

FEW BANDS AND MANY FANS, THAT'S REGGAE IN BOSTON

[FIRST Edition]

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Author:

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Reggae, the music of Jamaican ghettos, first appeared in the streets of Boston-Cambridge last summer when little-known reggae musicians and disc jockeys gathered Friday nights at Cambridge Custom Percussion on River street in Cambridgeport to listen to reggae and other music indigenous to Jamaica - ska, rock-steady and dub.

These get-togethers at the CCP were known as discos - not discos as we know them, but a Jamaican disco featuring a musician singing and "rapping" over a tape of reggae rhythms. Occasionally, one of the city's two best reggae groups, Zion-Initiation or the I-Tones, appeared unannounced to play with a rock band at one of the local clubs. But it wasn't until a few months ago that reggae turned the corner locally and musicians began performing publicly at clubs and other facilities.

Reggae is Jamaican rock n roll, a strain of sugar cane soul music with political and religious lyrics and a chunky rhythm that emphasizes the second beat, the off beat. It is related to calypso, ska and American rhythm and blues. It is also, in theory, related to Rastafarianism, a culture whose thinking stems from the freedom-and- dignity teachings of Marcus Garvey, a 19th century black nationalist, and includes the symbolic escape from Babylon and ceremonial smoking of marijuana. But reggae has gained much of its attention by piercing the heart of rock n roll. Young English bands such as the Police and the Clash have made hit reggae records and helped introduce reggae musicians. Jamaican reggae stars such as Bob Marley and the Wailers, Peter Tosh and Burning Spear have captured the fancy of Western World youths who, unlike most of their Jamaican counterparts, have money in their pockets to spend on records.

Reggae concerts in the area - most recently at Tennis Up, the indoor tennis courts at Massachusetts avenue and Newbury street and the Inn Square Men's Bar in Cambridge - have attracted a peaceful, heterogenous mix of fans - white and black, Rastafarian and Protestant, with skinheads or dreadlocks. In this regard, the variety of audience and attention, it is the most successful popular music form in the city.

But there are obstacles to success in Boston: there are many reggae fans here and only a few bands. The I-Tones and Zion Initiation are the only bands that play "roots" reggae. Magic and the Reggae Stars, another group, play a commercialized reggae, a top 40 style popularized by Desmond Drekker and Toots and the Maytalls in the 1960s, as does Loose Caboose, another band that frequents Cambridge clubs like Jack's. Racial distractions at the predominantly white rock clubs in Boston have discouraged the reggae bands from playing them. But unlike the excitable, sometimes violent, atmosphere surrounding soul concerts here, reggae shows have operated smoothly.

The reggae group with the most exposure in the Boston area is the I-Tones. There are four members: the leader, singer and bass player is a 26-year-old, English-born man called Ram, whose real name is Luke Erlich. Chris Rockers, the band's guitarist, was born in Cuba but raised in Jamaica; the keyboard player, Abdul Baki, is a Filipino who says he has lived "all over;" and Horace Reid is the wincingly shy drummer with a spectacular singing and scat style. Reid left his native Jamaica nine months ago for the first time.

Reggae - no one seems to know where the word came from, but it has been associated with "ragged," "regular" and "from the ghetto" - holds some attraction for fans of new wave rock music. Although the I-Tones quickly sold out four shows at the Inn Square Men's Bar this past weekend, they will not be playing in Boston's music clubs. The I-Tones are Rastafarians as well as reggae musicians. The distinction between reggae and rock is that the former is deeply rooted to religion - Rastafarianism. Iva Spitzer, the band's manager, spoke about the culture Saturday night during the I-Tones concert at the Inn Square Men's Bar. "Reggae is the music of a people, a culture. There is a real relationship between reggae, rasta and a way of life. The I-Tones will never be a club band because the whole idea of alcohol and cigarettes and staying up all hours of the night is not healthy or vital. It's incongruous for the I-Tones to play here."

Ram has a softly cynical voice and wears the long, matted, traditional "dreadlocks" of Rastafarians. For two years, he lived with farmers in Portland Parish, Jamaica. He was nicknamed "White Ram" after adopting Rastafarianism in Kingston, Jamaica, reggae's capitol. He was raised in San Francisco and Cambridge. Now he works days as an audio-visual assistant in the financial district. "We are not a reggae-rock band," he said. "We play traditional reggae because we are a traditional reggae band."

Area radio stations have recorded the interest in reggae music, its predecessors, ska and rock-steady, and its offshoot, dub or version music. Peter Simon, singer Carly Simon's brother, of WCAS and WBRU hosts perhaps the city's most popular reggae show, "Reggae Bloodlines." (He is coauthor of the book with the same title.) Glendale Reid supervises "Roots, Rock, Reggae" Sunday afternoons from 1-5 p.m. on WRBB. Doug Herzog plays "Strictly Rockers" on WERS. Ras Gary broadcasts "Radio Free Ethiopia" on WMFO. And there's more.

Ironically, the art form that christened Cambridge as a reggae enclave was film. Actually, it was one film - "The Harder They Come," the quintessential reggae movie starring singer Jimmy Cliff that celebrates its eighth consecutive year of showings next month at the Orson Welles Cinema in Cambridge. It has run at midnight on weekends for the last five years, playing to some 200,000 patrons. On June 27, the OWC will be the scene of the American premiere of the new reggae film, "Rockers," which had its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival last year. It stars many of the musicians that have achieved commercial success in reggae.

The I-Tones are the vanguard of roots reggae in Boston-Cambridge. They're seeking to tour Europe in the near future. Eventually they want to record an album in Jamaica. They will be playing at the Cambridge Community Center April 12; at UMass/Boston April 17 and the Tam O Shanter in Brookline on April 25. "I know the band wants to go on the road, but I also know they'd like to make it happen right here," Spitzer said.

GETTING THE BEAT ON BOSTON'S REGGAE SCENE

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

Author: Morse, Steve

Date: Jan 3, 1985

CALENDAR

The scope of the region's reggae - much of it still beneath the commercial surface - has never been wider. There are the veteran reggae bands the I-Tones and Zion Initiation who are considered the

cream of the scene, but also steady, hard-working reggae bands such as One People, Magic & the Reggae Stars from Provincetown and Loose Caboose from the western part of the state.

This list doesn't begin to touch the reggae singers such as Ras Jackson, Ras Coley and Courtney Morris who sit in with different bands. There are also a number of relatively new bands like Dub Culture, Natural Mystic, Lamb's Bread, the New Lions and two bands that use reggae as a jumping-off point - the Shy Five, who craftily integrate rock and pop; and Right Time, who expand into lively South American festival music.

"There are a lot of new bands that have come out lately, and a lot of them really know what they're doing. Things are starting to look up," says Ann Ronshagen, who coordinated the recent reggae extravaganza at the Channel which benefited Oxfam's Ethiopian famine relief fund. The Channel event raised \$6000, which was \$2000 more than a rock 'n' roll benefit held in the Metro the same week.

"Just a couple of years ago there were only two or three reggae bands around here," says the I-Tones guitarist Chris Rockers, who comes from Jamaica. "We like to think that our success has helped open up the market for other bands."

"There's an abundance of talent here," adds Don Hall, a Jamaican emigre who manages Dub Culture. "There are not just bands and singers here, but some real outstanding talents." There's also a growing deejay scene in which, like Jamaica's famed albino deejay Yellowman, announcers rap verbally over the cool heartbeat rhythms of the reggae beat. This scene is nowhere near as developed as it is in Jamaica where deejays have sometimes been more popular than bands, but it is starting to spread beyond just urban houseparties.

Local deejays can be heard at the Western Front in Cambridge and occasionally at the Cambridge Community Center, the Windsor Cricket Club in Dorchester and at scattered dancehalls. The better-known deejays include Papa Willie, Papa Mexican, Sister Ivy, Echo Ranking, David Irie, Mr. Reds and Jah P. These rappers perform an updated role of town criers, translating current events and offering personal, colorful commentaries.

As for the bands, they can be heard at the Western Front on weekends (the Front is the nerve center and draws one of the most racially mixed crowds around), while clubs such as Jack's, Jonathan Swift's and the Channel offer periodic reggae, as does the Caribbean Culture Club in Dorchester. The Zodiac Club in Dorchester often offers reggae records to dance by, but not live acts. And in summer, you can sometimes hear live reggae on Cambridge Common, in Franklin Park, on Water Music boatcruises on Boston Harbor and in clubs on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, where reggae is a summer groove music.

Radio outlets include the Emerson College station WERS-FM (88.9) which features reggae on its "Rockers" show weekdays 4-6 p.m. (during school vacations and in the summer 4-7 p.m.); Michael Perkins' "Strictly Reggae" Sundays 1-4 p.m. on the Boston Phoenix station WFNX-FM (101.7), which also mixes some reggae into its regular programming; Lee O'Neill's "Reggae Connection" during "Black Expressions" on UMass-Boston's WUMB-FM (91.9) Mondays 9 p.m.-1 a.m.; "The Black Star Liner" on Brandeis' tiny WBRF-FM (91.7) Sundays 7:30- 9:30 p.m.; "Reggae Mukasa" on MIT's WMBR-FM (88.1) Tuesdays 8-11 p.m.; and the predominantly black-oriented WILD-AM (1090), which boasts Joe Johnson's "Caribbean '85" show Sundays noon-3 p.m.

"There's been an improvement in hearing reggae on the college stations," says Dub Culture's Hall. "But I'd like to see an increase in the commercial stations that play it."

Television has been slow to catch on to reggae, but for those who get Boston's cable service there's the brand new "Caribbean Culture Variety Show," airing every few weeks on the A-3 cable

channel. Produced by Campanella Godfrey and hosted by WILD's Joe Johnson, it is an hour-long program featuring interviews with prominent Caribbean educators and videos and interviews with local musicians. It is a loose but informative and uplifting show. Tomorrow night at 8:30 the show includes an interview with the I-Tones taped during the recent Oxfam benefit at the Channel, as well as a video shot in Paris of the band's reggae remake of Dionne Warwick's hit, "Walk On By." Coming on Jan. 21 at 8:30 p.m. the show will feature other reggae acts interviewed at the Channel and freshly discovered footage of Bob Marley in concert.

Boston has served as a steppingstone for numerous reggae artists. First there's Emperor's Choice - known as Ethiopian Roots when it was in Boston - which has moved to New York and become the No. 1 backing band for international reggae stars visiting Manhattan. And guitarist Carlton Bryan, who became better known in Boston even though he lived in New York, has recently joined the respected English band Steel Pulse.

Top Boston acts like the I-Tones and Zion Initiation have gone on national tours. The I-Tones, with two vocalists in the soulful Ram and Jah Shirt, focus on the rock steady period of Jamaican music from the late '60s to mid-'70s and have a subtle Motown influence. Zion Initiation, a dreadlock Rastafarian band led by singer Danny Tucker, keyboardist Abdul Baki and a hot three-piece horn section, play roots music with style and grace. They've also just made an album, "Jah Light," and are hunting for a label to release it on.

Although some persist in thinking reggae bands are interchangeable, this is far from the truth. Some acts are totally unpolished while One People, for instance, is a slick commercial reggae act with a jazzy fusion feel to the music and the almost arena-rock energy of leaping singer Stone Montgomery. They also have a bassist, Mark Jayaprasanna, who comes from Bombay, India. "Not many people in India play reggae," he says in an understatement, "but you do hear Bob Marley's records in discos over there and that's how I got interested in it."

Then there's Dub Culture, which sings powerfully about the unity of races and has two lead singers in Michael Skeritt from Montserrat and Sonya Allayne from England. The latter cut two records in London last summer, including the rap track, "Bum Bum in a Different Stylee." Band members Johnny Ringo and Freddie Thomas are cousins from Trinidad, drummer Pablo Leslie is from Jamaica and bassist Lycergus Mitchell is a gifted talent from Greece.

Other new bands are equally cosmopolitan. Right Time, which formed at Dartmouth College, is a nine-piece jazz and funk-influenced reggae group including bassist Eric Richardson from Jamaica and magnetic singer Josefina Bosch from Argentina. They recently released a fine local album and are on the way up.

Two of the most intriguing new bands are the Shy Five and the New Lions. The Shy Five, fronted by Neil McGee who used to lead one of the original '70s Boston reggae bands I-Ses, gallops across genres, from ska and a Bob Marley sound - with a great cover of Marley's "Wait in Vain" - to progressive rock. His band, which includes the esthetic guitarist Joe Campagna and an upbeat Casio keyboard player named Honor Havoc (yes, that's her name), could be said to be the Talking Heads of Boston reggae.

The New Lions are only a few weeks old, but are very promising. Their rhythm section of Malcolm Weston and Menuba is from St. Thomas, while leader Mason Vincent is a Buffalo native by way of San Francisco where he played with the rock group American Standard and ska group the Neutrinos and by way of New York, where he's spent the last two years writing songs. Newly arrived in Boston, he's a prodigious talent who plays reggae spiced with slicing guitar rock.

If these and other reggae acts are to advance in the overall Boston scene, however, they're going to have to clean up an image problem pertaining to the stereotype of reggae musicians being too stoned on ganja (marijuana) to be on time for gigs.

The major Boston booking agency, Pretty Polly, only books a few reggae bands because they admit to having had some bad luck in the past. "We're very careful what reggae bands we use because a lot of them are semi-unreliable about arriving at jobs. And once at jobs they take very long break-times between sets and people complain," says Pretty Polly's Frank Hallowell.

But this image is changing. Boston reggae acts are smartening up because they know they're competing in a city in which reggae is still an underdog music.

"Some regional bands in the last few years might have been less than totally professional," says Paul Cahn, who has worked with local acts and runs the Concerted Efforts booking agency. "But you're getting a much higher degree of professionalism these days . . . Now all reggae needs is to get a song in the Top Ten and prove to the bigwigs that reggae is commercial.

"It's hard for new groups to keep it together because of a lack of steady work and financial pressures," says Cahn, who has also booked national tours for the Jamaican acts the I-Tals and Gladiators. "But above all with reggae, people get involved in it because they love it. And that's what makes it such a wonderful kind of music."

I-TONES CAP LOCAL TRIUMPHS WITH DEBUT ALBUM RELEASE

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Author:

Morse, Steve

Date:

May 14, 1987

The I - Tones are having a year to remember. They won a Boston Music Award for outstanding reggae band. They scored their fourth win as best reggae band in the Globe Calendar Readers' Poll. And now comes their happiest triumph -- the first album of their career.

Entitled "Something We Share," it is everything one would hope from these founding fathers of the local reggae scene. Six of eight songs are originals, spanning melodic lover's reggae and message music about the ills of South African repression.

"This album has been half a decade in the making," says Ram, the band's co-singer. "We would tithe our money away and chip away systematically at the recording. It took a long time, but we're very proud of it."

The band will celebrate with a record release party tomorrow at the Conservatory Lounge in the Copley Marriott. For the occasion, the band will be joined by guest guitarist Jon Jelleyman and three horn players: Henley Douglas and Ken Field of the band Skin, and John Ferry, original saxophonist of Bim Skala Bim.

All these musicians performed on the album, but so did some internationally known Jamaican stars. Tyrone Downie, organist for Bob Marley & the Wailers, contributes an infectious rhythm to the title track, while Albert Griffiths of the Gladiators turns up on the yearning "Goodbye Sorrow."

But the I-Tones are hardly overshadowed. Ram, a reggae expert who wrote an essay in Stephen Davis' book, "Reggae International," displays a wide vocal range. Co-singer Jah Shirt offers brilliant rap reggae, including an insight into slavery days in "The Ship." Guitarist Chris (Rockers) Wilson, who has made two compilations of hits from Jamaica's Studio One for Rounder's Heartbeat label, keeps the

rhythms cooking. And keyboardist Jon Gorr, a Berklee College grad, adds an element of modern sophistication.

While the album has a reggae heart, Ram hopes the I-Tones will also now be able to attract more mainstream audiences, as the British band UB40 has done.

"We want to be America's UB40," he says. "We want to be able to open for reggae bands, but also for rock groups like the Pretenders. We want to play the reggae circuit and play mainstream places.

"We began by copying a Jamaican mind-set," he adds, "but now we don't think of ourselves as only a reggae band. We're just a band, period. So when we approach an audience, we seek to excite them just as rock performers would."

The I-Tones started in 1979 when Ram joined with Wilson and original keyboardist Abdul Baki, who is now with the region's other founding-father reggae act, Zion Initiation. The I-Tones later made two singles, "Love is a Pleasure" and a reggae remake of the Dionne Warwick hit, "Walk On By." Both songs were also placed on the new album.

The band has undergone several regroupings through the years. And their album seemed to be on permanent hold until new financial backers turned the tide this year.

"I don't think anything can keep us down now," says Ram. "It feels like we've weathered every storm."

NIGHTLIFE; ; LOBBING A LITTLE REGGAE

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

Author:

Morse, Steve

Date:

May 1, 1980

For Bostonians, the Jamaican soul music of reggae has been something we've mostly had to hear on the radio rather than enjoy in person. Yet this bleak situation is at long last changing. Grass-roots Jamaican bands - rather than just superstars like Bob Marley and Jimmy Cliff - are finally starting to visit the region with regularity, thanks to a club that has recently opened in the Back Bay.

The club is Tennis Up, which by day is a sports facility containing practice tennis machines. Located on the fourth floor at 100 Mass. av., at Newbury st., the club on weekends has been hosting both Jamaican groups and leading new Boston-based reggae bands like Zion Initiation and the I-Tones.

Last weekend was the most memorable yet. The Mighty Diamonds, a silky, harmony-rich Jamaican trio who once toured the States with Toots & the Maytals, headlined a show that included the very impressive Zion Initiation, a passionate ensemble devoted to the reggae precepts of love and unity. Almost 700 listeners filtered in on Saturday night. There were about half that on Friday when I attended, but it was the club's agreeable ambiance rather than numbers that stuck in my mind anyway. Although the ceiling is low, the floor space is wide open and massive, allowing for a sea of reclining folks up front (resting on blankets and knapsacks in a sort of impromptu Tent City) and an ample ring of standees and dancers around them. People of all ages and lifestyles and including many local Jamaicans, interacted without animosity.

No alcohol is served - you can bring your own, but you're encouraged to partake of the club's fresh-squeezed juices (would you believe carrot juice?) and authentic Jamaican Ital stew: a rice stew with coconut oil that "will put your mouth on fire," as patron Chris Manning says. The free-flowing atmosphere is reminiscent of the late-'60s, do-your-own-thing Boston Tea Party - an analogy that can only be made in rare instances these days - and even evokes parallels to the looseness of outdoor festivals, especially the exemplary reggae event (with Burning Spear as headliner) that occurred at the Music Inn in Lenox two summers ago. "It's very informal, not very spiffy and sort of revolutionary," is the way local reggae DJ Peter Simon characterizes Tennis Up. At the mention of the legendary, defunct Tea Party, Tennis Up's music coordinator, Mike Cacia, brims with pride. "I first moved to Boston during the Tea Party days," says the Rochester, N. Y., native. "That's what we're trying to create here."

A diehard reggae booster (he owns 2300 reggae records), Cacia is an Emerson College graduate whose main occupation is videotaping local and national bands of all types, from Shane Champagne to Cheap Trick. He also co-manages Zion Initiation and is starting a reggae label (Armageddon Records), with the first album being one by Zion Initiation (which was mixed by Mikey Dread, who is producing the Clash's next LP) due out in six weeks.

Cacia hopes to book reggae events each Friday and Saturday at Tennis Up. The upcoming schedule includes: May 3, Jamaica's Leroy Smart, along with two New York bands, Sons of Creation and the Perfidians, plus Boston singer LenkyRoy; May 9, Bahama Mamas and Zion Initiation; May 23, Jamaica's Gregory Isaacs; May 24, I-Tones and Zion Initiation; and May 30, Jamaica's Ras Michael and Sons of Negus.

The club's spinoff incentive on local bands also cannot be underestimated. "There's a group of us in Boston who know we have the talent but feel it wasn't coming through," says singer Lenky Roy. "This helps us to get our message across."*

REGGAE MARATHON AIDS OXFAM

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

Author:

Morse, Steve

Date:

Dec 18, 1984

REVIEW MUSIC REGGAE: LIFELINE ETHIOPIA - The I-Tals, Don Carlos, I-Tones, Zion Initiation, the Kuompo West African Dance Troupe and others at the Channel, Sunday.

This felt like the Reggae Sunsplash festival in Montego Bay, Jamaica. Bands came on, went off, came on, went off and the hours passed in a kind of good-hearted daze. It was a nearly seven-hour marathon of music revealing all forms of reggae from rock-steady and dub to gospel and rap-style narratives, mingling talent from Boston, New York and Jamaica itself. Most importantly, it was a selfless evening. The many bands and 600-plus fans had come to pledge their support to relieve the famine in Ethiopia. Organized by Oxfam America, the event raised \$6000 for that purpose, said coordinator Ann Ronshagen.

Oxfam had originally sought Jamaica's peacemaker Jimmy Cliff to headline, but even though he couldn't make it the program was still a prestigious one. Jamaica's Sugar Minott dropped out at the last minute (his whereabouts was unknown), but otherwise the night proceeded without a hitch.

It was a golden opportunity to catch up on the growing local scene, for there were five Boston-based bands. The New Lions, literally brand new after only two gigs, started the local parade with a promising set of rock- influenced reggae paced by singer/ guitarist Mason Vincent, a San Francisco transplant. His guitar solos rambled at times, but his trance-like songs had a brooding, pent-up power. Roxbury's Dub Culture, with vocals alternating between the gallant Michael Skerritt and ladylike British emigre Sonya Allayne, nicely spanned lover's reggae and mild rap before being joined by the whiplash New Yorker, Sister Jackie, who bulled through DJ-style raps about black women's pride ("Respect is due me . . . I'm full of pride") and a sympathetic defense of the dethroned Miss America, Vanessa Williams.

Boston toaster Papa Mexican kept things moving with some raw, intensely physical shouting into the mike, while Jamaican singer Don Carlos was winsomely magnetic but left far too soon. Suddenly, mayoral candidate Mel King was on stage giving a speech about how no one in the world should go to bed hungry, and he was well received even if he did carry on too long. In a highlight, the Kuompo West African Dance Troupe, with seven percussionists and five tribally costumed dancers, then performed unamplified on the dance floor. Leader Ibrahim Camara is now based in Boston, and he educated the crowd as to how different drums are used to announce weddings, babies and wish good luck to neighbors. As the drums soared, the dancers flapped and stomped as though doing an African charleston.

Boston's One People, with dreadlocked singer Stone Montgomery a fireball of energy, kept spirits high, leading to the impeccably honed groove of local favorites the I-Tones, who also backed Jamaican Horace Andy (who never hit stride) and Papa P.A., a witty deejay and chef at Cambridge's Western Front club.

Another local mainstay, Zion Initiation, bristled with power and a three- piece horn section. They also backed Ethiopian Dread (who slurred his words too much) and the night's true headliners, the I-Tals, whose glorious three-man vocal harmonies melted hearts and left misty eyes on a gospel song, "Oh Lord," which reminded all skanking fans that the suffering of others was the night's most lasting concern

GILMORE'S THE LEADER AT THE WESTERN FRONT

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

Author:

Morse, Steve

Date:

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When Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, the racial mix in many Boston nightclubs shifted abruptly.

"There was a major change of whites not coming into black clubs," says Marvin Gilmore. "And that really hurt the business."

It also hurt Gilmore personally. A longtime integrationist who went with Celtics star Bill Russell to break the color barrier at a hotel in Jackson, Miss., in the early '60s, Gilmore has worked hard to unite the races in his Cambridge club, the Western Front.

"This is the only minority-owned club in Cambridge," he says. "But our door is wide open to everyone. Our policy is that, as long as you respect us, we respect you."

The key to that policy is reggae, a global music heard at the Western Front Thursday through Sunday nights. It has helped turn the 20-year-old club into a paradigm of racial harmony. Local carpenters, Harvard students, Cambridgeport Jamaicans and visiting African dignitaries have all danced to the music performed on its small upstairs stage.

"I was frightened by reggae at first," says Gilmore, a former jazz musician who's a distant cousin of famed African drummer Olatunji. "Reggae seemed like a bunch of war cries with frightful politics, but then I started to tune in to it more and saw its sense of love and peace. That was over three years ago. Since then we have come to live and breathe reggae here."

Popular Jamaican acts such as Mutabaruka and Eek-a-Mouse have performed at the club. So have the American-based bands Blue Riddim, Black Sheep and First Light, along with prominent locals such as the I-Tones, Loose Caboose, Magic & the Reggae Stars, Zion Initiation, Jah Spirit, Afrikan Roots, New Lions and Cool Runnings. (The last of these perform this weekend with guest Andy Bassford, guitarist for Jamaican star Dennis Brown.)

Unlike his counterparts in most clubs, Gilmore books his acts personally. "We don't even have contracts. We deal with each other's word. It's a lot better to talk to the bands personally, rather than through agents, because that way you find out who they are," he says. Sitting at the Front this week near a poster of Bob Marley, Gilmore wore a neatly tailored suit that was a long way from the informal, rolled-up-sleeves attire he wears when he plays maracas from behind the bar and sits in with bands on weekends. But the suit reflects another side of Gilmore: his civic leadership.

Gilmore, 61, is a community dynamo. He's president of the Cambridge Boys and Girls Clubs, president of the Cambridge Enterprise Collaborative, governor's appointee to the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, NAACP board member and executive director of Roxbury's CrossTown Industrial Park, which is supported by the Ford and Riley foundations. He also founded the first minority bank in Boston (Unity Bank and Trust in Roxbury) and is a former vice president of the Rental Housing Association.

To keep up this busy schedule, Gilmore sleeps only a few hours a night. But he's not complaining.

"I still feel like I'm 30," he says. "You have to, especially in the club business. You have to set the tone for the young generation, or else they won't come here. You have to keep your club alive and responsive to their social needs."

A graduate of the New England Conservatory and Royal Scottish Academy in Glasgow, Gilmore had a 19-piece jazz band called the Eugene Gilmore Band (Eugene is his middle name) in the early '40s. Later he opened the jazz- and funk-oriented Candlelight room in Cambridge, which lasted into the early '60s.

But nothing has topped the pleasure of his last few years at the Western Front. "You want to create an atmosphere where people feel at home," he says, noting that the Front also serves down-home Jamaican food on weekends.

"I love to see people come in, tear off their coats and get right with it. We want them to get that warm feeling here."

GRACE NOTES; MUSICIANS WHO FEEL MUSIC HEALS

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Author:

Jeff McLaughlin Globe Staff

Date:

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Reggae music, growing in popularity in Boston as the area's West Indian community grows and reaches out to new neighbors, contains a deeply spiritual strain. It is a joyful, social spirituality, and while the captivating rhythmic structures make it impossible not to dance at a reggae concert, there is more at work than "riddim."

The atmosphere of sharing, of free and open celebration, of common humanity makes you want to be a participant when a good group makes music, not merely a spectator. You dance with the people you came with, or with strangers who are instant friends, or by yourself if that is how the spirit moves you. Even when reggae songs talk of injustices endured, the emphasis is on hope for changes to come. When reggae people get together for serious conversation, it is "reasoning," and the goal in every endeavor is to be "positive."

In a town struggling with racism, reggae is one oasis: an art form that regularly brings together people of all colors and nationalities.

Igene, keyboardist for one of the top-ranking local groups, Healin' of the Nation, said in a weekend interview: "We think that reggae is the only music with the spiritual ingredients to heal the ills of society, to put joy into everyday living, to advance the idea of One Love - regardless of race, color or creed - and to help cast out any kinds of isms and schisms."

Formed in February after Igene left another outstanding local group, Zion Initiation, Healin' of the Nation is a multinational sextet that prefers to transcend origins and be described simply as a West Indian reggae group. In addition to Igene, its members are Ace on bass, Iphus on drums, Jeff Greenwald on guitar, Inando on percussion and Rocky, who is lead vocalist. Igene's original compositions for the group include the anthemic "Healin' of the Nation," "Love is the Answer," "Four Hundred Years" and "Hypocrites and Parasites."

This is a good week to discover reggae, Healin' of the Nation, and the rich cultural traditions of the fast-growing Boston- Cambridge community of people from the islands, principally Jamaica, Barbados, Haiti and Trinidad.

Healin' of the Nation will perform Friday night beginning at 9 at The Group School, 345 Franklin st., Cambridge, not far from Central Square. The evening is being billed as a Reggae and Calypso Jamdown, and the Sunshine Calypso Sounds sound system will keep the music flowing as well. The progressive, alternative school has been the scene of several concerts in recent months, most involving reggae, but also including rock and funk (at benefits for Rock Against Racism). West Indian food will be available - including curried goat and rice-and-peas.

The next day, Saturday, the Caribbean American Carnival Day Assn. of Boston is sponsoring its annual West Indian fest at Franklin Park. Pageantry, costumes, masks, dance, music (including steel bands), dancing "jump ups," and lots of food mark the celebration, which will begin in late morning with a parade of bands and revelers from Martin Luther King boulevard (near Washington street) in Roxbury to Franklin Park. Carnival, a tradition in many lands for more than 2000 years, is celebrated by West Indians in America in late August or early September. The members of Healin' of the Nation will discuss the traditions during the Thursday edition of "Rockers," the reggae radio show broadcast daily 6-8 p.m. over WERS- FM (88.9). "We'll be playing live in the studios," said IGene, "but it's important to say we'll also be reasoning."

A new choice for reggae

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

Author:

Morse, Steve

Date:

Apr 18, 1991

Cambridge already has the Western Front for reggae, but now there's a new addition. A group called Irie Music Productions has started a dual live reggae/DJ dance hall series on Thursdays in Cantares in Inman Square. Based on last week's debut, it's a promising night out.

"We want to establish an alternative dance spot where you can hear a mix of reggae and Afro-Caribbean music with nice vibes; and where you don't have to spend much money," says Julia Goldrosen, one-half of Irie Music Productions.

Goldrosen is a Harvard grad who founded the Saturday afternoon "Dub Frequency" reggae show on WHRB and is now on WZBC's "Ragamuffin International" on Saturdays. She joined with Harvard's Lancaster Stewart to book the Thursday series at Cantares, a Latin restaurant-club at 15 Springfield St.

They started by booking Robin & Lisa's Dynamic Duo Sound System for DJ nights in January, before expanding last week to live music by roots-reggae masters Ambassa.

DJ dance hall music will continue in the restaurant portion, where there's a special dance floor; live music will be in the adjoining club, which drew a hardcore reggae crowd last week to its intimate setting of archways, wall mirrors and parquet dance floor. A \$6 cover charge gets you back and forth between both rooms. If you eat dinner, you get in free.

Ambassa opened the series on a keenly spiritual note. The group's name means "Lion of Judah" -- one of the titles of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie.

Two of the group two members, singer Horace Reid and keyboardist Abdul Baki, are founders of the long-acclaimed I-Tones. Rounding it out is bassist Iraka and guitarist Needson, both of whom played in Zion Initiation with Baki; lead guitarist Hideaki, whose father is a professor of music in Japan; and percussionist I-Marts, alias Kete-man, who played kete drum on Jimmy Cliff's "Bongo Man" and on several Bob Marley records. I-Martys is also an original member of Ras Michael's Sons of Negus.

Ambassa's pedigree can't be assailed. And though the group lacks showmanship (admittedly, Kete-man wasn't there last week), its roots sound and message puts them in the front rank of local reggae acts.

They did an occasional cover song, such as Marley's "Natty Dread," but most songs were originals, from the inspired "Fighters," about fighting oppression; to the religious "Only Jah" and the nature anthem "Up in the Country." Ambassa will also play the Western Front on May 2.

The series continues tonight with Star, a local woman whose new "Jah Guidance" tape is highly captivating.

Allston's reggae beat goes on

[City Edition]

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

Author:

Morse, Steve

Date:

Apr 14, 1994

Reggae lovers have searched long and hard for a replacement of the Channel, the South Boston room that often booked one-love, one-world reggae shows before it closed last year. The good news is that reggae fans, especially those who appreciate the interracial harmony of the music, have found that tradition living on each Thursday night at Local 186 in Allston.

Local 186, formerly called Bunratty's, offers a potpourri of music on other nights, but Thursday is strictly reggae. There are live bands upstairs, while disc jockey Jason Steinberg sets the tempo downstairs, where reggae stalwarts can play pool and drink Red Stripe to their hearts' content. It's not a slick club -- actually it's just the opposite with beer-soaked floors and a casual ambience -- but the reggae spirit is there.

"It's a totally positive vibe on Thursdays," said Steinberg, who used to spin records on the "Rockers" reggae show on WERS and now works for WBCN. "Everybody gets to know one another and they're super-friendly to me. I've never seen any violence here."

Steinberg specializes in roots reggae -- he played tunes by Lucky Dube and Gregory Isaacs last week -- but also mixes in more rap-oriented "dance-hall" reggae tracks. The upstairs room showcases a similarly rich variety, with bands alternating sets with dance music by DJ Rodney.

And then there's a band like Motion, which does it all.

"We're versatile and I think that makes people feel comfortable. We give them songs that are not always too slow, not always too fast. This music is our life," said Motion bassist Reggie Beazer, whose group lit up Local 186 last week with streetwise, deejay-style rap balanced by some rootsy Bob Marley songs ("War" stood out), a medley of ganja tunes ("Pass the Dutchie" drew hoots from the packed crowd that had paid \$6 each to get in) and some original songs such as "The Teachings of His Majesty," a Rasta-affirming anthem.

"We want to put Boston on the map for reggae. That is our goal," said Motion's Beazer, whose band mates are his brother, Eddie, and Julien Cumberbatch and Kenny Isaac. The first three are from St. Croix in the Virgin Islands, while Isaac is from Trinidad. They're a young, talented band (the oldest member is 25) that used to back local reggae legend Danny Tucker. They were recently nominated for outstanding reggae band at the Boston Music Awards. They lost to the more familiar I-Tones, yet have the potential to become a national act. (Danny Wood of NKOTB, alias New Kids on the Block, is producing a new tape for them. He's a known reggae fan.)

Motion plays once a month at Local 186 (and also plays Bill's Bar this Sunday). Upcoming reggae bands at Local 186 include Hot Like Fire tonight, Rockers International next Thursday and Danny Tucker the week after that. The Channel is gone, but it's great to see Local 186 bringing new life to the city's reggae beat.

A first for the reggae scene

[City Edition]

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

Author:

Morse, Steve

Date:

Dec 2, 1993

There are many blues jams around town, but a reggae jam? "It's never been done as far as I know," says Sir Cecil Esquire, who took matters into his own hands and persuaded the Middle East club in Cambridge to start a reggae jam on Saturdays from 3 to 6 p.m.

The reggae jam has run for only three Saturdays, but already it is a magnet for reggae performers seeking to improve their craft or find inspiration.

The host is Sir Cecil, a reggae veteran who's played locally with Jah Spirit, Zion Initiation and Sister Rose. Before that, he was a blues/R&B performer who played in Britain with C-Jam Blues, which opened for Cream back in the '60s and once jammed with Ray Davies of the Kinks.

"Come one, come all," Sir Cecil said at last Saturday's Middle East gathering. "Don't forget to bring your wives and your husbands. And bring your chickens and your kangaroos, too. We're going to make this happen."

The jam's focus is on singers, not dancehall/deejay rappers. "I'm not really into the deejay stuff. I basically like to hear people sing," says Sir Cecil, who did some of his own singing last weekend. He did an original song, "Bad Boy" (not the tune by the same name popularized on the Fox-TV show, "Cops").

The jam's musicianship was generally of a high quality. The core band featured bassist Kyle Russell, who normally plays with Rockers International and publishes Rhythm Music Magazine; guitarist Rico Dobson, who used to play with Zion Initiation; and keyboardist Odie Teken, a student at Berklee College of Music.

The jam also had an international flavor. Teken is of Turkish descent, while another performer, Harvey Wirhd, comes from Suriname. "I like this jam," said Wirhd, whose regular band is Hot Like Fire. "I play reggae, but I'm not familiar with all the styles, with all the different bass lines. This is a great chance to learn from each other."

Indeed, the jam was entertaining and experimental at the same time. Capable singers included Orel Badoo (alias "The Journalist"), Horace Reid (formerly with the I-Tones and now with Free-I), Momma More-I and Jimi Thompson. As for the experimental side, blues guitarist Reverb Joe Scurio played a modified version of Jimi Hendrix's "Hey Joe," given a reggae backing by Dobson and an African flavor by drummer Andreas Brade from the soukous group Rhumbafrica. The entire jam was videotaped by Francis DiMenno for airing on local cable channel 66 on Jan. 18. He'll also videotape future jams. One further note: the jam costs \$2. A bargain by any standard.