

## Basslines 6: Roots, Dancehall, and Karaoke

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*Annotated version with sound and text references*

Text: Marius ‚Comfortnoise‘ Neukom ([www.comfortnoise.com](http://www.comfortnoise.com))



*With his 2000 book Bass Culture: When Reggae was King, Lloyd Bradley presented the most comprehensive, varied, and entertaining history of reggae to date. In its last section, however, the book takes a surprising turn – Bradley argued that the history of reggae came to an end in the mid-80s, and left was without any notable offshoots. This is an astonishing thesis, especially coming from an author like him. What were the arguments behind it, and what kind of light do the fifteen+ years since the book's publication shed on its legitimacy?*

In the early 1970s, after ska and rocksteady<sup>1</sup>, Jamaica found in reggae a style that was distinctive in both musical profile and content. It was a style that would go on to influence the identity of a generation and that was characterized by the social and political

<sup>1</sup> The origins lie in the boom of the still colonial Jamaica of the 50s, when first sound systems (loudspeakers placed under free sky) were playing mento, calypso, r&b, jazz and soul. At the end of the 50s in the ghettos of Kingston, ska (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ska>) emerged: a mixture of the aforementioned music styles that became the first genuine Jamaican genre. With the high pace of ska, its emphasis on the rhythm and by broaching the issue of everyday life in the ghetto, the first gangsters entered the stage. Not least in order to calm down the minds, the pace was lowered, and rocksteady (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rocksteady>) originated. From there, it was only a little step toward early reggae with its characteristic emphasis on the off-beat.

conditions of its time: the civil war-like process of independence, the harsh life in the ghetto, the fusion of slavery's aftermath with Rastafarian<sup>2</sup> culture. Supported by the technique of dub (see the [Basslines column in zweikommasieben #11](#)), roots reggae pushed for "righteousness", which encompassed the elimination of social injustice and the critique of capitalism as well as cultural awakening and revolution.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1980s, that began to change. The failure of socialist experiments led by Jamaica's Prime Minister Michael Manley caused the end of an exchange between producers, artists, and the social-political leadership.<sup>4</sup> Violence and hardship in the ghettos increased. The ganja-based "ital culture"<sup>5</sup> of the Rastafarians couldn't fulfill its promise of salvation; cocaine and crack began to dictate the atmosphere at sound system parties.<sup>6</sup> Following a phase of reggae's global distribution, Bob Marley's death in May 1981 left a vacuum in its wake. Marley's success had been based on a stylistic variant that was in turn integrated into the aesthetics of mainstream rock by the pop industry – which meant that for most western, white audiences, reggae began and ended with him.<sup>7</sup> After Marley's death, reggae became virtually unmarketable and was dropped by many international labels. Producers gave up and started making dancehall, a style named after the venues where it had all started and where the now-disillusioned crowds wanted, simply, to have fun.<sup>8</sup>

In Bradley's view, that was the point at which reggae's creative development deteriorated:<sup>9</sup> roots came to a halt both musically and lyrically, was both stifled formally and squeezed economically.<sup>10</sup> Finally, in 1985, the demand for both musicians and studios vanished almost overnight as people started composing backing rhythms using Casio drum machines. *Under Mi Sleng Teng*<sup>11</sup>, a song produced by King Jammy and sung by Wayne Smith, was based on a rhythm without a bass line passed down by reggae<sup>12</sup> and as such changed the standards of the Jamaican music industry from the ground up. Now, people without any musical training could produce in their own homes – namely, they could remix already-made tracks ad libitum and sing over them. Bradley wasn't the only one to show disapproval: Dennis Bovell complained that "reggae had slipped into its karaoke phase."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rastafari>

<sup>3</sup> However, Prince Buster's *Wreck a Pum Pum* (1967) documents that a remarkable sexualization of the lyrics already began in ska and rocksteady – <https://youtu.be/Tu-fkomKxXk>.

<sup>4</sup> Bradley, pp. 494f.

<sup>5</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ital>

<sup>6</sup> Bradley, p. 497

<sup>7</sup> Bradley, pp. 485ff. – By the way, Bob Marley's records were well sold all over the world except for Jamaica (Bradley, p. 519).

<sup>8</sup> Beth Lesser (2012, S. 83ff.) judges with substantially more far-sightedness but considers noticeably less (sociological) context.

<sup>9</sup> Bradley, pp. 490ff.

<sup>10</sup> Compared to ska and rocksteady, roots was innovative for an extremely long time, namely over 10 years.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wjw7m-BKmq8>

<sup>12</sup> Bradley, p. 517

<sup>13</sup> Bradley, p. 501

Digi-dub paved the way for 1990s dancehall – the tempos got faster, the “toasting”<sup>14</sup> changed. The ubiquitous rhythmic chanting of rub-a-dub<sup>15</sup> turned into ragga<sup>16</sup>, a predecessor of rap and hip hop characterized by wordplay, humor, and frivolity. “Slackness”<sup>17</sup> and “punaani”<sup>18</sup> as well as “reality” and “rudebwoy style” crowded out “culture” and “consciousness” – the content and commercial draw of the music now revolved predominantly around sex(ism) and (the glorification of) violence. Buju Banton’s openly propagated homophobia in *Bye Bye Boom* (1993), for example, is one of the most regrettable manifestations of the often dreadful gender order in Jamaican society at the time.<sup>19</sup> For Bradley, it was the loss of a relationship to history and the heedless attitude towards music-making that acted as evidence for the argument that reggae stopped developing in the mid-eighties altogether.<sup>20</sup>

He may be partly right – the political and social messages of roots reggae became obsolete and irrelevant<sup>21</sup>, and the style didn’t develop further. However, despite its artistically ruinous commercialization, dancehall was both a continuation and a fundamental turning point in a process of unravelling that engendered styles including jungle, drum’n’bass, dub techno, dubstep, 8-bit reggae<sup>22</sup>, and bass music. Although some of these genres are unconcerned with the transmission of social or political messages, they have all absorbed important aspects of the reggae culture and continue to bring those aspects further – i.e., markedly outside of Jamaica (see the [Basslines column in zweikommasieben #13](#)). They are the spawn of globalization and computer technology, both of which have given rise to a creative excess of repetitions, remixes, sampling, retro movements, reissues, and finally to the constant availability of everything.<sup>23</sup>

When Bradley guessed at the turn of the millennium, that “in twenty years” no one would be excited to see a ragga reissue, he revealed little more than his own cultural pessimism and the limits of his own imagination.<sup>24</sup> From today’s perspective, it seems clear that every decade since the foundation of reggae has gone on to produce ever more distinctive, relevant reggae.<sup>25</sup> It is, though, important to choose selections carefully and to distinguish knowledgeably between roots, dancehall, and karaoke.

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<sup>14</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deejay\\_\(Jamaican\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deejay_(Jamaican))

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Beth Lesser (2012)

<sup>16</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ragga>

<sup>17</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slackness>

<sup>18</sup> <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/punani>

<sup>19</sup> [https://play.google.com/music/preview/Tynxd6be3nthb2vu6buj4iezvmy?lyrics=1&utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_campaign=lyrics&pcampaignid=kp-song-lyrics](https://play.google.com/music/preview/Tynxd6be3nthb2vu6buj4iezvmy?lyrics=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=lyrics&pcampaignid=kp-song-lyrics) – Bradley (p. 539) calls Beenie Man, Bounty Killer, Simpleton and Ninjaman “hardcore guys”; cf. also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Batty\\_boy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Batty_boy).

<sup>20</sup> Bradley, p. 520

<sup>21</sup> If you like, however, you may recognize an advancement of roots in the self-descriptive descendant called “lovers rock”, domesticated and completely adjusted to the aesthetics of pop. – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lovers\\_rock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lovers_rock).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. [Basslines column in zweikommasieben #13](#)

<sup>23</sup> They are the requirements of the great aesthetic designs of the rave era and club culture of the 90ties. Interestingly, Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher argue similarly conservatively as Bradley, yet relating to the rave culture – cf. [Basslines column in zweikommasieben #10](#).

<sup>24</sup> Bradley, p. 520: “It seems highly unlikely that, in twenty years’ time, we’ll be looking forward to reissued ragga albums.”

<sup>25</sup> For instance, the Jamaican duo Equiknoxx (<https://www.discogs.com/artist/4911851-Equiknoxx>) currently produces highly remarkable, innovative and experimental dancehall.

## Literature

Bradley, L. (2000). *Bass Culture: When Reggae was King*. London: Penguin Books.

Lesser, B. (2012). *Rub-a-Dub Style. The Roots of modern Dancehall*. Toronto: Beth Kingston.

In this column, Marius 'Comfortnoise' Neukom introduces book publications that relate in various ways to dub culture. He contextualizes each publication, describes its guiding principles, and expands on its author's thoughts. The annotated versions of this column with supplemental sound and text references can be found at [www.comfortnoise.com/blog/basslines.html](http://www.comfortnoise.com/blog/basslines.html)

