

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello again, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of 'Arts and Africa'. Today we have music but not strictly African music. We're going to be listening to and talking about Reggae.

## MUSIC - MR. MELODICA

That was "Mr. Melodica", played by Lattyguzang. No doubt you enjoyed it but you may be wondering why Reggae on 'Arts and Africa'. Well the reason is that news has filtered through to me that musicians, particularly in West Africa, are taking an increasing interest in Reggae music and that their music is being influenced by it. Now we all know that there's sometimes an information gap in Africa - we don't always get the latest information quickly. So I thought that 'Arts and Africa' would step straight in on this one especially after I'd met Nick Kimberley. Nick is a Reggae Correspondent of Time Out a London magazine that specialises in arts and entertainment as and when they happen. So nobody knows more than Nick about the very latest developments in Reggae. Nick, before we get on to the most recent records could you give us a brief history of Reggae? How did it begin?

## NICK KIMBERLEY

Well it dates back to the mid-50's when Jamaican dances relied on a constant flow of rhythm and blues records supplied from America for the DJ's to play for their dancing audience. And in order for the different DJ's throughout Kingston, Jamaica to maintain their superiority with the very latest rhythm and blues records and the most exclusive that none of the other DJ's could get hold of. And after a while one or two of the notably, Clement Dodd and Duke Reed decided that in order to maintain their superiority they should record their own versions of rhythm and blues records in Jamaica with local musicians that way they would be the only DJ with those particular records. So they picked out a band of local musicians and went into their own recording studios to make imitations of American rhythm and blues records. These slowly evolved their own specifically Jamaican rhythm which was at that time called "sca" which lasted for five or six years until about 1967 when the beat, for some reason the DJ's decided should happen, the rhythm was slowed down and became known as "rock-steady" which again was an

imitation of American song music at the time with sweet vocals and lots of love songs. A year or two later the beat was speeded up again and became reggae which in time began to cater for a more youthful audience than that which it used to cater to before. So we find today that reggae is street level music, catering for Jamaicans rather than the music of the late 50's once it evolved which was basically for an older audience so that it's now basically a youth music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

We started with Mr. Melodica - what is that an example of: Scar of reggae?

NICK KIMBERLEY

That is today's reggae music but again it shows that reggae is still basically intended for dance halls. There's no lyrical content - it's just simple straightforward dance music. The next two records that we're going to play are simply straightforward reggae records but they both reflect a sense of reggae's history because both are new versions of old records which were made some years ago. The first is YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD MAN DOWN by The Immortals which the same group recorded some ten years ago and first we'll play the old rock-steady version where you can hear the very heavy plodding rhythm and then we'll play the new version where the rhythm is adjusted to suit today's pace and the sound is generally fuller thanks to the more complex studio techniques which are available to the producers now.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Nick I must say I prefer the older version to this new one. What is special about this new one which you think makes it better?

NICK KIMBERLEY

It seems to be in tune with today's pace obviously since the old record was made over ten years ago, but the producer's done more work in the studio bringing forward this sound or that sound so that the organ comes forward at that point, the guitar at that point, the vocal at that point. In the old record it was probably done on one tape where they just put down the basic rhythm all in one go and then on top of that they dubbed the vocal. So the producer has had to put more work into making the contemporary version. So although I like the old version, it has a certain quaint charm, the new version has more sophistication for my personal taste. And I think the same point can be made with an extra, Freddie McKay new version of "How Can I Leave". It's very closely based on the old version by the Sharks, which Clement Dodd, one of the original Jamaican DJ's produced. I imagine he produced this record in about 1970. The new version from this year has a more complex sound although basically it imitates all the same points that the original record made. I think for my taste the new version has more complexity. If we play them one after the other we'll be able to judge for ourselves.

MUSIC

The two versions of "How Can I Leave" the first by the Sharks and the more recent one by Freddie McKay. Which one you prefer is a matter of personal taste. All the records we've played so far have been simple dance music or love songs, None of them have shown any reference to politics which has become Jamaica's other abiding obsession and reggae music has reflected that obsession.

ALEX TETTEH LARTEY

We've got another record here by Burning Spear. As you may know the late Jomo Kenyatta was known as The Burning Spear. Is this a direct reference to him or is it purely incidental?

NICK KIMBERLEY

It is a direct reference - Jomo Kenyatta along with Nkrumah were the two African politicians that have meant most to Jamaican people and Jamaican singers. And Winston Rodney which is Burning Spear's real name decided, in order to refer back to what he saw as his African roots, he would have to adopt an African name so he took on the name Burning Spear.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So far the name of these performers we have used are quite strange to me. They are completely unknown and I don't think many people in Africa would know them either. The more popular names are those of Jimmy Cliff and Bob Marley and perhaps Toots and the Maytals who represent reggae to African listeners. Are they important to you or important as far as reggae music is concerned.

NICK KIMBERLEY

I think Bob Marley is a very important figure. He was one of the first young musicians to reflect an interest in politics in Jamaica through his Rastafarian beliefs and he made some very good important records in the history of reggae. Jimmy Cliff and Toots have made some good records but they're not highly regarded in Jamaica. Jimmy Cliff went to London and lived virtually in exile and so his records meant nothing in Jamaica. Toots and the Maytals made their best records in the early days of Ska music and they were an important dance band at that time. But in more recent years Jamaicans feel that their music has become somewhat diluted and therefore has less relevance to what is happening in Jamaica today. So although they have had their various important parts to play they perhaps tend to mean less now than they did some years ago.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about Desmond Dekker who is also very very popular and I think very good.

NICK KIMBERLEY

Desmond Dekker was making excellent records in about 1965/66 and he was one of the first Jamaican performers to refer to Jamaican street level culture in records he made about the "rude" boys which were roaming Jamaica - youth gangs who caused trouble in many different ways. And he made records that were both a plea for them to stop their misbehaviour and also a plea for older people to understand there were good reasons for them to behave like that. So, in a sense, Desmond Dekker was important in 65/66, but he too, like Toots lost his impetus and is now just a cabaret performer in

England with no possible relevance for the Jamaican audience.

ALEX TETTEH LARTEY

Now how about somebody like Freddie McKay, Laty Quzang, Burning Spear, are they well known?

NICK KIMBERLEY

Burning Spear I think could be seen as the most important reggae performer of the day, whereas perhaps two years ago Bob Marley could lay claim to that position. I think Burning Spear's serious lyrics, his moody singing and his own complex production techniques which are all in evidence on this next record called "The Whole A We Suffer" have made him the single most important performer in Jamaica today.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nick Kimberley thank you very much. And thats it from 'Arts and Africa' for this week and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, its my usual warm farewell as I leave you this week with a final Reggae record by Burning Spear THE WHOLE A WE SUFFER.