## Caribbean Popular Music: An Encyclopedia of Reggae, Mento, Ska, Rock Steady, and Dancehall

David V. Moskowitz Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2006 xxi + 345 pages (hardcover), \$85.00, ISBN 0-313-33158-8

Priced at \$85.00 and available only in a 7x10 inch hardcover edition, this is a reference book designed for public and academic libraries, and perhaps as a supplementary course text. The book's subtitle describes its contents well. Its main title is misleading as only five of more than 600 entries deal with Caribbean music or musicians from islands other than Jamaica. As a reference book on *Jamaican* popular music, the encyclopedia provides well-conceived and reasonably thorough coverage, especially for the period from the early 1960s to the mid 1980s. In this review I leave aside the book's obvious deficiencies as a source of information about the rich musical traditions of other Caribbean islands, and approach it as an encyclopedia of Jamaican popular music.

The encyclopedia is organized as a series of short entries arranged in alphabetical order. Most of these are between 100 and 700 words; a few are substantially longer.

Readers are guided through the book's contents by a thorough cross-referenced index, a largely superfluous alphabetical list of entries at the beginning of the book, and bolded words throughout to indicate names or terms that appear elsewhere as their own entries. By using the index and selectively navigating a path through the bolded words, readers can expand outward from a specific description to glean increasingly more detailed and contextualized information about an aspect of Jamaican music that interests them. For example, in addition to the 550 words devoted to influential reggae producer Lee 'Scratch' Perry in a description under his name, he is referenced in 73 other entries, and his own entry contains 32 bolded cross-references to other descriptions. Unfortunately, neither citations nor suggested readings are provided for individual entries

This book, like Lloyd Bradley's Bass Culture (2000) or David Katz's Solid Foundation (2003), exposes readers to Jamaican popular music primarily by leading them through the careers of the people most involved in making it. Unlike Steve Barrow and Peter Dalton's Reggae: The Rough Guide (2004), it does not focus much on individual performances or recordings. There are no entries for song or album titles, but those for performers often list their most influential songs and albums. These sorts of choices are necessary for an encyclopedia of this length, and in general I think its coverage of Jamaica's music scene is thorough and judicious. Descriptions focus most frequently on vocal performers or groups (about 380 entries), instrumentalists and instrumental groups (about 100), recording studies, labels, sound systems and stores (about 60), and record producers and sound engineers (about 45). Approximately 20 entries define relevant musical terms (e.g., rock steady, one drop, nyabinghi). These are useful, and in combination with the book's four page introduction, provide an accessible primer on some of the central acoustic features and rhythmic developments in Jamaican music. Another 25 descriptions offer some cultural reference points for Jamaican popular music (e.g., maroon, Rastafari, One Love Concert), but the selection of these seems somewhat arbitrary (e.g., there is an entry for Leonard Howell, but not for Marcus Garvey), and there needs to be more of them. The book does a poor job of conveying the social, cultural and political context of the music it describes; something that several other broadly-focused reggae books do well (e.g., Bradley, 2000; Katz, 2002; Potash, 1997; Stolzoff, 2000). On the other hand, it attends more carefully to the crucial role of session instrumentalists and production personnel in the development of Jamaican music's various sounds than does most popular reggae literature. This attention to backing musicians, producers, and sound engineers allows readers to develop a sense of how the Jamaican popular music scene is structured and how the music developed stylistically that is often lacking in writing that focuses more exclusively on reggae's singing stars (e.g., Davis and Simon, 1992; but see Katz, 2003).

Coverage is best for the period from the early 60s to the mid 80s and for the styles of music most associated with that time period: ska, rock steady, reggae, and early dancehall. Bob Marley gets disproportionate attention; a 2000 word entry, compared to 800 words for Coxsone Dodd and Studio One combined. Dancehall music since the mid-80s and especially since the turn of the millennium is

addressed less evenly, but still extensively in over 100 entries that cover the major figures. One of several significant omissions is Sean Paul, whose 2003 album *Dutty Rock* placed him in the top stratum of international dancehall stars two years before the book's 2006 publication. The UK-based reggae scene and its links to the Jamaican music business are the subject of 40 entries. Mento, the Jamaican popular music that preceded ska, receives little attention (only 6 entries). This pattern of coverage closely resembles that of other literature on Jamaican popular music; I found little information in this encyclopedia that I had not already encountered in other sources.

I was surprised and disappointed to find the book littered with small inaccuracies, unnecessarily vague phrasing, and contradictory information; evidence, I think, of careless editing and sloppy fact-checking. This is a serious flaw in an encyclopedia, which constructs its authority on clarity, accuracy and internal consistency. The entry for "Black Ark Studios" (p.32) provides one of many possible examples of the damage inattentive editing does to a book like this. The description is about 150 words, and begins by saying Lee Perry opened Black Ark Studios in the "late 1970s"; the studio actually opened in 1973 (Katz, 2000). It goes on to indicate that the Wailers' recorded "Duppy Conqueror" and "Small Axe" at the studio, before Island Records "lured Marley and the Wailers away from the Black Ark" (see also p.235). These songs were produced by Perry, but in 1970, and obviously not at Black Ark Studios. The entry then states that "the late 1970s and 1980s were filled with active recording at the studio" but that "Perry began to believe he was losing control of the studio and set fire to it." In fact, the infamous fire occurred in 1983; this is a detail that should have been added to the previous sentence, thus correcting the misimpression that the studio was in business throughout the 1980s. This entry is typical of many in the book that get the broad outlines right, but not the details. The problem is compounded by occasional contradictions between and within entries, and by sentence constructions that frequently obscure rather than clarify.

I imagine this encyclopedia will be used mainly as a sort of combined glossary and "Who's Who" by people who want to clarify some of the factual details they encounter in more narrative descriptions of the Jamaican music scene, or quickly situate music they are listening to in the context of its production and genre. The book is well-designed for this purpose; it contains an appropriate range of entries and is easy to navigate. Unfortunately, as many of the descriptions are vague or inaccurate they either fail to provide the clarity readers seek or offer clear but untrustworthy information. With another round of careful editing and fact-checking, the addition of a list of citations and suggested readings at the end of each description, and more attention to social and cultural context, this encyclopedia could become a valuable resource on Jamaican music. In its current form it does not quite deliver what it promises.

## **Works Cited**

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