

How 1980s Houston bred a nightlife superstar

Posted At : May 3, 2016 1:23 PM | Posted By : Mavis Carr

Related Categories: History

By Kristyn Beecher

The air was thick with Jheri Curl activator fumes and Jovan Musk cologne. Kool and the Gang were singing about a "Celebration" and U.S. President Ronald Reagan had just taken office. For a young Jamaican immigrant, 1981 was the beginning of the American dream and a continuation of a love affair with music.



This season, CNN's "**The Eighties**" series directed by Tom Hanks, has resonated with many so-called Generation X and Baby Boomer-age citizens. The decade was a period of tumultuous change in music, mass media and global politics.

For Paul Beecher, 1980s America was a wish come true. "We would sit on the porch and watch American television, dreaming about America," he said. "We had it nice, my father was the superintendent of prisons and my mother was a preacher, but everything in America was way bigger than we could imagine."

Shows that aired during his childhood like "Leave it to Beaver" and "Mr. Ed" showed American people living the life that most Jamaican families prayed for. Paul Beecher – father of this writer – and his five siblings lived well above the average family in Jamaica, but they dreamed of something even larger; they dreamed of America.

In the states, Paul was in heaven. He loved the women, the Afros, and the opportunity. After immigrating to America in the late '70s, Paul settled in Georgia. Over the years most of his family would eventually leave their Caribbean island and settle here as well.

There was so much in America for him to experience and none of it was what he came to this country for. "I came to America to study medicine, then I changed my major to computers," said Paul. He never finished either course of study, because Paul dropped out of college in the spring semester of his senior year. Paul couldn't afford it anymore and something else was calling his name. Music.

Paul had a long history of forgoing his responsibilities for his love of music. In his home country of Jamaica, he would steal the family car and sneak out at night to DJ parties in the local cities and get his siblings in trouble as they tried to cover for him. Now, in a new country, he had absolute freedom to pursue his passion.

"**Rap started** in Jamaica in the '60s and '70s," he said. "That little story

about how it all began in New York isn't all the way true. If it was, I wouldn't be here right now."

Paul was referring to the Jamaican tradition of toasting, where club DJs would recite rhymes and chants over breaks in reggae records. This party style originated in the 1960s Jamaica and most of hip hop's most influential pioneers were Jamaican immigrants who added some American style to the Jamaican party trend.

Houston, Texas in the 1980s was the perfect place for Paul to explore this budding world combining American hip hop and reggae music. After leaving school, and making sure that his older sisters were settled in Georgia, Paul moved to Texas to continue following his dreams of music.

"It was easy back then," he said, "to pick up your life and start over. There was just so much opportunity and everyone was so willing to help out a brother or a sister."

Paul got a job at a local listener-funded radio station and it was in 1984 that DJ Paul Mellotone was born. DJ Mellotone hit the airwaves on station 90.1 KPFT in the Houston metropolitan area. The late-night reggae show was one of the first in the city and the usually mainstream airwaves now had a Caribbean flavor.

"In the '80s reggae was the thing," said Shirley Brooks, a Houston native who recalls listening to Paul's nightly radio show. "Everybody, white, black, Asian, Hispanic; it didn't matter, was jamming to reggae music. It brought people together."

Tropical fever had hit Houston, hard. What's now the **fourth most-populous** U.S. city known for country music, rodeos, and oil wells had been taken over by an island wave. Reggae artists from across the world were coming to Houston performing to packed crowds in sold-out venues that American artists couldn't dream of performing in.

"There was place called Caribana in Rice Village that would be full of people every night," said Nina Giles, a former Houston resident. "The drinks were cheap and the music was good, so I went basically every time those doors opened. It was just something about the '80s we had real fun, you know."

Paul was ready to monetize this fun. He was noticing how powerful music was in the '80s and he was ready to capitalize. Nightclubs were booming, but a key slice of Houston's demographic was without a place to party. "There was no place for blacks to go, most people had these little hole in the walls that couldn't fit more than 20 people and they were cramming eighty sweaty bodies in there," Paul said. Blacks just weren't owning the nightlife like the other races.

There were huge night clubs in Houston. They all had a specific niche market and most of them were striving to be like the mega clubs in New York. Numbers, Riches, and the Paragon were some of the most historic '80s spots in Houston. But racism and classism kept some people locked out of the fun.

Paul joined Jamaica Jamaica as co-owner in 1987. Patrick Gillies another

Jamaican immigrant, had started the club a few years earlier as a place for reggae music to cater to a black audience. "We wanted people to jam, be here and not worry about a thing, and we were ready to bring the real island flavor to the city," said Paul.

The nightclub was packed every night and reggae's biggest names graced the stage: Jimmy Cliff, Gregory Isaacs, and **Third World** all performed in the nightclub tucked away in the middle of a strip shopping center in Houston's Kirby District of Houston.

"The line for **Jamaica Jamaica** would be around the block," said Shirley Brooks "Everybody wanted to be there. Celebrities would be passing through Houston and had to stop at the club."

As the 1980s closed out and made way for the new generation of club kids in the '90s, Paul Beecher's legacy was able to live on. The former medical student who dropped out of college just shy of graduation was able to ride the island wave to success in Houston. The '80's was a perfect storm of good music, good fun, and good vibes.

Paul Beecher found a way to use all of those make a name for himself in a foreign country and cement his history in 1980s Houston.

*The writer is a student in the **Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications**.*