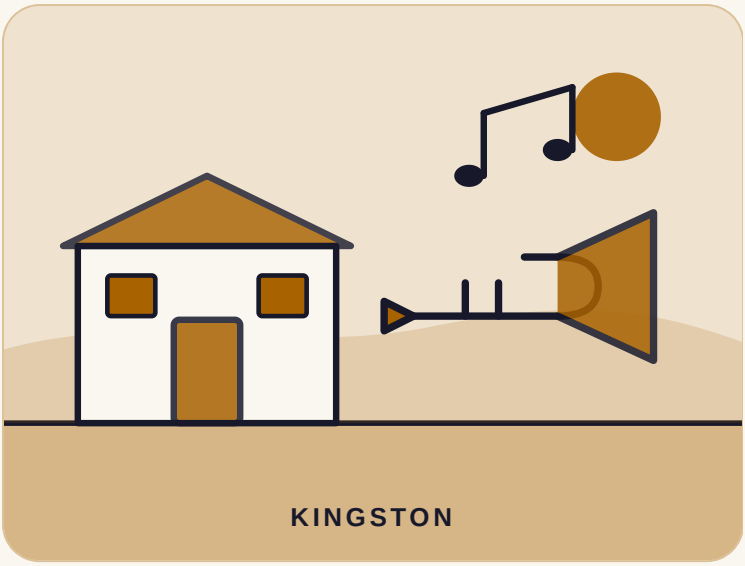

JAMAICA

The school behind the sound of Jamaica

A Kingston home for outcast boys taught music. Four of its pupils went on to form the Skatalites.

WHERE	Kingston
WHO	The Sisters of Mercy and the boys of Alpha Boys' School in Kingston
WHEN	1880 to 2014

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

In 1880, Sister Jessie Ripoll and the Sisters of Mercy opened a home in Kingston, Jamaica. It was for poor and orphaned girls. It soon took in boys too, boys who lived as outcasts in the city. It became known as a "school for wayward boys".

The nuns taught trades such as tailoring, tile making and farming, so the boys could earn a living. Music was added soon after. In 1892, a school band began. At first it was a drum and fife group. Later the Bishop of Jamaica gave it brass instruments.

> **Alpha saved Jamaican youth from challenging early life circumstances by giving them the gift of music.**
>
> LONDON'S BLACK HISTORY JOURNAL, IN A BOOK REVIEW QUOTED BY WIKIPEDIA

From brass band to ska

Over the years, the band became part of Jamaica's musical life. It played for kings, princes and other important guests, the Jamaica Gleaner says. Many boys went on to careers in music.

Four former pupils formed the Skatalites: Don Drummond, Tommy McCook, Lester Sterling and Johnny Moore. The band is generally credited with

inventing ska. Ska later led to reggae. Other Alpha pupils include the drummer Leroy “Horsemouth” Wallace and the singers Yellowman and Leroy Smart.

1880	1892	4
year the home opened in Kingston	year the school band began	founders of the Skatalites who studied at Alpha

The nun with a sound system

Sister Mary Ignatius Davies ran the music department for 64 years, according to a book review quoted by Wikipedia. She played jazz, R&B and ska records on her own sound system. Her boys adored her and stayed her friends for life. The review calls her the “Godmother of Ska and Reggae”.

In September 2014, the school ended its residential system. It became the Alpha Institute, a day school. It trains at-risk young people from the inner city in trades such as carpentry and barbering. Music is still taught, from classical and jazz to ska, rocksteady and reggae. A two-year course prepares students for jobs with a band. The most gifted get an extra year.

How it unfolded

- **1880** The Sisters of Mercy open the home in Kingston.
- **1892** The school band begins as a drum and fife group.
- **Ska** Four former pupils form the Skatalites.
- **2014** The school ends its residential system and becomes the Alpha Institute.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Alpha did not set out to make stars. It set out to give outcast boys care, discipline and a trade.

Music gave boys with few options a way to be seen and heard.

OUR TAKE

A home for outcast boys became one of the birthplaces of Jamaican music.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1. ### Teach a skill, not only give a meal

   The nuns taught trades and music so the boys could earn a living.

   Try this: When you help someone, add a skill that lasts.

2 Mix discipline with joy

The school was known for discipline and for its music tuition.

Try this: Pair a daily routine with something people love to do.

3 A teacher can shape generations

Sister Mary Ignatius ran the music department for 64 years, a review says.

Try this: Thank a teacher who stayed with you for years.

4 Change the form, keep the heart

The school ended its residential system in 2014 and kept teaching music.

Try this: When circumstances change, change the method, not the purpose.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A rescued life can start a song that the whole world dances to.

Sources

Jamaica Gleaner
Music Diaries: Alpha continues rich musical heritage (2017)

Uncommon Caribbean
Alpha Boys' School, Nurturing Jamaican Music for More Than 100 Years

Wikipedia
Alpha Boys School

Fact-check note: The three sources agree on the main story and differ on a few details. Beginning: the Jamaica Gleaner says Sister Jessie Ripoll first saw the need to house and care for orphaned and underprivileged girls, and that the idea was later extended to boys who lived as outcasts in Kingston, starting in 1880; Wikipedia and Uncommon Caribbean say the school was established in 1880 as a “school for wayward boys”; the story gives both. The trades (tailoring, tile making, farming) and the 1892 start of the band as a drum and fife corps, which later became a brass band after the Roman Catholic Bishop of Jamaica gave brass instruments, are from Wikipedia; the Gleaner also dates the band to 1892. That the band played for kings, princes and other dignitaries is from the Gleaner. The four founding members of the Skatalites (Don Drummond, Tommy McCook, Lester Sterling and Johnny Moore) all attended Alpha according to Uncommon Caribbean; the Gleaner lists Drummond, McCook and Moore (as “Johnny ‘Dizzy’ Moore”) and Sterling among its former pupils. “Generally credited with inventing ska” is from Uncommon Caribbean; Wikipedia says the school “has been credited with influencing the development of ska and reggae”. The story does not give a year for the Skatalites. Leroy “Horsemouth” Wallace, Yellowman and Leroy Smart are named as alumni by Uncommon Caribbean, the Gleaner and Wikipedia. The pull quote and the description of Sister Mary Ignatius Davies (64 years as head of music, her own sound system, jazz, R&B and ska records, lifelong friendships, and the “Godmother of Ska and Reggae” title) come from a book review in London’s Black History journal as quoted by Wikipedia, so they are second-hand and we could not open the review; the Guardian obituary of Sister Ignatius could not be read. The end of the residential system on 5 September 2014 and the change into the Alpha Institute, a day school for at-risk inner-city youth teaching trades such as carpentry and barbering, are from the Gleaner (2017), and the music styles taught and the two-year course (with an extra year for the most gifted) are from the same article. We did not check developments after 2017. Wikipedia and others use the school’s name “Alpha Boys’ School” and “Alpha Cottage School”; the story uses Alpha Boys’ School. The pin shows the school’s location in Kingston. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.