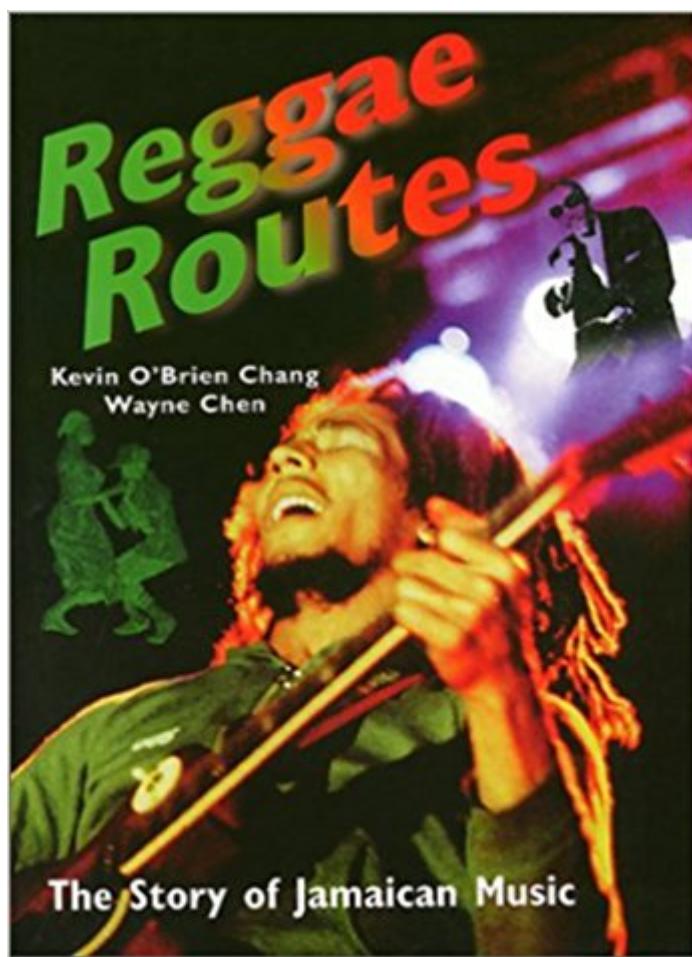


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# Reggae Routes: The Story Of Jamaican Music



## **Synopsis**

Jamaican music can be roughly divided into four eras, each with a distinctive beat - ska, rocksteady, reggae and dancehall. Ska dates from about 1960 to mid-1966, rocksteady from 1966 to 1968, while from 1969 to 1983 reggae was the popular beat. The reggae era had two phases, 'early reggae' up to 1974 and 'roots reggae' up to 1983. Since 1983 dancehall has been the prevalent sound. The authors describe each stage in the development of the music, identifying the most popular songs and artists, highlighting the significant social, political and economic issues as they affected the musical scene. While they write from a Jamaican perspective, the intended audience is 'any person, local or foreign, interested in an intelligent discussion of reggae music and Jamaica.'

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

"...the new bible of Jamaican music." -- Jamaica Sunday Gleaner, Mar 8, 1998 "Insightful...Enthralls from start to finish...Accurate." -- Jamaica Sunday Observer, Jan 11, 1998 "It is alive...the reader experiences the history in-depth. -- Jamaica Sunday Gleaner, Feb 22, 1998

Reggae's pulsating rhythms and appeals for social justice have galvanized music audiences all over the world

MUCH MORE THAN MUSIC Two Jamaican Reggae enthusiasts pen the history of reggae music from the Jamaican perspective - and end up giving us so much more. REGGAE ROUTES - By Kevin

O'Brien Chang and Wayne Chen"Jamaica has less than one-twentieth of one percent of the world's population and produces even less of its wealth...In terms of popular music, though, it's the most fortunate nation on earth. Like everything else, reggae has had to adapt to a faster moving world. But it remains inarguably Jamaican, a rhythm in tune with its people, not only listened to all over the globe but still listening to itself." Such is the tone for Reggae Routes. From cover to cover, and with practically flawless consistency, lead author Kevin O'Brien Chang and co-author Wayne Chen bring to life the story of Jamaica's reggae music with the same frankness, pride and gutsy insight that punctuate this excerpt. When asked what prompted him to write about reggae, Brien Chang just laughs. "Oh, I don't know! My friends and I used to spend a lot of time as youngsters talking and arguing about reggae and its evolution over the years. It was like a hobby of sorts." An understatement indeed! As the name implies, Reggae Routes walks the reader through the entire history of Jamaica's hallmark of music, now globally famous, if not unmistakably recognised. The work is no less than thorough in its research, one of its obvious strengths, with every musical contributor being given his or her fair share of the limelight. Fear not. Bob Marley, while featured prominently on the book's cover, does not upstage his colleagues. In fact, the book is a virtual three-dimensional exposé of reggae's history, with all aspects covered, or rather, uncovered. We are made privy to the many impromptu meetings, the social observations and the private battles that lay the path for the creation and promotion of the songs that we would eventually come to know and love, and which would eventually lead to the birth of entire musical trends. Humorous anecdotes about the naming of songs and the origins of names (even reggae itself) only begin to whet the appetite for information. From the origin of Kumina to the influence of Louise Bennett, the book's occasional scholastic touch is neatly balanced with its obviously entertaining flair. The careful but lively detail used in this account is a tribute and a compliment to Jamaicans and reggae fans alike who may already know some of the history. As if sharing the microphone in their own recording studio, the authors prudently and frequently share the voice of authority with every side involved in an issue. From song writers to producers, musicians to singers, the opinions positive and negative, contradictory and favourable are all included in the mix, and lend much credibility to the book. Readers will appreciate this approach by these two businessmen-turned-authors who use fact to support their views, rather than force an opinion with blind passion. But if research and supportive facts are the canvas of this piece, then it is the fresh presentation and perspective employed that make Reggae Routes a masterpiece, and much more than an account of Jamaica's musical history. The book in effect also tells the story of social Jamaica in its post independence years, and makes the link between the nationalistic pride we searched for then and the role reggae played in helping

us find it. The authors also include enough global perspective to remind us of how influenced and influential our island nation has been over the years. For the younger generation especially, many of these points will make for an eye-opener. In fact, "eye-opening" describes much of this book. It is virtually crammed with information for the taking. Written in any other way, it would have taken on a more didactic tone. But herein lies its other strength. It has been expertly crafted by two individuals who have managed to weave into the written word the same upbeat lilt natural to the book's subject. There is no disappointment here. Chang and Chen are gifted storytellers. They have written their book with the hearts and "nuffness" of two Jamaicans whose passion for reggae music could not be contained. They had said they were determined to write a book on reggae from the Jamaican perspective, but one which both Jamaicans and foreigners could appreciate and share. In the end, they accomplished their goal.

Reggae Routes is by far the best written and most entertaining book on reggae. Unlike so many others that get bogged down on irrelevant details it cuts to the chase and tells you everything a curious and intelligent person could want to know about Jamaican Music. If you want to know about obscure albums released only in the UK - or happen to be a Scratch Perry or Flipper Price? fanatic - then you probably will find it inadequate. But if you want a good read that tells you what really happened on the Jamaican musical scene - and Reggae Routes is great at historical perspective and context - buy this book. Unlike others who just make it up, the authors actually got historical charts to show what was popular in Jamaica when. And the authors' choice top 100 reggae and top 30 dancehall lists are a great guide to starting your own reggae collection. I don't agree all the way through but they clearly know their reggae. Only caveat is that the dancehall lists stops in 1998 so no 'Gimme The light' or 'Welcome to Jamrock'

This book certainly makes a lot of bold claims for itself. According to the back cover it's "the authentic story of Jamaican popular music" as well as being "the best book ever written on reggae". So my first disappointment after receiving "Reggae routes" (a gift from a well-meaning friend) was to discover how short it is. Although the authors seem to think that they've written a "reggae bible", in reality it barely qualifies as a primer, and not a very good one at that. The book is divided into 3 sections, so it makes sense to consider each one in turn. Section 1 briefly outlines the history of Jamaican music and on the whole is a pretty good introduction to the subject, but it's nothing like the definitive account I was expecting. The only really bad chapter is "Reggae international", which mainly consists of well-worn cliches about Bob Marley and actually says very little about the impact

reggae has made beyond the shores of Jamaica, particularly in the UK since the 1960s, or about the huge influence of Jamaican music on today's rave and dj culture, or its specific contributions to the development of hip hop as well as more recent phenomena like drum 'n' bass. In Section 2 the authors list and discuss memorable recordings from the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s in roughly chronological order, and although most of their choices are worthy of inclusion, it's a far from comprehensive selection, mainly because they focus entirely on singles. It's true that reggae is without doubt a singles-driven genre, but failure to include some of the great albums from the last four decades means that many of Jamaica's finest recordings aren't even mentioned in "Reggae routes". What's worse is that some really significant singles are also missing, for example Wayne Smith's seminal King Jammy produced "Under mi sleng teng" (which kicked off the digital era in the mid-1980s) isn't included in the authors' 80s selection. It also rapidly becomes clear that they don't have anything original to say about the music, and their comments about individual records are often brief, insipid or clearly borrowed from other sources. This part of the book is also littered with mistakes, and mainly demonstrates the complete opposite of what Chang & Chen would like you to believe, ie the mere fact that you're from Jamaica does not make you an expert on reggae music (I was born in England, but that doesn't make me an expert on cricket)....They are clearly unfamiliar with some of the records they review. For example their brief description of U-Roy's "Natty rebel" correctly states that it's based on a recording of the Bob Marley song "Soul rebel", but they don't seem to realise that the recording in question is a cover version by the Gladiators (from their excellent "Trenchtown mix-up" album) and not by Bob Marley himself. Quite a few of the singles have also been assigned to the wrong year, which might be understandable for some of the more obscure tracks, but it's hard to believe that they don't know when massive hits like Marley's "Three little birds" came out....Section 3 mainly consists of lists: Jamaican radio charts for each year from 1960 to 1997, a "most popular artists" chart (based on the radio charts), the authors' top 100 reggae chart (featuring their favourite tracks from 1960 - 1980) and top 30 dancehall chart (featuring tracks from 1983 - 1996). It's a pity that the latter two charts consist solely of the two lists of records with no explanatory comments, because it would be interesting to know why the authors decided that these 130 tracks are better than the huge number of others which weren't included. Failing this, it would have been helpful to cross-reference each item in the chart with the page on which it is discussed in Section 2 of the book (although quite a few of them don't actually appear in Section 2). It's also a shame that the authors didn't compile an album chart, which readers would probably find more useful, and I'm mystified as to why they don't seem to think that anything worthwhile happened in 1981 and 1982! The book finishes with a list of sources and references and a very

short essay about Rastafarianism, which for some reason is tagged on rather untidily at the end. Throughout the book the very variable quality of the photos and artwork is another let-down. Many of the images are either not well integrated with the text or poorly reproduced. For example, check out the pic of Lady Saw on p213 - although I'm quite prepared to believe it's really her, the photo is so blurred that it could just as easily be Nancy Reagan or even an alien from another planet! In addition, the choice of images to accompany individual sections of text is sometimes rather strange. For example, the authors illustrate their review of Black Uhuru's "Solidarity" with a picture of the front cover of the group's "Sinsemilla" album, which came out four years earlier and doesn't contain the track in question (it's actually from an album called "Anthem"). And there are other examples which are just as bad....Overall, "Reggae routes" is the worst book on the subject that I've read, and as there are several infinitely superior reggae guides on the market, I'd strongly recommend that you avoid it.

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