Kenneth BILBY, *Words of our Mouth, Meditations of our Heart: Pioneering Musicians of Ska, Rocksteady, Reggae, and Dancehall*

Michael Largey

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/5173>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.5173

ISSN: 1950-568X

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 21 April 2017

Number of pages: 211-212

ISBN: 978-2-913169-42-5

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

Michael Largey, "Kenneth BILBY, *Words of our Mouth, Meditations of our Heart: Pioneering Musicians of Ska, Rocksteady, Reggae, and Dancehall*", *Volume !* [Online], 13 : 2 | 2017, Online since 21 April 2017, connection on 25 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/5173> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.5173>

Kenneth Bilby, *Words of Our Mouth, Meditations of Our Heart: Pioneering Musicians of Ska, Rocksteady, Reggae, and Dancehall*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2016.

Despite the abundance of publications on Jamaican music in the last twenty years, few books have focused on the hard work, creativity, and life experiences of the Jamaican musicians who toiled, often in obscurity, in Jamaican sound studios. Kenneth Bilby's *Words of Our Mouth, Meditations of Our Heart* fills that gap with colorful portraits of the unsung heroes of Jamaican ska, rocksteady, reggae, and dancehall. Bilby also documents the contributions of musicians of non-commercial music such as the Buru drumming tradition and Jamaican church music, giving the reader a full picture of the musical diversity on the island. Filled with beautiful color photographs and insightful commentaries from Jamaican musicians, this book provides a new and welcome view of Jamaican music life that puts the emphasis on the musicians that made Jamaican music a worldwide phenomenon in the first place.

The book is organized as a photographic gallery of over 100 Jamaican musicians. Bilby took the photos himself, usually following an intensive interview in which he queried each participant on their involvement in Jamaican music. The portraits show the musicians relaxing with friends, performing on stage, and playing in their living rooms, front porches, and recording studios. Although the settings for each photograph are unique, they share an intimate quality that conveys a personal side of the performers. From the sheer joy of Dwight Pinkney's bass playing (201) to the contemplative

Kumina drumming of Herbert Armsby (29), to the Gumbe drumming of David "Lapi" Powell (with a little help from an interested toddler) (37), the photos alone show the reader a wealth of cultural information about the role of music in Jamaican society, its affective power, and its capacity to bring generations together in song.

Each photograph is accompanied by an excerpt from a longer interview with the individual artist. Bilby selected what he called the "high points" of these interviews for the book, choosing quotations that were said with "pas-

sion and personal conviction" (xx). For example, George "Bunny" Dudley, a member of Bunny and Skitter, as well as the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari, traced his own musical lineage through Jamaican Revival, a syncretic religious practice that draws upon Christianity as well as West and Central African religious practices. According to Dudley, contemporary Jamaican music forms owe a debt to their religious forebears: "You see deejay and all these thing? It's just a Revival song they are singing" (18).

Bilby's book is an extended meditation on the often-quoted Jamaican saying "the half has never been told." Although it provides an important glimpse into the rosters of famous recording sessions, it also includes important historical figures who might not have sung on a record, but who, nevertheless, made important contributions to the Jamaican musical scene. One example of such a contributor is Edgar Reid (34), a singer and "lieutenant" in the early Howellite church, a religious denomination founded by Leonard Percival Howell who was "generally acknowledged as the first prophet to preach the divinity of Rastafari [Haile Selassie]." Reid might not have been as well-known as Peter Tosh or Bob Marley, but his inclusion in this collection gives weight to Bilby's claim to tell the story of the "other half."

One of the great strengths of the book is its inclusion of the verbatim texts of Jamaican musicians in Jamaican English and Patwa (or Jamaican Creole). Through the voices of the musicians themselves, it is possible to see how

the music they performed fit into the larger context of Jamaican life. For example, in his interview with brothers Lammy and Emmanuel Palmer (2), Bilby includes a song lyric of the Jamaican Maroons, whom he describes as "enslaved Africans who escaped and formed their own free communities in the interior of the island." The song, about a Guinea bird that has "gone home," refers to ancestral Africa or "Guinea" where Maroons trace their ancestry. Bilby's choices of culturally resonant texts like the Guinea bird song allow the reader to see how contemporary Jamaicans maintain connections with their African roots.

Bilby's introduction to the book is an eloquent testimony, not only to the musicians whose images and words he provides, but to the complexity of the concept of music itself. Calling music "a barometer of human suffering and a measure of social conscience that remains ever sensitive to the enormity of Jamaica's founding sin—the enslavement and attempted dehumanization of an entire people—and its painful echoes in the present" (xxii-xxiii), Bilby shows how music both chronicles Jamaica's struggles and provides a transformative outlet for Jamaican people. *Words of Our Mouth, Meditations of Our Heart* is an important work that deserves to be on the shelves of anthropologists, folklorists, oral historians, ethnomusicologists, and Caribbeanists and will serve as an example of how to honor those everywhere whose stories have yet to be told.

Michael Largey