

Jamaican music

From mento to dancehall, and how it reached reggaeton and Peru.



Before you start

Jamaica is a small island with enormous music. This guide follows the tree: mento, ska, rocksteady, reggae, dub and dancehall.

In this guide

The tree — The Jamaican music tree · Mento · Ska · Rocksteady · Reggae · Dancehall

Reggae — Reggae by era · Bob Marley: why he matters · What is a riddim? · Dub · Reggae instruments · Women of reggae · Lovers rock and British reggae · Producers who changed everything · Reggae as heritage

Sound systems and studios — Sound systems · Studio One and Treasure Isle

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Beyond Jamaica — Where does reggaeton come from? · The dem bow rhythm · Reggae in Peru



The Jamaican music tree

Five genres, one family.

Five genres

Mento	19th century · peak in the 1940s and 50s
Ska	Late 1950s · dominant in the early 60s
Rocksteady	1966 – 1968
Reggae	From 1968
Dancehall	From the late 1970s

Each one grows from the last

Ska	Mento + US R&B and jazz.
Rocksteady	Ska, but slower.
Reggae	Rocksteady + more bass + Rastafari.
Dancehall	Reggae with the deejay at the centre.

The sound systems.

Speaker rigs with a DJ that drove Kingston's parties from the 1940s.

Their owners, such as Coxsone Dodd and Duke Reid, began recording their own music. That is how the Studio One and Treasure Isle studios were born.

Mento

The first Jamaican music to be recorded and sold.

From the 19th century to the 1950s.

It was born in the 19th century as folk music.

Its golden age was the 1940s and 50s, in clubs, at parties and events.



Banjo and rumba box.

Banjo, acoustic guitar, hand drums and the rumba box: a box with metal tongues that plays the bass.

The rumba box was brought by Jamaican workers returning from Cuba.

JAMAICA

Rumba box

&

PERU

Cajón

Music made with a box

The rumba box plays the bass in mento. The cajón, born on the Peruvian coast, has been part of Peru's cultural heritage since 2001.

Mento artists

1950s

Lord Flea, Count Lasher, Lord Fly

1980s–90s

The Jolly Boys

2000s

Stanley Beckford

It is not calypso.

Calypso is from Trinidad and Tobago. For years they were sold as if they were the same thing.

Several of Harry Belafonte's hits from 1956 to 1958 were mento sold as calypso.

Ska

Late 1950s to 1966.

Mento + R&B + jazz.

After the Second World War, R&B from the United States reached Jamaica on the radio and on records.

Musicians mixed it with mento. The accent falls on the offbeat.



The sound system owners.

Prince Buster, Coxsone Dodd and Duke Reid played R&B at their parties.

To have tunes nobody else had, they began recording local musicians.

The music of independence.

Ska sounded joyful just as Jamaica was becoming independent.

There were songs to celebrate it, such as "Forward March" by Derrick Morgan and "Freedom Sound" by The Skatalites.

Ska artists

The Skatalites	The instrumental band of ska
Prince Buster	Producer and singer
Derrick Morgan	"Forward March"
Desmond Dekker	Also recorded ska

The first global hit.

"My Boy Lollipop", by Millie Small, was Jamaica's first big international hit.

It sold more than seven million copies.

Rocksteady

It lasted only two years, but it changed everything.

Ska, but slow.

The guitarist Lynn Taitt summed it up like this: "Rocksteady is slow ska."

With less speed, the bass moved to the front.

There are two versions.

One: at Studio One, the drummer could not keep up with the ska tempo and Jackie Mittoo slowed it down.

The other: Lynn Taitt suggested going slower when recording "Take It Easy", by Hopeton Lewis.



It comes from a dance.

The name comes from a slower dance that appeared in the song "Rocksteady" by Alton Ellis.

Rocksteady artists

Alton Ellis	The father of rocksteady
Phyllis Dillon	The queen of rocksteady
The Paragons	Vocal group
The Heptones	Vocal group
Ken Boothe	Solo singer

From love to consciousness.

The bass became more complex and the electric organ came in.

With the rise of Rastafari, the lyrics moved from romance to protest. It was the birth of reggae.

Reggae

From Kingston to the world.

"Do the Reggay".

In 1968, Toots and the Maytals released "Do the Reggay": the first popular song with that word.

Where the word comes from is not clear; there are several versions.

Slow, with the bass at the centre.

Slower than ska and rocksteady.

Its signature is the skank: short guitar or piano chords on the offbeat.

Rastafari and consciousness.

In the 1970s, reggae grew alongside the Rastafari movement and Black consciousness.



The lyrics speak of social justice, of Africa and of faith.

The Wailers.

Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer formed the group in 1963.

They went through ska, rocksteady and reggae. Their "Simmer Down" was number 1 in Jamaica in 1964.

Reggae artists

Bob Marley	Catch a Fire (1973), Exodus (1977)
Toots & the Maytals	"Do the Reggay" (1968)
Jimmy Cliff	The Harder They Come (1972)
Burning Spear	Roots reggae
King Tubby · Lee Perry	Dub producers

Heritage of humanity.

UNESCO inscribed the reggae music of Jamaica as intangible cultural heritage.

Dancehall

From the late 1970s to today.

Voice over riddim.

It was born in Kingston's neighbourhoods as a simpler version of roots reggae.

The deejay sings or raps in patois over an instrumental track: the riddim.

U-Roy.

He was a pioneer of talking and singing over riddims, what in Jamaica is called toasting.

Many dancehall deejays started out imitating him.



Sleng Teng: all digital.

"Under Mi Sleng Teng", by Wayne Smith and the producer King Jammy, was the first digital riddim in reggae.

That same riddim was used on more than 200 recordings.

The greats

Yellowman	First deejay signed by a major US label
Shabba Ranks	Dancehall's first Grammy
Beenie Man · Bounty Killer	Great deejays of the 1990s
Sean Paul	"Get Busy": dancehall's first US no. 1
Spice	Female star

From dancehall to reggaeton.

Jamaicans who went to build the Panama Canal took reggae with them. In Panama it was sung in Spanish, and in Puerto Rico it became reggaeton.

The dembow rhythm comes from Jamaican riddims of the late 1980s, and Shabba Ranks made it popular with "Dem Bow" in the early 1990s.



Reggae by era

From 1968 to today: who made it and why they matter.

Five eras

1968–1972	Early reggae
1970s	Roots reggae
1970s	Dub
1980s	Lovers rock and the first Grammy
Since 2012	Reggae revival

The ones who took it off the island.

Toots and the Maytals gave it a name with “Do the Reggay” (1968). Desmond Dekker was number 1 in the United Kingdom with “Israelites” (1969).

Jimmy Cliff starred in “The Harder They Come” (1972), which introduced Jamaican music to the world.

Consciousness and faith.

Peter Tosh co-wrote “Get Up, Stand Up” and released “Equal Rights” (1977).

The mixing desk as an instrument.

King Tubby took instruments out and put them back, adding echo and reverb. He is often cited as the inventor of the remix.

Lee “Scratch” Perry produced the early Wailers and created unique sounds in his Black Ark studio (1973).

Lovers rock and the first Grammy.

Gregory Isaacs, the “Cool Ruler”, recorded “My Only Lover”, which some call the first lovers rock song (the sources disagree), and “Night Nurse” (1982).

Black Uhuru won the first Grammy for Best Reggae Album with “Anthem” (1985).



The new generation.

Chronixx, Protoje, Jah9 and Kabaka Pyramid went back to roots reggae.

Koffee won the Grammy for Best Reggae Album in 2020 aged 19: the youngest person to do so.

Bob Marley: why he matters

More than songs: what he did for Jamaica.

In dates

1945	Born in Nine Mile, St Ann.
1963	Forms The Wailers with Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer.
1973	"Catch a Fire", his first album with Island Records.
1981	Dies aged 36.

He was shot. He sang anyway.

Gunmen wounded him at his home in Kingston, in an attack believed to be political.

Two days later he sang at the Smile Jamaica concert.

The One Love Peace Concert.

In the middle of political violence, he brought the two rivals on stage: Michael Manley and Edward Seaga.

At his request, they shook hands in front of the crowd.

The world's reggae.

"Legend" (1984) is the best-selling reggae album in history.

In 1999 Time magazine named "Exodus" the album of the century. Jamaica awarded him the Order of Merit in 1981.



What is a riddim?

One instrumental track, hundreds of songs on top.

riddim /RÍ-dim/ · noun

The instrumental track of a song: drums and bass at the front. It comes from the English "rhythm".

Several singers record over the same riddim.

One track, many voices.

The producer records the track and then different singers add their voices. Other producers make their own version of the same riddim.

A riddim named after a film.

"Stalag 17", by Ansel Collins, came out in 1973 on Winston Riley's label. It is named after a 1953 war film.

There are hundreds of records on that track, such as "Ring the Alarm" (1984) by Tenor Saw.

From Studio One to US radio.

"Full Up" was born at Studio One with Leroy Sibbles on bass and Jackie Mittoo on keyboards.

In 1981 the producer Gussie Clarke reused it for the Mighty Diamonds. A version of that song, by Musical Youth, entered the US top 10 in 1982.

The riddim nobody wanted.

Steven "Lenky" Marsden, keyboard player in Sly & Robbie's band, created it in 1998. Many artists turned it down because of its "annoying" handclaps.

In 2003, Sean Paul's "Get Busy", recorded on Diwali, reached no. 1 on Billboard.

From riddim to dem bow.

Every time reggaeton plays in a Lima combi (minibus), there is a riddim behind it.



Dub

When the sound engineer became a musician.

A mistake people liked.

Ruddy Redwood, a sound system owner, asked for a cut of "On the Beach", by The Paragons. The engineer forgot to add the vocals.

At the dance, the track without vocals was a hit. Some sources date it to 1967 and others to 1968.

The B-side without vocals.

From then on, many records carried the instrumental track on the B-side: the "version".

Deejays talked over it, and engineers began to play with it.

King Tubby, the technician.

He repaired radios and televisions. At 17, in 1958, he already had his own sound system, Hometown Hi-Fi.

In 1968 he was cutting records for Duke Reid. By removing vocals on the mixing desk, he saw he could remake the whole song.

One filter, a thousand sounds.

In his studio he used a mixer bought from Dynamic studio and played with its filter to create sound sweeps.

King Jammy and Scientist came out of his school. Tubby was shot dead outside his home in 1989.

The Black Ark.

In 1973 he built the Black Ark studio in his back yard. In 1983 he was suspected of burning it down himself; he said he had burned his "sin".

He won a Grammy in 2003 and died in Lucea, Hanover, in 2021, aged 85.

Children of dub

1973

First dub records, such as Aquarius Dub.



1974	Pick a Dub, by Keith Hudson.
Later	Hip hop, house, techno and trip hop.
1990s–2000s	Jungle, drum and bass and dubstep.

Reggae instruments

Drums, bass, organ and hand drums: who does what in the band.

The one drop.

The bass drum and snare hit together on the third beat; the first is left empty. That is the base of classic reggae.

Carlton Barrett, drummer of The Wailers, made it popular. Who invented it is debated.

More kick, more drive.

In rockers the bass drum sounds on every beat; in steppers, twice as often.

Sly & Robbie took rockers into the studio in 1976, and it pushed out the one drop.

Aston “Family Man” Barrett.

Carlton’s brother and bass player of The Wailers. His son called him “the backbone” of the band.

In 2020 Bass Player magazine put him at no. 1 on its list of legendary bass players. He died in 2024, aged 77.

The bubble.

On the Hammond organ, the left hand plays low notes on the offbeats. According to Berklee, it is felt more than heard.

The right hand reinforces the guitar skank on beats 2 and 4.

The nyabinghi drums.

Three drums: the bass, the fundeh, which holds the rhythm, and the repeater, which carries the lead voice.



Count Ossie developed these rhythms at Wareika Hill, with roots in kumina and burru.

The full band

Drums	One drop, rockers or steppers.
Bass	The melody that leads.
Guitar	The skank, on the offbeat.
Organ	The bubble, low and steady.
Hand drums	The nyabinghi heritage.

Women of reggae

Voices that carried the genre, inside and outside the backing vocals.

From Studio One to the world.

She grew up in west Kingston and first sang in church. Her first hit was “Feel Like Jumping” (1968), at Studio One.

From 1970 to 1974 she sang as a duo with Bob Andy. In 2014 she received the Order of Distinction.

The Electric Slide song.

Bunny Wailer wrote it. With Marcia it was no. 1 in Jamaica in 1983, and a 1989 remix made the Electric Slide line dance famous around the world.

It reached number 51 on Billboard: her most successful single.

The I-Threes.

Rita Marley, Marcia Griffiths and Judy Mowatt were Bob Marley’s backing singers from 1974 until his death in 1981.

Judy Mowatt started as a dancer and later sang with The Gaylettes.

The first Grammy nominee.

Her album “Black Woman” (1979) came out on Tuff Gong. With “Working Wonders” she was nominated for the reggae Grammy in 1986.



The Gleaner names her as the first woman in reggae to be nominated. She later became a Christian and moved to gospel.

“Bam Bam”.

Ophlin Russell recorded “Bam Bam” in 1982 on the Stalag riddim, in Winston Riley’s studio.

It is one of the most sampled reggae songs. It took her years to find out it was a hit.

Her royalties, at last.

For 32 years she received no royalties. In 2014 her daughter heard the song in a Reebok advert and encouraged her to sue.

She reached a settlement: payment for ten years and half of the rights.

Lovers rock and British reggae

The romantic reggae born in London.

Reggae with a soul heart.

It mixes reggae bass with Chicago and Philadelphia soul. Its lyrics are about love.

A label called Lover’s Rock.

Dennis Harris opened a label with that name at his studio in south-east London, with John Kpiaye and Dennis Bovell.

The Clash helped spread the term with their song “Lover’s Rock” (1979).

A hit at 14.

Louisa Mark was 14 when her version of “Caught You in a Lie” became a big hit of the genre.

That same year “To Be in Love”, by Simplicity, was playing.



“Silly Games”.

Janet Kay was born in London, the daughter of Jamaican immigrants. “Silly Games”, written by Dennis Bovell, reached no. 2 in Britain in 1979.

She was the first Black British woman to get that high with a reggae song.

More lovers rock

Carroll Thompson	The “queen of lovers rock”.
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Brown Sugar	Trio from south London.
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Maxi Priest	“Wild World” (1988).
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Dennis Bovell	Producer of several hits.
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What about Gregory Isaacs?

The sources disagree.

Producers who changed everything

Behind every voice there was someone at the mixing desk.

The first ones

Coxsone Dodd	Studio One, 1963.
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Duke Reid	Treasure Isle, rocksteady.
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Leslie Kong	Bob Marley’s first single.
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King Jammy	Sleng Teng, 1985.
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The flying cymbal.

He created the “flying cymbal” sound, played by the drummer Santa Davis on Johnny Clarke’s records in the mid-1970s.

He worked with King Tubby on dub. He received the Order of Distinction in 2008 and died in 2020, aged 79.



The riddim twins.

The drummer Sly Dunbar and the bass player Robbie Shakespeare teamed up in the mid-1970s. They played as The Revolutionaries at Channel One, the Hoo Kim brothers' studio.

In 1980 they founded the Taxi label.

From Bob Dylan to Grace Jones.

They played on three Bob Dylan albums and three by Grace Jones. They won two Grammys.

Robbie died in 2021. Sly died on 26 January 2026, aged 73.

The digital leap.

Augustus Clarke produced his first record in 1972, with U-Roy. In 1988 he opened Music Works, designed for digital reggae.

That is where "Rumours", by Gregory Isaacs, came out: the big hit of summer 1988 in Jamaica.

The dem bow duo.

The beat of reggaeton comes from that riddim.

Reggae as heritage

What UNESCO says and how Jamaica defended it in person.

It was almost put off.

UNESCO's evaluators recommended postponing the nomination for two years. Jamaica did not accept this and travelled to Port Louis, Mauritius, to defend it.

All 23 committee members supported it.

Born in west Kingston.

The text says reggae was born in a space of marginalised groups, mainly in west Kingston.

It was once the voice of the marginalised; today it is embraced by people of every gender, background and religion.



Three functions.

It speaks of injustice, resistance, love and humanity.

At school and on stage.

In Jamaica, reggae is taught at school, from early childhood to university.

UNESCO names festivals such as Reggae Sumfest as spaces that keep it alive every year.

The Rastafari root.

The Minister of Culture, Olivia Grange, asked for a special tribute to the Rastafari community.

She mentioned kumina, revival and Rastafari drumming, and Count Ossie and the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari.

JAMAICA

Reggae

&

PERU

Danza de tijeras

Heritage of humanity

Reggae joined the UNESCO list in 2018. The scissors dance of the Peruvian Andes, with violin and harp, joined in 2010.



Sound systems

The mobile disco that changed Kingston's music.

Speakers the size of a wardrobe.

A mobile rig with turntables and huge speakers, a selector who chooses the records and a deejay who hypes the crowd.

Hedley Jones built speaker boxes the size of a wardrobe, which he called "House of Joy".

Cheaper than a band.

By the mid-1950s, sound systems were already more popular than live musicians at Kingston parties.

Hiring someone to play records cost much less than paying a band.

The first to succeed.

At one point he had three rigs at once, and in 1952 he won two clashes that made him the number one sound.

Trojan vs. Downbeat

Duke Reid	Former policeman; his sound was called Trojan.
Coxsone Dodd	Of Downbeat; brought records from the US in 1953.
Count Matchuki	First star deejay; moved from Tom to Coxsone.
Prince Buster	Left Reid's camp for Coxsone's.

Two sounds, one crowd.

A sound clash is an organised battle between two sound systems, which take turns playing music.

The rivalry between Reid and Coxsone went as far as spying: they sent people to see which records the other was playing.



A record nobody else has.

A dubplate is an acetate disc with a single copy: an exclusive tune the rival cannot play.

“Specials” carry a voice that names the sound. In 1961 Coxsone had a man arrested for stealing one from him.

Studio One and Treasure Isle

From the speaker to the studio: Kingston’s two rival labels.

Recording what nobody had.

Coxsone Dodd and Duke Reid started out playing US R&B on their sound systems.

To have exclusive tunes, they moved on to recording Jamaican musicians. Reid began producing in 1962.

13 Brentford Road.

Coxsone opened Studio One in 1963. In 2004 the street was renamed Studio One Boulevard.

The National Library of Jamaica describes it as the first Black-owned Jamaican studio. It is called “the Motown of Jamaica”.

A huge list

Bob Marley	Coxsone made the Wailers known.
Jackie Mittoo	Musical director of the band (1965–1968).
Alton Ellis	Recorded for both rival studios.
And also	Burning Spear, Ken Boothe, Marcia Griffiths.

One track, many songs.

The house band recorded about 60 riddims a week. Afterwards, different singers added their voices.



According to The New York Times, "Real Rock", by Sound Dimension, is the most reused riddim in reggae.

A studio above a liquor store.

Duke Reid and his wife Lucille had a liquor store on Bond Street, the Treasure Isle. Reid set up his studio above it.

It was the centre of rocksteady: The Paragons, The Melodians and Alton Ellis recorded their hits there.

The deejay reaches the record.

When rocksteady went out of fashion, Reid returned to the top with U-Roy, who talked over the riddims.

The National Library of Jamaica credits him with helping to launch the modern deejay era.



Dancehall by era

From the first deejays to number 1 in the United States.

Four eras

Early 1980s	The first deejays
1985	All digital
1990s	The great rivals
2000s	The global leap

Yellowman.

He was the first dancehall artist signed by a major US label (Columbia, 1981).

He did it as a person with albinism, at a time when albinism was shunned in Jamaica. He was the first “king of dancehall”.

Sleng Teng: all digital.

The producer King Jammy released “Under Mi Sleng Teng”, with Wayne Smith: the first digital riddim in reggae.

From then on, dancehall was made with keyboards and drum machines.

Shabba, Beenie, Bounty.

Shabba Ranks won the Grammy in 1992 and 1993: the first for dancehall. Beenie Man won it in 2001.

The rivalry between Beenie Man and Bounty Killer began in 1993 and ended in friendship: in 2020 they did a Verzuz together.

Sean Paul.

“Get Busy” (2003) was the first dancehall song to reach number 1 on the US Billboard chart.

His album “Dutty Rock” won the Grammy in 2004 and sold more than six million copies.



Lady Saw and Spice.

Lady Saw was the “Queen of Dancehall” for decades; today she sings gospel as Marion Hall.

Spice inherited the crown: her album “10” was nominated for a Grammy in 2022.



Where does reggaeton come from?

Spoiler: its root is in Jamaica.

Four stops

Jamaica	Dancehall: deejays over riddims.
Panama	Late 1980s: reggae in Spanish.
Puerto Rico	Early 1990s: the underground.
The world	2004: "Gasolina".

The canal.

Afro-Caribbean workers, many of them Jamaican, came to build the railway and the Panama Canal.

Their descendants took up reggae. By 1977 there were already DJs singing it in Spanish.

The clubs and the cassettes.

Panamanian artists such as El General took these rhythms to the clubs of Puerto Rico.

There, DJs mixed them with hip hop on cassettes that circulated under the counter.

Reguetón /re-gue-tón/ · noun

Reggae + maratón (marathon). The name appeared in 1994, on DJ Playero's cassette Playero 36.

Daddy Yankee and DJ Playero are credited with the word.

The dem bow rhythm

The beat of almost every reggaeton song was born in a Kingston studio.



Fish Market.

The Jamaican producers Steely & Clevie created the “Fish Market” riddim, also called “Pocoman Jam”.

It is the base of dem bow.

Shabba Ranks: “Dem Bow”.

Shabba Ranks recorded “Dem Bow” over that riddim.

The song gave its name to the rhythm, and later to the first reggaeton.

Pounder (Dub Mix II).

The producer Dennis the Menace made a version of the riddim, “Pounder (Dub Mix II)”.

That was the version Puerto Rican producers sampled for years.

3 + 3 + 2.

It is a tresillo (3+3+2) over a four-on-the-floor bass drum.

Elements of the original track appear in more than 80% of reggaeton productions.

Reggae in Peru

From backpackers’ cassettes to festivals in Barranco.

It arrived in the 1980s.

Reggae was born in Jamaica in the late 1960s.

According to the newspaper El Peruano, its rhythms reached Peru in the 1980s.

Backpackers’ cassettes.

Pochi Marambio moved to Cusco in the mid-1970s.

There he heard the reggae cassettes that backpackers brought and decided to play that rhythm.



Tierra Sur is born.

Marambio founded Tierra Sur, considered the first Peruvian band with an all-reggae repertoire.

They have shared the stage with Yellowman, Ziggy Marley, Inner Circle and The Wailers.

“Llaman a la puerta”.

With that song, from the album “Mi marimba”, Tierra Sur became known across the country.

Some religious groups did not like the lyrics; Marambio says he talked with them.

Jamaica in Lima.

There have been reggae festivals in Peru since the early 2000s. In 2019, Reggae Sessions brought Ziggy Marley to Lima.

On 31 July 2026, Reggae Patrio brought together The Gladiators and 12 Peruvian artists in Barranco.



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