

“The Future of Reggae is in the Mirror”

[An article for the "Irie Up" Magazine in 2010.]

How the world would be if Finland would be the ruler of them all. Or not.

Finland, Land of a Thousand Lakes (187. 888, to be precise), home of Santa Clause, no. 1 coffee consuming country in the world, the Northland, where Aurora Borealis dances around and fairies and magical little creatures still exist. How does this fit into a reggae & dub magazine? Simple:

With a feature about the leading Finnish roots & dub collective *Intergalaktik Soundsystem* (IGS) who just visited Berlin for a heavyweight dub session with the local MoonBass Hi-Fi. Roving reporter Dub Rogue joined them to learn the Finnish things of life. And the result is that Sami Hyypiä is the oldest player who ever scored a goal in the German Bundesliga.

Since Finland has only about 5 millions inhabitants, it is not difficult to imagine that the roots & dub scene is even smaller than in other countries. However, the Finnish reggae scene is a surprisingly old one. Already in 1980, a reggae magazine called *Cool Runnings* saw the light of day and in 1983, *Black Star* (a record shop and radio show run by *Tero Kaski*) published the book “Reggae Inna Dance Hall Style” which is possibly the first book about soundsystem culture at all. Who would have believed that it is a Finnish production? No wonder that *Olli Dublifter*, one of the IGS-selectors and a former member of *Cool Runnings*, points out “the importance of the magazine and ‘Black Star’ for the Finnish reggae scene.”

Also in the 80s started a regular club night in the capitol Helsinki called *Punky Reggae Party*. There, all sorts of reggae styles were mixed together, just for fun and good vibrations. It was like a hot Caribbean flavour during ice-cold winter nights for the Finns. What seems to be unique in Finland is that the scenes are not as separated as in other countries and the people are still more friendly and open towards each other. A serious rootshead can go to a bashment party and a ska-lover joins for a heavy stepping dubnight. “Only lately did it start to divide more”, explains Olli, “mainly because the dancehall music took steps into other directions.”

It turns out that the Finns take their reggae not as strict as it sometimes happens elsewhere. They enjoy themselves more and like their freedom. It has possibly to do with the Finnish past, being constrained by their big oppressing neighbours Russia and Sweden. “There are also cultural differences”, explains *MC Nestori*, “you don’t have dances where people wouldn’t be drinking for instance. If there is alcohol for sale, a Finn buys it. It is usually a relaxed drinking culture, but if there occurs a fight, well, we are warriors, you know. But seriously, smoking herb is illegal and difficult in Finland, smoking cigarettes inside clubs is prohibited as well. So, people are used to drink rather than smoke.” – “Sometimes we do illegal underground parties though. Then you can smoke as much as you like”, adds operator and graphic designer *Lhuger*. – “And drink.” – “True.”

Nestori, who is also a part of the crew *MPV*, is a real teaser, always a joke in his mind. But he is still a conscious bredrin as it turns out. And he is the best-selling Finnish reggae singer in the Non-Finnish world. His secret is “a down-to-earth attitude, you know. I don’t pose too much, I’m just who I am, a humble one-hit-wonder, haha. It also helps that I sing in English, rather than Finnish, I suppose.” Indeed, while he is internationally the no. 1 Reggae-Finn,

within Finland, he has strong competitors with, for example, *Jukka Poika*, *Nopsajalka* or *Raappana*.

“Intergalaktik Sound had an international approach right from the beginning”, interjects Lhuger. “There are reggae labels focussing on the local market, with Finnish lyrics and a bit more poppy style. But IGS wanted to sound original, not typical Finnish or like yet another UK copy.” If you check out their releases like “Beat Down Babylon” which is voiced by their second singer *Jahvice*, you feel like wanting to agree with Lhuger: Based somewhere in the outskirts of UK roots style, you can hear the influence of glowing Northern Lights and the heat of the Midnight Sun in every bar.

Responsible for the music is *riddim-builder* *Mika*. The dubs are done by *Studio Red* which is not officially part of the IGS-collective but since the Finnish scene is so small, “we are all friends. It wouldn’t even make sense to have a real competition because all crews are some sort of connected to each other anyway. Like, IGS is actually a joined-forces collaboration of the former crews *AB-10* (Lhuger & business organisator *A-Roy*), *Uptown Selector* (Mika & soundguy *Kaitzu*), *Cool Runnings* (Dublifter), the band *Suhinators* (A-Roy & Nestori) and MC *Jahvice*.” Except for the MCs, all other guys have double functions with selecting being the second one. Still following?

While it looks quite tangled and complicated, the merging was done because “it was easier for the flyers”, laughs Olli. That was back in 2005. Five years later, IGS is a proper soundsystem, a record label and an alien life form resocialisation program (“Intergalaktik Terrestrials”).

As for Finnish roots sessions, whether organised by IGS or other crews like *Tulitauko*, they are usually well attended, partly because of a lack of alternatives. “One can find many non-reggae people joining the sessions. Actually, we prefer to call it roots *parties*”, claims Olli. “Maybe we’re a bit slacky. But in a positive way. It might have to do with the mentioned ‘Punky Reggae Parties’ back in the days that we give every style an equal chance although at the end we keep it mainly rootical. But we are not overly strict and serious. You can enjoy yourself and have fun and play good music, of course still with conscious vibes, but well, in a way it’s a lighter version of roots sessions.” – “Still heavy though”, Lhuger grins.

Nestori agrees. For him, laughing is the best medicine. “That strong seriousness is actually the point in my song ‘Leave it to Jah’: There is no need to be too strict to others or to oneself. No need for bad vibes. There are too many *don’ts*. But it’s about what you DO, who you are, not what you should NOT do. No judgement style, you know. Just leave it to Jah.”

More and more international acts realise the special Finnish vibes and drop by for a gig. Whether from Sweden (Meditative, Tesfa), Mid-Europe (Dub Flash, Cultural Warriors) or the UK (Bush Chemists, Dubateers, Manasseh, Russ D., Iration Steppas, Aba Shanti...), guests are always welcome and much appreciated by the crowd. There comes the typical Finnish humbleness in play again: Why would they extra come all the way up North to us? But fantastic that they do it anyway!

Locally, there are a few sounds operating in different towns: *Healing of the Nation*, *Tulitauko*, *Dub Culture*, *Jah Equity*, *Dub-a-delik* as well as live acts like *Dreadlock Tales*, *Suhinators*, *Tasottavat*, *Jenkkarekka*, *Lightman*, *Antti Mäkeläinen Allstars* and others. To mention some labels that are worth checking out if you are looking for some hard to get releases from Finland: *Black Hula*, *Fat Belt*, *Juurihoito*, *Wolfram Records*... And let us not forget the dancehall sound *Komposti*.

The percentage of reggae-people in Finland seems quite large compared to, let us say Germ?Any! When IGS organised a dub festival in a park in Helsinki in summer 2008, officials claimed that 5-7000 people walked by or stopped to enjoy the music.

Only Formula 1 is more important for Finns than their daily dose of dub. "Finnish people love their soundsystem, but they must watch Formula 1 first. Even if Channel One is playing at the Carnival and one extra travelled to London for that." That surely is a proper main principle. "IGS is like Formula 1... in the first gear", giggles Olli while Lhuger adds that IGS is the "Keke Rosberg of the soundsystems". Nuff said.

They are a bit different, the Finns. But loveable for sure. How could you not love someone who builds a soundsystem into his sauna to enjoy his *special* herbal water vaporising on the hot stones with an extra dose of bass in the background? Speaking about sauna, this of course is "the most Finnish thing one can do" and Lhuger invites all interested minds to visit them in Finland to "take a sauna in a summer cottage at a lake side".

At the end, let us come back to the controversial subheading of this article. Would the world be a better place if Finland would be the ruler of them all? Nestori: "I'm not so sure." Lhuger: "There are some really crazy people in Finland." Olli: "In the soundbusiness, it already rules the world." Knockout (in case you take this serious which of course you should).

But until the author forged a certain ring to make Finland the ruler of them all (and himself the ruler of Finland), he advises you to buy (and maybe listen to) the current Intergalaktik Sound 7'es which are available from your trusted record dealer and after that wait impatiently for the next releases. And in case you would like to experience the Intergalaktik Soundsystem live, you are welcome to invite them for a session to your town. The guys are looking forward to "more international gigs, seeing more places, meeting more people". You find them in the telephone book of Helsinki under "gymnastic exercise". Alternatively, visit their Myspace or Facebook:

www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=19890540185

www.myspace.com/intergalaktiksound

Bonus links:

reggaelicious.pbworks.com/Reggae+Inna+Dance+Hall+Style

www.lonelyplanet.com/finland

Ralf Wunderlich (2010)