

## Reggae Returns to the Motherland

By Roger Steffens

Name this country: There are dreadlocks in its teeming streets, sporting red, gold and green clothing festooned with badges whose patois inscriptions call for peace, love and I-nity. Its jam-packed nightclubs feature djs toasting over dub tracks, while couples wine and grind till dawn. Its stores rapidly sell out the latest reggae hits by artists with names like Ras Kimono, Kole-Man Revolutionaire, and the Mandators. Meanwhile, perplexed authorities lament the eclipse of the country's traditional culture and the hold that reggae has taken of its youth.

Jamaica, right?

Wrong.

You're in Nigeria, where reggae is king.

Years of exposure to Jamaicans singing about moving forward to the Motherland has brought the music of the black diaspora firmly to the forefront of contemporary African consciousness. From Capetown to Cairo, Africa is rocking to Jah music, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the crowded lanes and sweaty dance halls of Lagos.

"It's only right," observes Gboyega Femi, better know as Tera Kota, Nigeria's earliest reggae star. "The name itself came from here in the first place: *ere-ege*. That means 'palace music,' and my parental grandmother sang it over a century ago. The rhythm is the same, as well as its use—to sing praises to the king or the gods. Now it's chanting down Babylon!"

Life was high in the heady days of the "oil boom" in Nigeria. "But that was the old days, the '70s," says Kota. "Now the voice of reality has to come in—reggae. We can't continue to sing about love when the stomach is empty. We have to go into the studio to sing *something*. Back in '82, I wanted to change the trend. My debut album was the first serious reggae lp in the country. I called it *Lamentation in Sodom*."

The lyrics left no doubt about where he stood: *The people suffer power starvation/the people suffer social oppression/their greedy leaders cause them inflations/those who know it get deportation/prejudice no justice in the city called Sodom.*

The lp was number one for 16 weeks, stayed on the charts for an unprecedented 11 months and sold more than a half-million copies in 1984. *Solitude and Shackles* was the successful follow-up, dedicated in part to the then-imprisoned Fela Kuti. In 1987 *Peasant Child* was released, cementing his reputation in the forefront of Africa's reggae movement. By extensively touring colleges and arenas all over Nigeria, Kota almost singlehandedly transformed Nigerian youth from "huzzle-buzzle" disco lovers into conscious followers of roots



**Majek Fashek is already a Nigerian reggae legend.**



PHOTO BY TOMMY NOONAN

**Tera Kota (right) with Toots Hibbert backstage in Washington, D.C.**

reggae and its philosophy of positive action.

His adapted name is a call to roots awareness, and its spelling is uniquely his own. "Terra-cotta [the usual spelling] is an ancient artifact that has been preserved for the purpose of tomorrow. It's like forever—it's from the earth, heterogeneous."

As with many of the new reggae artists, he is a dreadlocks, a style he points to with pride. "This is true African tradition, from before cosmetics and combs. In fact, many children are

born in our country with dreadlocks. They are called *dadas*. Their hair cannot be cut off until they consult with the oracles and the children give their consent."

Such a child was Victor Toni Essiet, leader of a male-female duo called the Mandators, who make music as good as anything coming out of Kingston. Essiet says that dreadlocks at birth "are a sign of one who has come to stand for those who are weaker. It represents strength, power and courage coming from Sampson in the Bible."

His partner in the Mandators is Peggy Curtis Imanah, and they have been playing music together since they were schoolmates in 1980. Their first album, *Crisis*, went platinum. *Rat Race* is their second release and, like its predecessor, is filled with tracks whose titles would be at home on a record by the Gladiators or the Wailing Souls: "Coat of Many Colours," "Rat Race," "Inflation Crisis" and "Redemption." The Mandators make records that can be tracked from first cut to the last, satisfying blends of great harmony singing and contentiously aware lyrics. They even include a dub instrumental or two, which is becoming increasingly common on Nigerian reggae lps, giving neighborhood toasters some locally produced beds over which to rap topical chants.

Another leader of the pack is Majek Fashek, whose initial offering, *Prisoner of Conscience*, is

about to be released internationally by Island. Majek, whose guitar style has been compared to Jimi Hendrix, is already a legend. The opening track on his lp is the prophetic plea, "Send Down the Rain," and it led to the establishment of his otherworldly reputation. During the months that Fashek was first touring the provinces, bringing them his new reggae sounds, Nigeria was experiencing one of the worst droughts in its history. In parched Kano, he decided to open with his rain song. Instantly, the skies darkened and sheets of rain pelted the audience until the grounds were literally flooded. And at every other place he played, the drought broke too.

Fashek has a David Hinds (lead singer of Steel Pulse) kind of voice, which can hurl an imprecation with the best of them. His songs are tiny morality plays, with titles like "Let Righteousness Cover the Earth," "Africans Keep Your Culture," "Police Brutality" and his own "Redemption Song." Predictions of international stardom abound for him.

Another for whom a brilliant outer-directed future is predicted is the so-called "Queen of Nigerian Reggae," Evi-Edna Ogholi. She has only been singing for two years but already has three hit albums to her credit. Nigeria's *Punch* magazine reported in September that Evi-Edna has returned to her Isoko village of Emede where she became something of a modern feminist heroine. "Evi-Edna was the first female member of the community to be honored with a traditional war dance and 21-gun salute," the report said. "The traditional ruler in a speech enjoined women in the community to emulate the good works of Evi-Edna, adding that they should now cultivate the new spirit of competing with their male counterparts in all professions."

Her producer is also her manager and husband, Emma Ogosi, and it is a rare edition of a Nigerian newspaper these days that doesn't carry a story about one or both of them. Ogosi recently resigned as manager when her label, Polygram, released a third album while her second, *Happy Birthday*, was still on the charts. Fearing overexposure, Ogosi said he would no longer work for the label, causing an ongoing national controversy.

Evi-Edna's music is a light blend of country-and-western African rhythms and double-tracked harmonies reminiscent of Althea and Donna. Unlike her peers, she sings mostly in her native language, Isoko. "It's my love for reggae music that led me to play it," she told L.A.-based dj/promoter Namdi Moweta recently. "I

like the melody, I like the way Jamaicans preach. But I'm not a Rasta." On tracks like "Tribalism" though, it's hard to tell: "Tribalism is tearing us apart/...all Jah Jah children try to love one another."

The reggae queen's popularity has already crossed borders into Liberia, Ghana, even far-away Zimbabwe, and Pepsi-Cola sponsored the recent tour of her homeland. Given the proper material, foreign releases seem inevitable.

*Under Pressure* is the title of Nigerian-born Ras Kimono's first effort, and its tracklist sounds like an Abyssinians collection: "We No Wan Dis Shitstem," "Dem Persecute Rastas," "Rastafarian" and "Gimme Likkle Sugar." The album spawned a massive hit called "Rum-Bar Stylee." At a huge concert in Lagos' National Theater in the summer of 1989, Kimono's failure to perform the song until his final encore almost led to a riot. A ubiquitous figure in the Rasta scene in Nigeria and London, Kimono has a voice that can swing from thin and reedy to thick and husky. He writes wonderfully varied arrangements, ranging from breezy brass to thick-bottomed bass. And he toasts terrifically too.

The call-to-judgment sounds of Yabby You are echoed in the yardly preachings of Kole-Man Revolutionaire, whose songs often have the "broop-boop" choruses of a Burning Spear or the Meditations. *Tribulation* is his premiere compilation and includes "Jah Works" and "Fight the Fire," both sung in patois indistinguishable from what one might hear in the back alleys of Trenchtown.

"Reggae Rigmorole" is one of the standout tracks on Jan Blast's debut, *Hardship*. From his ites, gold and green necklace, cap and jacket, one would be hard-pressed to tell that he wasn't just another rude boy on a Caribbean idler's corner. His sound is a rootsy amalgam of Al Campbell and the Mighty Diamonds.

For the past three years, reggae competitions have been held under the rubric of the Lekki Sunsplash. The winner in 1988 was young Alex Zitto, whose first lp is called *Tickle Me*. His style ranges from roots to lovers rock, and his repertoire includes a tribute to Jimmy Cliff called "Minute Man."

Cliff is the unsung subtext in the drama of Nigerian reggae. A star there since his land-

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## REGGAE UPDATE

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Dollar Bills"), we begin to lose the point. It's still filled with delight and obscurities (all B-sides present), variations on a fine theme.

Reggae from West Germany reaches us in the U.K. release from Roadblock, *Three Dimension* (Nubian). There was a time when it was hard for a non-JA band to get an authentic reggae sound but the recent trend toward the domination of keyboards makes it a little more likely. These guys even get the sound right on the vocals, and although some of the material is light, it is fresh and catchy.

Local Hero's *Forward for the New Generation* (Third Street) shows a lot of work on the songs, the sounds, the graphics and package of their new cd. The name is self-effacing since most bands try to escape the "local" tag. This is the best Oklahoma reggae I've ever heard, and the crossover track "Jimmy 16" has real college radio appeal. It's kind of an update of Linton Kwesi Johnson's "Sonny's Lettah" that just might hit the youth where they feel it.

Two of the best new dub lps are *Sounds Irration in Dub* (W.A.U. Mr. Modo-U.K.), which has a Mute Beat intensity with a lot of open spaces and some tasty melodica, and *Zulu Warriors Dub* on the same label, which is a bit more uptempo and gimmicky. And don't miss *Bob Andy's Dub Book As Revealed to the Mad Professor* (I-Anka-U.K.). This is not just one of the best dub albums, but one of the best new albums around period, as the Mad Professor dubs up some of Andy's top songs, like "Life," featured here as "You Know It Dub," and "The Ghetto Stays in the Mind," (listed as "Mind Jungle Dub"). Drawing from five Andy albums released on this label, including the fine *Retro-spective*, we get the best of two worlds as the complex and cerebral Andy goes head to head with the wild and innovative Mad Professor. Highly recommended.

Also recommended, especially for roots lovers, is *Hit Bound! The Revolutionary Sound of Channel One* (Heartbeat). Channel One was one of the finest '70s roots labels, and this anthology covers the period when they were doing their best work. Additional volumes would be welcome! Classic tracks like the Wailing Souls' "Things and Time" and Junior Byles' "Fade Away" are included, plus selections from Hell and Fire, Earth and Stone, Leroy Smart, Ernest Wilson, Horace Andy, Black Uhuru, the Meditations, even a previously unreleased Mighty Diamonds track, with informative liner notes. A must package for those who love this sound and can't get enough of the old 45s.

*Chuck Foster is co-host of "The Reggae Beat" on KCRW-FM, Santa Monica, CA.*

## REGGAE WORLD

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mark film *The Harder They Come* played nationally in the early '70s, Cliff has long maintained a local residence and has many ties in the Muslim community as well. His work is followed avidly, and he has filled stadiums in Nigeria and other West African nations.

Another major connecting factor is Lemmi Jackson. The producer of many of the artists mentioned above, Jackson says, "Reggae is absolutely huge today," then adds ironically, "but I'm not happy about it!" Why? "Because we're promoting Jamaican culture and leaving our own behind." In fact, in a recent front-page article in the *Los Angeles Times*, it was claimed that indigenous Nigerian music was fast disappearing, a result of the dual threats of an economy that is severely strapped and the unsupportable size of the typical Nigerian big band, whose membership can include as many as four-dozen people. The replacement? Reggae, which can easily be learned, with no more than four or five musicians required to play it.

Indeed, people are flocking to reggae clubs from Kano to Kaduna, places with names like Paradiso and the Floating Bukka, the latter a seaborne rendezvous inside a ship on a Lagos lagoon. With more than 100 local reggae combos, the competition is hotter than ever before. Artists like Tera Kota are not worried though. They see reggae as a joyous means of consciousness raising, a kind of spiritual hands across the water between the Old World and the New.

"The problem with people in diaspora is similar if not identical to the situation here in Africa," observes Kota. "The colonies are fighting for freedom, the independent states are fighting against neocolonialism, and the overall effect is perpetual political instability, with the common man feeling the brunt of it all. Living in a depressed economic condition where the standard of living is deplorable, there will always be a cry for improvement especially where protest cannot be directly registered. It is inevitable to embrace the messages and philosophies of reggae music as a means of protest against the oppressors and self-aggrandizement.

"The image peculiarity and the tribulations portrayed through the records of reggae musicians make the music very attractive to the African people," he continues. "The fact that the original root of reggae music is Africa facilitates the swiftness in rekindling the flames of the music, especially after its refinement with scientific tools and instruments in the Western world, even though the messages remain very original and unadulterated. Just like cocoa seeds taken away raw and brought back fully refined as cocoa drinks, beverages and body lotions, it will always find a place in the heart of our people at all times.

"Reggae music's future is moral and human emancipation," Kota concludes. "It is now the language of the youth, who know we cannot continue to live like this any longer." ★



**A brilliant future is predicted for Evi-Edna Ogholl, the queen of Nigerian reggae.**

## TECHNOBEAT

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what they see I couldn't even hazard to guess.

Sister Carol, *Jah Disciple* (RAS cd). Symbols are supposed to expand meaning, not collapse it. But Sister Carol's assertion on "Lost in A Space" that the Challenger crew died because the mission "challenged Jah" is a subtraction; her insistence "none of them no respect the human race," a presumption. Disappointing, because the rest of the disc proves she's above cardboard dogma.

Flaco Jimenez, *Arriba El Norte*; Santiago Jimenez Jr., *Familia Y Tradicion* (Rounder cds). Tex-Mex *extraordinaire*-bearers deliver demon accordion as wicked as any Brazilian or Colombian. Brother Santiago is the traditionalist with a brand new lp of border standards. The more swing-out Flaco flaunts a casual style elevated to virtuosity in his 1969-80 sides. Mbaqanga fans, try these.

Collector's Edition: *Rare Reggae from the Vaults of Studio One* (Heartbeat cd). Reggae's Nuggets, wherein the odd, the obscured and the accomplished intersect. Includes the shockingly misogynist "Music [read: Girls] Like Dirt," Bob Andy/Marcia Griffiths' "Then You Can Tell Me Goodbye" clone "Always Together," early Sugar Minott and other solid delights.

The Itals, *Cool and Dread* (Nighthawk cd). Re the recent roots revival—these guys never left. Nor have they ever flagged. Better bet: must-haves *Brutal Out Deh* and *Give Me Power* come to cd for maximum bite per bit. ★