

Trench Town's coming in from the cold

Made famous by the lyrics of the legendary Bob Marley, western Kingston's Trench Town has rebounded from obscurity and is poised to take another incredible journey, this time, as an official cultural landmark.

Renowned as the birthplace of reggae music, the inner-city community, which was a growing squatter settlement for rural migrants in the late 1940s, is about to be transformed into a cultural village under the leadership of the Community Development Committee (CDC).

A number of entities in the area, including the Agency for Inner-city Renewal (AIR), Boys' Town, Culture Yard (where Marley lived and loved), Trench Town Development Association (TTDA), the Jamaica Music Institute (JaMIN) and Joy Town Development, are in partnership with the CDC. The team is riding on the rich cultural heritage left by the likes of singer/songwriter, Joe 'There Is a Reward for Me' Higgs, who tutored the Wailers, Peter 'Jah Is My Keeper' Tosh, Bunny 'Battering Down Sentence' Wailer, Alton 'I Am Still in Love with You' Ellis, Delroy 'You Never Will Conquer Me' Wilson, Jimmy Tucker, Hortense Ellis, Cynthia Schloss, Toots and the Maytals, the Mighty Diamonds, Ken Boothe and saxophonist, Dean Fraser, who all honed their musical careers in Trench Town. Already, one of Jamaica's largest hotel chains, Sandals Resorts International, and its destination management company, Island Routes, has committed to working with marketing and developing tours under the theme, 'Trench Town - the Birthplace of Reggae', said AIR's chairman, Dr Henley Morgan. "Trench Town is a jewel in the rough. It is one of the few communities having a name that is more recognisable than the name of the city in which it is located," asserted Morgan, adding that the renaissance taking place in the communities that make up Trench Town will see buses lined up in front of Culture Yard, as is done at Graceland, home of the late Elvis Presley. As impactful as Marley has been in popularising Trench Town, Morgan and his team said intense study of this fascinating community and the string of geniuses it has given birth to bring to realisation that Trench Town was what made Bob Marley, not the other way around. Acknowledging that it is music more than anything for which Trench Town is renowned. Morgan said one could make the argument that there is no space of equal size, between First and Seventh streets, that has produced a genre of music which, in the short time of less than a generation, has gone mainstream, attracting recognition at the level of the Grammy Awards. At the same time, he lamented that Jamaica has not capitalised on this unique heritage and is at risk of losing its status as the reggae Mecca to developed countries such as Japan, making the birth of the Trench Town Cultural Village even more relevant. The cultural village, he said, will directly influence tourism, Jamaica's main foreign exchange earner and biggest employer. Junior Lincoln has first-hand knowledge of Trench Town, having been born and raised in the community. "There is nowhere else in the world like Trench Town," he boasted. "Such a small community, hosting so many cultural icons, that has had such a great impact on the world's music/culture," Lincoln told Hospitality Jamaica during a recent tour of the community. His response to how it was possible for one small community to produce so many cultural icons was met with a simple, "only a supreme force could have done this". For Lincoln, another inspiration who shaped the uniqueness of the area was the late Father Hugh Sherlock, who penned the words of the country's National Anthem. Father Sherlock, brother of Sir Phillip Sherlock, co-founder of the University of the West Indies, Mona, was the founder of Boys' Town and a dominant figure in Trench Town's culture, history and legacy. "It was Father Sherlock who exposed the Trench Town community to all types of music - classical, pop - he could be described as one of the founders of Jamaica's modern history," said Lincoln. Father Sherlock, he said, created deep value systems along with a diverse sports and music culture at Boys' Town. Today, there remains a historic piano at Boys' Town, which many of the leading musicians from Trench Town, including Bob Marley, used to practise and develop their music. Father Sherlock and his work at Boys' Town were pivotal parts of what formed the culture of Trench Town, which would later "make Bob Marley into the icon he became," argued Lincoln. Charting a historical scene for the Hospitality Jamaica team, Lincoln said class and colour prejudice influenced those who played cricket in Jamaica at the time. "Not so at Boys' Town. Any boy could just come and play cricket and football - regardless of social class," he said. Boys' Town was able to start the breakdown of these challenges when Oneal Gordon Smith (Collie Smith), Boys' Town's head boy, was selected for the Jamaica and West Indies cricket team and became such a mentor par excellence that, after his tragic death, the main road through the Trench Town Community was renamed Collie Smith Drive. Trench Town laid the foundation, he said, for classical child prodigy Jimmy Tucker, who started singing at age eight. Landmarks such as the Ambassador Theatre, which will be part of the cultural village tour, became the cradle to the world of reggae music in the 1950s, said CDC members. According to the team, the Vere Johns Opportunity Hour of the 1950s had talent competitions to discover new talent. Many of today's reggae icons had their careers launched there. The winner would receive two pounds. Second place got one pound. This event was the precursor to other shows of the time which unearthed talents such as Dennis Brown. During that period, dances, using sound systems, was the most popular form of entertainment for the majority of the people. The music genre that was popular at the time was rhythm & blues from the United States of America. "In the late 1950s, rock and roll started to become popular. That form of music was a little bit light for us in Jamaica, so we started our own rhythm & blues," said Lincoln. This gave birth to Jamaica's recording industry. The records at that time were primarily made by sound system operators for use against each other. The commercial

aspect of the recordings developed from juke box operators requesting records from sound system operators/producers. Trench Town became the cradle of Jamaican music, Lincoln explained. "Lyrically, singers came from the greater Trench Town area. Musicians came from east Kingston and horn players from Warieka Hills, Rockfort, east Kingston, generally," he said. Jamaica's lyrical content and consciousness developed during the time of Mortimer Planno's mentorship of most of the artistes in Trench Town. Planno, who embraced Rastafarianism, was a mentor to young artistes, including Marley and Tosh.

History of Trench Town Trench Town was designed in the 1930s by the Central Housing Authority, whose mandate was to design, build and manage housing for the urban and rural poor, which included ex-servicemen. According to Chris Stone, of Trench Town Culture Yard, Trench Town was to be a model township. Government, he said, used 200 acres from the large Trench Pen property to create the community. Trench Town has First to Fourteenth streets, running parallel to each other. First to Seventh street as sung in Bob Marley's song 'Natty Dread' and 'No Woman No Cry', were the famous government yards. The area had all the right social, civic and institutional buildings and programmes to make a successful community/township. After Bob Marley's death, the community, through the Trench Town Development Association, planned to create a village/tourist destination, and tourists started visiting. (This plan was presented to Prince Charles in 2000.) Culture Yard was the first project aimed at harnessing and establishing formal tourism in Trench Town. Today, Culture Yard gets 'walk in' tourists every day and four to five regular tour operators who bring visitors bi-monthly. Tour Operators which include Culture Yard in their tours include Kiuki Tours, which specialises in European and North American tourists; Jamaica Cultural Enterprises, which is Kingston based; Music Buzz, Negril based; and Reggae and Japan Hostel, also based in Kingston. Jamaica Soul Vacations is the official tour operator responsible for developing and marketing the product. "Our objective is to bring in the tour operators, members of the diaspora and key influencers, along with media, to expose them to the product," said Beverly Stewart, managing director of Jamaica Soul Vacations.