Michael GARNICE, *The Ultimate Guide To Great Reggae*

David Katz

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/5169>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.5169

ISSN: 1950-568X

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 21 April 2017

Number of pages: 208-210

ISBN: 978-2-913169-42-5

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

David Katz, "Michael GARNICE, *The Ultimate Guide To Great Reggae*", *Volume !* [Online], 13 : 2 | 2017, Online since 21 April 2017, connection on 25 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/5169> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.5169>

analyses these two major themes of his music as indicative of a feminine marginalization that goes beyond other expressions of subordinated female role-models prescribed by fellow dancehall artists. Some of his lyrical invitations for the breaking of sexual taboos appear counter-cultural to an extent, adding to a multifaceted controversy on values and social norms as reproduced and changed through dancehall music. Sparta's satanic demeanour does not fit into the overall Judeo-Christian worldviews and ethical values perpetuated by most Dancehall acts—against its public media image of a bewildering (sexual) “slackness.” Campbell's lyrical examples are very illustrative of the points made. What is missing in my view are the opinions and reflections of the artist himself through a narrative interview. But this remark may be owed to the anthropological interest of the reviewer.

To sum up, this very readable volume deals adequately with traditional and emerging themes in reggae studies as intended by the editor. It is fairly steeped in cultural and media studies and occasionally lacks the anthropological per-

spective beyond texts, i.e. on practices and the agents' visions and rationalizations of their practical logic (of course with the exception of the two legendary reasonings in Section 1). As already hinted at, this is one of my few critical points from the perspective of social anthropology, but should by no means diminish the achievements of the book. Quite to the contrary it provides a consistent high standard and original approach in all its chapters, which is fairly unusual for a conference book. It is therefore a highly recommendable reading not just for scholars interested in reggae, but in the cultural politics designed “back ah Yaad” for global consumption. These international travels of ideas, styles and *riddims* from a Caribbean island to all crevices and corners of the earth make the title more than fitting.

Werner ZIPS

Bibliography

HELBER Patrick (2015), *Dancehall und Homophobie. Postkoloniale Perspektiven auf die Geschichte und Kultur Jamaikas*, Bielefeld, Transcript.

Michael Garnice, *The Ultimate Guide to Great Reggae*, London, Equinox, 2016.

As the influence of reggae has become more acknowledged in recent years, an array of books has appeared on the subject, ranging from biographies and historical accounts of the music's evolution to academic treatises and album dissertations. *The Ultimate Guide to Great Reggae* claims to be “the complete story of reggae told through its greatest songs,

famous and forgotten,” and while this grandiose assertion is not entirely borne out in the book's 604 pages, the weighty hardback certainly has plenty of useful reference material for the casual listener.

Author Michael Garnice, who is based in New York, is best known for his excellent Mento

The Ultimate Guide to Great Reggae

Music website,¹ which relays an incredible gamut of information on Jamaica's indigenous folk form, and a major strength of this book is that it rehabilitates mento, rightly pointing to its pride of place as the true root of reggae itself. Indeed, after a wobbling overview of the book's aims and a rough history of reggae's progression, there are four great opening chapters on early mento, with plenty of useful context in each. We are introduced to largely forgotten figures such as Lord Lebby, Harold Richardson and Lord Messam, as well as more prominent artists such as Lord Tanamo, Count Owen and Lord Flea, and Garnice is particularly good at letting us know what each artist achieved in their heyday and why they are important. As the book progresses, mento is returned to time and time again, cropping up as a revived tangent of roots reggae through Stanley Beckford and the Jolly Boys, and being referenced in dancehall, where appropriate. It all helps us to understand just how important mento has always been to the development of Jamaican popular music, and is one of the book's most commendable features.

However, despite the high volume of the material it covers, there are significant caveats, relating to stylistic matters that form unexpected limitations. Chapters on Jamaican r'n'b, ska, and rocksteady naturally follow the mento beginnings, but the flow is soon broken up by chapters devoted to individual artists, such as Prince Buster, the Skatalites, and Toots and the Maytals, who are all deserving of greater space, but make the text appear somewhat disjointed; Bob Marley and the Wailers keep reappearing in various eras, making the navigation a bit more problematic than it should be.

Of greater concern are the many factual errors that pepper the book, and there are places where the wording is problematic. For instance, to describe the pioneering sound system deejay U Roy as a “disc jockey” (11) is to seriously mislead the reader, since U Roy’s task was to deliver rhyming chants over the microphone, rather than flip 45s on a turntable; similarly, to suggest that King Tubby was “hired by Duke Reid to remove the vocals from some of his rock steady hits to create instrumental versions for his sound system” (22) is to completely misunderstand how and why the dub art form came into being.

In seeking to deliver potted histories of the artists and producers he describes in most of his entries, Garnice has an unfortunate tendency to be inconsistent with the facts throughout the book, and since the reggae context is not nearly as strong as that of the mento, one gets the sense that Garnice has fewer mento blind-

spots. Judging by the meagre bibliography at the end of the book, which lists a mere six books and two articles, much of the information relayed here may have been gleaned from CD liner notes and internet websites, both generally renowned for their unreliability.

There are also some strange spelling errors and the odd bit of repetition, which should have been weeded out by better editing, and there are no illustrations of any kind (save for a “music roadmap” chart at the start), which can make the oodles of text feel a bit unrelenting. Garnice continually suggests that obscure tracks are ripe for reissue on CD, though that format’s future is in question. And although there is a lot of great music described in the book’s pages with the obvious enthusiasm and passion of a true devotee, its most problematic feature is that the choice of records described is so purely subjective. For instance, much as I love the British reggae band Black Slate, I would not necessarily place them on the same level as such reggae icons as Burning Spear or the Abyssinians, as Garnice does; Jimmy Cliff’s slim chapter covers only a handful of songs in three and a half pages with precious little information divulged, yet the relatively obscure Nora Dean gets her short career thoroughly dissected in more than double the space.

The book’s somewhat overloaded format also had me wondering about the intended audience. If you are already well-versed in reggae matters, the 66 pages devoted to Bob Marley’s Island albums may not be particularly useful,

yet for those not already familiar with them, or with reggae more generally, the book would not necessarily spurn the reader towards any given song, record, or sub-genre, since there are literally hundreds of titles briefly summarised in its pages. Similarly, I found myself bristling by the suggestion that Bunny Wailers’ masterpiece *Blackheart Man* is somehow inferior to his *Sings The Wailers* covers LP, that Augustus Pablo’s iconic *King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown* is not as good as *Rockers Meets King Tubby in a Firehouse*, that Marley’s landmark *Survival* is “rather unremarkable” (493) compared to *Kaya*, and that the Wailers’ work for Lee Perry is inferior to the Island stuff; we all have our favourites, and I found Garnice’s atypical arguments to be far from convincing.

Although some reggae writing gets bogged down by a grim voice or undue seriousness, the tone is light-hearted and jokey throughout this book, which can be a plus or a minus, depending on your point of view. My overall feeling is that *The Ultimate Guide to Great Reggae* may have been an ultimately stronger work if it had simply stuck to mento, which is where Garnice so obviously excels. Nevertheless, it may be useful reference work for those seeking a detailed exploration of some of the greatest reggae ever recorded.

David KATZ

Note

1. <http://www.mentomusic.com/>.