Ray Hitchins

Vibe Merchants: The Sound Creators of Jamaican Popular Music. Farnum, U.K.: Ashgate, 2014. xiv + 240 pp. (Cloth US\$109.95)

In *Vibe Merchants*, Ray Hitchins presents a historical and ethnographic analysis of the Jamaican recording studio, tracing the development of Jamaican popular music (JPM) from the perspective of the island's audio engineers and studio musicians. He argues that while Jamaican recordings are often evaluated according to Western production standards, local studio practices and preferences have emerged in response to a uniquely Jamaican set of cultural values and economic conditions, and therefore constitute a distinctive local recording culture in which creativity, spontaneity, and an experimental approach to technology outweigh the more rigid technical conventions associated with Western studio models. In the process, he highlights the often underappreciated contributions of studio engineers to JPM history, challenges several dominant narratives that have come to define that history, and makes a case for further study of the intersections of sound, culture, and technology in popular music production more generally.

In the introduction, Hitchins outlines his main argument and methodology, noting that his thirty-year tenure as a professional musician in Jamaica afforded him broad ethnographic access to the local music industry. Chapters 1–4 examine mento and ska production in the 1950s and 1960s, with an emphasis on the conventions developed by pioneering engineers and producers—such as musical and technological spontaneity, a collaborative relationship between engineers and musicians, and a preference for bass-heavy recordings—in response to local cultural values, economic priorities, and technical capabilities. Hitchins also critiques the common narrative that local recordings' sonic aesthetics were shaped primarily by Jamaican sound system culture, demonstrating instead that the sound systems represented only one of many potential markets for the emergent JPM industry.

Chapters 5–7 jump forward to the 1980s, exploring the ways in which drum machines and synthesizers transformed Jamaican studio culture in the early dancehall era. Hitchins notes that these technologies introduced a serial recording model to the Jamaican music industry, replacing simultaneous ensemble performance with track-by-track programming carried out by individuals or small groups. This practice, in turn, helped to consolidate the dominance of the “riddim” (or reusable instrumental backing track) in dancehall culture. Hitchins also challenges the widespread notion that dancehall production required less skill than ska and reggae production, arguing that new forms of competence were needed to meet the aesthetic needs of local dancehall audi-

ences with cutting-edge digital technology. Engineers, for instance, took on a more musical role than ever before, creatively manipulating new studio equipment to generate novel sonic and rhythmic effects.

Hitchins then turns to a discussion of dancehall production in the 1990s and 2000s in the book's final chapters. He examines the impact of computer-based recording platforms on Jamaican studio culture in Chapter 8, arguing that these technologies facilitated the emergence of "multi-role producers," or individuals who finance, compose, record, and distribute their own music. Chapter 9 presents an ethnographic analysis of Hitchins's own studio experiences as a professional guitarist in the Jamaican music industry, highlighting the various ways in which the phenomena he describes in earlier chapters manifest themselves in the course of a single recording project. In the conclusion, Hitchins restates his primary argument regarding the importance of investigating cross-cultural studio practices, sound creation, and the contributions of audio engineers in popular music scholarship.

Vibe Merchants makes a number of significant contributions to the literature on JPM. Scholars such as Norman Stolzoff, Carolyn Cooper, and Michael Veal, for instance, have sought to reveal fundamental structural and aesthetic differences between Jamaican and Western forms of musical production and consumption, but Hitchins is one of the first to explore this topic from the perspective of studio culture; his historical analysis of Jamaican recording practices illustrates how local approaches to sound, technology, enterprise, and the studio process itself have shaped many of the distinctive musical and sociocultural phenomena examined by others. He also highlights the individual achievements of several pioneering engineers and producers, many of whom have been overlooked in more musician-focused accounts of Jamaican music history.

A few important shortcomings, however, detract from the overall effectiveness of this book. First, it would have benefited from more frequent and more detailed sonic analyses of individual recordings; Hitchins often focuses more on the circumstances surrounding sound creation than on the resulting sounds themselves. Moreover, his decision to skip over the roots reggae era of the 1970s makes his otherwise comprehensive narrative feel incomplete. Nevertheless, *Vibe Merchants* is an extremely informative, insightful, and engaging book, and it comes highly recommended to students of Jamaican popular music, cross-cultural recording practices, and the intersections of music, culture, and technology more generally.

Eric Bindler

Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Indiana University,
Bloomington IN 47408, U.S.A.
ebindler@indiana.edu