

To the Max

Maxi Priest headlines the 14th Midwest Reggae Fest

By Shawn Gaines

IT'S EASY TO TAKE for granted, but the annual Midwest Reggae Fest isn't just another summer music festival. It's the longest-running, as well as the best attended, reggae festival in the Midwest. It's also one of the top ten reggae festivals in the entire country. This year's festival will mark its 14th year.

Past years have featured renowned reggae artists like Culture, Yellowman and Luciano. "When Luciano played two years ago, just the energy he had onstage [was memorable]," explains promoter Packy Malley. "He was running out into the crowd. It was incredible."

Malley has worked on the festival since the very beginning. He has always been a major supporter of reggae, having been a reggae disc jockey from 1986 to 1991. In the summer of '92, he teamed up with local reggae artist Carlos Jones to put together the Cleveland Reggae All Stars. The group consisted of several local musicians who went on to perform a sold-out Bob Marley tribute show. That same summer, Malley organized the first annual Midwest Reggae Fest.

The first festival, and all subsequent ones, took place at the 132-acre Meadowridge Farm in Huntsburg, about 50 miles east of Cleveland. It was also there that Malley received the original inspiration for the show.

"There used to be a festival out there called the Rock & Reggae Festival," says Malley, who frequented the mixed-music celebration the 11 years it ran at Meadowridge. After that, Malley explains that Robert Lockwood had a blues festival in the same place. "I said, 'Hmmm, I bet we could put an all-reggae festival out there.'"

It wasn't too difficult to get the festival started. Malley didn't have too much trouble lining up the bands and originally just walked around and hung up posters to promote it. However, the festival has grown significantly since 1992, so advertising has increased. But thanks to constant repeat business, it hasn't been difficult attracting concertgoers.

About 2,000 people attended last year's festival, with a diverse mix of ages and races. "It's hard to pinpoint the target audience because

MIDWEST REGGAE FESTIVAL

Noon, Saturday, Aug. 13
Meadowridge Farm
17305 Mayfield Road, Huntsburg, Ohio
216.241.5555
\$25 Advance, \$30 Day of Show

reggae appeals to everybody," says Malley, who expects about 2,500 for this year's festival, providing the weather is favorable.

The location of Meadowridge Farm for the festival is especially appealing to Malley. "I just fell in love with the property," he says. "It's a beautiful, privately owned farm and one of the real beauties of it is that — well, there's a lot of things. It's the kind of place where it's completely acceptable to bring in your own coolers, your own picnic baskets, your own grills."

Malley also points out that "it's far different from most venues [the performers] play at and a lot of time the Jamaican entertainers say it reminds them of home."

Maxi Priest, the world's second most successful solo reggae artist, will headline this year's concert. "We're really excited to have Maxi Priest out there," says Malley.

Priest has been making successful reggae music since 1988, scoring numerous hits as a crossover artist. He has released ten albums and has performed all over the globe. His single "Close to You" went to number one on the Billboard Hot 100 Singles chart. His other hits include "Wild World," "Some Guys Have All the Luck" and "That Girl," a Grammy-nominated duet with Shaggy. He has recently released his 11th studio album, *2 the Max*.

"I started working on [booking Priest] in January up in New York," says Malley.

It took a couple months to get him for the festival, with Malley arranging shows for him in Detroit and Chicago as well. Priest will be joined by the Soldiers of Jah Army (SOJA), a five-piece roots band with four albums under its belt since 1998. Also performing will be Carlos Jones and the PLUS Band, Outlaws I & I and Roots High Power Sound System.

"It's a real celebration of summer," said Malley. "We'll have the volleyball nets set up, swimming with life-guards, a children's play area."

There will also be beer, pop, and food for sale, along with jewelry and Rastafarian-themed vendors.

"There aren't many festivals that are still kicking it for 14 years," said Malley. "And with the [help of the] good people of Cleveland, hopefully we'll be kicking it for another 14 years." ■



MAXI PRIEST One of reggae's most popular acts.