

Film Review

– *Pimento and Hot Pepper: The Story of Mento Music*, directed by Rick Elgood. Bilmon Productions, 2017.

The Caribbean island of Jamaica has been world-famous for its reggae music ever since Bob Marley gained popularity in North America and Europe during the early 1970s. Over the past decades, and particularly since the 2010s, a plethora of documentaries have been made to understand and celebrate the genre and its main legend, with Kevin Macdonald's *Marley* (2012) undoubtedly as most prominent example. At the same time, the Jamaican folk genres from which the reggae sound evolved are also getting renewed attention and appreciation. A few years ago, *Legends of Ska: Cool & Copasetic* (2015) told the story of ska music, and now there is a new documentary on its predecessor, *Pimento and Hot Pepper: The Story of Mento Music* (2017).

Pimento and Hot Pepper is directed by Rick Elgood, the British director who created a sensation back in 1997 with the Jamaican feature film *Dancehall Queen* (which he co-directed with Don Letts). He has continued to work in the field of Jamaican audiovisual media ever since. In collaboration with Bill Monsted from Bilmon Productions, a production company based in New Orleans, Elgood started preparing *Pimento and Hot Pepper* as a small documentary project in 2008, a timing which he has called 'propitious' as many of the original mento artists passed away in the early 2000s. Over time, and as part of a broader resurgence of mento music that arguably started with the 2010 album, 'Great Expectation', of the legendary Jamaican mento band The Jolly Boys (their first in thirteen years), the project gradually developed into a one-hour documentary. The result received its world premiere last February at the Jamaica Music Museum's 'Reggae Month' 2017.

Pimento and Hot Pepper represents a unique historical document on mento that, for the first time in film, depicts the music's origin and evolution on the basis of archive materials, interviews with mento artists, musicologists and political and cultural personalities, and – of course – a panoply of musical performances. The story is told in chronological order, starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing via the heyday of mento in the 1950s up to the role mento now plays in Jamaica. Early in the film, the musicologists Garth

White and Daniel Neely explain how mento music originated from a fusion of African and European musical traditions, including quadrille, waltz, pocomania church music and work songs from the days of slavery. Their contextualization is helpful in understanding the circumstances in which mento music and dance came into existence.

Unfortunately, the input of these musicologists remains rather limited, with the result that following sections on mento instruments, the early post-war years, and the golden age of mento lack some substance and coherence. Instead, *Pimento and Hot Pepper* presents a quick-paced chain of anecdotes by artists – anecdotes that are definitely interesting in their own right, yet they remain fragmentary and almost random. Overall, the lack of a clear narrative, in combination with the ‘piecemeal’ of interviews, anecdotes and musical interludes, makes *Pimento and Hot Pepper* a somewhat premature documentary. Nevertheless, the film convincingly manages to demonstrate the importance of mento music in Jamaica before ska, rocksteady and reggae came along. Or to use Elgood’s own words (he is also the voice-over of the film): ‘Mento is Jamaica’s original foundation music, the father of them all’.

The timing of *Pimento and Hot Pepper* has indeed proven to be propitious, as many of mento’s founding fathers are no longer with us (fortunately, several of them are still featured in the film, as their interviews were recorded some years ago). *Pimento and Hot Pepper* captures and preserves the long road that mento travelled from the 1950s to the present. Despite its fragmentary and somewhat loose structure, the film has significant value as a historical document. The memories, anecdotes and performances of the numerous mento musicians, including Lord Tanamo, Theodore Miller, Ernest Ranglin and Monty Alexander, are of major historical significance – and a great joy for everyone who wants to know more about this early Jamaican folk music.

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