

History of Reggae

Reggae is Jamaica's largest cultural export, and since its humble beginnings from the ghettos of Kingston, reggae has grown to become a worldwide cultural and musical expression. There are reggae bands from every habitable continent of the world, and as with music from the Jamaican source, reggae is a vehicle to teach, uplift, and inspire.

The music that came from the ghettos has been the most powerful voice of the downpressed, music that carries the cry from Trenchtown (the Kingston neighborhood so named for the open sewer trench) to the heavens—if you want to hear the heartbeat of The People, listen to Reggae music! Since the early days in Jamaica, and through to the present day worldwide, Reggae is filled with Social commentary, reflections on life (often by the poor and those marginalized by society), musings on systemic corruption—living in Babylon, a call to love, raising African consciousness, repatriation, teaching self-reliance, and of course—rejoicing the blessings of life, and giving praises and exaltations to Jah Rastafari... Jamaica's booming tourist industry is fueled largely by the world's love and fascination for Reggae Music and Jamaican culture. Tourists come to enjoy Jamaica's many festivals, including Sunsplash (which has also toured multiple times outside of Jamaica), Sumfest, Rebel Salute, Sting, White River Reggae Bash, among others. Not only has reggae become Jamaica's largest cultural export, but the large Jamaican and Caribbean communities in the United Kingdom (London and Birmingham particularly) have made the UK the second-capitol for reggae. Germany, France, Italy, many parts of the US—especially the coasts, plus Hawaii...Brazil, Argentina...all of these nations are skanking and swayin' to the beats of their own native reggae bands. Most notably throughout the past 5-7 years, the U.S. Virgin Islands have been producing a new wave of strictly conscious roots reggae music. Bob Marley, The King Of Reggae If there is any singular icon representing reggae music, it is Bob Marley. Many reggae fans are indoctrinated into the world of reggae by way of the music from "The King Of Reggae," Bob Marley. Marley's music and image can be found in all of the corners of the world, from college dorm rooms in the Midwest, to secluded beach cafes in Thailand, on the flags of freedom fighters in Africa, to stickers on the sides of festival drums in Brazil. It is said that his image is the most recognized of any celebrity or star throughout the entire world. His music strikes a chord with people of all races, colors, and creeds: "Get Up, Stand Up," is a call to freedom fighters everywhere, just as "One Love" is a simple and unabashed call for unity amongst all people. "Waiting In Vain" is one of the best lovers' tracks in the whole cannon of love songs, reggae or otherwise. Time Magazine notes the EXODUS album as The Best Music Album of the 20th century. Bob Marley started his singing career as one of the original Wailing Wailers, along side Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer. They came up, as did so many of the Jamaican greats (such as Burning Spear, Joseph Hill of Culture, The Abyssinians, The Skatalites, Ken Boothe, John Holt, Alton Ellis, to name a few) under the wing of Coxsone Dodd and Studio One. The Wailing Wailers' early tracks were ska numbers, soon followed by the slightly slower rock steady, and finally The Wailers helped to originate what we now know as reggae—slower tempos, heavy bass, the rich syrupy musical feel, and most notably a spiritual emphasis centered in Rastafarian consciousness. Bob Marley still remains today arguably the biggest proponent for introducing Rastafari consciousness to the masses worldwide. Bob Marley actively incorporated elements of blues, rock, funk, and R&B into his music, in hopes of crossing over and reaching American, European, African, and ultimately worldwide audiences. Although Jimmy Cliff scored big hits in the United Kingdom before Marley, Bob was the first "Third-World" Superstar to reach the world stage. Bob Marley is still considered the King Of Reggae, even more than twenty years after his passing. The music and message of Bob Marley continue to influence new generations of rock, blues, hip hop, and of course, reggae and dancehall musicians, as well as people from all walks of life. Types of Reggae Ska The original sound of reggae (pre-reggae), played in Jamaica in the early 1960's, originated largely by the island's resort and studio players who came together to form The Skatalites. The early hits from The Wailing Wailers, such as "One Cup Of Coffee," "Simmer Down," and the original "One Love" are all great examples of ska featuring vocals. (A large part of original Jamaican ska was instrumental—check anything from The Skatalites! The Skatalites were the instrumental backing band for some of the early Wailers' tracks.) Ska relies heavily on the saxophone, trumpet, and trombone to carry the melodies, and has a prominent steady upbeat carrying the music forward. Rocksteady Rocksteady is similar to ska, yet with a slight slowing of the tempos: not quite as fast beat per-beat as ska. While the horn sections could still be heard in some of the rocksteady era, more importance is placed on the piano and guitar in both the rhythm section, as well as the melodic role. Rocksteady begins to slow the baselines down, and thickens the feel—a direct precursor to reggae. Alton Ellis (The King of rocksteady: "Girl I've Got A Date" a seminal rocksteady track, that thanks to U-Roy's "Wake The Town," would also form the basis for the dawn of the Deejay era), Bob Andy, Ken Boothe, Toots & The Maytals, The original Wailers are all performers of rocksteady Reggae Reggae, like ska and rocksteady, reggae emphasizes an off-beat, syncopated guitar, piano, or sometimes horn chop (known as the 'skank' rhythm), only in reggae the tempo is slower, the skank is heavier than in ska and rocksteady, the bass even heavier and thicker. Reggae also has a greater predominance of lyrics dealing with spiritual calling, faith, poverty, systematic down-pression, Babylon tribulations, ganja, and—back to that spiritual calling: Rastafari! Much of Reggae is nothing short of a devotional form of music celebrating the teachings, life and works of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, praises to The King Of Kings, chants and exaltations to The Conquering Lion of The Tribe Of Judah, "sighted" or "seen" by Rasta to be "Christ in his Kingly Character." (Rasta will differentiate 'belief' in Selassie vs. 'knowledge' of The King, saying that in belief there can still be doubt, while in knowledge there is only certainty.) Reggae in and of itself is still nowadays a general and broad description of style, wide-ranging, deep and wide in its breadth, and includes several sub-genres: Roots Reggae/ Foundation/ Roots & Culture Foundation is becoming the word nowadays

for Roots Reggae, as it really encapsulates the sound and feel of the original form of Reggae. There is The Sound and The Message in Foundation. Roots Reggae/Foundation is exemplified by singers and groups such as: Burning Spear, Culture, The Abyssinians, The Mighty Diamonds, Gregory Isaacs, Dennis Brown, The Gladiators, The Heptones, and of course Bob Marley & The Wailers, to name a few. While many of the performers listed gave us timeless love songs, the Roots emphasis tends more towards spiritual messages: Rastafari praises, exaltations of Hailie Selassie I; self empowerment and reliance for black people; uplifting and uprising from slums and poor social conditions; breaking down systemic slavery, confusion, and corruption; peace among all peoples, non-violence, African consciousness, clean living, are all recurring themes within Foundation Roots Reggae. Many of the Foundation artists were vocal trios, a staple in the reggae form, exemplifying through harmony a way of life.

Lovers' Rock The love songs have been there since the beginning, since ska and rocksteady, through Foundation to the present time. Roots/Foundation artists considered to be kings of the lovers' genre are none other than Dennis Brown and Gregory Isaacs, as well as Freddie McGregor and Beres Hammond. Lovers' Rock woos the listener with sweet singing and beautiful melodies. Maxi Priest, Sanchez, and Bitty McClean are some of the better-known modern Lovers' singers.

Dub Dub is one of the wild sides of reggae—originally the B-sides, to be sure. Dub music started as instrumental versions ("version") on the B-sides of popular 45rpm 7" singles. Early on, the sides were versions with the vocals dropped out, and not much if any other alteration. Dub quickly gave way to more experimentation as early pioneers King Tubby, Lee "Scratch" Perry began to play more with the levels in the mixes, dropping in and out the parts, and most importantly incorporating increasing amounts of reverb, delay, panning, and phasing—the engineer and mixer become the musical artist with clever deconstruction and re-construction of the original tracks—Dub would give rise to the DeeJay styles (which would move into Dancehall/ Ragga), hip-hop, electro-dance styles, re-mix, and much more in the way of experimental and electronic forms of music. King Tubby, Scientist, Lee "Scratch" Perry, Linval Thompson, Gussie Clark are some of the classic dubbers, while Mad Professor, Bill Laswell, Adrian Sherwood, Dub Syndicate, and Twilight Circus Dub Sound System (among others) are some of the artists bringing dub into the 21st Century.

Deejays The DeeJays are the original rappers! These intrepid singers would get up and "toast" or chat and chant over dub-plates or instrumental versions of popular reggae riddims, usually played at sound-system dances. Not to be confused with radio host DJ's (selectors), the DeeJays, in the likes of U-Roy, Big Youth, Dennis Alcapone, and Lone Ranger, were pioneering a new vocal art form and style (styles!) as they performed. Most of their work was done over the B-side "versions" of 45's being spun in the popular street dances and dancehalls in Jamaica starting in the early 70's, and continuing through the 80's to the present day. The original DeeJays, from the U-Roy's 1970 hit, "Wake The Town" precede hip-hop by about 10 years—it was the DeeJays that began the art of mixing vocals over turntable tracks. While much of the DeeJay work may still convey some of the messages from the Roots/Foundation sensibility, the DeeJays tend to mix in more fun, playful lyrical elements, vocalizations, "bims, bings, brapps, and ripbits!" The songs indeed bring some of the tongue-and-cheek humorous traditions from calypso into the mix, reflections on the times through clever and wry lyrics; and of course—the self-aggrandizing reminder of how great the performer is on the soundsystem mic. The DeeJays have a gift for delivering social commentary with a lick of fun too, a smile with your food for thought.

Dancehall Some of the most distinguishing features of Dancehall versus DeeJays include faster tempos, and a stripped-down approach to the riddims, including the introduction and growing predominance (from the early 80's) of digital sounds and instrumentation. The Dancehall vocal style is still a DeeJay or Singjay style, with a blending of chanting, chatting, or toasting infused with singing. Yellowman is an early king of Dancehall. Also bringing in the new era are performers such as Sugar Minott, Wayne Smith (with "Sleng Teng" heralding the digital age), Tenor Saw, Eek-A-Mouse, Supercat, Ninjaman, and Charlie Chaplin to name a few. Dancehall is an interesting term for the genre, since so much of the development of classic reggae and deejay style took place IN the dancehalls and street dances. The dancehall is where The People heard, moved, grooved, listened to, and loved whatever fresh was coming out of the Kingston studios, from the ska days on forward. Perhaps this is where the term Dancehall surfaces as a genre, in that it is often the common experiences of life that are reflected in the subject matter of Dancehall. By the early '80's, the Dancehall style is getting harder and more raw, reflecting the raw and harder economic and social times in Jamaica. Much of the subject matter strays away from the spiritual messages of Roots Reggae, focusing instead on gun and gangster themes, sexually explicit lyrics, homophobia, and hard-knocks living. Towards the early and mid '90's, the rise of "conscious" lyrics, Rastafari consciousness, spiritual themes, and uplifting messages make a noticeable return through the works of artists such as Garnett Silk, Anthony B, Capleton, Sizzla, and Buju Banton, to name a few, who have in turn opened the doors for a new generation of "conscious" performers. Today, many of the styles and sub-genres of Reggae converge to blur the lines, defying neat categorization and labeling. At its heart and root, Reggae music is still "Rebel Music," not always easy to pigeon-hole. Artists and producers forge ahead, incorporating elements from Salsa music, flamenco, R&B, hip-hop, rock, electronic dance, and beyond, into the still-growing form that we call reggae. Dancehall deejays may voice over the deepest dub beats, or singers may make new melodies over classic riddims. Most notable on the world stage today are artists who uplift our consciousness and inspire with cultural and spiritual messages, and those who can deliver "reality lyrics" in a clean, edifying way. Luciano, Mikey General, Warrior King, Junior Kelly, The Marley Brothers (Damian "Jr. Gong," Stephen, Ziggy, Julian, and Ky-Mani), Richie Spice, Everton Blender, Midnite, Bambu Station, Sister Carol, Queen Omega are just some of the artists who come to mind, but—the list goes on! Originators such as Toots & The Maytals, John Holt, Ken Booth, Bunny Wailer, The Abyssinians, The Wailers Band, Steel Pulse, and The Mighty Diamonds still perform (and some still record) to this day. Reggae music is reaching maturity as an art form, even as it still evolves. Reggae's appeal is worldwide, and reggae is here to stay. - reggaefestivalguide.com