon organ, better I hold the piano'. Them always tease one another. Those musicians was quick, beca' they know what they was doing."

Seven years on from my initial meeting with him, I buck up on Jackie Mittoo at a recording studio off the Angel in Islington, where he is mixing a session for Sugar Minott's Black Roots record company along with singer Mikey General; though the real reason he's in England is to produce an album with Musical Youth, the teenage Birmingham band who score a worldwide hit with 'Pass The Dutchie', utilising a rhythm called 'Full Up' originally formulated at Studio One. Seeing Jackie Mittoo in the studio is something to behold! He sits fidgeting behind the desk with a short drink in one hand and a spliff in the other, gaily chatting to all and sundry, and giving his usual impression of just enjoying himself. As each track is played back, his fingers skim deftly over the switches, adjusting the controls and setting the levels, all seemingly unconsciously, without him even looking.

Later on, he takes me to a tiny public house across the road called the Sidney Arms, patronised this evening by less than a dozen local Cockneys of pensionable age. I fear they might not take too kindly to a black man entering their domain. However, as we walk through the door up goes a hearty cry of "Hello, Jackie!" from the man at the bar and assenting acknowledgements from the seated senior citizens. Getting his drink, Jackie Mittoo makes his way to a piano that I notice in the corner for the first time, and then for the next two hours proceeds to enthral his small audience with an extraordinary selection of melodies, occasionally even breaking into song. His impromptu session ranges from classical to ragtime to blues to rock'n'roll. He plays standards, pop tunes, Beatles numbers, a sad ballad. There are songs famous from musicals and old time music hall songs. He even manages to turn 'These Boots Are Made For Walking' into something resembling a Cockney knees-up, all to great

applause. It occurs to me that these old gents, just like the general public in Canada, though knowing nothing of Jackie's wider achievements, nevertheless recognise immediately his incredible talent and respond to the man's warm, natural personality. It also strikes me that here is a glimpse of the way that Jackie Mittoo conducts his life on a daily basis, preferring to weave his extraordinary magic in this sort of anonymous, low key setting for a small group of appreciative listeners, whether in a back street pub in North London or in the company of other musicians at a recording studio, sometimes for payment, at other times for fun for free. After we leave the pub and go our separate ways, it is the last time I ever see him. Five years later, Jackie Mittoo is dead at the young age of 42. I don't expect to meet his like again.

Penny Reel – February 2003

Interview sources: Conversations with Jackie Mittoo and the author Bunny Lee
interview with Steve Barrow, December 2002

All tracks produced by Bunny Lee

Musicians include

Jackie Mittoo: keyboard
Sly Dunbar: drums
Robbie Shakespeare: bass
Winston Wright: organ, clavinet
Keith Sterling: piano
Noel 'Skully' Simms: percussion
Earl 'Chinna' Smith: guitar
Carl Harvey: guitar
Jeffrey Chung: guitar
Winston Bowen: guitar

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