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Ring di Alarm: Riddim Magazine Makes Some Noise

-Laura Gardner
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Reggae publications often look as renegade as the artists they cover – pieced together busily with cut-and-paste images, color schemes that generate the same results as a whirl on Six Flag's "Vertical Velocity," and designs that jump continents from page to page. I say this with affinity because these run-come-up publications have passion behind them. Need money? No. Need a professional designer? Nah. Need talented writers? Not really. Need editors? Not today.

But there is an antidote to all of these guerrilla publications and it comes out of Germany, of all places. Riddim magazine was founded in 2001 and so far, they've published 27 German issues and have recently come with an English-language version (the fifth issue will be out soon). They're professional, have the resources to publish a top quality magazine, and it's evident that they adore the culture. The magazine's goals are to help spread the word, the music, the culture; and also to work against prejudices and clichés that surround the culture. "We want the music to enter the mainstream without losing its cutting edge," states Riddim's Editor, Ellen Kohlings.

I had a chance to speak with Kohlings who is stationed in Cologne, Germany. "The philosophy behind [Riddim] is to do justice to a genre with an amazing history and also an amazing future," she explains. "Reggae and dancehall have been neglected too long, at least in print media. Of course there exist magazines out there, but either they are not solely dealing with reggae/dancehall or their approach is totally different from ours." Riddim's approach is one of heterogeneity – their readers span in age from 7 to 70 and come from all walks of life. The Riddim staff is global, "We make sure that people who work for us share the same passion and love for the genre and the culture, which is the most important thing. They are professionals but on the same hand they are still curious fans," she states.

The first Riddim, back in 2001, was planned as a supplement to Juice magazine, a German hip-hop magazine, which is also published by Piranha Media. But the publishing company realized that it was time to do a Reggae magazine for the German market, especially since German artists like Gentleman, Patrice and Seeed became popular beyond German borders.

The first English-language edition came out in 2005, due to pressure from fans, artists, and industry folks. Kohlings explains, "Since we have been working with an international team of contributors already, it was just a logical progression to do so."

"No other magazine out there features every aspect of reggae/dancehall culture in depth," Kohlings emphasizes. "We try to cater for a whole range of people. We have short pieces as well as analytical in-depth stories and an extended review part. And we dare to even print six to eight page stories to portrait an artist. It's the mix which makes Riddim special." The magazine has had Beenie Man, Vybz Kartel, Damian "Junior Gong" Marley, Steven Marley, and countless other Jamaican dancehall artists on the cover. What's striking is that even though they are thousands of miles away from Jamaica, they stay current with their reporting. They're on top of it with up-and-coming artists as well as the big international stars. Not only that, they cover reggae and dancehall from around the globe – from the U.K., Germany, Senegal, Trinidad, and as far as Japan.

What have been some of the challenges? "It's not easy to find professional writers which at the same time are dedicated reggae/dancehall lovers," states Kohlings. "It took us quite a while to find those writers." But lucky for them, they found their contributors, and have the support from the big record labels like VP, JetStar and Greensleeves. What they need now is a greater readership. Not only does the magazine provide hours and hours of informative reading and it's pretty to look at, but each issue comes with a sample CD – now that's incentive!

To subscribe to the English-language magazine, visit www.magazinecafe.co.uk/riddim. The German website is www.riddim.de and the English site is under construction at www.riddimmag.com.

