

Jah Music: Rhythms of the Rastafari

The Rastafari are among the most African-oriented members of Jamaican society, but they are also among its most creative synthesizers. This is illustrated by Rastafari music, both in its "roots" form, Nyabingi, and its popular form, reggae. Reggae is linked with the internationalization of the Rastafari Movement from the late 1960s onward and shows ongoing fusions of local folk music with popular strains from abroad. Nyabingi, by contrast, is more esoteric—a drum music central for some four decades to the worship of Jah, the Rastafari creator. Both reflect widespread borrowings and cross-overs of musical forms.

Early Rasta music was largely European in form, reflecting cultural links shared with Afro-Christian revivalism. Songs from the Sankey hymnal and the Book of Common Prayer were adapted to Rasta needs and sung at street meetings to a rhythmic accompaniment of rhumba boxes, maracas, graters and scrapers. By the mid-1940s an emergent style of drumming became increasingly important to Rasta ceremonies in the camps and yards of West Kingston. This drumming style, Nyabingi, reflected the fusion of *buru* and *kumina*, two African-derived recreational musical styles. Early Rasta master drummers adapted the three-part *buru* ensemble (bass, funde, repeater) to suit their individual styles and needs. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Nyabingi music continued to be influenced by the folk musical experience of the Rastas. These influences grew out of the rural-urban connections of brethren who moved freely between country areas and the urban camps of Trench Town, Back O' Wall, and the Dungle, as well as rural migrants who joined the ranks of the Rastafari Movement.

Since the late 1960s island-wide Nyabingi ceremonies have increasingly been

held in rural areas. At these religious celebrations brethren and sistren gather in thatched tabernacles to "praise Jah and chant down Babylon." Typically, drumming and spiritual dancing take place throughout the night, punctuated by formal speechifying by leading orators. Elders recognized for their ritual knowledge officiate the week-long celebrations. As the Nyabingi traditions gained visibility in rural areas, younger members of the island's Maroon and Kumina groups have come to identify with the Rasta Movement without abandoning their own cultural expressions. Their involvement with multiple traditions will no doubt make itself felt in the further cross-fertilization of musical styles.

Reggae is a complex musical fusion that developed in the late 1960s from a combination of popular Jamaican styles (ska and rock-steady) and American rhythm and blues, with influences from other island folk traditions. Although reggae overlaps more with Jamaican popular music than does Nyabingi, they share an emphasis on African self-determination. Disaffected and radicalized youth (including Bob Marley) who entered the Movement during the political turmoil of the 1960s straddled the folk and popular musical spheres and gave reggae its cutting political edge. The "conscious" lyrics of many reggae compositions address the social and political circumstances of the masses in Jamaica and elsewhere, and popularized Rastafari throughout the world. Today reggae can be heard in metropolitan Black communities in the Caribbean, North America, Europe and Africa. Influenced both by local folk forms and Afro-American rhythm and blues, reggae is now a vehicle for political commentary as well as an artistic form.

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