

## Reggae Music Saved My Life

The Hiss Golden Messenger leader presses on with the help of some sweet Jamaican sounds

By **M.C. TAYLOR**

I'VE LISTENED TO A lot of music in the past year and a half, and most of it was reggae. Specifically, the songs I listened to were of the roots or devotional Rastafarian variety, recorded roughly between 1970-1985 in and around Kingston, Jamaica, but sometimes also in small, makeshift studios in Toronto or New York City. I've been drawn to reggae music since the day I ditched high school with my friend Aaron Thompson and he played me his brother's copy of Burning Spear's *Marcus*



Garvey while we smoked cigarettes around his pool. In retrospect, it was a bit like tripping over the Rosetta Stone on my first day as an intern on an archeological dig. Marcus Garvey remains, in my opinion, one of the high-water marks of recorded music—a hauntingly melodic, joyfully righteous, deeply funky elegy on slavery, liberation, joy and faith. A bell was rung that day that continues to vibrate through my life.

By the time I was in my early 20s and collecting records in earnest, we were in the midst of one of the first golden eras of reggae reissues, led in large part by the sorely missed Blood & Fire Records, an iconic label whose cover imagery alone was a stamp of approval for reggae newbies and serious heads alike. It was during this time that I bought King Tubby's *Freedom Sounds in Dub*, a collection of deeply hallucinogenic and hypnotic reworkings of tunes from the vaults of Bertram Brown's Freedom Sounds record label. I couldn't have asked for a better introduction to the world of dub music, a sub-genre of reggae in which multitrack recordings—usually of previously released songs—are recycled, remixed, and treated with shimmering layers of reverb and delay. Then, they're filtered until it becomes hard to determine where the original version ends and the dub version begins, as on Johnny Clarke's "Ites Green and Gold" and Bob Marley's "Rebel Music." Vocals are often removed, and sometimes new melodies or instruments are added, in essence creating an entirely new song. Like a musical game of telephone, it can become hard to remember what the original tune even was. I can think of at least half a dozen different songs that are built on Lloyd Parks' churning "Slaving" rhythm—my personal

favorite being Sylford Walker's "Chant Down Babylon"—with completely different lead melodies and lyrics. Tubby, born Osbourne Ruddock in Kingston, Jamaica, elevated this type of remixing to a high art. This is the reason he's called King.

Not long after purchasing *Freedom Sounds*, I was digging in the dusty bins at Discount Records off of Harbor Boulevard in Costa Mesa when I found Trojan Records' *Upsetter Box Set*, a classic collection containing three of producer Lee "Scratch" Perry's early records with his group The Upsetters. It was almost time for the store to close, and I could tell the teenager behind the counter wanted to be rid of me so he could lock up. "How much is this?" I asked in as neutral tone as I could muster, not wanting to give away my excitement.

"How many records are in it?" he replied without interest.

"Three," I said, holding my breath.

"Ten cents per record. Thirty cents."

I paid with two quarters and walked out, feeling like I'd just robbed a bank.

If King Tubby's offerings are the equivalent of hydroponic weed grown with almost surgical precision for maximum existential impact, then Perry's music—especially the material he recorded at his haunted Black Ark home studio—feels more akin to psilocybin mushrooms grown in the wild. By that, I mean it is unpredictable, temperamental, shambolic, gnomic, sometimes darkly funny or claustrophobically spooked. In my opinion, no collection is complete without a copy of *Heart of the Congos*, an eerie record that Scratch produced around 1976 for Rastafarian harmony duo the Congos. *Heart of the Congos* is, in essence, a gospel record that

moves in dank rhythm under dark and ominous clouds; it sounds like it was made during end times, and its strange mix of joyous devotion and Old Testament apocalypse is totally unique. Lee "Scratch" Perry's vaults seem to be bottomless. I just recently discovered a record of his called *Megaton Dub*—after being a fan for over two decades—that I would put up there with the very best of his work. And labels like the great Pressure Sounds have created a cottage industry out of collecting his most obscure singles for compilations like *Roaring Lion* and *The Return of Sound System Scratch*, all of which are worth hearing.

What both Tubby and Scratch—and indeed everyone that was making reggae records in Jamaica in the 1970s, as far as I can tell—share is a deep affinity for the in-the-pocket groove known as the one-drop, in which the kick drum emphasizes the third beat and the rhythm dances along on the high hat. To an American drummer this can feel like playing backward. Just the other day, my 12-year-old son and I were listening to a Mighty Diamonds record and he said, "All these drummers play the same beat, don't they?" He was hearing how central the one-drop was in the world of reggae.

This past year, I went further down the reggae rabbit hole than I ever have before. Part of the reason why is that it felt like a beautiful world to lose myself in during a time that seemed to carry only bad news. Getting into the weeds with *any* subject is like learning a language, and reggae isn't any different: The deeper you go, the more nuance you hear. Leroy "Horsemouth" Wallace plays his drum fills in a loose, rangy way that feel distinct from those of Carly Barrett or Sly Dunbar. Bullwackie's production technique swings

differently than Niney's or Phil Pratt's or Glen Brown's. This is fun, if arcane, knowledge to be in possession of. It was a year of great discovery for me, and I feel like I was regularly stumbling upon masterpieces, like The Tiduals righteous "Put Those Fools" or Itopia's driving "Creation," that I'd never heard before. Any record head knows this type of joyful fervor.

It's important to acknowledge that, as a white American male, I've been the beneficiary of the oppressive systems that so much of the most potent reggae music, certainly of the roots variety, is working in opposition to. When Yabby You sings "Chant Down Babylon Kingdom," he's singing about dismantling the wicked institutions of white supremacy that have allowed Black people to be abused and murdered by the police. He's singing about being denied the most basic human rights in broad daylight. As a fan of reggae that happens to be white, it's good and necessary to keep this in mind.

At the same time, so many of the themes that reggae deals in—persistence, hope, liberation, justice and devotion—felt more deeply universal than ever this past year. Maybe this is why I continue to return to it day after day; reggae offers the most instructive and pointed commentary about what it means to press on. In a year of so much suffering—individually and collectively—it was the soundtrack I needed. And in 20 years, if someone asks me how I made it through the year of the global pandemic, I'll tell them: "I listened to reggae music." 🎧

M.C. Taylor's project, *Hiss Golden Messenger*, released their latest LP, *Quietly Blowing It*, in June. Make sure to visit [Relix.com/Hiss](http://Relix.com/Hiss) to explore his curated reggae playlist.

