

25 years in the Penthouse

February 22, 2013 By Cecelia Campbell-Livingston

Few record companies in contemporary dancehall can match the track record of Penthouse Records which has amassed an impressive catalogue of hit songs and albums. The label celebrates its 25th anniversary this year and CEO/founder Donovan Germain has big plans for the milestone. A double CD and documentary detailing Penthouse's achievements, will be released.

Although the global downturn in music sales have made running a traditional record company challenging, Germain says his passion will not allow him to quit.

"I'm a very positive person. I believe that if we develop good artistes, you can earn through live performances. It's a little difficult now. It's a global thing, not just music alone" he told Splash.

Reflecting on the company he started in 1988 after returning from living in the United States, Germain says he has no regrets.

"I've been all over the world, to places that if I was working a nine-to-five I could never afford to do" he said.

A former Manning Cup player for Kingston College, Germain operated a thriving record store in New York City for several years.

He started Penthouse on the top floor of a building on Slipe Road, St Andrew. Its first big hit was Chaka On The Move by deejay Chaka Demus the following year.

The 1990s were fruitful for Penthouse which embraced dancehall's digital revolution and scored with numerous hit songs like What One Dance Do (Beres Hammond), Everyone Falls in Love (Tanto Metro and Devonte), Fresh Vegetable (Tony Rebel), Fire Burning (Marcia Griffiths), Saddest Day of My Life (Wayne Wonder) and Lionheart (Garnet Silk). It was a decade that also saw the emergence of Buju Banton, a gruff-toned singjay who recorded a series of hits for Penthouse such as Browning, Deportee, Murderer and the epic 1995 album 'Til Shiloh, which remains the jewel in the label's crown.

Germain guided and managed Banton's career for 18 years. Others including Wonder, Rebel, Cutty Ranks, Sanchez and Mad Cobra figured in the label's remarkable success of the 1990s. Veteran artistes Beres Hammond and Marcia Griffiths enjoyed career revivals at Penthouse during that period.

Its current roster includes promising singer Romain Virgo, Torch, Shuga and Exco Levi. Germain says one of his biggest achievements is the recording studio and manufacturing plant he opened at Ballater Avenue in St Andrew in 2006.

A father of three children, Germain says he would have loved to see one of them succeed him as head of the studio. They have taken different career paths — lawyer, computer engineer and radiologist. He says he plans to run Penthouse Records pretty much the same way he has since 1988. *"Building more music and trying to spot that unique talent."*