

# SHELLA RECORD – A REGGAE MYSTERY



## WORLD PREMIERE

Director and Producer - Chris Flanagan  
Executive Producers - Herbie Miller & Matthew Bate  
Editor - Sonia Godding Togobo

**Running Time: 87 minutes**



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## SHORT SYNOPSIS

Artist and vinyl fanatic Chris Flanagan becomes haunted by a lost singer's voice after discovering an incredible junk shop record. He embarks on a quest to find her from Toronto, to Kingston Jamaica and all across America enlisting the help of psychics, private investigators and a ghost hunter on a surreal adventure. SHELLA RECORD - A REGGAE MYSTERY is a meditation on the power of music and obsession, blurring fact and fiction through the use of Flanagan's creative studio built models and fantastical recreations.

## SYNOPSIS

10 years ago, artist and vinyl fanatic Chris Flanagan unearthed a mysterious thrift store record that changed his whole life. Haunted by the voice of a woman listed only as '*Sheila Record*' he dropped everything and began a quest to find out who she was and what happened to her.

Beginning in Toronto's underground Reggae scene Chris hears only rumours and whispers until finally, after playing the song on local radio a mystery caller identifies her as 1960s Jamaican Jazz singer *Sheila Rickards*.

Despite warnings to drop the search, Chris embarks on a pilgrimage to Kingston Jamaica to try and find Sheila, hoping to get some clues from the Reggae godfather, producer Bunny 'Striker' Lee.

Chris follows rumours and red herrings across the island, exploring the city's streets, burned down studios and sacred musical sites encountering legends of Reggae's golden era. These musicians all remember the dynamic Sheila Rickards but no one has seen her since she recorded her only Reggae song and then vanished.

Chris returns to Toronto empty handed but is unable to let go of his obsession with the mystery diva. He soon travels to America following in her footsteps from New York to Los Angeles, enlisting the help of psychics, private investigators and ghost hunters in an increasingly desperate search.

SHELLA RECORD -- A REGGAE MYSTERY is a meditation on the power of music and obsession, blurring fact and fiction through the use of Chris' creative studio built models and surreal recreations.

Chris' art practice forms the whimsical aesthetic of the film with the incorporation of models and silhouette animations as scenes are recreated and scenarios re-imagined with actors playing Sheila Rickards and other incidental characters .

There is also a wealth of archival footage of Bunny Lee, the musicians who played on the song and Sheila herself. The soundtrack is an array of some of the deepest and most powerful Jamaican dub and Reggae from the archives of the great Bunny Lee and the late King Tubby.

## Chris Flanagan -- DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

### **When I stumbled across a discarded thrift shop record in rural Ontario 10 years ago, I had no idea of the journey it would take me on.**

The never ending quest to discover sounds, voices and stories I've never heard before is what keeps me hitting Flea Markets at dawn, keeping some strange company and spending far more than I can afford on pieces of round black plastic.

"Jamaican Fruit of African Roots" by *Shella Record* is one of those 1 in 10,000 songs that leaves you utterly floored. As an artist, obsessive record collector and Dj I have always searched for ways to connect these passions within my visual arts practice. Haunted by her unique voice I knew I needed to drop everything and find out anything I could about this mystery diva *Shella Record*.

I had never made a documentary before and bought a cheap camera on Craigslist to document my search in Toronto. The name *Shella Record* was ungooglable-but surely with a voice like that she must have made other recordings! Was she Canadian, American, Jamaican, English, alive or dead?

It could have been a very short and simple search but as I began to dig I was faced with intrigue and confusion at every turn, making me even more determined to keep searching.

Hitting dead ends in Toronto I went on a local Reggae radio show playing the song on air hoping that someone might recognize Shella's voice and call in. Off air a mysterious older gentleman with a Jamaican accent revealed that *Shella Record* was in fact a misprint of "*Sheila Rickards*" a Jamaican Jazz singer from the 1960s. Could it really be the same person? I had to go to Jamaica to find out. What followed was a search spanning more than 5 years across Jamaica, New York and Los Angeles, New Orleans and Mississippi.

### **Process**

This process was entirely self-funded, friends and my long-suffering partner Emily grabbed cameras and sound recorders and accompanied me across the world as I chased the next clue.

Friend and mentor Matthew Bate (*Shut Up Little Man, Sam Klemke's Time Machine*) gave invaluable ongoing input, advice and support as did artist and documentary filmmaker Sameer Farooq (*Silk Road of Pop*). Eventually I was able to secure grants from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts for a shoe string post-production budget to bring some paid professionals on board.

### **Art elements/aesthetic**

It was always clear that this was a mystery story and I played up elements of that intrigue and dark noir-ish aesthetic throughout.

These themes were strengthened through my creative recreations with actors which were used to give drama to an imagined scenario, recreate a scene I was unable to film or to seamlessly blend in with archival footage.

My background as an artist plays an essential role throughout the film through the integration of intricate models and silhouette puppets of me and several other important characters. They are whimsical and playful at times but can also be haunting and powerful as when engineer Newton Williams describes his anguish when his studio in Kingston Jamaica burned down.

### **Music**

As the documentary centres on my obsession with a song and a voice, *Jamaican Fruit of African Roots* features prominently throughout, both in its original form and in the dub remixes. *(More about the song below)*

The music is a fundamental part of this documentary and the score includes a mix of some of the greatest Reggae and Dub songs of the 70s along with original compositions. I have been extremely fortunate to license some of the highlights of the catalogue of Producer Bunny Lee - an essential character in the story who became a friend through the process. Songs feature such greats as Horace Andy, King Tubby, Prince Far-I, Cornell Campbell, Roots Radics and more.

I composed incidental music for the documentary using samples from vinyl records as the starting point and augmented with live instruments including a xylophone I borrowed from the Toronto Public Library.

### **Post Production**

The post production phase was daunting. Throughout production, every phone call and dead-end lead had to be recorded, as I never knew where the next clue would come from. This left me the unenviable task of sorting through hundreds of hours and terabytes worth of footage. I also used this post production period to return to my art studio to build models and recreations as the story took shape.

### **Grappling with my white privilege**

Throughout the making of this film I have always grappled with questions about my role in this story as a white filmmaker obsessed with a Jamaican woman who sings a song about slavery. This is something that was essential to address early within the film itself and the story has always been more about MY search for and obsession with the mystery singer rather than an attempt to tell HER story.

I consciously sought out collaborators of Jamaican/Caribbean descent in key creative roles in this film about an outsiders journey within Reggae and Jamaican culture. This resulted in a process which necessitated important conversations, extending the production and post-production periods, ultimately resulting in a much more meaningful and honest film.

My primary creative collaborator was editor Sonia Godding Togobo who had a large role in the shape of the finished film. In addition I had cultural consultation from educator and activist Robin Akimbo, script editing by writer and spoken word artist Kevin Reigh, studio camera and motion graphics were by Graeme Mathieson, and finally Executive Producer Herbie Miller of the Jamaica Music Museum in Kingston, Jamaica has provided invaluable insight.

## THE PRODUCTION TEAM

### **CHRIS FLANAGAN (Director/Producer)**

Chris Flanagan is an installation artist and documentary filmmaker. His documentary short *Ruff and Tuff - Stranger Cole's Toronto Roots* premiered at Hot Docs in 2018. He is currently developing a series of documentary shorts with collaborator Graeme Mathieson for the National Film Board of Canada.

As an artist he has exhibited in numerous artist-run and public galleries across Canada and Australia for more than 15 years. His art practice has also included composing original including a fabricated band and a film score for a small town. His compositions featured in *Hannah Gadsby's Oz* a three part series on Australian Art.

Chris is also a DJ, record collector, and runs Shella Records, a record label dedicated to reissuing incredible lost Canadian Reggae music in partnership with the original artists.

### **HERBIE MILLER (Executive Producer)**

Herbie Miller is a Jamaican musicologist, social analyst, song-writer, music producer and cultural historian. As Director and Curator of the Jamaica Music Museum in Kingston, Jamaica he has dedicated much of his life to preserving and archiving Jamaica's rich musical history. Herbie Miller managed Reggae icon Peter Tosh at the height of his career until his death.

### **MATTHEW BATE (Executive Producer)**

Matthew Bate is a multi-award winning writer, director and producer. His 2011 feature *Shut Up Little Man!* premiered at the Sundance Film festival before screening theatrically across the U.S and being picked up by Netflix. His follow up feature *Sam Klemke's Time Machine* premiered at the 2015 Sundance New Frontiers Program and won the Doc Aviv Artistic Spirit Award. Matthew has created television series and one-off films for SBS, ABC, Al Jazeera and The New York Times. In 2013 Mathew wrote and directed the hybrid film *I Want to Dance Better At Parties* which won the 2013 Dendy Award, and that same year was the recipient of the David and Joan Williams Fellowship. Matthew's Virtual Reality work has seen him collaborate with the Sydney Dance Company on ACMI's first ever VR commission, and more recently the VR artwork 'Summation of Force', with Magnum Photographer Trent Parke, was selected for Sundance's New Frontiers and won the VR Award at the Imagine Film festival Amsterdam. Matthew has been nominated for two AACTA Awards and is an AWGIE Award winning screenwriter. Matthew is a founding director of Closer Productions.

**(Production Team continued on next page)**

## THE PRODUCTION TEAM

### **SONIA GODDING TOGOBO (Editor)**

Sonia Godding Togobo has close to 20 years of media experience as both an editor and director. Sonia has edited television programs for BBC, Channel 4 and ITV in the UK and for OWN, CBC, HGTV, SLICE and E! in North America. Along with *Sheila Record: A Reggae Mystery*, Sonia recently edited the CBC documentary *Mr. Jane and Finch*.

Sonia directed the feature documentary *Adopted ID* that opened the Images of Black Women Film Festival at the British Film Institute and the Blackstar Film Festival in Philadelphia, screened at the Hollywood Black Film Festival and Caribbean Tales Film Festival in Toronto. Sonia also directed a second documentary short, *Rosie Douglas : A Fearless Rebel*. Sonia co-produced and directed a documentary web series and video installation *In The Black Canada* featured at the Art Gallery of Windsor.

### **GRAEME MATHIESON (D.O.P./Motion Graphics)**

Graeme Mathieson is a Toronto-based Director, DOP and Editor, having spent the last 15 years in the industry, filming across the globe and is the Creative Director at Q Media Solutions in Toronto. He also moonlights as DJ Gramera, hosting parties such as SoulSkank and Rebel Hop and spent 15 years at the helm of StolenSouls show on CHRY 105.5fm radio. He is currently developing a series of shorts on Toronto's buried Reggae history in collaboration with Chris Flanagan and the National Film Board of Canada.

## ABOUT THE SONG

When Chris Flanagan first found the song, it was listed as "Roots Jamaica" by Sheila Record on an obscure compilation *Warzone* released by Toronto's Monica's Records. No more than 500 copies of *Warzone* were ever pressed, making it an extremely rare album only known to the deepest reggae collectors.

During the search, Flanagan discovered the song is actually "Jamaican Fruit of African Roots" by Sheila Rickards produced by the legendary hitmaker Bunny "Striker" Lee.

The vocal track was never actually released in Jamaica, however the dub version (instrumental 'remix') was included on the 1975 *Creation of Dub* album, mixed by dub-pioneer King Tubby, considered one of the great albums of the genre. The "Jamaican Roots Dub" was the stand out track on the album, but Sheila's song that it was remixed from remained totally unknown and has been a mystery for dub collectors for decades.

In 2013, while still searching for Sheila, Chris Flanagan licensed the original track and King Tubby dubs from Bunny Lee. Chris started Sheila Records, a record label to re-release the Sheila Rickards song in a limited run. The 500-record run sold out and has been played by DJs, radio stations and sound systems around the world.

### Reviews and comments on *Jamaican Fruit of African Roots*

Reknowned BBC DJ Gilles Peterson played the track on BBC 6 in 2013 - 150,000 people tune in weekly to listen live, and Peterson has more than 3 million followers on Soundcloud.

*"Rickards' haunting vocals blend Broadway and jazz influences over a reggae backing track as she sings ..with an infectious spirit of celebration and resistance." "Jamaican Fruit is a unique musical curiosity rescued from the brink of obscurity and a must for reggae collectors."*

- Vincent Pollard, Exclaim! Magazine, March 25, 2013

[http://exclaim.ca/music/article/sheila\\_rickards-jamaican\\_fruit\\_of\\_african\\_roots](http://exclaim.ca/music/article/sheila_rickards-jamaican_fruit_of_african_roots)

*"...don't sleep on this one. With celebrity UK broadcaster Gilles Peterson already hyping it like a new Galliano joint on Brownswood, the entire pressing run may sell out before word spreads to dealers that there's also a documentary film in the works."*

- Tim Perlich, The Perlich Post, April 2 2013

<https://theperlichpost.blogspot.com/2013/04/solving-sheila-rickards-mystery.html>

Further details about the release, including the original musicians and full liner notes available here: [www.shellarecords.com/jamaicanfruit](http://www.shellarecords.com/jamaicanfruit)

## FUNDING SUPPORT

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### About Canada Council for the Arts

The Canada Council for the Arts is Canada's public arts funder, with a mandate to foster and promote the study and enjoyment of, and the production of works in, the arts. The Council champions and invests in artistic excellence through a broad range of grants, services, prizes and payments to professional Canadian artists and arts organizations. Its work ensures that excellent, vibrant and diverse art and literature engages Canadians, enriches their communities and reaches markets around the world. The Council also raises public awareness and appreciation of the arts through its communications, research and arts promotion activities. It is responsible for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, which promotes the values and programs of UNESCO in Canada to contribute to a more peaceful, equitable and sustainable future. The Canada Council Art Bank operates art rental programs and helps further public engagement with contemporary arts.



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