Kenneth Bilby

Words of Our Mouth, Meditations of Our Heart: Pioneering Musicians of Ska, Rocksteady, Reggae, and Dancehall. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016. 232 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

“Given its remarkable leap from obscurity and disdain to worldwide influence, it is hard to avoid the sense that there is something special about Jamaica’s popular music,” notes Kenneth Bilby in the well-written and sensitive introduction of this book. Indeed, like Cuban music, Jamaican music stems from a Caribbean island but has generated an enormous amount of literature and attracted legions of fans around the globe. This is in great part thanks to Bob Marley, revered by his admirers as an international prophet and hero. Reggae, in particular, has given a voice to the “sufferers”—to people who have been enslaved and colonized, to the underprivileged and despised people of the Kingston slums and the Jamaican countryside. With its concomitant Rastafarian faith and philosophy, reggae delivers a powerful message of hope, exalting Jah and a “natural” lifestyle, closer to the one of the old African motherland. Many found (and still find) solace and inspiration in this philosophy and way of life, adopting the Rastas’ dreadlocks, tams, ganja smoking, and rejection of Western consumerist values.

Bilby, who has lived in Jamaica and played guitar and drums there, and whose grandmother also lived on the island, is fully conversant with its music, and passionate about it. He points out that despite Jamaican music’s international appeal, most of its creators-instrumentalists, and to a lesser degree, singers, have been ignored and exploited by the “producers” they recorded for, and rarely if ever received credit and royalties for their contributions, while producers and deejays enjoyed all the attention. This is similar to the situation that prevailed in the early history of jazz and Afro-American music in general. Fats Waller, for one, sold several of his compositions for piddling fees and never got royalties for them. Intent on redressing the injustice done to these originators of Jamaican popular music from the 1950s to the 1970s, Bilby has tracked down a good number of them, on the island but also in the United States, England, and Canada—quite a feat in itself. And he has allowed them to freely express themselves, in some cases keeping the patwa transcription. Along with many of the artists he interviewed, he considers the different Jamaican strains. Some are traditional, such as quadrille, Maroon music, Kumina, Buru, Pocomania (and Revival music in general), Niabinghi, that is “the roots.” Others are more modern, such as mento, ska, rocksteady, reggae, and dancehall. But they are all presented as part of one continuum; the traditional genres have nurtured more modern ones and still inform them. Most Jamaican musicians identify with

these roots and acknowledge their importance. As percussionist and vocalist “Sticky” (Uzziah Thompson) puts it: “But we cyaan fegat de past. And we have fe remember de culture, de roots. For de roots is de roots.”

The expressive photographs in this book, also by Bilby, are accompanied by statements by the musicians; mentions of some of the most important tracks they recorded on; a few biographical lines; and, occasionally, examples of song lyrics, and explanatory notes. The musicians truly speak from the heart. What often comes across is that music is a “feeling,” something that “happens” when “the right vibes” hit, that springs from the depths of one’s life, of one’s experiences, and that being a schooled musician is not necessarily a guarantee for good, soulful music. “When I go to a studio, no one don’t really tell me what to play ... But most of the time—98 percent of the time—it’s just what is inside of you that you take out,” says, for example, drummer “Mikey Roo” (Michael Richards). And as trumpeter “Dizzy Johnny” (Johnny Moore) declares: “The more emotional the musician is, the sweeter his music.” For some, such as singer and percussionist “Cedric Congos” (Cedric Myton) and vocalist Justin Hinds, Jamaican music is also something spiritual and liberating. Singer Claudette Clarke, for one, asserts that reggae comes from Revival church music. There is a certain directness and a sense of worth in those unsung pioneers’ testimonies.

Words of Our Mouth, Meditations of Our Heart also contains a detailed discography, classified according to various musical genres, plus a list of documentary films and videos; mention of the locations and dates of interviews and/or field recordings; a glossary, a bibliography, and an index. This is an engaging, vivid, highly recommended read that fills a gap in the history of Jamaican popular music. Such a book was long overdue.

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