

Reggae in Retrospect

As India's first reggae collective Reggae Rajahs turn seven, we take stock of how they fuelled an interest in the genre



ROUGH AND READY (From left)
Raghav Dang, Zorawar Shukla
and Amit Rahul

IF SHARING THE STAGE WITH SNOOP Dogg and Major Lazer and starting a reggae festival is any mark of success, it is safe to say that Reggae Rajahs have come a long way from their early days throwing laid-back dance parties in south Delhi back in 2009.

First cut

The first seeds of what would become Reggae Rajahs were planted back in 2008, when MC Taru Dalmia aka Delhi Sultanate and Mohamed Abood aka DJ MoCity joined up with fellow members of Delhi's After-shock Records crew to throw a soundclash [the DJ/soundsystem equivalent of a dance-off] featuring hip hop, reggaeton, reggae, and dancehall. "That show doesn't get much hype as a foundation thing," says MoCity, "but it was key in what we all are doing now."

Nearly a year later, on the eve of what would have been Bob Marley's 64th birthday, MoCity threw a Marley tribute night at Delhi's now-defunct Ai-The Love Hotel. That same evening, he was approached by two fellow reggae-lovers, Raghav "Diggy" Dang and Zorawar Shukla aka General Zooz, formerly Mr. Herbalist, and the three decided that a musical collaboration was in order. "I really didn't have any major expectations," explains MoCity, when asked what his initial hopes were with the project. "I just wanted to step away from the hip hop scene and do something more meaningful."

Not long after, the trio began hosting regular reggae nights in Hauz Khas Village's TLR Café. What started as intimate rum-punch fueled dances dominated by TLR's core crew quickly grew into a solid fixture of Delhi's music scene. "The fact that we had quite a few expats in our circle helped make things easier for others to digest, as they were already familiar with reggae beyond Bob Marley," he says.

Riding on new tides

But the Rajahs did face struggles getting their sound out there in the early days. MoCity credits a few early supporters, particularly TLR as well as Ai, with helping give the Rajahs their initial push. The timing was also ideal. "Delhi venues were moving towards a left-field vibe, trying to stand out from the rest," he explains. "It wasn't easy, but nothing valuable in the music scene is easy to obtain."

Despite initial challenges, the Reggae Rajahs' fan base steadily increased, and so did their opportunities to bring reggae sounds to new listeners across the country. In 2012, MoCity, who is originally from Iraq, relocated to Dubai [though he still returns to India regularly to perform with the crew]. The Rajahs headed out on their first European tour the same year. "There was a lot of interest in us because we were from India," says Zooz. "People reacted well to the songs

which we had mixed Indian elements into. We played up the Indian connection even further by wearing customised outfits with turbans!"

In 2013, the Rajahs opened for Snoop Dogg, who had taken a detour from rap at the time and was performing reggae as "Snoop Lion", right in India. Says Zooz, "Many people saw us at the Snoop Dogg show for the first time."

The group also took on two new members that year — Rahul Gairola aka Ziggy Blunt and Bader Essafi aka BeLights, based in Malta. In 2014, they toured Southeast Asia and South America for the first time and ended the year by opening for Major Lazer in Gurgaon.

Off the record

Although the Rajahs have put out over a dozen promos and mixtapes in their career, it wasn't until the end of 2015 that they released their first proper EP. The five-track *Beach Party* featured Zooz and Diggy Dang singing and MCing over riddims [instrumentals] from producers around the world. "We waited so long because we felt we weren't ready," says Zooz.

This year may very well be among the Rajahs' most transformative year to date. Plans are in the works for more tracks, touring, and possibly music videos. In January, the Rajahs were at the helm of launching Reggae Sunsplash in Anjuna, headlined by British ragga legend General Levy.

Reggae Rajahs have also joined forces with a number of other artists to build a massive speaker sound system, dubbed 10,000 Lions. The system consists of 12 custom-designed speakers developed specifically to enhance bass frequencies, making it ideal for reggae and dancehall music. "People in India have never heard reggae on a customised sound system like this," says Zooz. "It's going to change the game."

That there is a game at all says a lot about what the Reggae Rajahs and other major Jamaican music-influenced acts—notably Delhi's Ska Vengers and Hyderabad's Dr. Dub—have done for the scene in India. Says Zooz, "Indian audiences are much more receptive to reggae now than they were when we began. It's been a joy to see the progress!"

MARGOT BIGG

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