

What is Reggae and where did it come from?

Reggae is a type of music that developed in Jamaica in the 1970s, but its origins go back further than that.

In the 1930s and 1940s, **Mento** and **Calypso** were two popular forms of music that were popular in Jamaica and the West Indies. **Mento** was a form of Jamaican folk music, and **Calypso** was a style of syncopated music – one famous example is the ***Banana Boat Song***.

In the 1950s, American Jazz and Rhythm and Blues (R&B) became the most popular style of music in Jamaica. This was a time of great change, when what had been a mostly rural population began to move towards the cities – in particular the capital, Kingston – in search of work. At the weekends people would gather to listen to music on **Sound Systems**, which were essentially large, mobile discos (stacks of large speakers driven by powerful amplifiers). Few people could afford to buy their own records player or radio, so this was the way they were able to listen to music, and Sound Systems became central to downtown life.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a new style of music emerged, called **Ska**, which combined elements of Mento, Calypso, R&B and Jazz – and most importantly, the feature of American **Blues** and **Swing** music whereby there is an emphasis on the second and fourth beats of the bar – this would become one of the main characteristics of Reggae music.

Ska continued to be popular outside Jamaica long after this – notably in the UK in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with bands such as **Madness** and **The Specials** .

By the mid-1960s, a slower, more soulful style of music known as **Rock Steady** had become popular. Although very similar to **Ska**, one important change was that the vocals became more important than the instrumentals, and the lyrics began to be about people's lives and experiences.

What is Reggae?

When you speak of Jamaican music you usually talk about **Reggae**, which came about from **Ska** and **Rock Steady** and reached a global audience in the 70s through the iconic power of Bob Marley.

In the 1960s the term **Reggae** was used to refer to a "ragged" form of dance rhythm popular in Jamaica. No one is quite sure where the word "reggae" came from, but it may have come from a 1968 dance single by *Toots and the Maytals* called "Do the Raggay."

Around the same time, **Rock Steady** began to take a new direction, slowing down, emphasising the bass-line and developing a more "choppy" guitar sound.

Reggae, like American Soul music, increasingly began to address social issues, and the lyrics typically deal with poverty and political issues. Reggae music has always been strongly linked to the **Rastafarian** religion, making the music culturally important. Rastas do not have an organized church; instead **Rastafarianism** is a set of spiritual and cultural beliefs open to a variety of interpretations.



By far the most famous and influential **Reggae** artist is **Bob Marley (1945-1981)**. With his band **The Wailers**, Marley had a string of hits worldwide, including **No Woman No Cry** and **Jammin'**. Bob Marley died in 1981 of cancer of the toe. As a devoutly religious person he believed that amputation of part of his body (like a toe) is sinful, though this would have cured him. He died aged 36.

Answer the following questions using complete sentences.

1. Name a popular style of Jamaican folk-music.
2. Name a famous Calypso song.
3. How were Jamaican people able to listen to music in the 1950s?
4. Why did Jamaicans move into the cities?
5. What is Ska? (What are the main beats of the bar)
6. How is Rock Steady different to Ska?
7. What came about after Ska and Rock Steady
8. What type of things are Reggae songs all about?
9. How and why did Bob Marley die in 1981