



Feeling Reggae Together in Ethiopia

by David Aarons

“Keep it there for now. Just let it groove for a bit.” Sometimes in our rehearsals in Addis Ababa, Ras Kawintseb would close his eyes and ask us to keep the reggae groove going for a few minutes to develop rhythmic feel. His body swaying to and fro, simultaneously feeling the music and demonstrating the feel he wanted from the band. Ras Kawintseb, originally from Trinidad and Tobago, is part of a group of Rastafari who repatriated to Ethiopia from the West believing Ethiopia to be the Promised Land. His reggae band, Aetio-frika, mainly comprises Ethiopian musicians who enjoy reggae and identify with Rastafari philosophy to varying degrees. Engaging Ethiopians through reggae music is a significant aspect of the repatriation experience for many Rastafarians who have chosen to make Ethiopia their home. Based on ten months of research between 2015 and 2016, observing and performing with reggae bands in Ethiopia, I posit that a commitment to cultivating musical feeling is pivotal to the building of relationships between Ethiopians and repatriates through reggae music.

“Feel” is one of the most distinguishing features of reggae [1], and it presents the biggest challenge to Ethiopian musicians who wish to play reggae. The feel is such an important element in music, and yet describing exactly what it is or how to achieve it can be quite difficult. Feel can encompass “what notes are chosen, how they are played, and where they are placed by a musician” (Washbourne 1998: 161). Feel can also refer to the essences of larger-scale structures and how parts interact with each other throughout a song – what Shannon Dudley refers to as “interactive rhythmic feel” (1996). In reggae, feel can also take on a mystical quality whereby musical expression emerges from an attitude or mindset (Hitchins 2013). Many Rastafarians liken the reggae feel to the heartbeat, for instance (Bilby 2010).

Part of the reason for reggae being a challenge to some Ethiopian musicians is that Ethiopian music tends to emphasize melody more than harmony and groove. In reggae music, different rhythmic patterns come together in ways that do not always line up exactly, creating an interactive rhythmic feel. The slight out-of-sync-ness that occurs, what Charles Keil calls “participatory discrepancies” (1987), is what pushes the music to groove. For reggae to “feel right”, rhythms must be executed in a delayed manner with a certain laid-back attitude (Hitchins 2013: 35).

To demonstrate how reggae musicians manipulate and articulate feeling and how this feeling impacts music, I want to (re)present one of my experiences performing with Sydney Salmon and the Imperial Majestic Band in Addis Ababa. This band mainly comprises Rastafarians who repatriated to Ethiopia from the West, but also includes Ethiopian musicians. Whenever I performed with this band I always preferred to set up my steelpan beside the keyboardist, Ma’an Judah, because I liked her vibes (performance energy) and she gave clear instructions on what was coming next. The following is an excerpt from my field notes:

“While keeping the reggae skank[2] pattern going in her left hand, the keyboardist played a melodic line with her right hand and said to me “play this”. I tried to quickly pick out the melody. As soon as I had it, she switched to the bubble[3] pattern with two hands playing chords in an alternating manner. The bubble pattern cradled the guitar skank in a way that caused me to bounce up and down as if the sounds themselves were moving me. Further along in the song Ma’an raised her eyebrows at the drummer who then skipped the first beat and they both came crashing down on the third beat—emphasizing the one drop[4] feel. I missed that cue. She was rocking back and forth, leaning into the one drop with her body. My body fell in sync with hers. All the different sounds seemed to revolve around and orient themselves to this accent on the third beat—as if a gravity-like force was at work. A few bars later she yelled “dubwise” and the rhythm guitar and I dropped out of the texture leaving mainly bass and drums. The guitarist strummed chords out of time to imitate an echo effect. Although the drum rhythms became more busy and active, the “out of time” sound from the guitar made the music feel even more laid back. I was being pulled in different directions. I inserted a few improvised melodic lines into the spaces making sure to respect the disorienting feel. After a few cycles of this we returned to the original groove.”

Within this song, there were different sections that required specific musical attacks, rhythms, and spaces for which prior knowledge and experience is important. While this experience was not new to me as a Jamaican musician, I noticed that my performances with this band over time became more natural as I became more accustomed to the way they played. Ma’an, a Filipino American Rastafarian, not only demonstrated an intuitive sense of what sounds were required for each section but she was also able to communicate and initiate these requirements. Even though she did not grow up in Jamaica, she has developed a strong feel for reggae through immersion in reggae bands and the Rastafari movement. What happens in musical settings such as this one is that Ethiopian musicians begin to pick up the feel from her and other repatriated musicians in the band.

Renowned Ethiopian pianist Samuel Yirga is one such musician, who spent time playing with the Imperial Majestic Band and admitted that he “took lessons” from repatriated musicians Ma’an, Alton, and Sanjay and

learned how to achieve the right rhythmic feel from them. He explained, “the bass player should be a bit behind... The connection of my bubble with the bass line and the hi-hat with the bubble and... everything is related. And unless you really got the feeling, it’s just a technique and not the music” (personal interview. Feb 2016). The Ethiopian saxophonist for the Imperial Majestic Band, Wondwosson Woldeselassie, who brings a distinct Ethiopian flavor to the music, said that he sometimes had trouble knowing when to come in with his melodic lines, especially when he first started playing reggae. Melodies in reggae feel different for him because they do not consistently begin on the first beat of the bar as they do in many Ethiopian songs. In some cases, these challenges may have caused frustration both for himself—an expert saxophonist—and other band members, but through his commitment to the music and the band’s commitment to him he is now much more comfortable performing reggae.

By participating in bands comprising Ethiopian and repatriated musicians I could observe and experience the challenges of feeling the music both in myself and others. Discussing the dynamics of playing together, Nachmanovitch states that “each collaborator brings to the work a different set of strengths and resistances. We provide both irritation and inspiration for each other—the grist for each other’s pearl making” (Nachmanovitch 1990: 95). To feel the music better, therefore, musicians must spend time playing together and working through the irritation while recognizing each other’s strengths. The exchanges that happen in these sessions are much more than musical ones. Relationships are formed and people are brought closer together. It is not just the act of playing together but feeling together—a much deeper experience—that achieves this sense of togetherness.

References

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Footnotes

- [1] For a more thorough discussion on feel in reggae music see Hitchins, R. (2013). Rhythm, Sound and Movement: The Guitarist as Participant-Observer in Jamaica’s Studio Culture. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 22(1), 27-48.
- [2] Skank is one of a few terms that refers to the rhythmic pattern heard in the guitar and keyboard that emphasizes the offbeat.
- [3] Bubble refers to the rhythmic pattern heard in the keyboard or organ that features an alternation between a chord in the left hand and the same chord in a higher register in the right hand
- [4] One drop is the characteristic rhythm heard in the drum set in which the third beat of each bar is emphasized by the bass and snare drums.