

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT & ORDERING INFORMATION

Weber, Thomas J. (2000). Likkle but talawah (small but mighty): Reggae music, globalization, and the birth of a social movement. Unpublished dissertation, Bowling Green State University.

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This is a study of cultural globalization using the specific case of reggae music, a form of popular music that originated in Jamaica after World War II but is now performed and appreciated in local variants worldwide. After a review of literature on the Caribbean communication environment and reggae music, I propose a theoretical framework in which globalization is subdivided into vertical and horizontal components, which I term “industrial” and “grassroots” globalization. I classify the global community of reggae practitioners as an interculture constituted through ongoing participation in cultural production, rather than a subculture constituted through consumption of cultural goods. I then study the phenomenon of global reggae from both a micro perspective (the meaning-making practices of individual practitioners) and a macro perspective (the location of reggae within the global political economy of communication).

On the micro level, I identify three communicative practices that help constitute an interculture. I then turn to the ethnographic data, where I identify premises about the meaning of global reggae from the points of view of practitioners. On the macro level, I present an institutional analysis of the music industry in which I discuss the dynamics of production, distribution and consumption of popular music with specific reference to reggae. I argue that the cultural impact of reggae has been far greater than its market impact, and that the globalization of reggae has occurred in large part through grassroots rather than industrial channels.

I then turn to the ethnographic data to compare these findings with views expressed by reggae practitioners. Comparing the local (Jamaican) and global contexts of reggae, I identify infrastructural differences (such as a lack of access to global distribution networks) and cultural differences (such as a collaborative approach to musical authorship) that set the two contexts apart. I present a theoretical synthesis in which I argue that the reggae interculture has the characteristics of an emerging social movement, and that social movement activity is the arena in which the “micro” and “macro” levels of globalization can be observed to interact. I conclude with a personal reflection on the major themes of the study and two “versions” of reggae’s future.

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