

Jonah Siekmann

ANTH 210

5/1/17

Popularity of Reggae outside of Jamaica

Reggae came into being in the 1960s as the successor of Rocksteady, which in turn formed out of Ska and Jamaican folk. As a result, reggae is essentially a product of Jamaica, and the vast majority of early reggae artists were Jamaican (Dagnini 1). However, reggae has spread over the globe like wildfire in recent decades. In Europe, bands are not just producing reggae, but selling out to crowds of thousands (Dreisinger 1). Reggae has found audiences as far as Japan, and audiences as diverse as those of the United States. Yet it's hard to say that any of those audiences have any kind of understanding of Jamaican history or culture; mainstream appreciation for reggae far overshadows any knowledge of Jamaica. For a genre so explicitly linked to Jamaica, what could be the reasons for its success abroad?

The ideals promoted by reggae are ones that are universally adoptable. It's hard to argue against promoting spirituality and unity. It also is a powerful tool for social criticism, which could explain why it is used often by disadvantaged groups in cultures across the globe. In the case of England, the modernist movement, composed mainly of working-class youth, displayed an affinity for reggae after being introduced to the genre by working-class Jamaican migrants (Dagnini 3). The two unlikely subgroups bonded over their musical overlap, proving that music (and in particular, reggae) is also a powerful tool for bridging prejudice. In America, hip-hop and reggae became intertwined when musicians with Jamaican heritage like Busta Rhymes and B.I.G. became national hits. Both hip-hop and reggae focus heavily on oppression enforced by racism and classism, and both genres were born out of ghettos and popularized by the working class. Reggae has come to represent a rebellion against oppression not just for Jamaicans, but for all people who have known racism. It's easy for a group of oppressed people to find a voice through the political lyricism of reggae. This is especially pronounced in South Africa, where government-sanctioned institutional racism survived as late as 1991. Reggae artist Lucky Dube in South Africa denounced the system of apartheid and promoted unity among the people of his country starting in 1980. The political and social context that spawned reggae back in the mid-20th century created a genre that has universal themes which can be

The mass migration of Jamaican people into Europe and America also likely had a lot to do with the popularity of reggae internationally. In the 1960s and 1970s, scores of Jamaicans immigrated to England to escape poverty in their homeland. The expat Jamaicans found a home in some of London's poorest neighborhoods, and integrated successfully into England's proletariat, bringing with them the music of Jamaica. In the same time frame in the United States, Jamaicans immigrated to the Bronx in New York but regularly returned home for visits (Dagnini 18). The spread of Jamaican music can be traced back even before then, however; Marcus Garvey's 'return to Africa' program spread Jamaicans (and people from the greater Caribbean area as well as America) throughout western Africa. These people likely maintained contact with relatives in their countries of origin, and this may have facilitated the introduction of reggae to Africa; specifically, to Cote d'Ivoire, which is considered the "second reggae country in the world after Jamaica" (Dagnini 26). The widespread emigration of Jamaicans is therefore a large contributor to the spread of reggae music.

The exposure of the themes and messages associated with reggae was therefore facilitated by expatriate Jamaicans who moved overseas over the course of the 80-year period between the dawn of UNIA and the turn of the century. The subsequent popularity of reggae can be attributed to the lyrical themes of reggae and its capacity to be used as a powerful political instrument. It's hard to dislike reggae in general, because the themes it promotes are in no way divisive. Certain genres of music, such as rap, pop, or metal often evoke polar reactions from people; either you like it, or you dislike it intensely. Reggae, however, in general does not evoke such reactions. This is one reason why it's been so easy for such vastly different cultures to enjoy the same genre of music; it's hard not to.

Bibliography

Dagnini, Jeremie Kroubo. "The Importance of Reggae Music in the Worldwide Cultural Universe." *Etudes Caribeennes* 16 (2017): n. pag. *Etudes Caribeennes*. Apr. 2017. Web. 1 May 2017.

Dreisinger, Baz. "Non-Jamaican Reggae: Who's Making It And Who's Buying It." *NPR*. NPR, 12 Nov. 2011. Web. 3 May 2017.