

THE TREE OF LIFE THAT IS REGGAE MUSIC IN ALL ITS FORMS IS DEEPLY SPREADING ITS ROOTS BACK INTO AFRICA, IDEALIZED, CHAMPIONED AND LONGED FOR IN SO MANY REGGAE ANTHEMS. AFRICAN DANCEHALL ARTISTS MAY VERY WELL REPRESENT THE MOST EXCITING (AND LEAST-RECOGNIZED) MOVEMENT HAPPENING IN DANCEHALL TODAY. AFRICA IS SO HUGE, CULTURALLY RICH AND DIVERSE THAT IT IS DIFFICULT TO GENERALIZE ABOUT THE MUSICAL HAPPENINGS. YET A RECENT MUSICAL SAMPLING OF THE CONTINENT SHOWS THAT DANCEHALL IS BEGINNING TO EMERGE AS A POWERFUL AFRICAN MUSICAL FORM IN ITS OWN RIGHT.

FROM THE MOTHERLAND... DANCEHALL

BY LISA POLIAR

Coming primarily out of West Africa, artists such as Gambia's Rebellion D'Recaller, Dancehall Masters and Senegal's Daara-J, Pee Froiss and V.I.B. are creating their own sounds growing from a fertile musical and cultural cross-pollination that blends elements of hip-hop, reggae and African rhythms such as Senegalese *mbalax*, for instance. Most of these artists have not yet spread their wings on the international scene, especially in the U.S., but all have the musical and lyrical skills to explode globally. Chanting down Babylon, these African artists are inspired by their Jamaican predecessors while making music that is uniquely their own, praising Jah, Allah and historical spiritual leaders. Hip-hop beats layered with rough-voiced ragga chanting, smooth rootsy vocals and rapping characterizes much of African dancehall. Conscious lyrics in French, English and African languages such as Wolof and Mandinka, as well as the incorporation of traditional African instruments including the *kora* (often called the African harp), *xalam* (a small, four-stringed guitar), *balaphon* (a wooden xylophone with calabash resonators below each slat), *tama* (talking drum) and *sabar* drums also contribute to these innovative and unique sounds.

The ongoing relationship between Jamaican artists and the African people dates back to Bob Marley, whose tremendous influence cannot be overstated. In recent years Luciano, Sizzla, Buju Banton, Frankie Paul, Patra, Sister Carol, Anthony B and Everton Blender, among others, have all performed in West Africa, and occasional creative collaborations have resulted. Cote d'Ivoire's Tikken Jah Fakoly, who has been turning out roots and culture reggae since the mid '90s, spiced up his new cd *Françafrique* (Universal/Barclay 2002) with some welcome dancehall flavor thanks to Anthony B and the granddaddy himself, U Roy. A new version of "On A Tout Compris (Mangercratie)," a typical Tikken tune protesting political corruption, is far more distinctive with the addition of Anthony B's fiery chanting and trademark "yagga yows!" The same goes for "Justice," previously released on his *Le Caméléon* cd but now enhanced with some masterful toasting by U Roy.



GAMBIA

Gambia is Africa's dancehall hot spot. Out of Gambia, Rebellion D'Recaller and Dancehall Masters are creating music that is less rap-influenced than what is coming out of Senegal. In Gambia, they're basically heavier on the rootsy vibes. According to New York's DJ Wow who hails from Gambia, reggae has long been popular there, perhaps more than in any other African country: "Before we had many of our own musicians in Gambia, we listened to reggae. That was our music." Dancehall Masters' Brother Coms names Dennis Brown as his favorite singer and musical inspiration, and their two cassettes, *Brotherman* (1999) and *Masterful Creation* (2001) reflect this influence. Brother Coms also speaks of the spiritual inspiration that fuels the music he creates with partner Daddy Sam, who is Senegalese but now lives in Gambia. "Serigne Touba is a great Islamic scholar. We feel we have to sing about him," he says, describing songs like "Buga Bamba," a paean to Islamic spiritual leaders of the Senegambia region. (Senegal and Gambia share many fundamental cultural traits, including the predominance of Islam, because they are essentially one land that was divided by the French and British.)

Rebellion D'Recaller, whose voice sounds uncannily like a young Joseph Hill of Culture, is Gambia's number-one dj. When Frankie Paul performed in Gambia in 2000, Rebellion was invited onstage to duet with this old-school master. His 2001 cassettes *Departing From These Days Vols. 1 and 2* with a guest appearance from Markie B of V.I.B on the track "Life Is Not A Gamble," blends his throaty, fast-style chanting with



Rebellion's flinty-voiced harmonies over a pounding drum 'n' bass riddim.

SENEGAL

In Senegal, dancehall queen Patra met the members of Daara-J (Daara-J's three members, Ndongo D, the rapper, Lord Aladji Man, the ragga chanter, and Fadda Freddy) at a Dakar club while on tour. As Daara-J's supple-voiced soul singer Fadda Freddy tells it, "When we saw Patra, we wanted to explore the Jamaican music in an African stylee." After playing some of their music for Patra, she suggested a collaboration. The result is "Come On Get It," featured on Daara-J's second release, *Xalima* (BMG France, 1998), a song that gave Patra an opportunity to explore her more soulful songstress side rather than her usual wicked deejaying.

I spoke to Fadda Freddy while he was in Paris working on the group's new cd, to be released by BMG France in January 2003, and he describes Daara-J's sound as "a hip-hop/reggae mix." The first Senegalese group to really explore dancehall, more commonly still called raggamuffin in French-speaking countries, Daara-J released their first self-

titled cassette in 1995. The international version was produced by Mad Professor and released on disc in 1997 (Sony/Globe). Positive Black Soul (PBS), the first group to drop a rap album in Senegal in the early '90s, "opened the rap door" for Senegalese artists, according to Fadda Freddy. "Exodus," the title track of the group's most recent release, only available on cassette in Senegal (though some copies have made it to Harlem), is not simply a homage to Bob Marley as the name

the speakers of a music kiosk, and so made my first African dancehall discovery, Cote d'Ivoire's Negro Muffin. Their 1997 cassette *Authentic!* lived up to its name (and exclamation point) with nary a weak track. Negro Muffin was not only Cote d'Ivoire's first dancehall group but were truly groundbreaking artists in the land of Alpha Blondy, but unfortunately its two members, Halasko DeeJay and Goody Brown have disbanded.

"Dancehall makes people shake. It's such a strong musical form, people want to infuse it with their message. The younger generation's mind is so open, they've seen so much, they see through bullshit. If you give them some stuff that tickles their minds, they're more apt to listen to the music."

African dancehall, however, is still considered very underground. There are several likely reasons that dancehall has not emerged faster and more furiously from Africa—the serious problems

ANCESTRAL DANCEHALL INNA AFRICAN STYLEE!



suggests. It delivers a serious message about Africans who leave Africa to seek opportunity and wealth, and how they must then "go back and build up the land of our ancestors." As Fadda Freddy sees it, "Europe and America are not going to build up Africa, Africans have to do it."

The group takes their name from the Quranic schools in Senegal where "the youth go to develop," Fadda Freddy explains. "In the group, we say Daara-J really means the school of life. It is a way of living, a manner of thinking." The group has had such an

impact on the Senegalese youth culture that "any place you get good vibrations is called *daara* these days," Fadda Freddy says, likening it to the use of the word "crib" in English, as in let's go chill at the daara.

Other groups to watch for are Senegal's Pee Froiss and V.I.B and Gambia's Pencha B. Pee Froiss's 2001 cassette *Li Moss Mak* is hip-hop-oriented. Their politically charged lyrics often flow over hardcore rap beats, but their sound is very diverse, ranging from Binghi-style kora-tinged chanting to a version of Youssou N'Dour's classic "No More," churning out lyrical deliveries in the form of a Wolof rap. The track "Afrika for Afrikan" includes the sweetest intonations of "fyah bun dem" I've ever heard.

V.I.B.'s 1999 cassette *Surgit des Décobres* is heavily dancehall-influenced, and they have their Jamaican patois down to a T. They big up Buju so successfully on the track "Ghetto Youth" that they sound much like Buju himself.

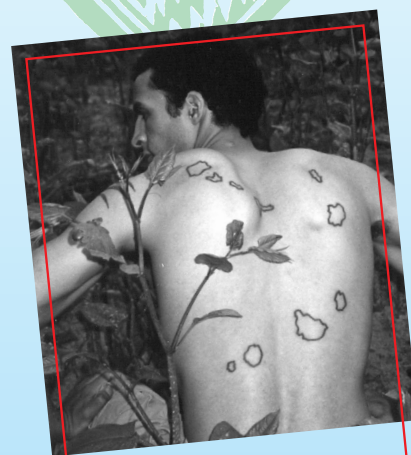
Walking through the streets of Abidjan in 1997, I heard a dancehall chant in Baule pumping from

USA FOR AFRICA

That African dancehall is starting to infiltrate U.S. borders can be seen in aspiring artists like Jo Black, born in Cote d'Ivoire to Gambian parents, raised in both countries, and now trying to make his mark in New York. Black is originating his own sound he calls "Bolomba Stylee," to signify Bolom, the upcountry of Gambia, as opposed to the capital city of Banjul. He translates Bolomba Stylee roughly as "big country style" and it combines roots reggae, dancehall and traditional West African rhythms. Black's sound demonstrates his belief that "You gotta change the music with the times."

Another artist is South Africa's Bongo Maffin, already popular in the U.S., having played numerous American venues including Reggae on the River 2000. While they do a mix of styles that is more oriented toward techno-influenced dance music and South African *kwai*, selected tracks from their cd *Bongolution* (Sony/Lightyear 2002) get the dancehall vibes flowing, especially "Gudoguru." The group's propensity for genre-bending often defies categorization.

The African diaspora spreads across the globe, and people involved in the creation and emergence of African dancehall are expressing feelings similar to Fadda Freddy's about dancehall's power to reach and teach the youth. Producer Tyrant, a first-generation Cape Verdean-American currently laying down beats in a Boston studio, breaks it down like this:



TYRANT
Tatoos on his back depict his island homeland of Cape Verde.

of a lack of experienced producers (cited unanimously by musicians and djs); the difficulties of getting funding; and the paucity of promotion. Equally inhibiting were the pressures put on artists who wanted to experiment with different styles, and were therefore perceived as losing their African roots. As Fadda Freddy breaks it down, if Senegalese artists wanted to do reggae or rap in the past, they were considered "uprooted" and "lost." However, PBS's breakthrough release and their use of African languages and beats in their raps helped start changing that misperception. Understanding Daara-J, like so many African artists involved with the scene, is a way to begin to understand the roots and spiritual inspiration of African dancehall. Daara-J's aim is to reach the youth, to stress the importance of faith and African values such as respecting elders and the value of community, teaching them how to live right. "Before anything, we see God," Fadda Freddy says. "We preach our roots and culture."

All of the artists emerging from Africa today will ultimately expand our conception of what dancehall is. They are breaking out from pre-packaged music, originating their own sounds and "trying to flip things in a different way," as Tyrant puts it. As the reggae tree of life continues to spread its roots deeper into the Motherland, it will produce fruits we can't yet envision.



JO BLACK

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