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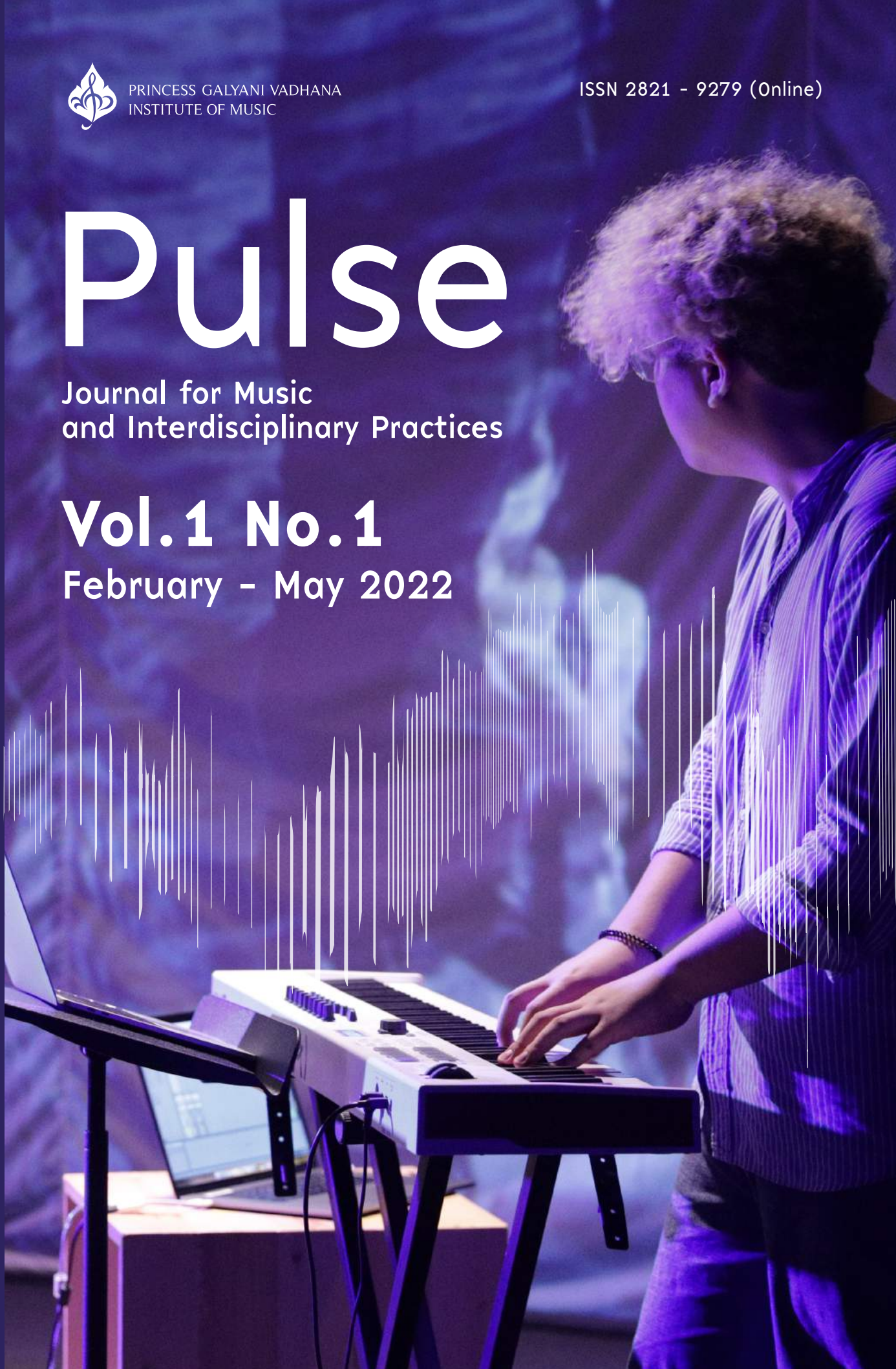

An Embodied Musicology: Social, Political and Aesthetic Aspects and Implications of the Experience of Reggae Music in Areas of Indonesia and Thailand.

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Abstract

Some areas within the ASEAN region, specifically in Indonesia and Thailand, have thriving and multifaceted musical cultures based on reggae music and Rasta culture. While this adoption of a musical style originally from the Caribbean and with no immediately obvious links to the nations of the ASEAN region may seem surprising on its face, interviews with performers, a contextual analysis of their performances, and an examination of their contingent lifestyle and philosophy reveals significant synergies between the originators and ASEAN adherents of reggae music. Significantly, many ASEAN musicians who engage with reggae are not simply reproducing the 'parent' music as a simulacrum in a trite, formulaic manner, but are instead creating a sophisticated and embodied musicological critique with cultural relevance. The resulting music transcends the local and has global significance

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Keywords: South East Asian music, ASEAN reggae, postmodernism, reggae, rasta culture, musical activism, music and politics, Beaudrillard, simulacra theory, Indonesian popular music, Thai popular music, Sri Lankan popular music, Japanese popular music, British punk and post punk, musical rhizomes, intercultural penetration/germination, reconstructed memory, music as prophecy

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Areas within the ASEAN region have within them a thriving and multifaceted culture based on reggae music and Rasta ideas. There are of course many borrowed or 'loaned' aspects of music in most cultures—whether occidental, oriental, global north or global south. The manner in which musical aspects spin and swirl around the globe, like coloured ink in water, is fascinating and beautiful. Even so, the occurrence of a popular musical form originally from the Caribbean and, to a lesser extent, areas in Africa is, at first glance, surprising. As one might expect, some of the ASEAN musical responses to reggae are trite and simulacral, essentially working for the tourist dollar. Much of the reggae music I have experienced in parts of the ASEAN region over the last twenty years has involved responses to, and echoes of, the works of Bob Marley and the Wailers. Sometimes I've heard very close musical echoes that nonetheless have a distinctiveness and interest that emerges from the change of language and adaptations to the local context. Alongside this, is the music of those ASEAN artists working with reggae and dub who go beyond the template supplied by Marley and others to produce new music that, though very much still within the world of western popular music, nonetheless offers intriguing and considered commentaries. This music, which provided the impetus for this paper, represents an 'embodied musicology'. The ASEAN artists under consideration here mashup, investigate and respond to a wide and eclectic range of source inspirations, in the most fascinating ways.[1] In particular, the once close relationship between punk, post punk and reggae music in the west is being revisited and revived now in the ASEAN region by these new experiments in roots and dub. This recontextualisation, this ripping out of the archive creates a new space for reggae music to breathe and become present in new compositions and arrangements made half a world away. Significantly, this is not an academic or intellectual exercise. The excitement evidenced by audiences hearing these echoes of familiar music is palpable and contagious. This vital and cutting-edge work has grown out of a musical journey sourced in Kingston, Nine Mile and Summertown, Jamaica; that travelled through expat and exile communities in London, Birmingham and Manchester and finally landed in the heat of bars and clubs in Bangkok, Jakarta, Kuta and other ASEAN cities. The surge of

[1] The easier access to music offered over recent years by online listening and watching platforms has certainly played a part in the creation of this music. The difficulty of seeing and hearing live concerts and physical artefacts in some areas is extreme.

creativity investigated here was facilitated by ASEAN musician's rejection of the ossifying, intractable and overwhelmingly commercial understandings of genre in the west, and a return to the creative plasma that informed the original 'scenes' in the first place.

To approach this very new music, we need first to look at the often-bizarre development of Rasta music in the ASEAN region, something I have observed and participated in over the last twenty-plus years. Although this certainly was not an intentional action on my part—I am not by any means a reggae musician—there seems to have been a commonality of intention that has acted magnetically between musicians within this scene and myself. My unwitting and unintended involvement began some years ago on a series of journeys, undertaken as part of my work at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire in the UK, in which I explored the musics and wider cultures of a number of islands. These somewhat haphazard and improvisational journeys resulted in many scored and devised compositions that are contemporary classical, jazz and zen in emphasis. Although I was not looking for reggae, I seemed to find it in most of the places I visited.

On one journey, I went to Indonesia to see and record traditional Balinese Kechak and Barong performances. In Kuta where I was staying, reggae was unavoidable in the bars. Kuta is a coastal resort town, frequented predominantly by Australians, for whom it is an exotic but not too distant holiday destination. The famous Indonesian surf and the very particular and beautiful local visual and aural cultures have brought in tourists, traders and colonisers for centuries. This has stimulated a great deal of development in real estate and the service industry. One aspect of this development is a local culture that has developed around the needs of migrant, displaced and disaffected people from other areas within Indonesia. I met people who had come to Kuta in search of an escape from powerful lifestyle expectations in strongly religious and traditional social settings elsewhere in the country. The transient character of these migrants seemed to be reflected in their choice of music—often evidencing idealised dreams of other worlds beyond their shores. Due to the very high exit visa cost for Indonesian nationals at the time, these dreams were, for most, impossible to achieve.

Wandering the town, I was surprised to see so many reggae bands. Given the affluent white clientele, and the surf culture of Kuta, this perhaps should not have been so unexpected. Many of the bands emphasised a good night out. An example is *Mushroom Squad*.[2]

These bands certainly had ersatz and derivative aspects. Freddy Marley (not his real name) for example, despite singing in Indonesian, highlights something of this, as does his song about a tourist girl in the Gili islands, a popular traveller destination near to Bali.[3] Despite its ersatz nature, it has sincerity.

Ras Muhamad from Jakarta foregrounds this seriousness much more, spitting out Indonesian 'toasting'[4] with real passion and sophistication. He is someone working with purpose, and his music is certainly something more than tourist pleasing, good time covers.[5]

The overlay of serious intention on often clichéd music was powerfully evidenced for me in a Kuta bar by a man who went by the name Toulouse who had travelled from Sumatra following a half-articulated dream. He accompanied his high wavering voice with a finely picked guitar as he sang a love song by Tracy Chapman. His belief and passion redeemed the song for me, after its excoriation by a corporate western boy band. Simple songs for him and his friends represented something recognisable and ancient—music as a repository of hope, describing a land of better, a dream they were trying to sing into reality.

My interest deepened during a visit to Sri Lanka. I spent a few days in the charming if ramshackle shoreline strip development of Unawatuna. A beach bar there carried, unselfconsciously, portraits of Lakshmi, the Indian Goddess of domestic good fortune, and Bob Marley next to each other and alongside a small shrine to Buddha and Ganesh.

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2 "Kuta Bali," Mushroom Squad https://www.reverbnation.com/mushroomreggae/song/13093935-kuta-bali

3 "Mushroom," Fredimarley, https://www.reverbnation.com/fredimarley/song/12738025-mushroom-by-fredi-kayaman

4 A speaking over music, having some synergies with rap.

5 See, for example, "Lion Roar," Ras Muhamad. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8sra6sc2AM

Image 1 *Beach Café, Unawatuna*, collection of the author, used by permission.

This syncretic approach to faith—and the quite easy adoption of new faces into the pantheon is no new thing. On another occasion I travelled in a Tuktuk taxi celebrating both Christ and Buddha, again unselfconsciously.

Image 2 *Eastern Coast Road*, collection of the author, used by permission.

The Hindu pantheon is renowned for its flexibility. William Dalrymple in his *Life of St. Thomas* (Dalrymple, 2001, n p) makes a good case for the passage of the Christian St. Thomas into the belief system of Southern India. In light of this, the celebration of Bob Marley is not so surprising.

To the north of Unawatuna in the high Sri Lankan mountains is the town of Nuwara Eliya, reached by snaking mountain railway. It was formerly a colonial summer capital. The climate is fresh throughout the year and the tea-plantation-covered mountains are verdant and tranquil. Leaving the train, I talked with some men selling crafts at the station. They were interested to see that I carried an instrument,

and we arranged to meet to play some music together. I quickly realized that the musicians I'd met mostly played reggae and that their culture centred around singer and guitarist Rohantha Dissanayake.

Image 3 *Kingston – Rohantha's house,* collection of the author, used by permission.

After meeting and playing at my lodgings, I went out to Rohantha's house. His railings were painted in red, black and gold, and he wore a Fair Isle jumper that also had those colours. His house was called 'Kingston' and his band, and car, 'Wailing Exodus' reflecting Bob Marley band name and the title of one of his albums.

Image 4 *Wailing Exodus' Band Car* – collection of the author, used by permission.

I played music with them, and drummed on their percussion, made from a tea chest and discarded hospital x–ray film. Tin plates nailed onto broomsticks served as cymbals. What struck me most was how committed and serious they were about living the life they had extrapolated from the reggae songs, with a focus on compassion,

community, equality, environmental awareness and responsibility. This faith was exemplified by a particular incident: I gave Rohantha a spare electronic tuner I had on me for his guitar. The following day he was enthusing about Jah, and quoted the gift as an example of divine provision: he said he had expressed a need in prayer the week before and here Jah had supplied what he needed. Rohantha has since become much more widely known, playing widely in the Middle East, Germany, Japan and in Sri Lanka, on television, at festivals, concerts and often in hotels. In an interview for Sri Lankan television, he shared his ideas on the appeal of Reggae in Sri Lanka.[6] He feels that people have always liked the music, but took a considerable time to develop an understanding of it. At the music's heart, he argues, is a 'reggae feeling,' something he believes is partially a result of the tropical climate that Sri Lanka shares with Jamaica. He also identifies the notion of an 'island vibe;' that there is something in reggae music that especially works for island dwellers.

Image 5 *Rohnatha Dissanayake on Sri Lankan television,* Youtube screen grab, creative commons licence.

We can interrogate this trans cultural appeal that he mentions further, and find a finessed and foundational relationship based on particular musical and philosophical aspects of roots reggae and the way these relate to persistent human themes. I have written elsewhere about the ways in which cultural, imaginative and conceptual transmissions occurs through DNA, drawing on epigenetics and the work of Carl Jung, Konrad Lorenz,

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[6] Pulse.lk, "Colombo Hippie Market," YouTube video, 13:58, Mar 31, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvzHrNPC_t4

Andrew Samuels and Anthony Stevens (Day, 2008 and http://www.pgvim.ac.th/sym/Files/Proceedings_2017.pdf, pp 56-68). It is sufficient here to say that certain musical forms, and their associated numinous and contingent contextulisations, are transmitted genetically and can be accessed with a degree of intention through deep listening.

Certain music experienced at certain times allows us to walk/swim/wallow in a place that carries the wisdom, solidity and reliability of generations. Being there, outside our constructed and regular, socially received and mediated experience of time and space, can be restorative, centring and inspiring.

Aspects of reggae are built on just this kind of deep cognitive experience. The music was conceived as the heart cry of people dispossessed and forcefully relocated; there is in this music a longing for an intuited personal and ancestral past. At the heart of much roots reggae music is a memory/imagination of a home land. In Welsh this has a name: *hiraeth* the longing for the once known but now irretrievably lost home. This longing has clear international currency.[7] Rasta ideas reflect a desire for escape from a bad place, called 'Babylon', to a better place. This powerfully speaks to concerns found within the ASEAN region. The roots Rasta destination Zion has the characteristics of this idealised place.[8] Song in Rasta, as in so many faiths, is a mystical conduit to the 'world' of the lost dream, a tangible-ish, palpable-ish realisation of the longed for transcendent.

Attempts made by rastas to find Zion as an actual, real place have met with mixed success. Walford 'Poko' Tyson of the British reggae band *Misty in Roots* says,

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[7] Although a full account of Rastafarianism is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting here that the religion developed as a response to colonial oppression, widespread corruption, and grinding poverty. An essential aspect is the doctrine of re-patriation, preached most notably by Marcus Garvey, who intended to offer passage back to Africa on his Black Star shipping line.

[8] Heilie Selassie (Ras Tafari was his pre-coronation name), is seen as embodiment of Christ and as the latest in an unbroken line of Kings stretching back to Solomon. I have heard Bongo Herman, master drummer and percussionist from Bob Marley's band and many others, describe their experience of the miraculous arrival of Selassie in Jamaica, recalling that lightning struck the road in front of him. Rita Marley, Bob's wife, also recalls seeing on that same day the stigmata in his hands. He is for some a flawless, incorruptible, divine figure. See MacDonald, 2012, no pagination.

Our focus has always been on taking the music back to Africa and it was never easy. I'm pleased we did it. As a roots band it was what we believed in, but now it's time to go to America… (Cartwright, 2002: n p)

His enthusiasm for Africa as Zion appears to have been tempered by experience. Misty in Roots similarly modified 'Babylon' to 'Babylon behaviour' rather than seeing Babylon as a particular place.

Similarly, two rasta members of renowned punk-folk-reggae band *Edward the Second* who I interviewed, also journeyed to Africa. They returned to England having experienced some disappointment. Bassist Tee Carthy has since returned however, and is now working to make living in Ethiopia a reality for rastas.[9] Thus 'Babylon' can be understood as a description of a lamentable social and political situation, something that many around the world can easily identify with. Significantly, Bob Marley made no reference to the specific location of Zion, though his interest and passion for Africa were clear. [10]

I think this consciously global view in Marley's work is characteristic and deliberate. He was criticised for singing in English rather than patois as a bow to commercial pressures and potential sales, under the influence of his sometime producer and label boss Chris Blackwell.[11] That may well be, but it is also arguable that he wanted to communicate as widely as he could, understanding that the call and desire for home, the desire for a better world, sits deeply across cultures and individuals. Marley toured with singer songwriter Bruce Springsteen who said, "nobody wins unless everybody

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[9] As Carolyn Cooper (Emeritus Professor, University of West Indies) commented recently at the Reggae Innovation conference in Kingston, which I attended, this is made more complex by the view of many Ethiopians that Hailie Selassie was an oppressor, who spoke a different and elitist language. This linguistic class division also exists in some of the areas in the Asean region that I visited.

[10] David Aarons, "Songs about Zion: The Impact of 'Repatriation Reggae' on the Rastafari Repatriation Movement to Ethiopia" in MS, paper presented at UWI conference, February 15, 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPDNus8zCpU

[11] Joseph T. Farquharson "Language Use in Jamaican Reggae Music and its Implications for the Concept of Diglossia" in MS, paper presented at UWI conference, February 15, 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPDNus8zCpU

wins".[12] It is this kind of Rastafarianism, extrapolated from the songs of Bob Marley and his collaborators, that I have seen echoes of in the ASEAN region.

The belief in the possibility of positive change and the longing for a better world are powerful expressions of a global strophe. Musician Manu Chau spoke to the global power of Marley's music when he said in interview with Nigel Williamson,

> *The more I travelled, the more I realised there is only one 'world music' artist. Everywhere you go people respect Bob Marley. He is my teacher in simplicity…*
>
> *(Williamson, 2002, p. 31)*

Jack Healy, a president of Amnesty International, similarly noted, "Everywhere that I go today, Bob Marley is the symbol of freedom." (Steffans, 2001, no pagination).

Another globalised aspect that enhances reggae's widespread appeal is the fascinating and often surprising way in which it mixes elements of other musical styles. Reggae's genesis is syncretic from the start, mixing Jamaican traditional drumming with modern pop sensibilities. Jamaican Producer Byron Lee points out that many major reggae artists knew American pop intimately, as they started as 'tribute' bands.

> *The Blues Busters were simulating Sam and Dave, Jimmy Cliff was simulating Otis Redding, Bob Marley and the Wailers were a take-off of Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions… when acts came on to do shows they'd have to sing copy versions of songs by the act they were simulating as an introduction, only then, when they'd got the applause for that, could they do original material.*
>
> *(Bradley, 2002, p. 41)*

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[12] Donal O'Keeffe, the Avondhu, April 13, 2016 https://avondhupress.ie/nobody-wins-unless-everybody-wins-springsteens-championing-lgbt-rights-no-surprise/

Lloyd Bradley notes that "Southern US radio stations could be received in Jamaica, 90 miles away. American soul acts toured Jamaica extensively." (Bradley, 2002, p. 40). Similarly, Bunny Wailer says of his band,

> *...when we went down to three members, The Impressions were our choice (of influence). They were really impressive in their style and the Wailers had a similar kind of harmonic style, so we kinda got linked with Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions in that respect.*
>
> *(Bradley, 2002, p. 84)*

Anand Prahlad's description of a visit to the Ethiopian church on Maxfield Avenue in Kingston extends this notion of hybridisation:

> *I noted what sounded to the ear of an outsider as strangely discordant. During several parts of the service, the clergy was singing/chanting in a vocal style derived from Northern Africa; the choir was singing in a style that was more akin to Baptist or Revivalist; the drumming accompanying the singing was Rasta Nyabinghi style; the congregation was singing in a style like the Baptist church back in Virginia…all simultaneously*
>
> *(Prahlad, 2001, p. 52)*

Reggae thus combines aspects of musical modernity with memories of a lost and dreamed of culture, adding a dream of restitution. The reggae of Bob Marley at the same time rejects all that is greed-driven, environmentally careless, oppressive and exploitative.[13] It particularly speaks of the injustices of capitalism and its associated hierarchies. This is not surprising given that the Atlantic Slave Trade was the foundation of so many Western economies.

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[13] In the main, roots reggae also rejects party politics though it does berate politicians for their corruption:

> *When I and I put politics together from ancient times, it means people's parasite. Poli means people and tics is a parasite so when you put it together it's people's parasite and I and I is aware of the fact that these guys are parasites, so we try to distance ourselves from them. That's why we aren't into politics per se (Romeo in Bradley, 2001, p. 68)*

The most intelligent people is the poorest people. Yes, the thief them rich, pure robbers and thieves, rich! The intelligent and innocent are poor, are crumbled and get brutalised. Daily.

(Marley in White, 1992, p. 35)

Alan Lewens says that

Marley became the leader of a musical assault that for a while made reggae the most influential music on the planet. He became more than a reggae star or a rock star. Like Nelson Mandela, his mere name became a byword for a critique of the way the world was run.

(Lewens, 2001, p. 135)

Like the dispossessed in Jamaica, some of the young people of Thailand or Indonesia dream of a homecoming. This involves an embracing and bettering of the culture in which they find themselves. In many cases this is a necessity, as working in their home culture is their only option due to financial and legal constraints. Reggae offers a road map of behaviours and ideas that can facilitate positive change. Rasta, and especially the roots reggae of Bob Marley, filter aspects of culture, approving of some, whilst vehemently rejecting others. The songs are moral and ethical exhortations. "I don't care who the man is. My right is my right. It's my life…all I have is my life." (Marley, 2001, no pagination)

In the ASEAN region, traditions based on Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism exercise heavy social control. The Rasta preached in Bob Marley's songs is a cipher for a particular kind of freedom that is both social and personal. This is appealing to those who are disenamoured with their societies' traditional forms but do not want to simply turn to the corruption and dissolution of capitalist and neo-liberal epicurean and nihilist lifestyles.

It is in this way that reggae music, in the areas discussed here, allows an embracing of contemporary global culture without buying into its associated rampant greed, materialism and oppression. The choice of Rasta and reggae culture is an

informed and conditional embracing of the new. It does not reject modernity, but does object to those aspects of it that are unpalatable and unacceptable.[14]

The contemporary Rastas I have met and played with in some countries within the ASEAN region are counter cultural advocates, kicking against social norms and modes that they see as repressive. The dress codes, speech and other aspects of Rasta culture represent a recognisable counter cultural position in both their home societies and in the wider world. In many ways, Rastas in these places represent and reflect a belief and hope about the way a contemporary society could and should be; a hope that is elsewhere often fatigued and at worst exhausted. The ASEAN Rastas I spoke with dream of a better world.

All of this would, however, belong only to the discourses of religion, sociology and sub-culture were it not for the continuingly stimulating *melange* of music that emerges alongside these ideas. I've seen truly fascinating work in the ASEAN region and in East Asia more widely. Perhaps principal within these experiences are developments within Thailand.

Thai history and Thailand's social situation are very different from Jamaica's. Jamaica was also a long-time British colony, which practised extensive slavery. The memory of forced migrations, resettlement and slavery powerfully inform Jamaican culture. Rob Partridge, director of press for Island Records from 1977 to 1990, says:

> *The days of slavery are a recent folk memory on the island. They have permeated the very essence of Jamaica's culture, from the plantations of the mid-19th century to the popular music of our own times. Although slavery was abolished in 1834, the Africans and their descendants developed their own culture with half remembered African traditions mingled with the customs of the British.*
>
> *(Partridge, 1992, p. 7)*

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[14] An intriguing affirmation of these ideas is the current diversification of Rasta culture, with emphases on *iTal* eating, a kind of vegan cuisine and approach, and the adoption of Yoga into Rasta lifestyles. *Jah 9* is a popular singer in the New Wave of Roots reggae and has been a yoga teacher for 10 years.

Thai musicians certainly also challenge and counter hegemonic and oppressive forces but not in the same way as countries with a colonial history, or those based on the heritage of criminal slavery.[15] Thai musicians are still very much concerned with oppression, but with those based on historically class-based hierarchies and contemporary wealth-based stratification, overwritten by a top-down cultural imperialism.

Bangkok has in recent years been a notably revolutionary place. Musicians I have watched and interviewed are creating fascinating hybrid works through the choosing of revolutionary aspects of a range of western musical forms, since these offer similar opportunities for social critique and the possibility of liberation.

Image 6 *Sticky Rice gig flyer,* Youtube screen grab, creative commons licence.

One such collective is *The* S*ticky Rice*, fronted by Dr Dapookster. The band combine deep dub reggae with melodies reminiscent of post punk bands like the *Smiths*, the *Police* or the *Cure*. 'Prog rock' keyboard solos reminiscent of *ELP*'s Keith Emerson or Rick Wakeman from *Yes* blend with experimental moments that recall composer Robert Wyatt. These Thai musicians have found aspects of Western pop music that oppose and stand in conflict with mainstream politics and social norms, aspects that represent freedom and the inevitability of change. Whether these aspects are taken from music that is consistent in terms of genre or period is less of an issue.

[15] Thailand does have one brush with slavery: the Japanese treatment of prisoners of war in Thailand during World War 2.

This 'picnicking' at the table of global music is profoundly post-modern but, in marked contrast with much creative output sitting under that umbrella, is also conceptually and politically serious and, because of that, riveting. Rasta is clearly Dapookster's root position. I interviewed him and have no doubt that he is sincere and sophisticated in his understanding of his *credo*. Rasta is the lifestyle and belief system that inspires their mission. For him and others, therefore, dub reggae is the musical anchor and the centre from which their experiments radiate. The manner in which they then radiate outwards stylistically – catching, sympathetically citing and exploring all manner of references – is a joyful thing to witness. Seeing *The Sticky Rice* for the first time and watching and hearing them throw an array of fragments into the air and then weld them into an unpredictable yet cohesive and joyful whole felt like a revelation. Their music essentially is an embodied musicology. At the time, I had forgotten that all the music they were referencing originally shared the same natal conditions: it was all spawned in the same political and social circumstance at the same time. The sense of revolution in Robert Wyatt's *Soft Machine* or the *Cure* is similar to that in Marley, despite the radically different ways in which it is expressed. Bringing them together in the way that Sticky Rice does reminds me again something I once knew but had forgotten.

Image 7 *Sticky Rice at the Alchemist,* collection of the author, used by permission.

Bob Marley had a stated desire to bring people and music together "Black and White, uptown and downtown", as his girlfriend Cindy Breakspear expressed it in Kevin Macdonald's documentary.[16] Through their multitudinous refractions, repurposings and reinterpretations of specific musical moments—through catching ideas, sounds, words and melodies and throwing them out in a polychrome spray—

[16] "Marley," directed by Kevin Madonald, 2012.

Rasta musicians in the ASEAN region continue to realise this coming together in new ways that could not have been foreseen, anticipated or predicted. Through their work Marley's legacy lives on, and the future for this music continues to be vital and exciting. Had Bob Marley lived to see it I cannot believe he would be anything other than deeply delighted.

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