Five Corners of Reggae Music, and the House where Rastafari Lived

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Introduction

When Mussolini invaded Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital, in May 1935, it forced its Emperor, Haile Selassie I, into exile. The Emperor arrived in the city of Bath, England, in October 1936, and lived in a property called Fairfield House with his family, government advisors and Orthodox priests. After returning to Ethiopia in 1941, the Emperor gave the house to the city of Bath as a gift to be used by aged citizens. This paper explores the legacy of this period in Bath’s history, and most notably for this event, the legacy of His Majesty’s teaching for Rastafari people, and the lessons of roots reggae music that I can meditate on for the work of Fairfield House today. I will discuss this reflexively through my experiences of working in a voluntary capacity with Fairfield over a period of 17 years, in and around my day job at the university, sometimes in partnership.

To understand the modern-day impact of this Ethiopian Emperor living in Bath, it is important to state, (as I’m sure you all already know), that Haile Selassie I is viewed as a deity by members of the Rastafari faith. So, in that context, Fairfield is the house where literally God lived, during arguably the most difficult time of His human transcendent life. The complexity of feelings towards the legacy of this history is summed up by the Rastafari High Priest for the South West UK region, Ras Bandele Selassie: (extract from a film I made about this history in 1999 presented by Benjamin Zephaniah, Footsteps of the Emperor).

Ras Bandele Selassie says,

“It makes me feel sad, and it makes me glad, because the reason for His Majesty to be here is through the sadness of his heart. If the sadness never occurred, then the gladness of me being here today would not have occurred. The gladness of … the elderly being looked after here would not have occurred. The gladness of Rastafari having celebrations here would not
have occurred. Many things that are happening in Bath now … the love that we feel would not have occurred. So for that, whilst I am sad I am glad.”

This notion, that the memory a site holds acts as a source of both pain and comfort, positions Fairfield as an embodiment of what historian Olivette Otele refers to as a ‘reluctant site of memory – a seen or unseen space that owes their very existence to brutal European colonial conquest’. Significantly for Fairfield, it contains a narrative of both European colonial conquest and African liberation, as it was from there that the Emperor orchestrated the Allies to join the fight for Ethiopia’s liberation. Otele’s notion of the reluctant site is also in context with the argument that Black history is hidden or not promoted as much as it could be in comparison with Eurocentric history (Ruffins, 2006, 399).

The irony that the Emperor sought refuge in an Italian villa in a Roman city in England whilst being oppressed at home by Mussolini’s Rome, is not lost on many of the visitors. Likewise the fact that the Emperor came to Bath because he was deemed too popular to stay in London, as at that time the British government had not yet declared Mussolini an enemy, his pact with Hitler having yet to be established (Bowers, 2016, 39; Judah, 2016, 37). These layers, contradictions and insights on global political history add potency to the notion of the reluctant site and highlight how one relatively small building can trigger the unlocking of stories on a global scale.

This reluctant site of memory has personal resonance for me, as Bath is where I was born and raised. While growing up I heard fragmented statements indicating that the Emperor once lived there, but these were never followed with any further concrete information; it was just vague anecdote. It was not until I reached my late teens, in the late 1980s, and started to embrace the Rastafari way of life that I found out more. Years later, in 1999 I was working for ITV WEST television station and was fortunate to be able to make an hour-long documentary, called ‘Footsteps of the Emperor’, which detailed this specific history for the first time on screen. That was the starting point of my marriage to Fairfield House, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.

**Fairfield House as a space and place**

Fairfield is a place comprising multiple stakeholders and communities of interest, most notably Bath’s senior citizens, local and global Ethiopian and Rastafari communities, local residents and tourists (Figure 14.1). It is the various prior knowledges, understandings and empathies of visitors to Fairfield that transform the property from a mere physical space to a
place with meaning (Tuan, 1977, 4). Fairfield House, as with all heritage sites, means different things to different people (Poria et al., 2004, 19) and is the epitome of the sensory ethnographic notion of deep mapping, how the multi-layered dimensions of history of a space are still visible and tangible in the present (Biggs, 2011, 7).

One of the practical complexities of Fairfield is that the site operates as a working day centre for the elderly, at the same time as being a spiritual and cultural space open to the public. Whilst it is not only Rastafari that are interested in this history and recognize its importance, it is undoubtedly Rastafari that have most kept the name of Haile Selassie alive in public consciousness, especially through lyrics in reggae music and the use of the Emperor’s face on items such as clothing, flags, and other tributes.

I’d like to now share with you a personal exploration of reggae music from a Rastafari and Fairfield House perspective, in the form of lessons – which I call the Five Corners of Reggae Music - Educational, Spiritual, Political, Entrepreneurial, and Social.

1 - Educational
Music with a message of a proud Black African identity. Talking about the slavery in a way that was different to school, and evoking names in song such as of Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie, and the Abyssinians using words such as Sattamassagana, (an Amharic word meaning ‘give thanks and praises’). Infused with Biblical quotes and codes - roots reggae became like text-books for those of who were inspired by the music’s teaching and wanted to take it further. We would listen, make notes, and find out more through self-education and self-consciousness raising. For Fairfield House, there is a responsibility to further this educational project, raising awareness of not only the Emperor and His legacy, but also in telling an expanded version of what gets presented as European history - for example, how what was going on in Africa was central to what would soon happen in Europe, and our understanding of World War 2.

2 - Spiritual
Roots reggae is like hymns to Rastafari, especially that which evokes the name of His Majesty. Rastafari is very much a faith which is amongst the people, so I think it’s entirely apt that the popular music which carries some of the messages and ideas of Rastafari is also very much amongst the people. The popular dynamic of reggae is in some ways opposite to the more Churchical and private dynamic of nyabinghi drumming and chanting, which is less concerned with performance and audience, and more concerned with collective inner meditation. Similar to the Rastafari faith itself then, its popular music...
resonates on different levels, and deeply spiritual roots reggae music can appeal to non-Rasta people, just as certain aspects of Rastafari culture can appeal and inspire people who would never call themselves Rasta, but there’s still an affinity.

It’s important to also to mention dub music in the context of spirituality, as it is a form of roots music with no lyrics. Quite rightly when we talk about roots reggae music we foreground the message in the lyrics, but dub rarely gets mentioned. Anyone here who has been to a Jah Shaka session would know of the deep bass that exists in dub, and you experience the music with your whole body. I relate to dub music as a form of meditation, what you are focussing on isn’t the point, the thoughts of your mind becomes the lyrics, and you get lost in the repetitive nature of the drum and bass, trance like in the same way you would if you were meditating in silence, the dub is the vehicle that helps you reach that mind state.

I am aware the elephant in the room for many at this point might be the idea that it is with the help of Ganja that helps that mindstate, not just the music. I want to dispel that myth by not really talking about Ganja, some use it, some don’t. Not all Rastafari use it, in the same way that not all lovers of reggae use it. The music is powerful enough to take you places without the need of smoking anything at all. Though of course the relationship between Rasta and ganja, and reggae and ganja, whether or not a Rasta is the active listener, cannot be denied. And I know Yewande will talk more about some of this in her presentation.

For Fairfield House, one of the key spiritual dynamics is ensuring the numerous holy days in the Rastafari and Ethiopian Orthodox calendars are open for those respective communities to feel safe to celebrate, pray, meditate and observe in the way they see fit, whether individually or collectively. Also every first Saturday of the month is a Sabbath observance run by the Rastafari community, and we get visitors from all over the country knowing something will happen that day, even if they don’t know the specific details. The tightrope walked, is hosting the globally recognised spiritual dynamics of the House by the respective faithful, whilst at the same time the charity remaining a secular and non-denominational organisation.

3 - Political
Just as some reggae music is overtly spiritual, other forms are overtly political, and many mesh the two themes. The Bible itself can be read as a purely political text, so that form of meshing the spiritual and the political has a long tradition. Again I would say, speaking from a Rastafari perspective, you have some members of the faith that are deeply religious, and you have others that are not so caught up in the spiritual aspect and are more inspired by the political discourse that Rastafari also contains. And here I’m not trying to present that as
mutually exclusive, as I say there is a blend between them and they can’t really be separated in Rastafari, but I would still argue that you do get different energies of emphasis - which is often down to individual personality.

You can hear this dynamic in the powerful song that is Klu Klux Klan by Steel Pulse, and of we are lucky enough have Mykaell Riley from Steel Pulse here today, who we just heard from personally. That song Klu Klux Klan doesn’t pull any punches, and has the ability to be a hard hitting debate on social debate on social justice, whilst at the same time being incredibly beautiful to listen to.

I think one of the political dynamics and challenges of Fairfield House is having to work with whichever colour political party leads the local council at any given time, and to a certain extent playing the diplomatic political game, whilst at the same time staying true to the committee’s core values and the representing the values of the various stakeholder groups. By nature of its history, Fairfield has an activist story to tell, with Haile Selassie’s experiences of speaking truth to power in his famous League of Nations speech. He gave the house to the city as a gift for elders, but a few years ago the council tried to sell it off as a private concern. So whilst now we work with the council well and things seem cosy, we also know (or need to remember) they are politicians, and these relationships can change...

4 - Entrepreneurial

The entrepreneurial nature of reggae music pioneers, and what the island of Jamaica has globally achieved, is quite phenomenal – and I say this as a Bajan, so you know I mean it! Jamaica has had a significant and sustained cultural and religious impact on the world, and the entrepreneurial drive of the early pioneers of the Jamaican reggae industry is still present today in digital formats, with newly invented business models.

At Fairfield we need this entrepreneurial spirit more than ever as we’re financially precarious, though I will admit this entrepreneurial spirit has not been easy to unlock. One of the reasons may be because we’re mostly run by volunteers who have day jobs, so there’s little capacity. In addition to what the committee have been trying to do, such as writing grant applications and running fundraising events and campaigns, there’s also quite a telling elephant in the room – to date there have been no Rastafari entrepreneurs or international reggae stars coming to invest in the House where their God lived. George Harrison bought a Hari Krishna centre for his religious community, Madonna famously supported a Kabbalah centre. At Fairfield we are yet to see the equivalent coming from the reggae world. We are often told by well-meaning visitors how this should happen and that we should make it happen, but I
admit sometimes all we can do is shrug, as we know it’s a lottery we cannot afford to wait on or put more energy into. So if any of you have access to the big rich reggae stars, please let them know!

**Finally, 5 - Social**

Outside of Rastafari circles, reggae was successful in bringing people together irrespective of faith, and created new communities of interests, bonding over their love of drum beats and basslines. It was also successful in creating some culturally safe spaces for Black people, where they were inspired by the messages of Black liberation and entertained in equal measure. And as we know, reggae very soon also inspired large amounts of white lovers of the music, with a whole different set of references that brought them to that space, in the same way that all of you have different references that brought you here today. Again, the music was the vehicle for those meshes of communities to come together, to get along, dance, and allow the drum and bass to do its individual work on us.

Here I’m trying imagine what it would have been like to dance to a song such as Klu Klux Klan in such a culturally mixed environment - being starkly reminded about the horrors of racism in the outside world, and also allowing us to forget it at the same time. I mentioned this dynamic to Mykaell Riley as few months ago when we met in Bristol, and said I know the word ‘forgetting’ isn’t quite the right word. He said ‘distracted’ could be more of the type of word I was looking for, and I agree. I would argue this is precisely the beauty of reggae music, and its healing meditation – the ability to both remember and momentarily distract and inspire – to galvanize an instinctive emotional response through music, and start a new set of conversations in motion.

I’ll end by saying, through my work at the university I’ve secured some AHRC Research Networks funding for Fairfield, so over the next 12 months there’ll be a series of events and exhibitions which explore some of the things I’ve been talking about, and other themes. So I’m happy to link that project with this one and keep you informed and invite you down to Bath to take part. So I hope to see you there, until such time, Give thanks. Rastafari Bless.

**References**


Tuan, Y-F. (1977) Space and Place: the perspective of experience, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press