

# Analysing the reggae music genre music essay



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BUSTER**

Reggae, although not as popular as it was a few decades ago, is one of the most widely appreciated genres in modern music history. With reggae being so widely spread almost everyone could recite a reggae lyric even if they are not fans of the music and influential artists such as the legendary Bob Marley are well known and are still celebrated to this day. Although reggae is possibly the most popular genre in Jamaican music it was certainly not the first of its kind in Jamaica, with reggae having a few predecessors and a vast history that made reggae what it was today.

The very beginning of reggae could be seen in the early 1950s in the run down areas of Downtown Kingston, Jamaica with the emergence of the “Sound System”. It is thought that the birth of the sound system came about when they were used during the intermission of a dance orchestra. It was soon realised that the sound systems were much cheaper and needed no breaks and soon replaced the dance orchestras all together. Eventually the sound systems became booming business opportunities and many of the liquor barons in Kingston made a good fortune playing the popular American Rhythm and Blues of the time. Music business entrepreneur Derrick Harriott recalled his experience of the sound system street parties: “ Being part of the crowd...when a big sound system was playing was probably the greatest feeling in the world to any Jamaican kid. But if you had aspirations to make music then it was magical” (Bradley, 2000: 3). The sound system business very competitive and by the end of the 50s sound system owners opened up recording studios (this included the famous Studio 1 owned by Coxsone Dodd) to create exclusive tracks that would only be owned by the sound system owners. The sound system owners would audition hopefuls and

would agree to record the best to make a Jamaican version of R&B and it is then that marks the creation of Ska. A few years later on August 5th 1962, Jamaica was made an independent state after 300 years of British rule and the soundtrack to this new freedom was the newly invented Ska. It was this freedom that boosted the popularity of Ska and made it a huge success in Jamaica although it was mainly popular around the poor areas of Downtown Kingston and was not really accepted in the rich Uptown Kingston. Around the beginning of the 60s, many Jamaican musicians moved over to England to try their luck in the business which this started an underground Ska scene in London and eventually the scene became popular that it moved from West London to the West End. In 1964 the popularity of Ska heightened with the release of “ My Boy Lollipop” by Millie Small and Ska became the national sound of Jamaica. Although Uptown Kingston had finally accepted Ska, the mood was changing Downtown to relate with a slower pace in times. Downtown was poverty stricken and many were unhappy with the way the country was being run, so with slow times came a slower rhythm and this was the birth of Rock steady. Rock steady took inspiration from American soul and R&B and many of the songs were Boy meets Girl stories. Although this period was considered the most glorious phase in Jamaican music, Rock steady lasted 18 months but due to Jamaica’s problems worsening the music became more serious with heavier bass lines, a faster tempo and the subject matter based around social occurrences. People were looking for a revolution, and thus reggae was born.

In the beginning reggae, much like any genre, was relatively unknown but although it was a Jamaican export, reggae had a large underground following

in the UK partly due to the now settled Caribbean community that lived in London. Even the Mods who were big Ska fans had turned to reggae and eventually the Mod culture morphed into what is known as the Skinhead culture, Skinhead having a different meaning to what it has today. UK sound system owner Vego recalled selling the reggae records at the time: “ When I first come here there weren’t any record shops selling our kind of music... We’d go to dances with the records and give the tunes to the sound man to play, and when he see the reaction of the people in the dance then he’d have to buy it – he wouldn’t have a choice.”(Bradley 2000: 123). Even with this mass underground following it was not until 1972 with the release of the major motion picture; “ The Harder They Come” did the popularity of reggae skyrocket. “ The Harder They Come” was the story of a young hopeful musician turned outlaw and showed what it was to live in the ghettos of Jamaica and the importance of reggae culture in Jamaican society. The film boasted a soundtrack that became just as popular as the film (the soundtrack was the highest sold reggae album at the time) containing songs like the title track; “ You Can Get It If You Really Want” by Jimmy Cliff who was also the main protagonist in the film. The film developed a cult status and is considered one of the main sources for the popularity of reggae in the rest of the world. A year later, Ska-turned-reggae band “ The Wailers” released the famous “ Catch a Fire” album (not only for it’s lyrical content and tone but for its impractical cover sleeve too) which not only boosted the popularity of roots reggae but also for The Wailers’, especially their legendary frontman Bob Marley, careers too American guitarist Eric Clapton is also credited with the popularity of reggae in the Western world when his cover of Bob Marley’s “ I Shot the Sheriff” reached number one in the US

charts in 1974. With reggae's popularity peaking in the late 70s many rock bands including The Clash and The Police adopted a reggae style creating a reggae-rock fusion which proved to be very popular as these two bands have gained a legendary status. Unfortunately, reggae's biggest star Bob Marley was diagnosed with skin cancer and on 11th May 1981 he passed away at the age of 36. Many say the death of Marley was also the death of reggae itself, as Marley has been synonymous with the genre. Nobody could recreate the buzz or the style that surrounded Marley and eventually many stopped trying. However in 1984 a greatest hits album entitled Legend was released and became a huge success, selling over 25 million copies and becoming the second longest charting album ever making it the bestselling reggae album of all time.

Much like any genre reggae has its superstars and upon hearing the word "reggae" most people think Bob Marley. Although there were many other influential artists in the genre, it was Marley who made a significant imprint on reggae as a whole. However, Marley was not always singing solo