

The Heartbeat of a People

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Reggae is many things to different people – ‘conscious’ music dealing with social and racial issues; a reawakened African art form; just another danceable Caribbean rhythm. The music’s ability to satisfy such a varied spectrum of needs explains much of its widespread popularity. And each definition has some validity. Given Jamaica’s history, themes of social change and racial awareness have an obvious appeal. Jamaicans are mainly of African descent, so their music is naturally Afrocentric. And of course Jamaicans have little use for music you can’t dance to.

This last fact is a central reality of Jamaican popular music which too many observers ignore. Reggae has always been based on a dance beat. Coxsone Dodd, one of its progenitors, states frankly that ska developed from attempts to find a sound which was popular in Jamaican dance halls.¹ And as Lovindeer, reggae artist and social commentator, says: ‘A lot of people expect that reggae has to have a message. Rubbish. Reggae is a beat. You can put a message on top of it, you can put gospel, you can put on slackness, you can put on pop. But reggae is a beat, and a lot of us are losing sight of that fact.’²

With the beat came a sense of conviction, lack of pretense, and natural intensity which made the music attractive to millions who were never part of the intended audience. Yet reggae remains essential to Jamaicans not because it can be heard in every country on earth, but because it continues to move them deeply, to express their feelings, to mirror their everyday reality. Reggae’s creators set out to do nothing more or less than

make music which fellow Jamaicans liked. You don’t have to be Jamaican to appreciate it any more than you have to be Italian to appreciate opera. But let’s not read into reggae things which were never intended. The genesis of Jamaican music had nothing to do with preconceived notions of universal appeal.

Through all its stylistic changes, reggae in its purest arena – the dance halls – has retained the essential bond of shared emotional experience. Performer and audience implicitly assume a common language, culture and musical heritage. Foreign reggae artists have never gained large followings here. Though Lucky Dube has been well-received at Reggae Sunsplash, only a relatively few musical sophisticates know anything about him or other African reggae stars like Alpha Blondy and Majek Fashek. Even native-born and bred Jamaicans who migrate tend to lose touch musically with their homeland. Jamaicans are proud of stars like Jimmy Cliff, Burning Spear and Culture, but their current music no longer has widespread grassroots popularity.



Out of sight, out of mind? Foreign-based reggae artists, like Burning Spear and Culture, often lose popularity in Jamaica.

At the Sting Christmas reggae concert in 1988 Maxi Priest, fresh from a number one hit in England, was pelted with oranges by an audience impatient for dancehall stars. Bunny Wailer suffered a worse fate when he was 'bottled' in 1990. The 'massive's' behaviour was indefensible, but clearly they felt that wealthy, internationally orientated stars could not speak for them or share their concerns and outlook. While discussing The Wailers, Joe Higgs addressed this same issue in a different context: 'The heavier albums were the earlier ones, "Catch a Fire" and "Burnin'", dealing with experiences totally. Confrontation, truth and rights. No compromise. You can only imagine those albums now, because that experience was not to be experienced anymore, only to be thought of. You could only imagine afterward what it was like to be sad. Those days . . . was what it is.'⁵

Authenticity is no guarantee of musical excellence, but it's a necessary condition. A little technique coupled with real feeling can go a long way towards producing profound music. But if the heart is missing, all the technique in the world can never touch the soul. Compare rock and roll music to the delta blues from which it sprang. The great practitioners of the post-war blues – Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson – could never compare in musicianship with their acolytes such as The Rolling Stones, The Beatles and Led Zeppelin. But they produced a music of infinitely deeper feeling. Willie Dixon, the great blues song writer, mused about this: 'The ability to deliver the blues with this depth of feeling can't be learned from books or schools. You can find people who can play rings around these blues artists, and have better voices, but they can't duplicate that real, inherited soul.'⁶

It's not difficult to imagine reggae suffering the same fate as the delta blues – co-opted by commercial popular music, its roots insidiously and inevitably gnawed away, and its greatest practitioners lured away from the source of their inspiration. The separation of artistic ability and emotional depth is always a cultural tragedy.

How many great blues were written after rock and roll became popular in the mid 1950s?

Perhaps it's no accident that the vast majority of great reggae songs were made before 1975 or so, before reggae became a large scale, commercially viable music. Reggae's new found international appeal meant that Jamaican artists could generally earn far more money abroad than at home, so the cream of Jamaica's musicians began spending most of their time touring overseas. One could hardly blame them, but it did mean a diminished contact with their roots and, some say, a consequent loss of instinctive vigour.

Can Jamaican music resist being swallowed by the sheer forces of economics and population? International pop is already co-opting the sound. The 'Abbaesque' dancehall of Ace of Base sold in the tens of millions, and the ska-based sounds of groups like The Mighty Mighty Bosstones and No Doubt enjoyed tremendous success in 1996 – the Bosstones sold 7 million albums in the US alone the same year. Apache Indian, the 'bhangramuffin' deejay, became one of the biggest pop stars in India; Majek Fashek claims that reggae originated in Africa, not Jamaica; and dancehall



Apache Indian, part of the new wave of International Reggae

is commonly referred to abroad as 'Jamaican Reggae Rap', which is a little like calling rhythm and blues 'black rock and roll'.

In the nineties Jamaican reggae artists are experiencing unprecedented sustained international success. Dancehall has made larger inroads into popular music abroad than even Bob Marley did while alive. Shabba Ranks appeared in *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and shared a number one hit on the American rap charts in 1995.

Snow, a white Canadian dancehall artist, took 'Informer' to number one in America and Britain. Chaka Demus and Pliers had a number one hit in the U.K. with 'Twist and Shout'. Ini Kamoze's 'Here Comes The Hot Stepper' topped the U.S. Billboard Singles charts in late 1994 and was one of the year's biggest selling records.

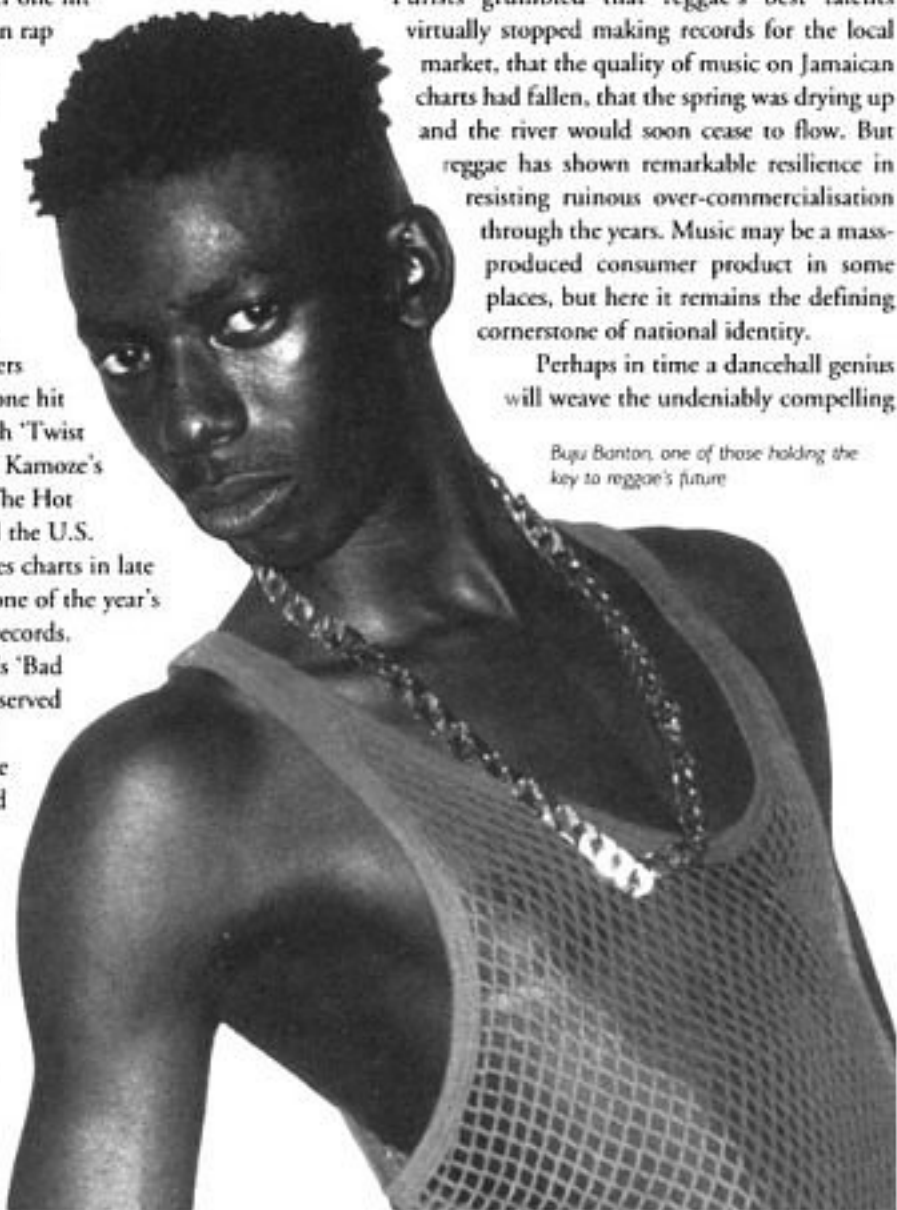
Inner Circle's 'Bad Boys' not only served as an American television theme song, it inspired a 1995 hit movie of the same name. Diana King's 'Shy Guy', used in the 'Bad Boys' movie soundtrack, made the Billboard top ten and her album

'Tougher Than Love' reportedly sold over a million copies. Shaggy, who topped the U.K. charts in 1993 with 'Oh Carolina', is probably the biggest selling reggae artist of all. His two-sided 'Boombastic/Summertime' hit #3 in the U.S. charts in mid 1995 and debuted at #1 in the U.K. charts. The Grammy winning 'Boombastic' album went gold.

All this causes talk about watered down music. Purists grumbled that reggae's best talents virtually stopped making records for the local market, that the quality of music on Jamaican charts had fallen, that the spring was drying up and the river would soon cease to flow. But reggae has shown remarkable resilience in resisting ruinous over-commercialisation through the years. Music may be a mass-produced consumer product in some places, but here it remains the defining cornerstone of national identity.

Perhaps in time a dancehall genius will weave the undeniably compelling

Buyu Banton, one of those holding the key to reggae's future





Clockwise from top left, Luciana, Diana King, Beenie Man and Shaggy, defining the cutting edge of reggae's development.

rhythms of the sound systems into lasting and memorable music. Some older performers are going from strength to strength, like Beres Hammond, who enjoyed a sell-out European tour in 1997. Garnett Silk suggested great things before his untimely death in 1994, while artists like Shaggy, Beenie Man, Tony Rebel, Buju Banton and Luciano give hope for the future. Indeed many critics saw Buju's 1995 album 'Til Shiloh' as the genre's first masterpiece and compared the single 'Untold Stories' to 'Redemption Song'. Some boldly acclaimed him the greatest Jamaican musical artist since Bob

Marley. More recently, similar accolades have been hailed on Luciano, who was the subject of a glowing review in *Time* magazine early in 1997, suggesting he might be headed for levels stratospheric.

What's to come is always unsure. Perhaps the prophets of musical doom will for once be correct. Or maybe reggae is enjoying a halcyon age. Whatever its ultimate destiny, we will always be able to savour the golden high points of the beat 'sent forth from yard to conquer the world', the music that Jamaicans can forever boast as 'fe we own'.

Roots Music

KUMINA, QUADRILLE, MENTO, BLUES AND JAZZ

Some romantics say Jamaican folk culture is chiefly African in origin and evolved in remote villages uncorrupted by Europe. But though mainly of African descent, Jamaicans speak only English. So the question arises: which is the main social determinant – race or language? Noted social commentator Professor Rex Nettleford sees language, the transmitter of culture, as 'the primary bearer of social genes', and says of the Jamaican experience:

'Africa is indeed tolerated in spurts of syncretised or reinterpreted folk-lore – a little bit of dance, a little bit of music, a little bit of story telling, and a few words lacing the Anglo-Saxon tongue with exotic tone and colour. But our formal education system, our accepted belief system, our art, law and morals, the legitimate customs and so many of our habits and perceived capabilities – all indices of a so-called cultural sense are dominated by the European heritage.'¹

His main argument is irrefutable, but the 'little bit of [African] music' is debatable. As Pamela O'Gorman points out, the performance style of authentic folk music in Jamaica is African, no matter what the origin of the music. This is readily seen in Rastafarian or Revival performances of European hymns – the percussive accompaniments and use of complicated rhythmic figures, the syncopated treatment of melodies that were originally written in equal note values, the absence of variety in dynamics and the tendency to adhere strictly to meter and



tempo. But what makes these performances unmistakably African in style is the open, somewhat relaxed vocal timbre obtained by directing the sound to the face rather than the head.²

One African legacy extremely common in Jamaican music is the 'call and answer' group vocal technique, which has been called 'the most salient characteristic of African, or at least West African music.'³ And as musicologist Garth White points out, in both Africa and Jamaica virtually all music is conceived vocally and the human voice is of overriding importance. Even ordinary speech has a relationship to African music and there is often a 'sing-talk' style of rendering which is reminiscent of dancehall deejays.⁴ Then there is the interest in improvisation, and the tendency to use a variety of tone colours in the vocal technique, especially harsh, throaty singing – again African characteristics. Many of these features in Jamaican music follow very closely those listed by Bruno Nettl as having been carried into the New World.⁵ Quite a few are found in in ska, rocksteady and reggae, though they are present more as Jamaican characteristics individualised in rural folk music and later incorporated into popular music.⁶ The traditional view is that all persisting African cultural retentions come from the plantation slave period. But this ignores the influx of over 8,000 Yoruba and Central African immigrants who came to Jamaica between 1841 and 1865 as indentured labourers and settled

mostly in the St Thomas area. Historian Monica Schuler describes the impact on Jamaica of these post-emancipation Africans in her study, *Alas, Alas, Kongo*.⁷ The most prominent cultural legacy of these 'direct' African migrants is Pocomania, or Kumina, an African ancestor worship cult emphasising both singing and dancing.

Pocomania also has antecedents in the Myal cult, an African religion which survived among slaves and whose followers were sometimes called Native Baptists. Myalism played a prominent part in a number of slave revolts, and laws enacted in 1774 prescribed death for anyone attending these ceremonies.⁸ Zion Revival or Zionism, is similar to Pocomania but more Christian oriented. The term pocomania is sometimes said to be a corruption of *poco mania*, Spanish for 'little madness'. Edward Seaga opposes this and considers it a derivative of Pukumina.⁹ Leonard Barrett traces the term Kumina to two Ashanti Twi words: *akom*, 'to be possessed', and *ana*, 'by an ancestor'. (Obeah is another word of Ashanti derivation, combining *Oba*, 'a child', and *Yi*, 'to take'.) Pocomania first became prominent in the 1860s when the great religious revival, which began in Ireland, swept through the anglophone world. The spiritual intensity of the Great Revival, where worshippers physically experienced the Holy Spirit, infused Afro-Jamaican beliefs with a religious fervour which expressed itself in ecstatic music and dance.¹¹ In 1988 Leonard Barrett identified three types Afro-Christian sects – Pukimina is mostly African in its rituals and beliefs, Revival Zion is primarily Christian, and Revivalism mixes both.¹² But nowadays most Jamaicans use

the term Pocomania, Revivalism, Zionism, Pukimina and Kumina interchangeably.

The most African form of the cult survives in the eastern parish of St Thomas. Followers refer to themselves as 'Africans' and members of the 'Bongo' nation. Like Rastafarians they consider themselves exiles, but look not to Ethiopia but to the Congo-Angola region of Central Africa and the Guinea Coast of West Africa as the homeland of their ancestors.¹³ Early Rastafarians are known to have adopted the music of St Thomas Revivalists, and Kumina drumming recorded in 1953 has been shown to be indistinguishable from what Rastafarians now call 'Nyabingi'.¹⁴ Here then is a clearly direct African influence on popular Jamaican song.

In addition there is no denying that European influences have crept into Pocomania, notably the ubiquitous 'Sankeys', a term applied to a large variety of hymns, some of

which were learned from the popular 19th-century hymnal published by evangelist Ira David Sankey.¹⁵ (Hence Lovindeer's 1991 political parody 'Light a candle, sing a Sankey'.) In Revival singing, short verses from orthodox hymnals are repeated constantly, with ornamentation. Often a line is spoken by one person and then sung by the group. This 'tracking' is purely functional in origin, since many members could not read. The singing is normally accompanied by a bass drum and a rattling drum, suspended from the neck and shoulder and played by sticks. A familiar aspect of Revivalism is possession by spirits and a consequent ecstatic 'speaking in unknown tongues'.¹⁶

Pocomania, however, is not the only African derived music extant here. Others survive in



Pocomania performance



Kumina performance