

Nothing Quite Like the Independence Spirit of 1962

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Photo Credit: Garfield Robinson



A section of the audience which gathered to watch the Grand Gala last year. (Photo: Garfield Robinson)

Jamaica 55 is being celebrated left, right and centre. The Independence Village is drawing the crowds, the Grand Gala tonight is expected to pack 30,000 into the National Stadium. There is also a Reggae Night show on the cards, and the Denbigh Agricultural and Industrial Show, at 65 years, promises to salute our nation's best. It's also a party weekend. Fun lovers will head for the north coast for what they call the summer playground fantasy.

Beyond the headlines there will be fun galore as Jamaicans go the beach, enjoy sports festivals, visit families or, like me, just take a break. The churches will be well attended as, after all, it's the real Independence Day and a chance for people to show off their creative use of the national colours.

And, oh, this is also Bolt's weekend, as it seems that London World Athletics is all about Usain. His photos are everywhere in England and people are jostling over each other to get a close-up, a selfie, or an autograph. It's the IAAF World Championships, but everyone is calling it the Bolt Party, and the organisers have unashamedly cashed in on the name and his presence to ensure a packed London Stadium this week.

Poor Emancipation has been left behind as Jamaicans have switched their attention to the Grand Gala and athletics and last week's celebrations are already receding into the distant past. Serves them right, because we have always said that these two important holidays, Emancipation and Independence days, need to be merged into one single weekend, rather than the double dip August 1 and then August 6 that has become so confusing.

Many thought that they were celebrating Independence last week. The two days got mixed up. Emancipation and Independence are too important to be treated so frivolously. As others have said before me, the granting of two holidays within five days of each other doesn't make sense, as the two celebrations could be merged and save the expensive stop and start for business and industry. Remember, these holidays mean double time twice per week, and a consequent drop in well-needed productivity.

Nevertheless, we are into Independence with our Grand Gala extravaganza and facing an \$180-million bill. The Jamaica Cultural Development Commission has done a good job of organising and this evening's show which should be quite a spectacle. But it will always be difficult to recapture the enthusiasm of 1962 when people simply poured out into the streets and at a multitude of functions to welcome the dawn of the world's newest nation.

People ask me what was the first Independence like, and I return to the story repeatedly because of the wealth of memories I garnered as a little boy fascinated by the rapid-fire events of that time.

First of all, Jamaica was partying like never before with the sounds of Derrick Morgan's *Forward March*, Lord Creator's *Independent Jamaica*, and Al-T-Joe's *Rise, Jamaica*, *Rise* providing a background beats to the formal and informal functions that marked our transition to full nationhood.

The country was dressing up its main towns and villages, with the new colours of black, green and gold making a lasting impression with lights at night illuminating the decorations for miles around. Sums were provided for a thousand villages to stage Independence Day celebrations in true folk form — the quadrille, the kumina, ring games, greased pole climbing, cricket, dominoes, beach parties, 'cross the harbour races, and the flag-raising ceremonies.

From the weeks before we had been hearing the new Jamaica National Anthem being played on the radio, had heard of a new flag, which was to be unfurled at the Stadium on the evening of August 5, and how Princess Margaret, sister of Queen Elizabeth II, would be coming, as well as the vice-president of the USA Lyndon B Johnson himself.

Of course, fashion statements were being made as people vied to be invited to the banquets and other official events.

Hats, gloves and nose veils were in high demand, while the top tailors such as D B Dyer and Herman Farel were kept busy with orders. Nathan's Store, Issas and Topper on King Street were crowded, while rehearsals for curtsying took place all over the island. Hear Louise Bennett, in a constant teasing mode: "Ben' down lower, Sah, ben yuh back, nobadda ben' yuh knee. Yuh haffi learn di rightful way fi bow to royalty."

In addition, they were under considerable strain. The protocol for meeting the Royal Party was published and included what to wear, when, and how. Ladies curtsying should keep their backs straight and should not bow their heads. Gentlemen, however, should lower their heads to an almost horizontal position and then raise it.

So what was the week like leading up to August 6?

Well, the national programme was published and included flag-raising ceremonies, street dances, bonfires, float parades, beauty contests, exhibitions, State functions, and fireworks.

Education Minister Edwin Allen instructed his ministry to summon all schoolchildren to assemble at their various schools on Independence Day for the observations. The excitement was growing.

Her Royal Highness arrived on August 3 and was officially welcomed at George V Memorial Park (now National Heroes Park). The following day she unveiled the Olympic Statue and opened the new National Stadium

Later that night, Saturday, August 4, Jamaica's Bunny Grant defeated Britain's Dave Charnley over 15 bruising rounds at the Stadium to win the Empire Lightweight Championship and give Jamaica its first Independence present.

Sunday was a National Day of Prayer with the Princess worshipping at St Jago de la Vega (Anglican) Cathedral in Spanish Town.

Things were moving into pace for the flag-raising ceremony on Sunday night, August 5. However, there were still a few hitches, which we were to learn of later. Like good planners, the committee, led by Donald Sangster and *The Gleaner's* Theodore Sealy, made sure that no one knew of the little hold-ups or bugbears. Because, in spite of the well laid-out plans, nerves were on edge, and Sangster was concerned about turning out the lights at midnight for one minute while the British flag was lowered to be replaced by the Jamaican National Flag. Both Sealy and Hugh Shearer, minister of external affairs, poo-pooed that argument.

The Royal Box included Princess Margaret and her husband Lord Snowden, Jamaica's Governor General Sir Kenneth Blackburne, Premier Sir Alexander Bustamante, and the American VP Johnson. Sir Kenneth had been opposed to Johnson getting a seat in the royal box on the basis

that he was not a head of state, but Sealy and Bustamante disagreed. Bustamante pointed out that Princess Margaret was not The Queen, so against Blackburne's will the Johnsons were seated.

But not before the American vice-president himself caused an upset with his late arrival. At the appointed time for his arrival it turned out that he was elsewhere in Kingston putting on a dinner party and had to be flown to the Stadium via helicopter to meet the deadlines.

Back home, in the country, I had accompanied my father to a short ceremony in the village square where he spoke as the local head teacher. We hurried home to listen to the Stadium ceremony on the radio. At other places in the rural areas midnight church services were being held. A young Reverend Neville deSouza conducted service at the Porus Anglican Church, while Reverend E A Ritchie Haughton led the service at the Congregational Church. Musician Evon Grant conducted a combined choral service at Brooks Park in Mandeville.

We took in the radio commentary from Kingston, and the next day, August 6, I found myself at the local school with other children for flag-raising, an Independence pack of sweets, aerated water, sweet biscuits, an Independence cup, badge, a ball point pen, and a mini Jamaica flag.

So on that first Independence Day, nostalgia excused, the whole island came alive with the tempo of the occasion. We went on a drive through May Pen, Chapleton, and Frankfield, and through the hills of Clarendon, and I have vivid memories of the buntings that were everywhere in town and hamlet.

Some two dozen Maroons danced in the Port Maria Square before moving on to Highgate and Richmond. Moneague celebrated with street dancing, Above Rocks in St Catherine enjoyed a community picnic, sack races, grease pig chasing. Float parades wound their way across the hills and valleys.

Ahead was the opening of Parliament, the State Ball at the Sheraton, and a week set to culminate with a giant float parade through the streets of Kingston and the IX Central American and Caribbean games at the Stadium.

The arrangements were carried out without a hitch. The transition was seamless and representatives of the 70 countries that attended were moved to speak highly of the dignity and stateliness of the Jamaican people.

“To tell you the truth, Mr Sangster,” Sealy had said to the deputy prime minister in the Royal Box when he expressed concern about the lights, “if our nation is afraid to turn off the lights at midnight for one minute, then we shouldn't be self-governing.”

Now 55 years later, don't worry, Sir Donald, we are still not afraid.