

BOOK REVIEW

Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music. Kevin O'Brien Chang and Wayne Chen. 1998. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. x+246pps. ISBN 1-56639-629-8. US\$19.95 (paper) Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. ISBN 976-8100-67-2. US\$20.00 (paper).

Reggae music has played a very unique role in the history of the post-colonial world. From producing the Third World's first musical superstar in Bob Marley; becoming the official protest music from everything from Zimbabwean independence, Amnesty International, the marijuana legalization movement and more, this culturally specific product has become a global theme music for revolutions of all kinds. While many people have taken a look at the global spread and impact of reggae music and the Jamaican culture which it brings in tow, there have been few accounts of reggae music from the Jamaican perspective. As with any colonized people, there is a need for them to express their own definition of themselves and their culture. While reggae music could be seen as a colonizing music in its own right, given its success around the world; nevertheless, reggae music, as both a product of the colonized world and having an adopted patronage in the colonial world, has been defined under the terms of those outside of Jamaica's boundaries. These terms for the most part are very different from the ways in which Jamaica views its own creation. Jamaicans have always looked upon, defined and enjoyed their music in a different light than the rest of the world. One need not even travel to Jamaica to witness this, but rather look at the demographic differences between the patrons of a Burning Spear and a Bounty Killer concert. While both would be considered reggae artists and Jamaican without question, the distinct differences in their fan bases illustrate the separation in how Jamaicans and the rest of the world view their music.

One look at the landscape of reggae

music's written history expresses this division also, as the accounts of reggae music have been written from an overwhelmingly Western viewpoint. This need to express the Jamaican perspective on the history and meaning of reggae music, is the basis for the book *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music*. The book takes an ethno-historical approach, which leads the reader through not only the history of Jamaican music but also through the concurrent cultural milieu that the music reflects. This volume provides the reader with a comprehensive history of Jamaican music, from its African roots, to ska, to the dancehall of today and all of the twists and turns which occur in between. How the book performs this task makes this the unique volume that it is. The authors' preface explains their feelings for the need of a distinctly Jamaican account of reggae music. The work following is comprised of three main sections, which are written along chronological lines.

The first section of the book outlines the history of Jamaican music, noting its diverse influences from West African cultural traditions to the European Quadrille. We see a constant theme throughout the book of Jamaicans incorporating foreign ideas and styles into their music, but applying them with their unique cultural spin. This section travels through the various stages of Jamaican music, introducing the reader to not only the various styles but also to the artists, musicians, producers, and other various personalities who helped to shape the music. The second section of the book is divided into four sections chronicling the sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties. This section is probably the most informative as it performs several tasks. Each section is on the surface a simple chronological listing of the authors' choices for important songs of the decade. However, interwoven in their explanations of the songs, are oftentimes invaluable histories and background stories of the artists, or circumstances surrounding the songs. These richly-textured narratives often overtake the reader's concern to learn

about the specific song itself, as a simple song explanation often turns into a tale about a deal gone bad, or the socio-political situation that inspired the song. This inside, or local knowledge about the music and country, adds value to what could easily have been another simple listing of Jamaican hit songs. In addition to the listings, scattered throughout this section are sidebars containing a myriad of interviews, biographical sketches, historical and cultural lessons, and other information too broad to fit under a song explanation. One of the sidebars that stands out as an example of the authors' uniquely Jamaican perspective, addresses the love Jamaicans have for country music; this topical matter would seem out of place in a book on reggae music, unless you have a truly *Jamaican* understanding of the culture. The authors weave in this sidebar, ironically, directly above a song explanation of Dennis Brown's seminal "Revolution," and somehow it all seems to make sense. The authors also treat each decade with equal reverence rather than placing a heavy emphasis on the "roots" period of the seventies, while condemning the dancehall of the nineties. The third section of the book is made up of appendices, including lists of the top songs on the JBC Radio charts from 1960-1996, and rankings of the authors' favorite reggae and dancehall songs.

At the same time reggae culture is beginning to be taken seriously by academics, the recording and preservation of the rich history of reggae music is just now starting to be taken seriously with music historians. As both a comprehensive listing of the best in Jamaican music, and a lesson in Jamaican history and culture, this book will be of great use to both of the aforementioned communities, as well as a general audience interested in reggae music and Jamaican culture. From the book, one understands that reggae (and its derivatives) is truly global music. However, at its best, even when not produced in Jamaica, is still Jamaican in essence.

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