Five Corners of Reggae: what reggae music means to me
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Welcome to the Afrika Eye film festival screening of Roots, Reggae, Rebellion, the documentary on the history or reggae music presented by Akala. Today we are honoured to have Mykaell Riley from the legendary reggae band Steel Pulse with us, who features in the film. I'll be interviewing Mykaell after the screening about his experience of Steel Pulse and what he's doing now, in his new career as a scholar of music, an academic at the University of the Westminster, and please do ask him lots of questions. We also have a video message by the director of the film, James Hale, after this short introduction I have been asked to give, which I was honoured to accept.

I’d like to share with you a personal exploration of reggae music means to me, especially in my formative teenage years, the impact it had on me and that I could see happening, and its significance across five aspects of life – which I call the Five Corners of Reggae Music.

1 - Cultural / Educational
Music with a message of a proud Black African identity. Talking about the slavery in a way that was different to school, and singing names such as of Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie, 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.

2 - Spiritual
Roots reggae music are like hymns to Rastafari, especially that which evokes the name of His Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I. Rastafari is very much a faith which is amongst the people, so I think it’s entirely apt that the music which carries some of the messages and ideas of Rastafari is also very much amongst the people. Similar to the Rastafari faith itself, the music resonates on different levels, and deeply spiritual music appeals 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 an affinity.

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 repetitious 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.

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 the 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’ll see in this film, it features that fantastic and powerful song Klu Klux Klan by Steel Pulse, and as I said earlier, we’re lucky enough to have Steel Pulse singer Mykaell Riley here with us today, who I’ll be interviewing after the screening. 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. So I look forward to chatting with Mykaell more about that afterwards.

4 - Entrepreneurial / Resourcefulness
In the film Akala mentions the entrepreneurial nature of reggae music pioneers and what Jamaica has achieved. Before I watched the film when I was planning what to say here today, I had a whole section planned about how such a small island of Jamaica has such a cultural and religious impact on the world, and the entrepreneurial drive of the early pioneers of the Jamaican reggae industry. I was going to say this, but in the film Akala says it much better than me, so I’ll let him say that in the strong way he does.

5 - Social
Outside of Rastafari circles, reggae was successful in bringing people together and creating new communities of interests, bonding over their love of drum beats and basslines. It was successful in creating some cultural safe spaces for Black people, where they were inspired by the messages of Black liberation and entertained in equal measure. And as we know, and as we’ll see in the film, 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 forgetting it at the same time. I mentioned this to Mykaell just now, and said I know the word ‘forgetting’ isn’t 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 hope you enjoy the film, please stick around after the film for the Q & A with Mykaell Riley, and thanks for listening.