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Reggae Ambassadors. La légende du reggae

Alexandre Grondeau (ed.), *Reggae Ambassadors. La légende du reggae*, Aix-en-Provence, La lune sur le toit, 2016.

Reggae Ambassadors has the look of an anthology of short articles from a glossy French music magazine. It does not purport to be a scholarly study. However, as France has produced some of the best reggae journalism of recent times, this is not necessarily a bad thing. This book, like the much-missed French fanzines *Natty Dread* and *Ragga*, displays a relatively high standard of music journalism (as does the companion video documentary released in conjunction with it). It consists of thirty-four profiles of individual Jamaican performers or groups, co-authored by a collective of eleven writers and photographers connected with the French-based website, Reggae.fr. Each profile discusses career highlights and current professional involvements of the featured artist(s) and is accompanied by high quality color and black-and-white photographs, most taken in performance. Profiles are enhanced by pithy and interesting interview quotes.

The book contains three major sections corresponding to musical eras, beginning with the present and moving backward in time—"Reggae Revival," "New Roots," and "Roots Rock Reggae." This reversal of the usual chronology is meant to make a point. By focusing on the present first, the editor and contributors wish to show that, despite rumors to the contrary, reggae (in the restricted sense of Jamaican music in the style that was dominant during the glorious heyday of the 1970s) is as alive as ever among the younger generation. Indeed, it is said to be undergoing a full-blown resurgence.



In line with this conviction, the book opens with a handful of younger Jamaican artists who over the last few years have been consciously attempting to resuscitate “old school” or “classic” reggae styles (nowadays lumped together as “roots reggae”). The contemporary dance-hall scene is virtually absent here.

This restricted coverage suggests a number of interesting questions about the current state of Jamaican popular music as a whole (sometimes referred to as JPM in recent academic publications). As is now widely recognized, JPM (in all its varieties) has become one of the world’s most widespread popular musics. As such, it is increasingly defined and shaped by complex global and translocal currents. One striking example of this is the emergence over the last couple of decades in France (not to mention

the larger Francophone world) of one of the most significant markets and centers of gravity for Jamaican music. However, although the French passion for JPM spans different eras and styles (e.g., ska, rocksteady, reggae, dancehall), you would not know that from this book. Nor would you know that France is home to a distinctive and vibrant reggae scene of its own. Not featured here are any of the dozens, if not hundreds, of homegrown artists and bands specializing in Jamaican-derived music in France, much of it in a 1970s “roots” vein.

Yet, although *Reggae Ambassadors* pays virtually no attention to reggae made by French artists, it clearly reflects a particular French perspective and attitude—one likely shared by many French fans and players of Jamaican music who in recent years have been supporting a revival of interest in old-style “roots reggae” (much of it played by local bands). This “revivalist” trend appears to be considerably more influential at the moment in France (and elsewhere in Europe, as well as several other parts of the world) than in reggae’s homeland. Another apparent difference between non-Jamaican versus Jamaican perspectives can be detected in the book’s breakdown of contemporary JPM into labeled categories that have relatively little currency in Jamaica itself. While the phrase “Reggae Revival” (in reference to recent attempts by certain younger artists, such as Chronixx, Protoje, and Jah9, to bring 1970s-style Rasta-oriented reggae once again to the fore) was coined in Jamaica (by a young Jamaican activist known as Dutty Bookman), it has yet to gain mass acceptance on the island. And the label “New Roots” (used in this book to lump together artists as diverse as Buju Banton, Sizzla, Capleton, Tarrus Riley,

Jah Cure, Luciano, and Warrior King) is seldom heard on the streets of Kingston.

In a few places, the book hints that, at least at home in Jamaica, these current roots-checking musical trends and labels might carry certain class associations. We learn, for instance, that one of the leading lights of the Reggae Revival movement, Jah9 (née Janine Cunningham), comes from “a rather privileged social origin.”

“Like several of her companions from the Reggae Revival scene,” the text continues, “Janine Cunningham is not a child of the Kingston ghettos. This does not prevent the artist from being lucid on the subject of the social problems of the island and from being critical toward the existing political system” (26) (my translation).

The artist herself tells us that “the expression ‘Reggae Revival’ exists because we are youths who understand the importance of marketing and the importance of having names to identify things. That’s why this name saw the light of day” (*ibid.*) (my translation).

In perennially class-riven Jamaica, such facts are of more than passing interest. Conspicuously missing here, though, is any kind of real social analysis that might help us to place this new revivalist “scene” into the larger context within which it emerged, or to understand its relationship to current Jamaican social realities (which, more than three decades after the original Rasta “cultural revolution,” still include extreme and tenaciously maintained class divisions). Clearly, whatever else might be said about it, the “Reggae Revival” phenomenon of today is in some ways worlds apart from the original manifestation of reggae in Jamaica (which had quite different class associations and meanings). What are we to make of this disjuncture? This

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book does little to illuminate where the carefully constructed and polished “neo-roots” music marketed under the “Reggae Revival” label is really “coming from.”

If the book falls short on social analysis, it offers ample rewards for Francophone enthusiasts of Jamaican music hoping to fill in gaps in their knowledge of the careers of artists whose coverage in the popular music press is seldom better than scattershot. The selection of featured artists is broad enough that almost everyone (other than hardcore dancehall devotees) will find something of interest. Alongside middle-aged mainstays of the local Jamaican soundscape such as Buju Banton, Sizzla, Capleton, and Anthony B (all of whom have international reputations as well) are a number of their contemporaries who have found success primarily abroad, such as Jah Mason, Junior Kelly, and Chezidek.

The last section of the book (the largest, at about eighty pages) is given over to some of the reggae artists who are least in the spotlight in Jamaica today, though they are deserving perhaps of the most recognition—the remaining elders who participated in the music’s first major wave in the 1960s and 70s. These pioneers—including Lee Perry, Toots Hibbert, Bunny Wailer, Ken Boothe, Max Romeo, Jimmy Cliff, U-Roy, Big Youth, The Congos, and several others—still have much of interest to say, and by featuring them prominently, this book makes a modest contribution to the growing literature attempting to capture the largely unwritten history of the formative years of reggae. Not only does the book help to preserve a certain portion of this history, it reminds us that some of these artists (including great but less celebrated

exponents from the “classic” era such as Israel Vibration, Ijahman Levi, and Clinton Fearon) continue to make and release vital music in “vintage” styles.

Like any book on reggae written in a language that most Jamaicans cannot read, this one points to the existence outside of Jamaica of substantial audiences and markets for Jamaican music. With the recent advent of major non-Jamaican reggae stars (and big sellers) such as Italy’s Alborosie or Germany’s Gentleman, there is increasing concern in Jamaica over the funneling of profits from an art form originally created in the slums and studios of Kingston to other parts of the world (not to mention the increasing potential for decontextualization and resignification of a primary symbol of Jamaican identity). This book, even though it privileges and explicitly lionizes Jamaican “roots,” is inevitably (and in some ways paradoxically) implicated in the discomfiting vagaries of musical globalization—the complexities of which it never broaches.

On the positive side of this equation, the book is part and parcel of a popular trend that has helped to revive international interest in some of reggae’s undeservedly neglected original creators, allowing them to develop new careers in foreign settings. Beyond this, it makes an entertaining and visually appealing contribution to an ever growing international literature on Jamaican music. This continuing international attention raises confidence in the assertion that, as the editor proclaims near the start, “reggae music will never die!”

Kenneth BILBY