

## 55. Desmond Dekker and the Aces

### You can get it if you really want

#### Background information and Performance Circumstances

- This song was written by the Jamaican musician and composer, Jimmy Cliff. Born in 1948, he has had a long career in music, and his songs have been recorded by many artists. He has also appeared as an actor in films, most notably 'The Harder they come' (1972), in which he plays a reggae musician.
- Desmond Dekker and the Aces made this recording, by some accounts rather unwillingly, in 1970, but it became a hit in the UK and America, reaching number 2 in the UK chart the same year.
- The style is *Rocksteady*, a sub-genre of Reggae, which, along with Ska, began to make an impact in the musical world outside Jamaica in the early 1970's.
- The subject matter of the song is in line with that of much Reggae and can be interpreted as part of the fight for justice. One of the strengths of the song's lyrics is that they can be applied to a variety of causes.
- The song mixes influences freely: Cuban/Mexican style trumpet lines, Ska and rocksteady organ and bass parts, and 'doo-wop' backing vocals, derived from 1950s American music.

#### Performing forces and their handling

- Lead vocals (Dekker), joined in the chorus by female backing vocals, singing in rhythmic unison above the melody. The close harmony style here is influenced by 1950s American music.
- Vocal lines are highly repetitive and use a relatively small range of notes, especially in the chorus.
- The lead vocalist uses falsetto at the end of Verses 1 and 2, in the final bar of the instrumental section, and during the fade out at the end.
- The rhythm section consists of the usual bass guitar and drums, with the addition of two electric guitars and an electronic organ – an instrument often used in Rocksteady, Ska and Reggae.
- Two trumpets are used, in unison and later in thirds, as at the beginning of the song
- In the instrumental section baritone and tenor saxes play a simple line, which is then heard in parallel harmonies when the trumpets join in.
- All of the Brass section ('the Horns') take over the main vocal hook in the fade out, allowing the lead vocalist to improvise against it.
- The Bass guitar part is repetitive and very much anchored to the beat, emphasising the first beat of the bar in particular (hence 'Rocksteady'). The bass sticks predominantly to the root of the chord.
- Tambourine semiquavers create extra excitement, while bass drum and snare play a backbeat (beats 2 and 4) rhythm almost continuously, a feature of both Rocksteady and Reggae.
- The drums play fills at the end of phrases.
- The brass provide both colour and weight, especially in the instrumental section.

#### Texture

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- The opening features Trumpets, playing first in unison and then in thirds.
- The voices operate as a homorhythmic unit in the choruses, singing in rhythmic unison.
- Homophonic textures are used throughout in the rhythm section to support the vocal line.
- The instrumental section states a riff in unison, and then harmonises, in rhythmic unison – another homorhythmic texture.
- The accompaniment drops out (stop time) at the end of the chorus, just before the words 'You'll succeed at last'. This textural change allows the positive nature of the words to come over.

## Structure

Intro	1-4
Chorus 1	4-14 (overlaps introduction with the pickup bar of the chorus)
Verse 1	14-25
Chorus 2	26-14 (notated as a repeat in the score)
Verse 2	14-25 (notated as a repeat in the score)
Chorus 3	26-36 (overlaps last bar of verse, and is overlapped by the Instrumental)
Instrumental	36-43
Chorus 4	44-53
Coda/Fade	54-end (repetitions of main hook)

## Tonality

- D flat major throughout, without modulations.

## Harmony

- Most of the piece is based around the three diatonic Primary chords of D flat major
- The introduction uses semitone steps between chords (C-D flat), an effect achieved easily on a guitar by sliding the same chord shape up a fret (barre chords).
- The chorus initially alternates between chords I and IV, changing every bar, but finishes with a V, IV, V7, I progression (bars 11-14).
- The verses uses a slightly wider range of chords, which initially change at a faster rate, and add chord III, F minor, before moving to dominant and dominant seventh chords (bars 24-25).
- The instrumental section uses 'unrelated' chords of E and D major in a passage of non-functional parallel harmony that provides some contrast to the diatonic nature of the previous material, especially as the bass moves in whole tones.

## Melody

- The main 'hook' uses a three pitch figure which dominates the song. Using the notes F, E flat and D flat, this idea spans a major third and is varied on its repetition by the ascent at the end of the phrase.
- The second half of the chorus adds the remaining notes of the pentatonic scale, i.e. the lower B flat and A flat.
- The verse adds the leading note C to the pentatonic scale but retains many of the same ideas as the chorus. The end of the verse involves a high falsetto passage.

- Most phrases are two bars long (exceptionally, the second half of the chorus - 'But you must try...' - contains one-bar phrases.
- Many of the phrases begin on the second beat of the bar.
- The word setting is mostly syllabic but there are short melismas, for example, on the word 'try' (bar 12).

### **Rhythm and metre**

- Strong quadruple rhythm throughout, with a characteristically strong emphasis on the backbeats (beats 2 and 4) in some sections.
  - Medium slow tempo - typical of Rocksteady and Reggae.
  - Bass is very much on the first beat, unlike Reggae.
  - Syncopated accompaniment and melody.
  - Vitality is supplied by the semiquaver tambourine and muted guitar pickings.
  - The drum fills feature triplet semiquavers, typical of Reggae and Rocksteady.
  - The steady quaver rhythms are threatened by the triplet crotchets at the word 'try', so underlining the 'struggle' of the words at this point.
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