

riffs

REGGAE IS A WORD most rock fans can scarcely pronounce (it's reg-gay), let alone define; despite several hit singles in the genre and widespread predictions that it would be the next big sensation. Quite simply, reggae is Jamaican rock 'n' roll. If you recall Paul Simon's "Mother and Child Reunion" or more recently, Johnny Nash's "I Can See Clearly Now" and "Stir It Up," then you've heard it.

Melodically and harmonically, reggae is as simple as early rock, leaning mostly on three chord songs. What sets this Caribbean style apart from its American ancestors is rhythm. The emphasis is reversed, with the bass drum hitting the backbeat rather than the downbeat as it does in the States. A buoyant double and quadruple time is laid down by cuffed electric guitars; their bubbly sound achieved by muting the strings with the cuff or the side of the hand doing the picking.

Each instrument plays a part so simple it may even seem dumb to sophisticated ears. But ensemble, they lurch along becoming a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. This interdependence and the turned-about rhythm create an unbalanced feeling, which is precisely what provides the sense of motion that makes reggae a dancer's delight. Vocally and instrumentally, this music has an exciting coarseness too long gone from the complicated thing mainland rock has evolved into.

For the curious, I can recommend no better initiation than Jimmy Cliff's "The Harder They Come" (Mango SMAS 7400), the soundtrack album of a movie of the same name. Cliff, who had an AM hit three years ago with "Wonderful World, Beautiful People," acted the lead role of an aspiring Jamaican singer struggling to escape his appalling poverty. He actually has only four songs on the record with two, including the title tune, repeated to make six cuts in all. The remaining six tracks are by other native artists, all more ethnic, making this a veritable reggae primer.

Jimmy is Jamaican but his music has been heavily laced with American r&b. For this reason it is the most accessible on the record, with perhaps the best chance of succeeding Stateside. He is a natural singer, reminiscent of Percy Sledge and Stevie Winwood on the haunting ballad "Many Rivers to Cross" (a gorgeous song evoking Traffic's "No Time to Live" for me). "You Can Get It If You Really Want" and the rollicking "Harder They Come" expound the desirability of fighting oppression and deprivation, preferring even death to passive acceptance.

Unlike Cliff, the other singers use dialects ranging from light to unintelligible—but all captivating. Fortunately lyrics are provided. They are especially needed for Scotty's "Draw Your Brakes," a droll lamentation on lost love and Desmond Dekker's "Shanty Town" (which, along with the Slickers' "Johnny Too Bad," celebrates the wild, rude slumboys of Kingston: "Dem a

loot, dem a shoot, dem a wail"). The most powerful lyrics belong to "Rivers of Babylon" by the Melodians. Using biblical imagery, the condition of slavery is poignantly described in a deceptively carefree musical setting: "Cause the wicked carried us away captivity/Require from us a song/How can we sing King Alpha song in a strange land?"

The Maytals, my favorite group on the album, are represented by two contagious cuts. "Sweet and Dandy" and "Pressure Drop" are worth the price all by themselves, though every track is a winner. Their raw energy and insistent rhythms make the Maytals the Rolling Stones of reggae. Like the Stones, they convert crudeness into infectiousness. You can't sit down.

Johnny Nash is an American r&b singer who took a strong dose of reggae, resulting in an advanced case of chart climbing. Both of his Jamaican-flavored hits are on the lp "I Can See Clearly Now" (Epic KE 31607) and they far outclass everything

else on it. This is in the soul tradition of a few dynamite singles packaged with bland fillers. I would suggest just buying "Stir It Up" and "I Can See" as 45s. The rest is bubblegum.

Once you've caught it, I believe the reggae bug is incurable. If you can't resist that beat, and want to hear more, try tuning in Mbari Mbayo. In New York City this weekly program of African and West Indian music is broadcast on WBAI. (It originates at Amherst and is carried by NPR stations elsewhere.) If you're lucky enough to catch a Jamaican show, you might hear the Maytals' "True Love" or an indescribable reggae rendition of "Sylvia's Mother" or some treasured rock classic (like "Nite Owl," transformed by Lee and the Caledonians).

Kingston's studios are humming with activity as more and more foreign producers and musicians flock there to record—most prominently the Rolling Stones' forthcoming work. Rather

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than the predicted flood, it seems likely that reggae music will be a refreshing stream flowing into rock's somewhat stagnant river (which has always grown by combining styles). Its elating simplicity could prove an antidote to the decadence of the glitter rock age.

—Johanna Schier