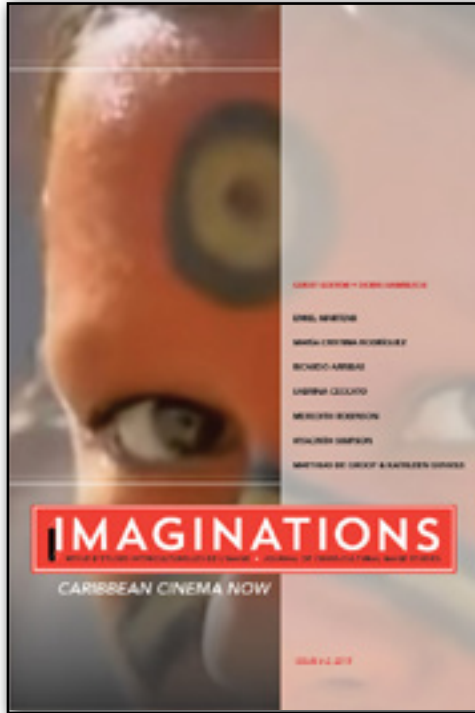


IMAGINATIONS

REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE ■ JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES



IMAGINATIONS

JOURNAL OF CROSS_CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imagination.csj.ualberta.ca>

"Towards a New Caribbean Cinema? An Interview with Jamaican Filmmaker Storm Saulter."

Emiel Martens

December 7, 2015

To Cite this Article:

Martens, Emiel. "Towards a New Caribbean Cinema? An Interview with Jamaican Filmmaker Storm Saulter." *Imaginations* 6:2 (2015): Web (date accessed) 10-17. DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.CCN.6-2.3

To Link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.CCN.6-2.3>



The copyright for each article belongs to the author and has been published in this journal under a **Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives 3.0** license that allows others to share for non-commercial purposes the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of this article represents the author's original work and any third-party content, either image or text, has been included under the Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act, or the author has provided the required publication permissions.

TOWARDS A NEW CARIBBEAN CINEMA? AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMAICAN FILMMAKER STORM SAULTER

EMIEL MARTENS

Résumé

*Storm Saulter, l'artiste invité de cette publication, est un photographe jamaïcain, artiste visuel, et cinéaste. Il est le réalisateur de **Better Mus 'Come** (2010) et le co-fondateur du mouvement **New Caribbean Cinema**. Dans cette entretien, qui accompagne le portfolio, il échange avec Emiel Martens sur les principaux défis de sa remarquable carrière, et sur la situation de son œuvre dans le vaste contexte du cinéma caribéen et de sa société.*

Abstract

*Storm Saulter, the guest artist of the present issue, is a Jamaican photographer, visual artist, and filmmaker. He is the director of **Better Mus' Come** (2010) and co-founder of the **New Caribbean Cinema** movement. In this interview, which accompanies the preceding portfolio, he discusses with Emiel Martens the main challenges of his remarkable career and the ways in which he situates his work in the wider context of Caribbean cinema and society.*

Storm Saulter (www.stormsaulter.com) is a Jamaican filmmaker, photographer, and visual artist. He is best known for directing the award-winning Jamaican feature film *Better Mus'Come* (2010) and for co-founding New Caribbean Cinema, a DIY (Do It Yourself) collective of young filmmakers in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean dedicated to creating a new wave of Caribbean filmmaking (www.newcaribbeancinema.com). Together they have already produced a series of short films under the title *Ring di Alarm* (2012), which was shown around the world before coming home to packed theatres in Kingston earlier this year. In this interview, which took place via Skype on November 12, 2014, Storm Saulter talks about his career as a filmmaker in Jamaica and discusses his work in the context of Caribbean cinema and society.

Martens: Could you first briefly introduce yourself? Where were you born, where did you grow up, what sort of education did you have, and how did you get involved in filmmaking?

"I was born on September 21, 1983, in Negril, Jamaica. I was number seven of, eventually, eight kids—four boys and four girls—from Bertram and Greer-Ann Saulter. Both of my parents were artists in their own right. My father was a builder and an architect and my mother was a designer, businesswoman, and just a pioneering woman in many regards, including motherhood. They always encouraged us to express ourselves creatively and we all developed some kind of artistic skill, even if not all—though many—of my brothers and sisters are making art for a living now. There was a very strong artistic streak embedded in us at an early age, which has over the years resulted in a major creative output by my family. Growing up in Negril, which was still pretty much a hippie beach town, was a real country

life. We were very free. We got lost in the bush and came back home when it was dark. We ran along the cliffs and jumped into the ocean, that sort of thing. So, I was very much having my own adventures when I was young, and I was always aiming to create something. As a teenager, I started taking pictures, as in still photography, and later I got into filmmaking, from the side of cinematography more than from the side of the story. After finishing high school in Kingston I didn't really know what I exactly wanted to do. One of my sisters had moved to Los Angeles and I had the opportunity to join her, to leave Jamaica and to see something of the world. Somewhere in that period, around 2000, the idea of becoming a filmmaker became a real possibility. I moved to L.A. and entered the Film Immersion

Program of the Los Angeles Film School, with a concentration on cinematography and editing. It was a very hands-on experience. In between my school schedule I also worked on music-video sets. I was the hardest working PA you could ever meet. I was out to prove it! One day on set, I met hip-hop video director Little X, who kind of took me under his wing. He encouraged me to move to New York to work with him, which I did. I worked on a lot of his sets as a second-unit director and just rolled a lot with him. For a late teenager, this was of course an amazing experience. At the same time I somewhat established myself as a visual artist. I started doing video art, mainly based on images I shot in Jamaica. I regularly returned home and just documented everything with my digital camera, little random Jamaican things, which I then edited in a certain way. At one point, I decided to move to Miami to work with Joshua Bratter, an immigration lawyer and friend of the family who wanted to invest in my first feature film. As I did not really want to become a hip-hop video director, the path I was heading in New York, this seemed a good opportunity for me. I wanted to make movies! I happened to move to Miami Beach at the beginning of a particularly vibrant moment in the local art scene, due in part to it becoming a new home for Art Basel. I began to really experiment with video and photography. The first exhibition I participated in was at The Museum of Contemporary Art Miami. It was called "Optic Nerve" and it was strictly for up-and-coming local video artists. I went on to exhibit with a number of Miami-based galleries for Art Basel, then the Caribbean Biennial and throughout Europe and North America. After a few years I had to go back to Jamaica to renew my visa; the visa was taking a long time to come, and I realized I wanted to make films there. So I decided to stay and to give it all."

Martens: How did you set out to make your ambition to become a filmmaker in Jamaica a reality? At the time, there was no real film industry to speak of on the island, so how did you go about it to start?

"Well, my brother Nile also returned to Jamaica after finishing film school in London so we decided to pursue our filmmaking passion together. We also linked up with a few other young filmmakers on the island, notably Joel Burke, whom I already knew from before. Our families

were close together and I had stayed with his family for a while when I moved to Kingston to finish high school. While I was in L.A., Joel got into editing through Paul Bucknor, who had his own film studio in the hills of Kingston. We just came together and started to make short films, with Paul being our executive producer. He covered the initial costs to put forward the money and to make things happen. My parents, along with Bucknor, came up with the idea of hosting an annual film festival in Negril. This became the Flashpoint Film Festival and our shorts provided most of the content. The festival was very influential for us as beginning filmmakers. We all of a sudden needed to create content—we just had to. I came up with a script called **Twang!**, Nile with **Forward**, and Joel with **Bad Lucky**. It was a different kind of filmmaking—it was extremely guerilla, low budget, not necessarily scripted, experimental filmmaking. **Twang!** was originally intended as a short film, but eventually we tried to make it into a feature. We spent one summer shooting our films and after that we edited our own projects with advice and suggestions from each of us. We literally finished editing only a few hours before the showings. When we hosted the festival for the first time in 2005, the films were not fully there yet; they were a little rough, but I believe Flashpoint kicked a lot of people on the island in the butt in terms of realizing that this is what we need to do to get the film industry going. It was all very hectic because we had so little time to finish our films—I will never do that again because you put out something that isn't your best work—but we premiered a bunch of stuff and I think it woke a lot of people up about making local films. We probably made all the mistakes that you can make as filmmakers, but after experiencing that whole process, from production to editing, I was really much more equipped to do my next story. It was a major learning ground. Eventually we did three editions of the festival, one more in Negril in 2006 and, after my Mom passed away, one in Port Royal in 2008. It was at the third and last edition that I showed a very early cut of my first real feature film, **Better Mus' Come**, and people started to feel something serious was coming."

Martens: When did you come up with the idea of *Better Mus' Come* and how did this project materialize?

*"As mentioned earlier, when I was living in Miami I worked with Joshua Bratter on the development of my first feature-length film project. At the time—I was about nineteen—I wrote a script of a film entitled **Fedda** (patois for **Feather**) about a 12-year-old boy, but it just never came together fully. Something wasn't ready; I guess*

My parents and their friends often told stories about the 1970s, that it was such a wild and violent period on the island that everybody now wants to forget about it. It was so magnetic for me, I just had to make a film about it.

*I wasn't ready. But a few years later, when I was doing all that stuff in Jamaica, I reconnected with Josh and everything was right. We had these long conversations about Jamaica, about geopolitics, about storytelling. And I remember we had a meeting one day and I was just sharing some ideas with him. I ended up explaining the rough premise for **Better Mus' Come** and Josh immediately said, "This is the one." It was there and then that the film began to feel like a real possibility for the first time. His support gave me the confidence to develop the script I had in mind. I really wanted to make a film about the seventies. I had always been fascinated with the Cold War and the international geopolitics at the time. I read a lot about the Cold War and watched a lot of espionage films such as *Bond* and more subtle stuff. I became particularly interested in the effect the Cold War had on Jamaica's two-party politics. My parents and their friends oftentold stories about the 1970s, that it was such a wild and violent period on the island that everybody now wants to forget about it. It was so magnetic for me, I just had to make a film about it.*

*I started to explore the archives of the **Jamaica Gleaner**. I read all these articles about the tensions on the island that resulted in various states of emergency and had such a murderous impact on our nation and I began to construct scenes from those articles. It became clear that, for me, the ultimate story of the Cold War era was about the poor people who were the sufferers, so the story had to represent them. At one point I came across the information about the Green Bay Massacre—the secret operation carried out in 1978 by a special unit of the Jamaica Defense Force under a People's*

National Party—in which five supporters of the Jamaica Labour Party were shot dead after they had been ambushed at Green Bay. That dramatic event helped me to anchor my story. I pieced together snippets of information and loosely reconstructed the lives of the people who ended up at Green Bay. This moment really showed the circle of tricking people, using people, and finally getting rid of people once they act up. So the Green Bay Massacre became the endpoint of my story which I then built backwards into a journey of one character in particular. I focused on a guy in the lower ranks of society and the decisions he has to make as a consequence of the communally segregated political parties of the 1970s."

Martens: *Better Mus' Come* became the first feature-length historical film to come out of Jamaica. How did you recreate the look and feel of the 1970s?

"Well, the person who needs much respect for that is our production designer Khalil Deane. He found all the props, from the cars and the signs to the guns and the clothes. He did an amazing job, because we don't have prop houses here in Jamaica that keep 1970s stuff. He had to find it all from actual people together with our costume designer Charl Baker. They had to

hunt down all the individuals who had that stuff in storage or whose grandparents had all these old clothes. They really scavenged Kingston to find the genuine versions we needed. We might have made one or two dresses, but we mainly refurbished old wardrobes. Also, there was a hotel in town that had all this old stuff as part of their decor—old radios, televisions, beer signs, and so on. When we discovered that place and had some arrangements with them to rent their stuff, that helped us a lot. Besides a really strong production design department and wardrobe department, we also had a strong make-up department. The hairstyles, and in particular women's hairstyles, were drastically different in the seventies. The people who ran the departments did a great job. Although we did everything in a really low-budget way, we were very meticulous with getting the look and feel right. The same goes for the locations we selected. Our main location was Sandy Park, which is a neighborhood in the Barbican/Liguanea area that is not in Downtown, even though we were filming there to represent Downtown Kingston. We just developed a good relationship with the residents there, especially with a group of young guys who were very active in the community. They had a recording studio, they were making music, they were putting on shows, they connected us to other members of the community and just got the rest of the community on our side. To recreate the arena of a 1970s ghetto, we basically only had to strip the new signage and remove all the cars. Sandy Park, like many communities in Jamaica, has these little ghetto parts, very rough and rustic, which do not look a lot different than in the seventies. They are still places that are run down, unfinished, and underdeveloped, wallowing in incompleteness."

Martens: Many people living in Sandy Park ended up appearing in the film, not only as extras but also in some of the title roles. How did you go about casting the production? Have you been able to show the film to the community afterwards?

"Most of the residents functioned as extras, but some indeed became lead actors. After a first round of auditions at the Edna Manley School of Visual and Performing Arts, we went to Sandy Park and pretty much auditioned anyone in the community who was interested. Literally hun-

dreds of people came out to sign up. We gave them all little scenarios to play out in order to see who was talented. This is how we found Ricardo Orgil who plays Flames, one of the main characters. He was just so overpowering at the audition that we knew this guy was special. Then there was another great guy from the neighborhood, Duane Pusey who got the part of Dogheart, the PNP bad boy who is the nemesis of the lead character. So we ended up giving them major roles in the film. The other gang members that you see in the film were also guys from the neighborhood. They may not have a bunch of lines, but they definitely hold a look on camera. And of course many residents became extras in the crowds. At the same time, we hired a lot of people on set. We for example hired people to cook food and to do craft services. We also rented a couple homes from the residents there. Whenever we were shooting, we had a house or two as production offices. So we were really doing business there and the people of the community were involved on many levels. This is also the reason why we were able to move around,

Although you will never find it, you have to strive for perfection.

to create any set we wanted, and to shoot all night there. When the film was ready, they were the first people to see it. We had our very first screening with them at the Palace Amusement cinema at Sovereign Centre, the closest cinema to them. They could just walk over there. So before the premiere we had this cast-and-crew screening, mainly with people from Sandy Park. It was amazing. They were so excited because it was all them in the film, all people and places they know. A few months later, we organized another screening in the community itself. We just

put up a big screen in the middle of the town. We also screened the film in Tivoli Gardens, the garrison community and JLP stronghold in West Kingston. The story of *Better Mus' Come* was and still is in many ways very much their reality. When the film came out in 2010, Tivoli Gardens was the scene of violent confrontations between gunmen and the security forces, associated with the hunt for Christopher "Dudus" Coke. For me, the Tivoli Incursion bore resemblance to the Green Bay Massacre. So at the one-year anniversary of that event we did a free screening in Tivoli Gardens as part of an effort by a group of young Jamaican activists to bring some uplifting energy through creativity to the neighborhood. Needless to say, this screening was very emotional.

Martens: Besides these community screenings, *Better Mus' Come* also had quite a successful film festival run. Could you tell a little more about this?

The film was first shown in theatres in Jamaica. It was a big hit and made a lot of noise. We did not really have an international film festival strategy, but we wanted to get the film out there, so we decided to bring it to the 2011 Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival. It was really the best decision. *Better Mus' Come* not only won the Viewer's Choice Award for Best Narrative Feature Film, but the film also created such a stir and the energy around the film was just so powerful that the film started to roll. The people who saw it at that festival alone started to get it placed in other festivals. For example, we were way passed the deadline for the Bahamas International Film Festival, but through a connection we got in and it also won Best Picture there. We were also in the Havana Film Festival and the Dominican Global Film Festival and we just did a lot of special screenings throughout the region. We unfortunately haven't been able to do a proper theatrical run in Caribbean islands other than Jamaica. For some reason that wasn't happening. At the time Caribbean cinemas were not very keen yet on showing Caribbean films. They saw it as a risk, but that is now changing. They have had some local hits and are beginning to open up to screening Caribbean content. For me that is a no-brainer. Clearly, when you put up the content, people are going to come, even if it's not amazing. Anyway, after a few festivals in the Caribbean, *Better Mus' Come* went to the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles, where I won the Award for Best Director, and eventually it

went to the American Black Film Festival, where lead actor Sheldon Shepard won Best Actor. Beyond that, we got the chance to screen the film with the Toronto International Film Festival as part of TIFF Cinematheque as well as places such as New York, London, and Amsterdam. Also, I have done a lot of academic screenings. I had the opportunity to travel to various universities internationally to present the film. I really enjoy these kinds of screenings, as students get the most engaged. They are looking at your film with a critical eye, so you always get really interesting questions and discussions, which is great. So basically, I have travelled the world with the film—and there are of course also tons of places the film has gone to that I haven't gone to. We eventually received North American distribution with AFFRM, the African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement. The film had a theatrical run in New York and Los Angeles and special screenings in cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. It then got on Netflix and iTunes and last year it was broadcasted in the UK on BBC2. So although we did not follow a standard distribution path, I think *Better Mus' Come* definitely made waves. It was all very indie, but for a Caribbean film it was pretty ground-breaking. It has cut a small path in the international world of cinema.

Martens: In 2010 you co-founded New Caribbean Cinema, a movement to foster filmmaking in Jamaica. Why did you decide to launch this initiative? How would you evaluate *Ring di Alarm*, the first series of short films you released under the banner of New Caribbean Cinema?

I founded New Caribbean Cinema along with Michelle Serieux, a St. Lucian-born filmmaker living in Jamaica, basically because we felt a need to put out work. Not only our own work but also the work of other Jamaican filmmakers. We saw a good amount of young and talented people on the island doing commercials and music videos who wanted to make the step towards short films and eventually feature films. So Michelle and I decided to join forces to create opportunities for these young filmmakers to produce work that could put them on the map. The idea was to write stories that could be shot in a single day, so that it could actually be done. There was no money to spend; it had to be as cheap as possible. So New Caribbean Cinema became a mix of a feeling of getting work done and a method of how to get it done—a "by any

means necessary" approach to filmmaking. We know we can always call on each other to do things, even if we are not making films under the New Caribbean Cinema banner. The first round of films that we made together, which was ultimately put out under the title *Ring di Alarm* (2013), was the combined effort of the directors Nile Saulter, Joel Burke, Kyle Chin, Michael 'Ras Tingle' Tingling, Michelle, and myself, with the support of a group of amazing actors and crew that shared our vision. We all made one short film and worked together on each other's films. Although the *Ring di Alarm* films are very different from each other, I do think they have something in common, and that is a slight interest in the dark side of life. All the films seem to have an element of death, whether it is death coming and not knowing how to deal with it or the premeditation of a murder or its aftermath. They are all morality tales. Each film has a character who is faced with a moral dilemma—they all have to choose which way to go and they all get what they ask for. It's a common plot device in much storytelling, but I definitely see it very directly in the *Ring di Alarm* films. Even the comedic work is darkly comedic. Looking at our work, I think it gives you some insight into what the Caribbean person of our age is thinking about and maybe slightly obsessing about. The issue of life and death is really an issue we think about a lot, particularly in Jamaica. I definitely see that as a day-to-day reality. At first, I didn't even notice the violent scent in most of the films, until other people started to make comments about it. I think we are obsessed with death—we are all dealing with death; it feels omnipresent. In filmmaking, these things tend to rise to the surface. One of my next film projects also involves death, a lot of death. It will make a social commentary on meaningless death and the cheapness of life in our society. I cannot tell too much about it yet, because it's quite controversial and I don't want to get shut down. Another project I am working on, *Sprinter*, has nothing to do with death; it's a coming-of-age story about the next great Jamaican sprinter. It's a story about the world of athletics, but even more so about a modern Caribbean family and the rivalry between siblings. It also deals with issues of migration, with separation due to economic opportunities elsewhere. So that's a very different story. Despite our slight obsession with death, we need variety.

Martens: I know that you do a lot of the organizational work related to your film projects yourself, from funding to marketing and everything in between. Could you tell us how you manage the execution of your projects? Does it provide you a sustainable income, or to put it more generally, do you think it is possible to develop a sustainable film industry in Jamaica?

Well, *Better Mus' Come* was funded by private investors who believed in my work and *Ring di Alarm* was basically financed by myself. I was the executive producer. Funding came from other jobs, such as doing regular commercials on the side. For my next projects, I am looking at all directions and angles to get funding. The Jamaican government unfortunately has no money available. Hopefully, they will be paying more attention to enable local filmmaking, whether it is making the process less bureaucratic or making incentives for investors. Whatever they have, I will be using. At the moment, I am mainly looking at private investors and international grants. I have already received a lot of support and interest for my new projects, so I hope to go into production next year. I am currently in the process of figuring how to put together a strong team that I can rely on to carry through work all the way to the end and to share responsibilities. When you do a lot of Do It Yourself filmmaking, you end up controlling almost everything by default, but that is not necessarily the best way to do things. You cannot do everything. You need a team of dedicated people. I have tried to do everything myself for a long time and I am just now accepting that that's not possible. Honestly, when my week starts, my phone starts ringing. And sometimes the week does not end, because my phone is ringing in the weekends too. There is no set schedule. I do quite a bit of commercial work; that is actually what I do most of the time. I usually have a few of these projects going on at the same time, in different stages of development, on which I work as a director or cinematographer or both. Throughout the week, I am often in touch with a couple of production companies. I oversee treatments, I deliver edits, I go to meetings, I scout locations, I am in pre-production, or I am actually shooting. I am also one of the primary people doing the marketing of our films through social media. While I have

people helping me with that, I am the engine. And on top of all that I am supposed to be writing, because I always have scripts to write. I am often cursing pure *bombaclat* about when I get to write. But in the end everything kind of completes itself in its own time. When I have a deadline, I just have to stay up for a few nights and get it done. In order to create a sustainable film industry in Jamaica, I think two types of projects need to be made: projects made for \$100,000 or less that are aimed at the local and diasporic audience with the hope of crossing over into the indie cinema market; and larger projects that are made in Jamaica primarily for an international audience. When you are making films here just for the local and diasporic audience, you have to be very good at producing decent work for cheap, because making your money back in Jamaica and the diaspora alone is difficult. But it is doable. It has been done in the past and will move forward in the future. In fact, you already see various great low-budget filmmakers in the Caribbean working like this, putting out film after film. This is one method of sustainable filmmaking. The other method is attracting more international productions, especially episodic television series. These kind of productions would bring massive investment and employment to the island, as television series usually run for a year or even years. This alone could create an industry. So yes, mastering low-budget indies on the one hand and bringing in big-budget productions on the other hand is the way to do it. I think it is possible and I think it will happen.

Martens: Taking a regional perspective, how do you see your work fitting in the wider development of Caribbean cinema? Do you consider New Caribbean Cinema as a driver of a new wave of Caribbean cinema?

I definitely think New Caribbean Cinema is a driver for Caribbean cinema in general. I just see it. I see local filmmakers in Jamaica making short films using our DIY method and I see it when we go to other Caribbean islands. People there have seen our work; they know what we are doing and it is energizing them to make their own films. I want to get filmmakers from all across the region involved. Our first major effort, *Ring di Alarm*, was done by filmmakers living in Jamaica, but I want our movement to be more Caribbean-wide. There are currently great filmmakers emerging from Trinidad, from Aruba, from the Bahamas—they are just making quality pieces.

We run into each other at film festivals and feel something serious is going on. So yes, together with these filmmakers I believe our movement is definitely pushing things forward in the Caribbean. With that, I mainly mean the Anglophone Caribbean. Of course the Latin-American film movement, with its main production centers in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba, is already much older and more ingrained. But there is a huge language barrier. In the Anglophone Caribbean we are not really exposed to Latin-American cinema. I got exposed to it when I went to Cuba for the film festival and realized not only the sheer size of it, but also how unaware we are of what's happening there. I do very much identify our work with the Latin-American film movement. First of all, I identify with the social realities. When I watch a film coming out of Rio de Janeiro or Mexico City, it pretty much could be Kingston. The people look a little different and the language sounds different, but the social dynamics are very similar. The films that inspired me majorly are the Brazilian film *City of God* (2002) and all the films that came out of that Mexico City movement in the early 2000s, such as *Amores perros* (2000) and *Y tu mamá también* (2001). More recently, *Miss Bala* (2011), a Mexican drama film, was excellent. I also see similarities with our practical methods, political statements, and cultural aesthetics. I consider Latin-American cinema as where we are heading and probably should be heading. I think we are on the brink of something amazing. I have been saying this for a long time, but I am now really seeing it. For example, a place where I am really seeing it is the Trinidad & Tobago Film Festival. They have the best selection of work from the Anglophone Caribbean and related work from the other Caribbean islands, from Latin America, from Africa, from elsewhere. You see all our films getting way better. So I feel any moment now we can make the big hit films, I definitely feel that. If we would be able to get funding more easily, it would already be happening. In the next few years, we will be there. Pay attention."

Martens: You observe several similarities with Latin-American cinema. What is Caribbean cinema bringing extra to the table? Is there something like a Caribbean film aesthetic?

*“There is. The Caribbean is so mixed up with influences—from Europe, Africa, Asia, North America, and South America. I think the Caribbean film aesthetic is a bit more kaleidoscopic, more saturated, and more colourful. Films from Latin America are often harsh and rigid and I think there is room in Caribbean cinema to be more vibrant, more playful, and more experimental—also using folklore and magical realism as a real mainstay in the work. You already see that happening, especially in films from Trinidad & Tobago. It is really Caribbean and has a great role to play in world cinema. So the Caribbean film aesthetic is still very much open, but it is definitely magical, colourful, kaleidoscopic, language-rich, and musical. The two Jamaican films that really inspired me are **The Harder They Come** (1972), of course, and **Rockers** (1978). **The Harder They Come** was just ground-breaking. It was classical storytelling applied to a very Jamaican reality. It still serves as a blueprint for Jamaican filmmakers; it will always be. **The Harder They Come** reminds us that making a great Jamaican film is possible. Before Perry Henzell, the film’s director, passed away in 2006, I was fortunate to pick his brain once in a while. Although we didn’t meet very often, I definitely learned a lot from him. One time I tried to pitch him the story of **Fedda**, because he asked what I was working on, but every time I was talking for not even a minute, he asked me to start over again. He taught me that if you can’t encapsulate what your story is within a few sentences, then something is off. At the time I thought it was very harsh, and I didn’t agree with him, but as I have grown older I have come to understand what he meant. You have to know the essence, the soul of the film. The last time I saw him, about two weeks before he passed, I asked him some editing advice. At the time I was editing **Better Mus’ Come** and doubting some scenes that people seemed to love but made me cringe every time. So I asked him if I should delete them or leave them in. He just looked at me and said: “When I cringe, I cut.” So I did that and of course **Better Mus’ Come** lost about half an hour of scenes, but it worked. He was very succinct, to the point, and it meant a lot to me. It’s what I have been doing ever since. If I cringe now, for anything, I am cutting, no mat-*

*ter how much the test audience seems to like it. Although you will never find it, you have to strive for perfection. **Rockers** was another great piece. It was almost like a documentary—it did not even have a real plot! They just filmed actual people as they were and then figured out how to flow a little plot in there. In doing so, it captured Jamaican language and culture. It was like a time capsule. I made all the people involved in **Better Mus’ Come** study **Rockers**, because we were making a film set in Kingston in the late 1970s and **Rockers** was filmed in Kingston in the late 1970s. For us, **Rockers** was our Bible with regard to language and dress, a manual about the way Jamaican people rolled in that particular period.”*

Martens: How do you see your role in the future development and direction of Caribbean cinema? What do you aspire to achieve with your films?

*“Maybe this sounds competitive, but I want to make the films that epitomize Caribbean cinema. I want to make the films that introduce a new way, a new aesthetic. I want to develop a style. I want to be as great as the filmmakers I look up to. I want to have an impact on cinema like Hitchcock, Scorsese, or Kubrick. I want my work to be seen by all film lovers. Although I am making films that are very Caribbean, my aim is to get on the radar of people who, for example, watch the films of Michael Haneke—that’s where I want to go. I am very aware of the fact that my most immediate audiences, and the audiences that can allow the film to travel, are the local and diasporic audiences. They are paying attention to what’s happening on the island. When an article comes out in the **Jamaica Gleaner**, people here and in the diaspora are seeing it. They are plugged in already. So I see the value of these audiences, as a source of support and a gateway to a larger global audience, but I want as many people as possible to see my films. I want millions. At the end of the day, I want to have a big presence in the world of cinema.”*

**In the next few years,
we will be there.**

Pay attention.