World tour: the Caribbean

KS3

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Introduction

This is the first in a 'World tour' series of resources exploring musical styles from different parts of the world that otherwise might not make a big impact on the Key Stage 3 curriculum.

We'll think regionally, exploring in each resource the diversity of traditional music from areas ranging from the Americas to China. We're going to circumnavigate the globe westwards, starting with a trip to the Caribbean in this resource and continuing in a few months' time with the music of Latin America, which will involve a further trip around some of the Caribbean islands and into South America.

These resources are designed to provide teaching ideas and activities for Key Stage 3 class music lessons, with the aim of expanding students' knowledge and interest in music from other parts of the world. A key aim is to find links between the music we encounter and music that the students might already know, and to learn more about how musical styles can interlink and cross-fertilise. With our look at the Caribbean this month, such links will become quite clear.

The Caribbean

There are 13 sovereign states and 17 dependent territories in the Caribbean, with more than 700 islands, reefs and other pockets of land dotted around the area to the east of Central America. The history of this region is rich and varied, with many European and American attempts – some successful, some not – to colonise the islands. Consequently, a tour of the Caribbean could encounter English, French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese influences, and though a number of the islands are now independent, there are still many with British, French, Dutch, and North or South American sovereignty.

Additionally, over the years, the geographical location of these islands has resulted in a lot of importing of cultures and traditions from other parts of the world. Depending on where you go in the Caribbean, you'll find African, American and European influences mixed with more indigenous styles in Caribbean art, religion, politics, language and cuisine. The musical styles we will look at in this resource will reflect those fusions.

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In this resource, we're going to concentrate on two sovereign nations. First, we'll look at **mento** from **Jamaica** and how this traditional music was infiltrated by the popular music of the United States, resulting in the rise of **ska** and **reggae** in the mid- to late 20th century.

Secondly, we'll move to the islands of **Trinidad and Tobago** off the coast of Venezuela, to explore the exciting styles of **calypso** and its more recent reinvention, **soca**. Within the resource, there will be some historical and stylistic background, and a range of ideas for the music classroom.

Jamaica

The third-largest Caribbean island, Jamaica sits about 90 miles south of Cuba and was ruled by the Spanish from the time of Columbus until the mid-17th century, who populated it with a large number of African slaves. The English drove the Spanish out and took over the island, making it into a significant exporter of sugar thanks to slave labour there, though all slaves were freed by the middle of the 19th century.

Jamaica became independent of the UK in 1962, though it remains a member of the Commonwealth. The country now relies heavily on tourism with the all-inclusive resorts in Montego Bay and Negril the most popular. Its music has had a global impact since the 1960s, but we're going to start by looking at a traditional folk music that combines African and European styles and was hugely popular in the 1940 and 1950s.

Mento

This traditional music became popular when artists who travelled the island began to record their music and sell printed lyrics. The genre enjoyed a golden age in the 1950s and started to get Jamaica recognition in the wider musical world.

Mento is acoustic and informal, sometimes known as 'Jamaican country music', though in urban areas it became electrified and more suitable for dancing, particularly in the 1950s. Songs tended to be about life in Jamaica and focused on happy themes such as national pride, eating and fashion, and it wasn't unusual for two mento songs to sound quite similar, due to their reliance on primary chords.

Syncopated accents are common in mento, particularly on the fourth beat of the bar, and melodies are syncopated too, such as in the Jamaican children's song 'Mango Walk' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7Kf6OrIKnU**). Though mento musicians rarely had formal musical training, their skills, particularly at improvisation, were finely honed. Nowadays a number of mento bands receive funding from the Jamaican government to play for tourists.

Mento activity: listening

Play students the introduction, first two verses and instrumental of 'Take Me Back to Jamaica' by the Jolly Boys (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYMceYslhTQ**).

Here are the words for students to follow or sing along with, together with chords:

Introduction (same chords as verses)

G **D7**
Take me back to Jamaica where I were born
G
Take me back to Jamaica where I were born
G **G7** **C**
Where the green bananas grow and the Rio Grandee flow
G **D7** **G**
Take me back to Jamaica where I were born

Take me back to the island in the sun
Take me back to the sunny land of fun
Where we all can sit and dine and off in the sunny sunny land of mine
Take me back to Jamaica where I were born

Instrumental (same chords as verses)

Get students to discuss and suggest their answers to the following questions:

What stringed instruments can you hear playing?
The chords are strummed by an acoustic guitar; the instrumental melodies and higher-pitched strumming are on a banjo. There is most likely a **rumba box** providing a bassline, too, though this is not as clear in the recording. See below for more information on this typical mento line-up.
What do you think is providing the 'drum beats' in the song?
Most likely some kind of hand drum, such as a bongo or conga – normally in Jolly Boys songs the percussion instrument is listed simply as 'drum'. Many mento songs have maracas as well.
What makes this song sound so happy?
There are a number of reasons – the sunny major key and simple, major (primary) chords of I, IV and V, the upbeat tempo and the short, repetitive vocal melodies. However, the element that contributes the most to the happy mood is rhythm – the melodies are syncopated and rhythmically lively with many dotted patterns, and the guitar and banjo strum largely off the beat in a pattern that became synonymous with ska and reggae.

The **rumba box** (shown left) is an instrument commonly found in mento songs. Also known (but under different names) in Cuba, Mexico and the Dominican Republic, it is a bassline instrument consisting of a wooden box with a hole cut into it. Metal strips are attached across the hole, tuned to different pitches, and are plucked in a similar way to the smaller African **mbira** or thumb piano. The rumba box provides not only harmonic but also rhythmic support to a mento song.

The picture in this video (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2h1N3Ny5Zc**) shows the instruments very clearly, and this video of the Jolly Boys in action (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=8t1mtvheEoo**) is also worth a watch.

Other mento activities: researching and performing

Get students to research the rumba box (known in Cuba as the **marímbula**) in more detail. It's worth noting that although it's called the **marimba** in some parts of the Caribbean, it's nothing like the tuned percussion instrument we know by that name. YouTube even has some 'how to make your own rumba box' instruction videos for those keen to collaborate with the Design Technology department.

Set up performances of 'Take Me Back to Jamaica' – either with the whole class or in small groups. Guitars and ukuleles lend themselves perfectly to the mento style, with ukuleles strummed on the second and fourth beats in the style of the banjo on the recording. Any kind of hand drum can be used for the quicker percussive rhythms, and either double bass, bass guitar or low keyboard can be used for the bassline.

Ska

The form of mento found in urban areas was more sophisticated than its country cousin, with wind instruments and electric guitars and basses, and as it became infused with the American music heard on the radio in Jamaica, a popular dance version of mento emerged. A faster style that combined traditional mento features with the American **rhythm and blues** craze of the 1950s became known as **ska**, and the appearance of recording studios and record companies on the island meant that this new genre took off at pace.

Ska activity: comparing

Possibly the first band to really popularise ska were the Skatalites, a ten-piece band formed in the mid 1950s (pictured above in their current incarnation). They recorded their first album, *Ska Authentic*, at Studio One in Kingston in 1964, and their best-known song – which made the UK top 40 in 1965 – was 'Guns of Navarone'. This was a version of the theme music to the 1961 film of the same name.

An interesting listening activity would be to compare the original (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ewi1LRld5_k**) with the Skatalites' version (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtESlTKBa4s**). You could additionally play the 1970s remake by British group the Specials (pictured above). This live version (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TL5MsxZJhw**) shows a number of common characterstics of ska, which you could discuss with students:

- The inclusion of popular ska instruments such as guitar, organ and horns – a direct influence from jazz and swing.
- The importance of the off-beat chords, often played on organ and as quick down-strums on guitar, known as 'skanking'.
- The popular ska and reggae practice of speaking rhythmically over the music, which developed in reggae and was known as 'toasting' – a strong influence on the emerging rap and hip-hop styles in America.
- Simple harmonic structures – often just two or three primary chords. This particular song has an interesting minor variation.
- An emphasis on repetition, particularly of horn riffs.

Ska activity: whole-class performing

It's possible to put together a class performance of *Guns of Navarone* fairly easily. The melody is quite easy to learn by ear, especially if you transpose from the Specials' key of B flat into C major – it begins with a rising stepwise pattern followed by a repeated falling broken chord, and then a falling stepwise pattern. Bassline and chords follow a simple primary chord pattern as follows:

C F-C F-C C G (repeat)

The contrasting B section is very similar, except that the whole thing has modulated to the mediant minor (E minor if your A section is in C).

Points to emphasise and practise with your musicians:

- The melody and harmony parts should be played almost staccato, with separated notes – not smoothly. In the Specials' version, they are generally played with a strong, confident sound and plenty of accents.
- The bassline can be simple crotchets, four to a bar following the chord pattern above.
- Keyboard players can choose to play off-beat chords using an organ sound, or they can choose brass sounds and play the melodic or harmonic line. An experienced pianist could 'comp' using the chords to fill out the sound.
- The off-beat chords should be played staccato by keyboard instruments, and with strums in the same direction (whichever is easiest) by guitarists. Practise getting these in time with the percussion parts.
- The percussion parts can have the same rhythms as either the bass or the off-beat chords, so practise playing these together before adding the melodies and harmonies. They can be played on any percussion instruments you have available, and if you have a kit player, even better.

This could also be an assessed activity, with students working in smaller 'bands' to perform to the rest of the class, or by recording or videoing the performance. Consider getting them to self-assess and peer-assess (see *Music Teacher*, May 2014).

Ska: further listening

Ska became popular internationally, particularly in the UK. In 1964 'My Boy Lollipop' by Millie Small (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiuPND4W6KM**) was an international hit and the first major success for Jamaican record label Island Records, which still operates today and has signed artists such as Amy Winehouse and Shawn Mendes. In the late 1970s and 1980s the Specials and Madness revived ska with their own brand of the style, providing a slightly comedic take on British social issues, in songs such as 'Baggy Trousers' by Madness (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dc3AovUZgvo**).

Rocksteady

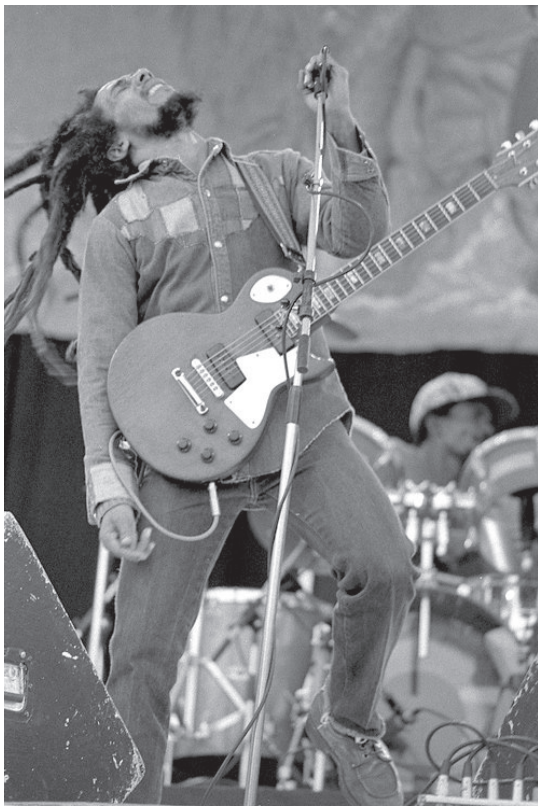
In the mid-1960s a genre called rocksteady emerged and became the most popular style of music in Jamaica for a couple of years. It developed as a slower, more relaxed form of ska with heavy emphasis on the off-beat chordal rhythm played by guitar and organ or piano. A new feature, now associated with reggae, was the **one-drop drum pattern**, where the third beat of the bar (out of four) was heavily accented, unlike in most rock and pop music where the second and fourth beats were traditionally stronger. Additionally, the bassline became more intricate and syncopated, largely thanks to the slower tempo, and rocksteady tracks tended to have a loud, dominant bass sound, often played on giant mobile sound systems that travelled on trucks around Kingston or appeared on street corners and in public spaces.

Rocksteady activity: comparing

Rocksteady songs were often about love or socialising, as opposed to the more political overtones of reggae that emerged later on. A good example is 'Sharing You' by the Prince Buster All Stars, which you can hear here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPooZA6EOGQ**). You could get students to compare it with the ska songs they have studied. The Specials' huge hit 'Ghost Town' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ2oXzrnti4**) – a political commentary on Thatcher's Britain in the 1980s – has strong rocksteady similiarities.

Reggae

The popularity of ska and rocksteady was eclipsed by the rise of reggae, which brought a new spiritual and often political dimension with strong influences from the Rastafarian religion. Rastafarians in Jamaica revered Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie and believed that redemption could be achieved through returning to Africa. Many reggae songs followed this theme.



Bob Marley (pictured left), with his band the Wailers, started out playing ska but melded it with rocksteady to create his own sound, combining a two-chord guitar and organ pattern that emphasised the off-beats with a strong and incessant drum and bass rhythm (sometimes known as the *riddim*). His 1972 album *Catch a Fire* was an international hit and caught the attention of British artists such as Eric Clapton, whose popular cover of the Marley song 'I Shot the Sheriff' made reggae extremely popular in the UK.

The 1972 film *The Harder They Come* featured Jimmy Cliff as a struggling reggae singer trying to make it in Kingston and featured his song 'You Can Get It If You Really Want' as well as other reggae songs by Cliff and Desmond Dekker. Though it wasn't released in the UK until later in the decade, it is often cited as the film that brought reggae worldwide attention and made it synonymous as a style with hardship and struggle.

Reggae activity: listening
Ask students to compare two very different reggae songs:

- ‘You Can Get It If You Really Want’ by Jimmy Cliff (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=18EAqHx2lMk**)
- ‘I Shot the Sheriff’ by Bob Marley (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XiYUYcpsT4**)

Students should list their similarities (such as aspects of the instrumentation and the off-beat chords) and differences (such as Marley’s more advanced chord choice and more political lyrics). It could also be interesting to add in Eric Clapton’s more recent live version of ‘I Shot the Serriff’ (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=APWhx97QvxE**).

Reggae to rap

As DJs began to exert an influence on the development and change of musical style in the 1970s, an electronic form of reggae known as dub became popular. Dub normally took existing reggae songs and removed the vocals, stripping them back to the *riddim* of the drums and bass and adding studio effects and samples from other music. It was a strong influence on hip-hop, house and techno music of the 1980s, and also on some punk records of that decade, and subsequently the 1990s genre of drum and bass. Jamaican artists famous for dub include King Tubby and, perhaps most famously, Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry who produced records for artists as diverse as Bob Marley and the Clash.

Trinidad and Tobago

The two islands of Trinidad and Tobago, the most southern country in the Caribbean, gained independence in 1962 having previously been a Spanish, French, Dutch and British colony. Naturally the culture there is diverse, with influences from these countries but also African and Indian, Venezuelan and Creole (from southern USA) styles. Trinidad and Tobago is a prosperous nation thanks to its oil reserves, and so its music is often celebratory and joyous, seen most clearly in the tradition of the carnival.

Calypso

The folk music of Trinidad and Tobago, calypso has more noticeable Spanish influences than mento, though it is often confused with its Jamaican cousin. French immigrants added their style to the genre with early calypso songs sung in the *patois* dialect. Calypso songs were the central feature of the **carnival**, which took place on the two days before Ash Wednesday, and they were often topical and nationalistic – so much so the government tried to restrict performances at times of particular social unrest.

The first recordings of calypso bands emerged in the 1920s, and there were frequent competitions to find the best ‘Calypsonians’. Stars such as Lord Kitchener, Harry Belafonte (who also performed mento) and Mighty Sparrow had major worldwide hits in the 1950s and 60s. Traditionally the genre featured a **steel band** – a collection of any number of steel pans fashioned from oil drums and covering all the parts from bassline to melody. Calypsos were usually upbeat with two beats in a bar and in major keys, and were known for their singalong choruses and enthusiastic dancing.

Calypso activity: listening

Lord Kitchener (aka Aldwyn Roberts) learned his craft in Trinidad but moved to the UK in the 1950s, where his songs became hits and he was revered as the voice of the British West Indian community. Start with 'London is the Place for Me' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGt21q1AjuI**) and ask your students to identify its characteristics by posing some of these suggested questions:

- What instruments are playing? Are these 'Caribbean' instruments?
- What clever 'sound of London' can you hear at the beginning?
- Is the song in a major or minor key?
- What aspects of the melody, words and rhythms make this song sound happy and positive?
- What similarities with mento can you hear?

Soca

Calypso went into decline in the 1970s, due probably to the increasing popularity of reggae and the strong influence of American music in the Caribbean. Unlike in Jamaica, there seemed no 'modern' incarnation of calypso in Trinidad and Tobago, until a Calypsonian named Garfield Blackman, aka Lord Shorty, experimented with combining traditional calypso with Indian rhythms and instruments. His new hybrid, called soca, became very popular with the large Indian population of Trinidad and Tobago, and soon took over from calypso as the leading music at carnival. Leading calypso musicians adopted the soca beat and continued to develop the 'crossover' between traditional Trinidadian music and Western pop.

Soca activity – composing

Listen to Shorty's international hit 'Soul Calypso' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVsdZFouGs4**). This song encapsulates the more modern party style that became synonymous with soca and resulted in mainstream dance hits such as 1983's 'Hot Hot Hot' by Arrow (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkGgdIBX1to**).

A good activity would be for students to work in groups to compose and perform their own soca song, using 'Soul Calypso' or a similar song as a guide, and including any or all of the following musical ingredients:

- A tempo of around 100-120bpm, with four beats in a bar.
- A regular quaver rhythm on shaker or maracas.
- A simple crotchet beat kept by cowbell or similar metallic instrument. Rhythmically these two rhythms will suffice, but bongos, congas or even a drumkit can be added if you have confident players.
- A two- or three-chord pattern played by guitar, ukulele, keyboard or bass (or any combination). I would suggest one of the following repeating patterns, with chord changes every two beats:
  - I – V – V - I
  - I – V – IV – I
- Lyrics: get students to listen carefully to 'Soul Calypso' and recreate their own words about having fun, being in the sun, moving to the music or whatever lively topic they fancy.
- Vocal melody: a simple, catchy refrain (in the style of 'Ah, la-la-la-la, Ah, la-la-la-la, Calypso music, Calypso music') with some simple, short verses in between. Get them to stick with only a few notes moving in step, and fitting with the chords.
- If you have players of melody instruments such as clarinet, flute, saxophone or violin, see if they can add a simple countermelody in the refrains or, if confident, take a solo.