

# **Homogenization of Reggae Music and Its Production in America**

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## Homogenization of Reggae Music and Its Production in America

In today's music industry, how producers create works has changed dramatically from the most seasoned producers of the past. This change in technology within the music industry has directly lead to the homogenization of the production and composition of reggae music. This change is inevitable and expected because of the propulsion of technology within the industry. Because of how affordable it is to your average person, a huge influx of homebrew producers has come to surface, especially within the reggae genre. This is not entirely a problem, as the idea that more people are self producing music now means that they have the ability to be self aware and introspective. This also means it is ever so possible to break away from the mold and limitation of uniform music production. But as one has witnessed, this is entirely not the case. By analyzing and contextualizing producers from the past and comparing and contrasting to today's current reggae producers and musicians, one we start to view an outside view on music production to aid in creating some individuality in the scope of music production.

As we all probably know, the role of a producer has turned into that of a musician, so there isn't as much of a third party influence on the bodies of work (made by producers / musicians today) Some may claim that homogenization of reggae music is not a problem; however, music as part of culture should be as diverse as its creators. In order to understand this evolution one needs to see where reggae music came from and how it developed and where we are now in the reggae world.

Around the late 1950's, Jamaica was experiencing a cultural and liberating golden age of optimism that lead to a new musical form. This new musical form was known as ska. Ska music was a mixture of the Jamaican musical form known as mento (Mento is a style of Jamaican folk music that predates and has greatly influenced ska and reggae music), with a mix of american

jazz, and rhythm and blues. When ska music rose to fruition in Jamaica, it allowed musicians in Jamaica to explore a new mode of political expression.

Out of this newfound outlet of expression in Jamaica, many artists became popular on a large scale even before Bob Marley, such as Jacob Miller, Peter Tosh, and Jimmy Cliff. However, Bob Marley went on to become one of the most influential figures within the realm of how this “island” music began to be internationalized. In the 1960’s Toots and Maytals appeared on the ska and rocksteady scene with their song “Do The Reggae” which was the first song to ultimately use the word Reggae. This further expanded and introduced reggae to the global audience. But this was largely aided from Island Records president, Chris Blackwell.

“Marley’s pivotal position as the first Caribbean artist to receive large scale financial backing from a western record industry makes assessing his career crucial to an examination of commercial transformation in regional popular music.” says Mark Alleyne. After some of Marley’s first recordings were released, Joe Higgs who coached and tutored Marley in his early years, hooked him up with Bunny Wailer and Peter Tosh, who would shortly after form the band the Wailers. Quickly after their formation they began to become fairly popular around Jamaica.

The Wailers then recorded in a number of places around Jamaica including the studio of Lee “Scratch” Perry who we will get to a little further along. The Wailers proved to not see enough financial backing from their music in these local record labels and because of their economic hardships they tried starting their own record label, Tuff Gong Records, but to no initial success. They wound up signing to Island Records where president Chris Blackwell paid

them \$8,000 dollars to record the album “To Catch a Fire”, which they recorded in less than a month under the sight of Perry.

This relationship with Blackwell is what truly internationalized reggae music and the Wailers and changed it from its original roots. “From the outset of “To Catch a Fire” in 1972, Blackwell set out to culturally and commercially rework The Wailers’ and the image of reggae as a culture.” - Mark Alleyne. Blackwell’s goal was to make reggae music appealing to a western audience. He succeeded. He completely mixed up their image, promoting them as rock stars instead of reggae artists from Jamaica. A quote from of of Blackwell's personnel “He made album covers displaying the Rastafarian use of ganja as a sacrament, as a rebellious act that further led to a misunderstanding of Rastafarian culture”. This misrepresentation of rasta culture is ever prevalent within the American reggae scene. According to Belinda Edmonson’s book, *Carribean Romances: The Politics of Regional Representation*, “The transformation brought about by Blackwell was not merely a minor cosmetic modification, but a reformation of the text of reggae in which elements considered most appealing to the western rock audience were foregrounded at the expense of its primary Afro-Caribbean characteristics”.

Inauguration and popularization of reggae music in America gained even more traction with artists such as Jimmy Cliff who aided in releasing a movie called “The Harder They Come” with a powerful socio-political storyline and an equally strong reggae soundtrack, Eric Clapton who in 1974 covered reggae icon Bob Marley’s “I Shot The Sheriff”, and The Police, who adopted a reggae sound that became widely covered by listeners in the UK and US. This brought a national attention in reggae music and paved the way for future reggae artists to come in the following decades. Because of how the reggae image was shaped by people like Blackwell, American’s latched onto, appropriated and evolved the genre.

American reggae began to populate itself through the 1980s and make a presence through the predecessors of family genres like punk and ska (bands such as Sublime and No Doubt) which lead to the most popular reggae subgenre, reggae rock.

As the reggae-rock genre began to grow in popularity, reggae as a whole began to become more and more widely emulated and re-created. Many bands have taken to a similar a similar sound to popular bands such as Rebelution, Iration, Tribal Seeds, Giant Panda Guerilla Dub Squad, Sublime etc. These similarities include your standard characteristics of a reggae song such as strong bass lines, one-drop rhythm with accents on the third beat of each bar, and simple repetitive chord structures. Some of the similarities also include a likeness in duration, tempo, subject matter, and tonal progression from one week's top hit to the next.

Specifically, the United States has been afflicted with this whitewashed diluted brand of reggae music. "A genre rooted in rebellion and activism is now more about chill vibes and fashion." says Jeff Terich of the San Diego publication City Beat. Reggae music in America has evolved to possess a "standard" sound. This movement is a serious one because it takes something away from the artistic and cultural aspect of reggae music.

But in all art forms, there is an interest and value placed on artistic method. The process through which art takes form is art itself. One of the most groundbreaking producers in the history of reggae music Lee "Scratch" Perry elevated and propelled reggae within the United Kingdom and The United States with his process. The Jamaican legend kick-started Bob Marley's career, has worked with everyone from Paul McCartney to John Martyn to the Clash, and has racked up countless records as both artist and producer. Perry's 1960s and 70s studio innovations were decades ahead of their time. His use of the grampian and fisher spaceXpander spring reverbs, with an RE201 space echo were just a couple puzzle pieces to name of Perry's

legendary sound. The grand poobah of dub's incalculable influence is still reverberating and echoing through genres from hip-hop to grime to dubstep, pun intended.

One of the most groundbreaking producers in the history of music production, Rick Rubin, rejected the complacency of working in a niche and instead took on artistic collaborations that were truly original. For example, Rubins work on The Beastie Boys 1986 release 'Licensed To Ill'. Rubin and the Beastie Boys put together a seminal album that would go on to establish hip hop as a commercially viable force. The incorporation of rock riff samples fused with hip hop beats became a blueprint throughout the rest of the 1980s. Rubin refused to play it safe when it came to production and strived to record music in its "most basic and purest form; all wheat, no chaff". Rubin wanted to capture the essence of what the music really is.

Another huge example of this concept would be the production with the Beatles and the British Invasion. Aside from being a cultural phenomenon, Paul McCartney of the Beatles was an innovator that influenced music production to come. This was experienced through the British Invasion as we saw many bands take on a similar form and model. With innovation in the industry comes imitation and the blueprint for others to follow. Take, for example, "Tomorrow Never Knows," often cited as the most innovative, forward-thinking recording in The Beatles' entire oeuvre. The revolutionary tape loops that dominate the arrangement that mark it as the truly bizarre recording is all coming from McCartney. In fact, McCartney had been toying with tape loops for some time before it became known as *musique concrète* in France. This was described as the greatest leap for the band into the future.

But, when tape was the dominant means of sound recording, it was necessary to physically cut out unwanted sections and rejoin the remaining pieces to create a final cut. With the shift to digital technology, music production lost this ritual, which is valuable not only as its

own act of creation, but also because it served as a reminder of music's artistic essence.

Producers and musicians like McCartney, Perry, and Rubin helped to refine and maintain individuality but propel their respective genres into a movement.

As something becomes popular artists can sometimes conform to what is popular and in effect, lose their voice in a way. This political and message forward side of reggae is still there but the presentation of it, is what has lost the meat on the bones. Dave Shiffman of Rootfire (a record label rooted in the American reggae scene summed up nicely the current state of new reggae musicians. "From the experience of Rootfire, interfacing with reggae artists and documenting their music as the scene has rapidly grown over the past ten years or so, most of the musicians making reggae music today have a deep knowledge and respect for the roots of the genre, which is what inspired them to perform reggae in the first place. Sure, there are plenty of songs that celebrate leisure, but much of the music contains political and social commentary true to its origin, or speaks of something even more universal – the human experience. Songs about love, loss, joy, pain and spirituality have created strong connections between the fans, artists and music, as evidenced by the daily activity in the online fan groups of the progressive roots bands".

This digital age we are in is being taken for granted. Producers and artists alike can compose songs on their own without using traditional instrumentation making the process become quick and formulaic. Take for example one of the most popular up and coming artists in the American Reggae scene, Iya Terra. Their entire album released in 2019 has programmed drums on it. One might be wondering what the issue with this. Bands are sacrificing the integrity of their work for convenience. While this is entirely opinion regarding the integrity of an artists work, when a large percentage of the top billed upcoming reggae artists are doing the same thing,

it raises an issue. With all of the technology available to artists producers today, there has still become a stagnation in the production of popular reggae music.

Niall Thomas, a professor at the University of Winchester, held a seminar in April of 2019 talking about innovations within record production specifically related to heavy metal but this applies to all genres. He stated that “Whilst the technology that defines the sound of the genre remains, more innovative technological processing, and approaches to producing the instrumental elements of a genre, takes place. It is this observed movement away from traditional, performance focused, recording, towards a more fragmented, technologically architectural approach that presents phenomenological problems for record producers and artists alike; how to balance tradition and innovation in the production of music.

It is important for one who is creating and producing reggae music to think about these sort of things. An Understanding of reggae’s history and evolution is important to maintaining the integrity of the genre. Where there is threat within an ecosystem, there is also an opportunity. In the world of artistry and record producing in reggae there is an opportunity for producers and artists to try and separate themselves and start their own movement. Using inspiration to start is key, but knowing when to push your process into a territory that’s all your own is how you avoid imitation. For creating and producing, sometimes the way to separate yourself is to create your own methods of production, similar to that of Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry, Rick Rubin, and Paul McCartney.

All music is informed in some way by the music that came before it. A huge proponent to the direction of reggae music and its production is the ease of replication. This is attributed to the workflows that we see in today’s home recording studios. There is an innumerable amount of



homebrew ‘producers’ within the genre, hopping into predominantly Logic, using stock plugins, stock virtual instruments, singing how about how irie they are (irie - nice, good, or pleasing 'the place is jumping with irie vibes' 'Im feeling irie' they are) praising Jah (Rastafari use the terms "Jah" or sometimes "Jah Jah" as a term for the Lord God of Israel and/or Haile Selassie, who some Rastafarians regard as the incarnation of the God of the Old Testament or as the reincarnation of Jesus Christ) and other hogwash that creates a lifeless, uninspired imitation that sits in the shadow of the pioneers of reggae music.

Where is the line in the sand drawn when it comes to problems within a genre. Seeing how much this genre has changed since it became more “mainstream” there is no telling when the wind will blow and erase the line drawn by past innovators. The sounds and records reggae producers and artists put out will undoubtedly continue to evolve, but how it will evolve is a question one won’t find out until the next fad comes along and changes up the game.

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