

## DESMOND DEKKER: 1941-2006

# Reggae singer introduced Jamaican music to world

BY JON PARELES  
*The New York Times*

Desmond Dekker, the Jamaican singer whose 1969 hit, "The Israelites," opened up a worldwide audience for reggae, died Wednesday. He was 64. He died after collapsing from a heart attack in his home in Surrey, England.

"The Israelites" was the peak of Dekker's extensive career in Jamaica and England, selling more than a million copies worldwide. He was already a major star in Jamaica and well known in Britain. "The Israelites" was his only U.S. hit, but the song was a turning point for Jamaican music among international listeners.

The Jamaican rhythm of ska had already generated hits in the United States, notably Millie Small's 1964 hit, "My Boy Lollipop." But that song was treated as a novelty. "The Israelites," with its Biblical imagery of suffering and redemption, showed the world reggae's combination of danceable rhythm and serious, sometimes spiritual intentions.

Dekker was named Desmond Adolphus Dacres in Kingston, Jamaica, when he was born in 1941. As a teenager he worked in a welding shop alongside Bob Marley and auditioned unsuccessfully for various producers until Marley encouraged him to try out for his own first producer, Leslie Kong.

Kong produced Dekker's first single, "Honour Thy Father and Mother," in 1963, and it reached No. 1 in Jamaica. A string of Jamaican hits followed, including "Mother's Young Girl," "It Pays," "Sinners Come Home" and "Labour for Learning."

Dekker had 20 hits reach No. 1 in Jamaica.

A series of songs including "Rude Boy Train" and "Rudy Got Soul" made him a hero of Jamaica's rough urban "rude boy" culture. Dekker's 1960s songs used the upbeat ska rhythm, a precursor to reggae also known as bluebeat. By the end of the decade, Dekker had won the Golden

Trophy award, presented annually to Jamaica's top singer, five times.

"Honour Thy Father and Mother" was released in Britain in 1964 on Chris Blackwell's Island label, which would later release Bob



**Dekker**

Marley's albums. Three years later, Dekker had his first British Top 20 hit with "007 (Shanty Town)," a tale of rude-boy ghetto violence – "Dem a loot, dem a shoot, dem a wail" – sung in a thick patois, which Americans would hear later as part of the soundtrack to "The Harder They Come" in 1972. Paul McCartney slipped Dekker's first name into the lyrics of the Beatles' ska song, "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da," on "The Beatles" (also known as the White Album) in 1968.

With "The Israelites," released in Jamaica in December 1968, Dekker had an international impact.

"The Israelites" reached No. 1 in Britain and No. 9 in the United States in 1969. The song would later return to the British charts in 1975 and was reissued as a single after being used in a commercial in 1990 for Maxell recording tape.