Caribbean Currents

Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

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with

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Jamaica

There is probably no country in the world that, relative to its size, has had such a disproportionate impact on world culture as Jamaica. In the space of a few short decades, this postcolonial island nation of some 2.5 million people, with all its economic woes, has accomplished a feat that few other countries (and then only major economic powers such as the United States and Great Britain) have been able to swing: Jamaica has conquered the world with its music.

Jamaican popular music has gained the stature of a global musical currency, alongside jazz, rock, and rap. Nor has its international impact been limited to shallow commercial exploitation. In complex and varying ways, reggae has been adopted by a wide range of local communities around the world—Hopi and Havasupai Indians in Arizona, Palenquero Maroons in Colombia, urban youths in Nigeria and South Africa, working-class skinheads in Britain, Maoris in New Zealand, and aboriginal Australians, to name a few—as an expression of something deeper than mere entertainment. Some are moved by its spiritual values, others by its emphasis on pan-African identity or its expressions of class consciousness, and yet others by its message of universal liberation. For its part, dancehall has become just as globally popular, especially as it becomes adopted as a vehicle for local self-expression, in local languages, in places as diverse as Korea and the Congo. But underneath the carefully crafted pop sheen of much of the island's exported music—not to mention the less polished music produced for purely local consumption—lie deep and distinctive cultural wellsprings.

KUMINA CULTURE, 1976

Sitting at the dinner table across from me was an eminent patron of the arts, a grande dame known for her creative work in the local theater

Chapter 7 was co-authored by Kenneth Bilby (roughly to pp. 191–93) and Peter Manuel.

movement, which had been gaining ground since Jamaica's independence in 1962.

"I am a baan-ya," she told me in stilted patois, explaining that this was the Jamaican way of saying that she was a "born-here" person, a true native of the island. I (Ken Bilby) could tell that she wanted to dispel any doubts that might have been raised by her European features and rather British-sounding accent: After all, she was about to assert her authority on matters Jamaican, including Kumina, a Jamaican religion deriving mostly from traditions brought to Jamaica by African contract workers from the Congo in the mid-1800s. I had started a polite conversation about the Kumina drumming one might hear on any given night in certain neighborhoods of Kingston but quickly found myself being corrected. Kumina, she informed me, was the last vestige of true African culture in Jamaica and was certainly not a feature of urban life. In fact, she said, it had nearly disappeared even in the remote country districts. Besides, Kumina was a ritual involving animal sacrifice, and such things were not permitted in town.

One reason this conversation has stuck in my memory is that it provided me with a striking lesson in the width of the gulf that separates "uptown" (the social and literal space inhabited by the economically privileged minority) and "downtown" (the realm of the huge majority of disenfranchised ghetto dwellers) in Kingston and, by extension, in other parts of Jamaica. It is a social division that is fundamental to life in urban Jamaica, and nowhere is it more clearly reflected than in the history of Jamaican popular music.

The uptown cultural expert sitting across from me did not know that I had spent most of the night before at a Kumina ceremony in Hunts Bay, one of many impoverished, ramshackle neighborhoods in West Kingston—a downtown area that children of "respectable" Kingstonians are taught to avoid. There had been nothing unusual about the occasion. A member of the community who had died was being commemorated and was being asked for spiritual aid. What was out of the ordinary was that I, a foreigner, was present. The reason I was there was that the organizers of the Kumina ceremony had needed to find a way to transport a goat from the village of Freetown in distant Clarendon parish to Hunts Bay on sudden notice. Some Kumina drummers from Spanish Town, with whom I had been studying, knew that I had a rented car and had tracked me down to ask for help.

I remember the drive well. We arrived in Freetown to find that another Kumina dance was already in progress there. As we approached, flecks of light came rippling through the slats of the bamboo dancing booth, and shadows played across the ground. Someone came and guided us into the booth, where we were served Red Stripe beer while one of my companions was invited to

sit in on the drums. The music reminded me of a popular Ghanaian style called *kpanlogo*, but with a deeper, more resonant bass pattern, a rhythm like the beating of an excited heart, which I had been told was the spiritual root of Kumina, the "heart-string" connecting the living and the dead. The drummers were doing their work well: A man with a piece of red cloth tied around his head spun around with a few jerking steps and fell into a graceful dance between the drums. After a few moments, he approached me and took my hand, staring me in the eye and saying something totally unintelligible to me. "African language," some bystanders told me. "He's thanking you." Later, as we lowered the goat into the trunk, its hooves bound with rope, one of the drummers explained that the spirit of an "old African" had used the dancer's body to speak to me and offer thanks for the use of the car.

All the way to Spanish Town, the bleating of the goat in back made me uncomfortable. Someone suggested that we stop on the edge of the town for a drink before continuing on to Kingston, so we pulled up to a zinc fence with a small crowd of young men in front. Inside, the small makeshift bar was dwarfed by a massive bank of speaker boxes. The vibrations blasting out of them seemed to penetrate every fiber of my body. It was the loudest music I had ever heard—louder even than the overdriven Marshall amplifiers of a hard-rock concert, but with one main difference: the loudness was concentrated in the all-enveloping rumble of the bass rather than in the searing treble of live guitar-driven rock. The naked speaker cones jumped right out of the boxes at us, along with the words: "Jah live, children, yeah." Bob Marley's defiant answer to those who were ridiculing the Rastafarians by pointing to the death of their divinity, Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie, had just been released, and the streets were buzzing with Rasta reaction. After all, how could God die?

Back in the car, the Kumina drummers rolled a couple of cone-shaped marijuana cigarettes, or "spliffs." While lighting up, one of them, Bongo Jack, told me, "Some people call the herb 'ganja,' but in the African Congo language we call it *diamba*. The Rastas have learned the truth that the old Africans always teach us, you know; it's the wisdom weed." The younger drummer sitting in back nodded his head in agreement. Emblazoned on his T-shirt was the silk-screened image of a wild-haired Bob Dylan in dark sunglasses.

My passengers warned me to stay alert and keep an eye out for Babylon; a police blockade might appear at any moment. Once again, Marley's trenchant lyrics captured the moment. His famous refrain "three o'clock roadblock" kept circling in my head. As we zoomed through Central Village, Jack pointed out the Spanish Town Cask and Drum Company on the left, where Rasta *kete* drums were made to order. We had just heard the sound of one of these

Kumina drummers, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1975 (Ken Bilby)

drums, called the repeater, in Marley's "Jah Live." Jack explained that the Rasta repeater was "coming off the same root" as his own Kumina drum but was designed a little differently. In fact, he knew some other "Bongo men"—Kumina players—living in the Spanish Town area who liked the unique sound of the repeater drum and used it sometimes when playing for Kumina dances.

As we approached the outskirts of the capital, the smell of burning sugarcane came wafting into the car. The night sky ahead glowed an ominous red. It was January, and national elections were around the corner. The political violence was escalating, and everyone and everything seemed to be on edge, especially in war-torn West Kingston. My guides made sure that I made no wrong turns, for our destination was only a few blocks away from a section of the city that had been reduced to cinders a couple of days before, the latest casualty to the wave of political terror sweeping over West Kingston. Here we were only a few miles from uptown Kingston, yet we were worlds apart.

We turned a corner and pulled into a yard. There we were met by a couple of "gatekeepers," who guided us into a partially hidden recess where the car would be safe. Once the goat was out of the trunk and in the right hands, we were led through an opening in a zinc fence into the yard where the Kumina was being held. At least two hundred people were present, all of them strangers to me. Several did not remain strangers for long, though. Every few minutes,

a new person would come up and introduce himself or herself, telling me to feel welcome and not to be afraid, for although these were "dread" times in West Kingston, I had nothing to worry about: I was fully "protected" here at the Kumina. It was, I realized, a major ceremony. Friends and relatives from all over the eastern part of the island had come together to do their part. One man introduced himself to me as a Maroon from a community in the Blue Mountains, where descendants of escaped slaves had maintained their own culture and identity. Maroons and Kumina people, he said, were from "different nations." He told me to enjoy the Kumina, and suggested that I visit his village in the hills if I wanted to hear Maroon music, which, he said, was even "deeper" than Kumina.[1]

The feeling of harmony within the Kumina yard was underscored by the music. Early in the evening, a large group, mostly women, congregated on the side to sing "Sankeys" (a term applied by Jamaicans to a large variety of hymns, some of which were learned from the popular nineteenth-century hymnal published by the evangelist Ira David Sankey). The performance was loosely organized, with people coming and going as they pleased. Yet it held together nicely. Everybody seemed to know the words by heart, and many showed an uncanny ability to improvise individual melodic parts that somehow managed always to become woven together into a rich harmonic fabric. The sound was clearly derived from Protestant hymnody, but the performance style was wholly unlike the hymn singing found in most European or North American churches. People sang at the tops of their voices, swayed their bodies to the mellifluous rhythm, gesticulated, and leaned on one another's shoulders. Several of the singers stopped from time to time to take a swig of ***kulu-kulu***, the raw, overproof white rum that was being passed around.

Before long, the impromptu choir was singing psalms. A woman had worked her way out front, Holy Bible in hand, and the gathering was now "tracking" along with her. As the song leader read out the text, one line at a time, the others repeated after her in a complex, polyphonic chorus. The improvised melodic parts snaked over and under one another, creating surprising harmonies and dissonances. The ethnomusicologist in me told me that this particular kind of call-and-response singing, though clearly traceable to the tradition of "lining out" psalms that first became established in seventeenth-century rural Britain, was also fully compatible with the antiphonal style of music making brought by enslaved Africans to Jamaica. This was not just an idle thought, for I was well aware that Rastafarians sometimes performed hymns and psalms in the exact same way at their own ceremonies, which they called *nyabinghi*, viewing them as an expression of their African identity. I was also aware that the Afro-Protestant musical heritage of which this tradition

was a part had made a major contribution to Jamaican popular music through Rastafarian reggae and other channels.

There was no doubt whatsoever about the African origins of the drumming that was now picking up momentum in the center of the yard. The three drummers were seated on their instruments, which were turned on their sides. Two of them played rock steadily, keeping to a single, unvarying heartbeat pattern. On top of this, the lead drummer created excitement with skillful improvisations. All of the drummers used their heels against the skins to vary the pitch.

Next to them was a "center pole," through which certain spirits, summoned by the drums, could travel on their way to the bodies of the dancers they chose to possess. Around this center, a ring of dancers slowly rotated with a gentle counterclockwise motion. Throughout the night, this circle continued to revolve in time, contracting or expanding as dancers left and were replaced by others. The combination of sound and motion was subtle and beautiful. Even when the drumming became especially hot, lifting the excitement to a new peak, the dancing remained cool, graceful, and disciplined, with only an occasional disruption whenever one of the dancers' bodies, suddenly seized by a visiting spirit, was thrown temporarily into convulsions.

As daybreak neared, the goat made its final appearance, borne on the shoulders of one of the drummers who had accompanied me on the journey from Clarendon. Moving into the ring, the man danced the goat several revolutions around the center pole, waving a machete in his hand. The air was filled with one of the "African country" songs of Kumina:

tangalanga mama gyal yu kalunga
tangalanga besi-oo kalunga
tangalanga besi mama kalunga
tangalanga besi-oo kalunga

With no warning, the man stepped inside the ring and placed the goat on the ground. For a minute or two, the animal lay still on its side, while the man rejoined the moving circle. And then, as the ring came around one more time, it happened in a split second: The goat suddenly stretched out its neck. Without missing a beat, the dancer spun around and brought the blade down, severing the head with a single blow.

To the east, the angry hue of the Kingston night was giving way to a blood-red dawn. Within a few hours, the sleepless maids and construction workers would be back on the job, while their unemployed friends and relatives, as usual, would be wandering the streets and gutters in search of a meal, and uptown Kingston would be none the wiser.

ROOTS MUSIC IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Rastafarian brethren have a saying: "The half has never been told." This adage seems particularly true of Jamaica's musical history. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the story of Jamaican popular music will never be told in its entirety, not only because of the difficulty of teasing out the diverse strands that contributed to the music's early development, but also because of the unusual fluidity and complexity of the social milieu in which it emerged. During the decades leading up to the 1960s, when the seeds of Jamaica's indigenous popular music were being planted, West Kingston was a new and rapidly expanding urban fringe made up of migrants from various parts of the island. Recently arrived from "country," these sons and daughters of peasants—among them, the poorest of the poor and the least schooled of Jamaica's unlettered masses—were seen as scarcely worthy of the attention of those in a position to record in print the latest trends in Jamaica's social and cultural life. Yet it was they who laid the foundations of what was to become a thriving urban musical culture.

Located at the interface of the rural and the urban, the traditional and the modern, many of those who made important contributions to Jamaica's emerging popular music did so anonymously, in the course of their daily lives. The paths of musical influence were often convoluted and indirect, products of the innumerable musical encounters, both planned and spontaneous, that formed part of everyday social life in Jamaica's new urban spaces. Whether at church, in dance halls, at *buru* gatherings, in Kumina yards, or in any number of other musical contexts, these ordinary Jamaicans, possessing little or no formal musical training, regularly made music that fulfilled a variety of social functions. For them, the act of making music was enmeshed in community life. As humble practitioners of rural folk musical traditions transplanted to the city, most of these individuals went unheralded, and most of them are probably destined to remain unknown. Nonetheless, their voices echo down to us in the present.

The older musical languages that were available in West Kingston during the formative period of Jamaica's urban musical culture were many. Neo-African drumming traditions, some of them going back to the ceremonial and social dances held on slave plantations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had survived in several parts of the island. Among these were the *etu*, *tambu*, and *gumbe* traditions, concentrated in the western part of the island, and the *buru* tradition, found primarily in the central parishes of Clarendon and St. Catherine. Like Kumina drumming, some of these neo-African styles were tied to African-derived forms of religious worship. Most

of them employed an ensemble of two or three drums, one of which led with improvisations while the others provided supporting rhythms, and an assortment of percussion instruments such as rattles and scrapers. European influence was almost absent from these styles. Less familiar were traditions like the music played on the benta, a monochord made of a long bamboo log, played, as shown on page 185, with a gourd and a pair of sticks, used to accompany songs at wakes.

Much more widespread than these surviving neo-African forms were the musical expressions of Jamaica's hundreds of rural Afro-Protestant churches and sects, most of them variants of the general form of worship known in Jamaica as *pocomania* (sometimes spelled pukKumina), or "Revival." These indigenous religions were forged out of the nineteenth-century encounter between the religious concepts brought to Jamaica by enslaved Africans and the teachings of European missionaries. Like their religious practices, which included possession by both ancestral and biblical spirits, the music of these groups blended African and European influences. Many Revivalists used a combination of two or three drums—one or more "side drums" played with sticks (often equipped with a homemade snare) and a bass drum played with a padded beater—to accompany their singing. Sometimes other percussion instruments and hand clapping were employed, as well. While the melodic style of many Revivalist hymns, such as the ubiquitous "Sankeys," was European-derived, some songs were of more mixed derivation, and certain other features of the music, such as the drumming and the form of rhythmic breathing known as "groaning" or "sounding," betrayed a clear African influence. These *Poco* or Revival churches were scattered across the island. Over time, they spread to the larger towns and cities, and today they remain a force to be reckoned with not only in the Jamaican countryside but also in poor urban neighborhoods.

Not all of the older musical traditions available to Jamaicans during this period were religious. Before the 1950s, the closest thing to an indigenous popular music in Jamaica was the mento. Though its exact origins are obscure, it is clear that the mento was born of a creolizing process that blended elements of a variety of European social-dance musics with African-derived stylistic features. Varieties of European-derived ballroom dances such as the quadrille, the lancer, and the mazurka were popular in Jamaica both during and after the era of slavery, and the instrumentation, harmonic structures, and melodic contours that typified them contributed much to the music played by village bands across the island until recent times. To the fiddles, flutes, and guitars of these rural bands were added banjos, rhumba boxes (bass instruments with plucked metal keys), drums, rattles, scrapers, and other instruments wholly or partly of African origin. This creole social-dance music, originally

A benta being played in Islington, St. Mary, Jamaica, 2002 (Ken Bilby)

European-sounding, eventually acquired a new rhythmic feel because of the African-derived aesthetic preferences of the musicians who played it.

It is not clear exactly how and when mento emerged from this background, but its linkage with these older, creolized European dance styles can still be heard in the common practice of replacing the fifth (or sometimes sixth) figure at quadrille dances with a "mento" (sometimes called a "round dance"). By the 1940s, the term "mento" had already come to embrace a fair amount of variation. Mento could be performed by ensembles consisting of little more than a harmonica and a few percussion instruments, by rural string bands featuring banjo and guitar, or even by large orchestras that included piano, trap drums, and a brass section. The musical style called mento had also long been associated with a genre of topical songs reminiscent of other Caribbean styles, such as calypso. Indeed, by the 1940s, mento was already being influenced by Trinidadian calypso (and was itself exerting an influence on the music of the other islands). Cuban influence is also suggested by the frequent use in mento of the "rhumba box"—like the Cuban marimbula—as well as the fact that in some rural parts of the island, the words "mento" and "rhumba" (a common misnomer for *son*) are used interchangeably to refer to the same musical style.

(In its original rural form, played in the eastern part of Cuba, the *son* sounds rather similar to mento as played by Jamaican string bands, making use of similar instrumentation.)

Add to these musical forms several kinds of work songs used to accompany a wide variety of chores in rural Jamaica, and the list of potential musical resources expands. Nor does the list end there. We must not forget the fife-and-drum music, of mixed African and European parentage, associated with the masked dance known as *jonkonnu* (or "John canoe") in most parts of the island. The list goes on; a host of other, less-well-known musical traditions could be cited. Some of these, such as the "digging songs" used in cultivating and planting crops or the "ring-game" songs used for rural entertainment, have long been leaving their mark on mento. In fact, certain songs commonly performed as mentos today actually originated as digging songs or ring-game tunes.

This ongoing tendency to absorb songs, melodies, and other stylistic elements from a variety of sources helped to make mento a sort of generic Jamaican folk music—a kind of synthesis of Jamaica's varied traditional musics. Over time, it became the closest thing to a Jamaican "national" music, known and appreciated across the island. Unlike many of the other forms mentioned here, mento had no special association with any particular community, region, religion, or social group within Jamaica (though it continued to be identified with its rural Jamaican roots). As a musical form capable of speaking to those who were flowing into the capital city from all over the island, mento was well positioned to serve as the basis of Jamaica's first wave of indigenous popular musical expression.

Following World War II, the nightclubs of downtown Kingston were driven by the music of dance orchestras, or "road bands," modeled in part on the African American big bands of the United States. Jamaican bandleaders presided over a steady diet of North American jazz and swing standards, supplemented by an occasional Cuban number. Other Caribbean styles, such as merengue and calypso, were also popular on the dance floors. Jamaica's own mento, however, was viewed with a certain ambivalence by these pioneering urban dance bands. Some looked down on it as "coming from country" and dismissed it as unsophisticated; others performed it with relish. Regardless of how they viewed the style, almost all bands featured at least an occasional mento to satisfy audience demand.

In contrast to these new dance bands, the older guitar-and-banjo mento bands that could also be found in the environs of Kingston at the time seemed to be on the wane. Some of them, however, found new life performing in tourist venues, where they often presented themselves as "calypsonians" in an attempt to benefit from the popularity then enjoyed by the somewhat similar Trinidadian calypso. Despite this misleading use of language, most Jamaican "calypsonians" were really mento singers who continued to perform in the indigenous Jamaican style.

MUSIC INNA DOWNTOWN STYLE: RECORDING THE UNRECORDED

When a businessman named Stanley Motta opened the first commercial recording venture in Kingston in the late 1940s, mento was the kind of music that caught his attention. Thus it was that the first local popular music that began to circulate on record was a form of mento that, though somewhat urbanized and occasionally featuring new instruments such as piano and traps, remained for the most part very close to its rural roots. Like the rural mento tradition from which their music was derived, these artists' recordings sometimes contained social commentary, but more often they consisted of reworkings of older digging songs or ring-play tunes. A portion of their output also reflected the increased emphasis on bawdy or suggestive lyrics acquired by mento in the context of urban clubs, where the pelvic-centered dance movements associated with the style had become more pronounced and had taken on a more erotic cast.

These early efforts at recording mento were overshadowed in the late 1950s by a new phenomenon, the "sound system," which would play a crucial role in Jamaican popular music over the next few decades. Indeed, it continues to play a vital role even today. In neighborhoods with limited financial resources, live dance bands were seldom affordable. The advent of increasingly powerful audio systems provided a solution: The owner of a set consisting of little more than a turntable, a few heavy-duty speaker cabinets, and a souped-up amplifier or two could now produce sufficient volume to draw large crowds to yard parties and "blues dances" and keep them dancing through the night. By the late 1950s, such sound systems were proliferating in downtown Kingston. Two of the early operators most often mentioned in accounts of this period are Clement "Coxson" Dodd (1932–2004, whose system was known as Sir Coxsone's Downbeat) and Duke Reid (known as The Trojan). Although these two stand out for the tremendous influence they had and for their longevity, literally dozens of less-well-known sound systems—sporting evocative names such as Admiral Cosmic, Count John the Lion, and Count Piah the Blues-blaster—operated in the metropolitan area in the early days. These systems played what their urban patrons wanted to hear: the hot African American rhythm 'n' blues then reigning in the United States, with special preference

shown for the New Orleans sound. But most of them made room for a certain amount of variety, spinning an occasional Cuban dance number, perhaps, or a calypso, and almost all of them played at least some mento records. The many competing sound systems at this time also included a number of mobile sets that toured rural areas and catered to more traditional tastes, and they tended to play a larger proportion of mento tunes.

A major impetus for the development of a local recording industry came when North American R&B began to take a new direction toward the end of the decade, so that it became increasingly difficult for sound-system operators to import U.S. recordings in the styles favored by Jamaicans. In this fiercely competitive world of small entrepreneurs, the ability to obtain exclusive copies of "hot" records and to keep them out of the hands of other operators could make or break a sound system. To offset the dwindling supply of records from the United States in the preferred style, some sound-system operators invested in basic recording equipment and began pressing records of local artists performing R&B. Two of the most important recording studios in the history of Jamaican popular music, Coxson Dodd's Studio One and Duke Reid's Treasure Isle, got their start in this way, as did a number of others.

Before long, these local recordings were displaying subtle evidence of stylistic change. Jamaican R&B was beginning to differ, though only slightly, from its North American counterpart. All of these circumstances—increasing rural—urban migration, the growing popularity of sound systems, the birth of a local recording industry, and the growth of a Jamaican style of R&B, increasingly taking on a sound of its own—coincided with a unique and critical period in Jamaican history. The Federation of the West Indies, to which Jamaica had belonged since 1958, was disintegrating, and Jamaica was on the verge of political independence, which was finally achieved in 1962. The prevailing mood of nationalistic pride encouraged an increasing openness toward indigenous cultural expressions—at least in the arts—and stimulated a certain amount of conscious musical experimentation with rural folk forms. It was in this general climate that Jamaica's first truly new and distinctive form of urban popular music, known as ska, emerged.

Most observers agree that the style that came to be known as ska developed gradually, as Jamaican studio musicians began to alter the basic rhythmic structure of the U.S. R&B music that they were accustomed to playing. This process of modification continued imperceptibly for some time, until eventually it could be said that a new, distinctively Jamaican style had come into being. But here the consensus ends. Precisely because this emergent popular music was a product primarily of downtown musicians, producers, and audiences, beyond the pale of "respectable" uptown society, the circumstances

Selector (Coxson Dodd) with deejay (UrbanImage.tv/Bernard Sohiez)

Guarding the sound system (UrbanImage.tv/Adrian Boot)

of its genesis were not carefully documented by the local media. In fact, they were hardly documented at all, and today we are left with little more than the recordings themselves and the testimonies of those who participated in their making. As a result, there is a good deal of controversy and sometimes even acrimonious debate over the question of origins.

Some have taken the position that reggae, apart from the R&B contribution, is derived essentially from mento; others say that it owes most to Revival and other Afro-Jamaican cult rhythms; and yet others say that it can be traced to *jonkonnu* music, or even to military drumming. The problem with such competing claims, aside from the fact that it is virtually impossible to prove or disprove them, is that they presume a simple, linear path of development from a single, original Jamaican source, with each new "stage" of the music (such as rock steady, reggae, or dancehall) representing a stylistically uniform extension or outgrowth of the one that preceded it. Throughout all the stages, the influence of the main, original source is supposed to have remained predominant. But Jamaican popular music has evolved in a considerably more disorderly manner than this and has always been stylistically more heterogeneous and complex than such a view would suggest. In fact, if one allows for the possibility of constant, multiple influences from many traditional Jamaican sources, varying in importance over time, then all of the arguments for different origins can be said to have some validity. Indeed, I would argue—as a number of others have—that the urban popular music of Jamaica, like mento before it, represents nothing less than a synthesis of many diverse stylistic influences, both Jamaican and foreign, the balance of which has continued to shift over time.

From this perspective, it is pointless to debate, for instance, whether the characteristic driving rhythm played by horns and other instruments in ska (and apparently carried over to the guitar and piano in much reggae) is derived from the hand clapping of Revival churches, the beat of the timekeeping Rastafarian *funde* drum (in one particular early style of *nyabinghi* drumming),

♩= 140

OR:

Musical Example 15. The ska rhythm

or the strumming of the banjo in mento, all of which display a similar emphasis on the offbeat. Both ska and reggae would remain open to stylistic influences from traditional sources, some of which might result more from a kind of organic "osmosis" than from conscious intent.

There is no doubt that local studio musicians have brought to Jamaican recording sessions a wealth of varied musical experience. For example, most members of the Skatalites, a seminal ska band, received formal training at the Alpha Boys School, an orphanage and home for the underprivileged in depressed West Kingston, where they and many other prominent local artists learned the rudiments of European classical music, jazz, and marching music and discovered the joys of brass-ensemble playing. They were also well versed in U.S. R&B, as they had to be to survive as session musicians during the period leading up to the birth of ska. Meanwhile, trumpeter Johnny "Dizzy" Moore claims that, rather than any of the traditional Jamaican styles, it was the European "martial" drumming he encountered during his time at Alpha and later in the army that had the strongest influence on his playing and that it was this that led to the development of the ska "beat." In contrast, tenor saxophonist and fellow Alpha alumnus Tommy McCook cites as a rhythmic inspiration the regular visits he made to the camp of Rastafarian master drummer Count Ossie (Oswald Williams), beginning in the late 1940s, where he would often sing along with the Rasta chants and sometimes jam on saxophone with the drummers. Clearly, if one were to poll a larger number of early Jamaican studio musicians or to probe in greater depth, a yet broader range of experience would come to light, and a number of other opinions regarding sources would doubtless emerge. Thus, much of "the half that has never been told" remains untold to this day.

ROOTS AND CULTURE: DOWNTOWN TRIUMPHANT

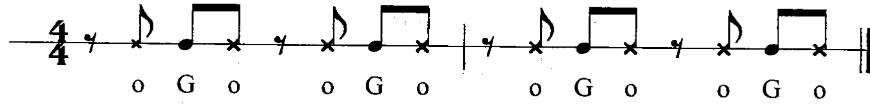
The 1970s were a momentous decade for Jamaica. They were a period of great sociopolitical upheaval and the era that saw the full flowering of reggae—or, more specifically, the style that retrospectively came to be known variously as roots reggae, classic reggae, or foundation reggae (as opposed to dancehall). The '70s can also been seen as the period in which various trends in Jamaican music came to fruition. One of these was a process of maturation in which Jamaican popular music, after getting off to a rather late start, quickly acquired a level of extraordinary sophistication and expressive power. If much '60s ska consisted of little more than tentative cover versions of American R&B tunes (with that certain Jamaican rhythmic twist), by the early '70s top reggae artists like Bob Marley and producers like Lee Perry were in complete control of

their idiom, fully endowed both with inspired ideas and the technical ability to realize them.

A concurrent trend was the intensifying international dissemination of Jamaican music, which, unlike Cuban music, had enjoyed no particular foreign presence until the "My Boy Lollipop" ska hit of 1964. In 1968, a bigger impact was made by the independent, black-and-white feature film *The Harder They Come*, which merged the figure of a famous rude boy with that of an aspiring reggae singer, played by the real-life singer and composer Jimmy Cliff. The film became a cult classic in the United States and the United Kingdom, and Cliff's LP by the same name soon became a standard fixture in Anglo-American record collections, alongside Led Zeppelin and the Beatles.

The biggest international stardom, however, was enjoyed by Bob Marley (1945–81), especially after he signed with Island Records' owner, Chris Blackwell, in 1972. Under Blackwell's guidance, Marley beefed up the Rasta look, foregrounded the electric guitar, added the gospel-sounding female backup trio, the I-Threes, and started producing nicely packaged LPs rather than singles. To American and British youth who had come to feel that rock had lost its countercultural edge, reggae and especially Marley's music seemed like a fresh sound—tuneful, rhythmically compelling, idealistic, and somehow untainted by commercialism. Marley and the Wailers (as of '74 without former sidemen Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer) went on to attain phenomenal global appeal, successfully touring the United States, Europe, and Africa and inspiring fans and imitators everywhere from Senegal to Sri Lanka.

Perhaps paradoxically, the international vogue of reggae paralleled a process of indigenization in which Jamaican popular music became in many ways more distinctly Jamaican. Along with the post-independence search for a national identity came the growing feeling that Jamaicans should return to their roots for inspiration. Although recordings in the transitional rock-steady style (ca. 1966–68) continued to draw heavily on North American soul music, the underlying rhythm, with its characteristic medium-tempo chugging, had become more distinctively Jamaican, perhaps influenced by the mento that rural migrants brought from the countryside. By 1968, when reggae proper became established on the scene, indigenous influences were becoming even stronger, partly as class-consciousness was converging with increasing cultural assertiveness. The popular expression "roots" came to refer as much to the downtown ghetto experience of suffering and struggle as to the African sources of Jamaican culture. Accordingly, by the '70s, cover versions of American songs had given way to original compositions, and reggae had acquired such a distinctive sound that it couldn't be regarded as simply a spinoff of American music.



Musical Example 16. The classic reggae rhythm (o = organ, G = guitar)

The "Jamaicanness" of reggae style may derive from a number of sources. Some have argued that reggae's slower tempo and distinctive syncopation comes from mento, with its similar banjo or guitar strumming patterns, especially as introduced by migrants from the countryside in the late '60s. Indeed, the seminal 1967 reggae song "Nanny Goat"—whose "riddim" (accompaniment track) was endlessly recycled—was unmistakably mento-based, as were other songs. Also noteworthy was the Afro-Protestant musical contribution. Even the Wailers, before fully embracing the Rastafarian faith, recorded a number of Revival-influenced spiritual songs during the ska period. With the ascendance of Rasta-oriented reggae, those elements of traditional Rastafarian *nyabinghi* music that derived from Revivalist sources were transferred to urban popular music, lending much of '70s reggae a hymn-like quality that would be familiar to the ears of churchgoers all over rural Jamaica. The melodies and chord progressions of many Rasta reggae songs, as well as the biblical language and prophetic messages that typify the genre, owe much to Revivalism. Yet another influence was local versions of Afro-American gospel singing, whose inspiration is particularly audible in case of the Maytals.

Much Jamaican music had become local in lyric content as well as in style. Local producers, who emerged from the sound systems, aimed for the largest record-buying market, and in Jamaica this meant the struggling masses of ordinary citizens. Thus, it was not long after the appearance of ska that popular music in Jamaica began to reflect the social tensions caused by the glaring divisions between elitist, bourgeois, uptown society and disenfranchised but increasingly self-conscious and assertive downtown. Many ska songs of the '60s sang of the shantytowns, of the travails of the "sufferers," and, ambivalently, of the rude boys who, in a milieu of poverty and instability, sought respect in street-corner machismo and petty or not-so-petty crime. In 1976, Max Romeo epitomized this class tension in a reggae song that told of how "uptown babies don't cry, they don't know what suffering is like." And when Bob Marley, on the brink of international fame, sang, "Dem belly full, but we hungry," those living uptown felt compelled to listen. These musical developments both reflected and helped shape major changes taking place in Jamaican society.

RASTA AND REVOLUTION

Linked to these trends was the rapid growth of the Rastafarian movement, especially among poor urban youth. By the 1970s, the Rasta emphasis on African roots, black redemption, and social awareness had become the dominant force in Jamaican popular culture. The roots of Rastafari lie in the teachings of Marcus Garvey, an early advocate of black pride and mobilization. Born in Jamaica in 1887, Garvey attracted some notoriety as a labor activist there and among Panama Canal workers and left Jamaica for the United States in 1916, hoping to seek a more receptive audience for his evolving creed of Afrocentricity and black self-reliance. In the United States he founded the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which urged black people to take pride in their African ancestry and bypass white domination by developing their own networks of support and sustenance and, ultimately, by "returning" to Africa. He founded a steamship line, the Black Star Line—at its peak consisting of four ships—which sought to establish trade links between black communities in the Americas and, eventually, Africa. The UNIA attracted tens of thousands of followers, along with the interest of the FBI, which regarded Garvey as a troublemaker. The young J. Edgar Hoover, who would later persecute Martin Luther King Jr. so effectively, set out to neutralize Garvey, who was imprisoned in 1925–27 for financial irregularities and then deported. Back in Jamaica, he continued preaching and developed a small but devoted following; he later moved to England and died in poverty in 1940.

In 1927, Garvey reportedly gave a speech urging followers to "look to Africa, where a black king will be crowned." And lo, in 1930 it came to pass, as one Ras Tafari Makonnen, with great pomp and circumstance, declared himself emperor of Ethiopia, taking the name Haile Selassie. Ethiopia, although it had no cultural connections to the slave trade or to black America, had already enjoyed a certain visibility among African Americans. It was the only independent country in a black Africa otherwise carved up by European colonial powers; it was also predominantly Christian, and the term "Ethiopia" had long been used as a synecdoche for "Africa" in general (including in the St. James Bible). Thousands of Jamaicans began worshiping Selassie as God, the returned Messiah, and Garvey as his prophet. The fact that both Garvey and Selassie (a devout Christian) disowned this belief made little difference to the growing number of Jamaicans who, alienated both from orthodox Christianity and African-based religions like Kumina, sought an alternative faith that celebrated rather than disparaged their African ancestry.

Rastafari evolved in many respects as a reinterpretation of Old Testament beliefs, taking inspiration from the tale of the "chosen people" taken in bondage from their home, Zion, to Babylon, where they lay and wept. "Babylon" thus encompassed Jamaica, the New World, and the entire "shitstem" of white neocolonial domination (even if enforced by black cops, or "Babylon bwoys"). More implicitly, it was a state of mind to be transcended. Rasta preached going "back to Africa," which could be interpreted in a figurative sense, of reorienting one's sense of identity, or literally, as in the case of the hundreds of gullible Jamaicans who purchased steamship tickets to Africa in the '50s, only to find they had been duped by scam artists. The Old Testament was also the source for dietary restrictions on alcohol, salt, pork (or all meat), and shellfish. For its part, the flaunting of long dreadlocks derived both from the tale of Samson and Delilah as well as a desire to invert traditional racist notions of "good hair" (straight) and "bad hair" (dark and kinky). In Rasta imagery, the biblical lion (of Judah) became the quintessential animal role model, perhaps in contrast to the humble Anansi the spider, the African-derived trickster figure. Although ganja (marijuana) was celebrated as a vehicle of spirituality, Rastas cultivated an ethic of clean and healthy living, represented in its own way by Marley and friends, who could often be seen jogging around Kingston and playing soccer.

Rastafarian musicians during a Sunday service at the African Reform Church of God, Braes River, St. Elizabeth, Jamaica, 2000 (Ken Bilby)

Despite its idiosyncratic Afrocentricity, Rasta had little to do with the real Africa, which functioned more as an imaginary utopia. Rastas had little use for the surviving aspects of West African culture in Jamaica (like Kumina) and instead looked over the heads of their West African cousins to focus on remote and culturally unrelated Ethiopia. Perhaps most important, however, was the way that Rasta, for all its contradictions, enabled or even obliged Jamaicans to confront and challenge the Anglocentric, colonial mentality that had dominated local ideologies for so long. Hence, while Rastas never constituted more than a small minority of Jamaicans, many others felt inspired by aspects of their image.

A Rasta ethic and lifestyle came to coalesce in the Pinnacle commune led by Leonard Howell, and the breakup of that community in 1954 served to spread the faith as brethren relocated in cities, paving the way for the dramatic growth of the movement in the '70s. Reggae became closely linked to Rasta, most visibly in the image of Marley, and the two movements thrived together, preaching spiritual renovation, lamenting the domination of Babylon, and predicting its fall ("Babylon, your throne gone down"). As the British-based group Steel Pulse sang:

> I curse the day they made us slaves
> How can we sing in a strange land? . . .
> One God, one aim, one destiny
> Rally round the [UNIA] flag, the red, gold, black, and blue
> the right direction: Africa, Africa.

The merging of Rastafari consciousness with reggae led to one of the most fertile periods of Jamaican popular music. This new surge of musical creativity helped to spur a Rasta "cultural revolution" that affected the entire society. Even many sons and daughters of the upper and middle classes began to take on the trappings of the Rasta faith. The international success of Bob Marley and the growing interest in the Rastafari movement in other countries helped enlarge the market for reggae in other parts of the world, which in turn gave a boost to the local music industry.

Hard-core Rastas shunned sociopolitical activism, regarding politics as a corrupt "shitstem" that would be swept away in the impending apocalypse. Progressive politicians like Michael Manley and internationally oriented artists such as Marley implicitly presented a more moderate form of this creed, in which anticipating the fall of Babylon could be interpreted as a fundamental optimism cohering with the general spirit of the '70s. Like their counterparts in other recently independent countries, many Jamaicans felt that they were poised to throw off the yoke of neocolonial (especially American)

Bob Marley (adapted by Peter Manuel)

domination, allying themselves as need be with the Soviet bloc and other Third World countries. In 1972, Manley (1924–97) and the People's National Party (PNP), riding a crest of mass mobilization and enthusiasm, came to power with a moderate socialist platform of demanding better payments from the multinationals mining Jamaica's bauxite, distributing that wealth to the poor, and seeking assistance from any quarter, including accepting Cuban doctors. Manley courted the Rastas and reggae fans in general, and many reggae songs praised the PNP and its idealistic commitment to the "sufferers." Echoing in worldly terms the impending fall of Babylon, many PNP supporters thought that Jamaica and the Third World could at last overcome imperialist domination. Innumerable reggae songs focused on a set of interrelated themes of shantytown life, social justice, Rastafari, socialism, and a general sense of optimism, as in Marley's "Small Axe," portraying him felling with his hatchet the huge tree (of imperialism? Babylon? exploitative record companies?).

The '70s were the heyday of roots reggae, with Marley, Jimmy Cliff, Peter Tosh, Toots and the Maytals, and other groups enjoying healthy local and foreign record sales and international stardom. Yet by mid-decade their music, although respected on the island, was already regarded by most young Jamaicans as a distinctly "international" and already somewhat old-fashioned style. Unlike in the Spanish Caribbean, few live bands performed in Jamaica, where roots reggae had evolved largely as a studio art

form, whose leading exponents were generally on tour "a' foreign." Instead, when young Jamaicans went out to dance on a Saturday night, they danced to the beat pumped out by that distinctly Jamaican entity: the sound system.

As we've seen, the basic elements of the sound systems had dominated Jamaican musical life from the '50s: a towering bank of speaker cabinets, each big enough to house a family; a "selector" with one or, later, two turntables, choosing from a collection of 78s that included not only familiar hits but also exclusive, custom-ordered specials; a throng of devoted followers, who were not above attacking members of a rival "sound"; an accompanying informal economy of hawkers, hookers, and hangers-on; and, increasingly in the '70s, the charismatic focal figure of the deejay, who "chatted," in a half-sung, half-rapped manner, over the instrumental B-side of a record. While the international market and local radio promoted Marley and roots reggae, it was the young deejays like U-Roy and Big Youth and innumerable aspiring stars who entertained dancers in ground-level Jamaica itself, chatting about the pleasures and vicissitudes of street life and "bigging-up" (praising) the sounds, their audiences, and themselves. The parallels with rap, which emerged in the Bronx around 1980, are striking, and some have argued that Jamaican immigrant and sound-system operator Kool Herc played a seminal role in adapting his talents to the New York scene. Like early rap, the deejays' art was primarily live rather than recorded.

Besides hits and their B-sides, the records played by the sound systems often featured a new genre called "dub," consisting of innovative remixes of contemporary hits. The starting point for a dub record was the instrumental flip side of a record, which sound systems would play for deejays to chat over, or for dancers to sing over. From the early '70s, recording engineers like King Tubby and Augustus Pablo (d. 1999) took the art of remastering a step further, manipulating filters, faders, echo effects, and the like to alternately cut out and then reintroduce various tracks (drums, back-up vocals, guitars etc.), adding reverb and other effects and perhaps even bringing back snippets of the original lead vocal. Though produced in the studio, dub was meant to be heard "live" in the sound-system dance, where dancers and listeners would revel in the surrealistic deconstruction of familiar songs, now presented as perpetually mutating rhythm tracks conceived and ideally consumed under the spiritually medicinal effect of ganja. Sound-system operators would often appear at the studio of King Tubby or another mixologist on the morning before a show, requesting a fresh dub for the evening's entertainment. Together with the deejays, the constant flow of fresh dub versions provided a sort of spontaneity to sound-system shows that more than made up for the absence of live bands.

Meanwhile, the dub records enjoyed their own market appeal, sometimes even outselling the records they were based on.

Dub, as a remix genre, should not be confused with dub plates (discussed later), rub-a-dub-dancing, or dub poetry. The socially conscious lyrics of dub poetry exist in both written and aural form—in the latter case, performed with reggae beats. Among its major practitioners are Oku Onuora, Mutabaruka, the late Michael Smith, Jean Binta Breeze, and the London-based Jamaican poet and music historian Linton Kwesi Johnson.

THE END OF AN ERA AND THE DAWN OF A NEW ONE: FROM REGGAE TO RAGGA

As the 1970s progressed, events conspired to crush the PNP's heady aspirations of chopping down the tree of imperialist domination with its small axe. The formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the quintupling of oil prices in 1973, while constituting a bonanza for nearby, oil-endowed Trinidad, hit the Jamaican economy like a steamroller, and the prospect of getting more money from bauxite sales turned out to be illusory. Washington, D.C., which resented Manley's playing footsie with Cuba, discouraged American tourism and started funneling weapons via the CIA to Manley's rival, Edward Seaga ("CIAga," according to graffiti), leader of the more status-quo Jamaican Labour Party (JLP). Rivalry between the two parties degenerated into bloody gang warfare, culminating in the deaths of more than seven hundred people in the 1980 elections.

In that election, frustration with PNP corruption and failures led to victory for the U.S.-friendly Seaga—just as the elections of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher marked decisive right turns in United States and the United Kingdom. The mood of the Jamaican public seemed to change overnight. No longer at the forefront was the vision—whether socialist or Rasta—of overthrowing imperialism, casting down Babylon, or returning to Africa. For its part, roots reggae, linked to this declining spirit of messianic optimism, suffered further setbacks. The death, from cancer, of Marley in 1981 was followed by the gang-style murder of Peter Tosh in 1987 and a most indecorous scramble for Marley's inheritance. The gifted, if highly eccentric, producer Lee Perry burned down his studio in 1979 and dropped out of the scene. Youth interest shifted decisively from roots reggae to the artful chantings of the deejays, which in the mid-'80s came to be called "dancehall." In a situation where denouncing the government could be mortally dangerous, the deejays retreated to the politically safe topics of sex and boasting.

In considering the dramatic contrasts in style and aesthetics between roots reggae and dancehall, it is tempting to regard Jamaican music as having completely reinvented itself in the early '80s. Such a view, however, would be somewhat inaccurate. For one thing, roots reggae did not fizzle out entirely. Indeed, it took on a new life overseas, in the form of British-based bands like Aswad and Steel Pulse, and in the music of African bandleaders like Alpha Blondy of Ivory Coast and Lucky Dube of South Africa. Further, Jamaicans like Beres Hammond, Barrington Levy, Gregory Issacs, and Frankie Paul, and even the Haitian Wyclef Jean, perpetuated the style, and the '70s songs of Marley and others continued to enjoy popularity as "classics."

Moreover, 1980s dancehall did not evolve overnight, as if from a vacuum, but can be seen as the logical evolution of the deejay/sound-system music that had dominated the island's dance-music scene throughout the '70s. Perhaps the main change in the late '70s was that what was once, like early rap, a primarily live art form now came to be widely marketed on records. While U-Roy is regarded as the first to record his chats (in the mid-'70s), in the early '80s he was out-chatted by a new crop of deejays. The most prominent of these was Yellowman, an albino orphan who deserves credit for successfully promoting himself as a sex idol ("the girls dem a mad over me"). By the end of the decade, with the emergence of deejays like Ninjaman, Super Cat, Shabba Ranks, and the often lyrically artful Buju Banton, Spragga Benz, and others, the modern idiom of dancehall was in full flower.

The stylistic differences between roots reggae and dancehall (outside Jamaica variously referred to as ragga, dub, bubbling, or rub-a-dub) are so pronounced that it seems odd that they both are referred to as "reggae." The trademark "skank" rhythm of classic reggae persisted in many '80s dancehall songs, but by the end of the decade that beat was just one possible rhythm among many and is seldom heard in modern dancehall. The Ur-format of guitar, bass, and drums (and possibly organ) also became at best optional, if not obsolete, especially after the vogue of the 1985 hit "Under me Sleng Teng," with its purely synthesized accompaniment (according to some usages, the trademark of "ragga"). Even the language of the two genres differed: Much classic reggae used standard English, often with a biblical flavor, while dancehall reveled in the expressive power of Jamaican patois/patwa, often delivered at high speed, and if Yankees or local uptown elites had trouble following it, then too bad for them. Moreover, much roots reggae generally used conventional "song" format, with original compositions with flowing melodies, changing chord progressions, and verses and refrains. Dancehall, by contrast, typically features the deejay intoning verses in what is often a short, repetitive tune ("chune") superimposed over a "riddim" (rhythmic accompaniment), which generally consists of a repeated, and often digitally generated or reproduced, ostinato. Unlike rap, the verses are usually sung in a simple, repeated melody rather than spoken, but deejays are in some respects classed differently from roots-reggae–style "singers," and if a deejay like Shabba Ranks intones quite out of tune with the tonality of the riddim, no one seems to mind.

The riddims themselves acquire a special importance and have a unique role in the music system. Rather than being originally composed for each song, many riddims are recycled—like many other things in a low-income place like Jamaica. The reuse of riddims, indeed, had begun in the 1960s, as producers found they could remix old materials from their vaults to provide backing for new releases, thus reducing their dependence on session musicians and arrangers. Nowadays, a dozen or so riddims may be in vogue at any given time. Many of them used to derive from the B-sides of Coxson Dodd's Studio One roots reggae classic songs, like "Nanny Goat," but by the latter 1980s, most were original creations of producers. The riddim could be named after the original song that popularized it (hence the "Sleng Teng" riddim), or it could be given a name by its producer (as in the "Diwali" riddim of the Miami-based producer Lenky Marsden). Typically, the producer, having created a new riddim (or an imitative "re-lick" of an existing one), would hire deejays to "voice" over it and would handle the marketing of the resulting recording himself. A deejay could voice (both live and on record) the same verses over different riddims, and, conversely, he could record and sing different voicings over the same riddim. In a dance club, the selector might play a medley of songs using the same riddim—a technique called "juggling." (The use of a digitally generated ostinato invites comparison with hip-hop, but in rap there is no custom of recycling beats or riddims in innumerable different songs.)

While some critics complain that the reliance on pre-existing riddims is uncreative, it should be noted that many deejays are very prolific, often recording thirty to forty songs a year. Accordingly, each week as many as two hundred seven-inch singles are released on the Jamaican market. The deejay (or "artist") must compose or somehow acquire both lyrics and a tune. Many of the tunes are original, but many others, like riddims, are recycled from earlier recordings, and there is also a certain free-for-all borrowing of snippets from other sources, be it Michael Jackson or Curtis Mayfield. The reliance on pre-existing riddims is also democratic in the sense that both the established star and the newbie are competing, as it were, on the same turf; no one can hide behind the producer's talent.

Producers of hot riddims, like Marsden and the veteran duo of Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare, are driving forces of the music. Some producers,

like Dave Kelly, are also composers who dole out their songs to appropriate artists. In Jamaica, most recordings, as produced in small but well-equipped home studios, consist of seven-inch vinyl singles, but especially due to local piracy artists certainly aspire to get material on CDs put out by foreign labels like VP Records (New York), Jet Star, and Greensleeves (Britain). A riddim can typically "buss big," on records and in shows, for several months or a year, before becoming a "dead stock."

While aficionados appreciate the talent and importance of behind-the-scenes producers, and the sound systems are the key institutions in dances and clashes, there is no doubt that in the realm of recorded music as well as at special concerts, the focus is on the deejay or artist. The best of them command catchy tunes, clever, pithy verses, strong voices, and an electrifying performance style. Their voices have variously included the booming baritone of Shabba Ranks, the dour monotone of Cutty Ranks, the smooth and silky tone of Sean Paul, the gruff, almost spooky voice of Elephant Man, and the gravelly, orchestrally rich rasp of Buju Banton, Sizzla, and Capleton.

TELLIN' IT LIKE IT IS, FROM "CONSCIOUSNESS" TO "SLACKNESS"

If dancehall differs dramatically from roots reggae in style, it also encompasses a broad range of values, some of which contrast markedly with those of classic reggae. Revivalist Rasta ideals of casting down Babylon and returning to Africa certainly persist in the "conscious" dancehall of Capleton, Sizzla, Luciano, and others. At the same time, other aspects of dancehall culture seem antithetical to those of the preceding generation. If Marley celebrated spiritual values over materialism, modern deejays sport gold chains and drive luxury cars. And in contrast to Rasta's pieties and invocations of Africa, much dancehall foregrounds the nitty-gritty perversities of street-level reality: the violence, the struggle for respect, and the pleasures of dancing and, last but not least, of sex. As young, downtown deejays reclaimed Jamaica's indigenous popular music from the pretensions of international marketers aiming to please cosmopolitan audiences, it became harder for foreign consumers of that music to romanticize the experience from which it springs or to see in it an entirely "progressive" response to social injustice.

The diverse values of dancehall culture, like those of classic reggae, are evident in the public personae of the stars, the album covers, the dress and behavior of fans, and perhaps most overtly, the song lyrics. To be sure, listeners may often ignore the lyrics, especially on the dance floor, and like rap, the main emphasis even of the verses may be less their message per se than their driving

delivery and the artful, rhythmically compelling play of rhymes, alliterations, and other devices. But there is no doubt that lyrics are an important dimension of dancehall, just as they are in rap, constituting both a uniquely expressive art form and an articulation of a worldview.

With dancehall releases and unrecorded live songs numbering in the thousands each year, song lyrics address an infinite variety of themes. Many might be classified simply as "topical" in their documentation of the vicissitudes of Jamaican daily life, from Beenie Man's anti-gun "No Mama No Cry" to Lovindeer's 1988 "Hell of a Blow-Job" regarding, of course, Hurricane Gilbert. A random look at one song—Buju Banton's "Deportee: Things Change"—may give some idea of the realism typical of dancehall lyrics. This song portrays the fate of young man who makes it "a' foreign," living the good life with "Benz and Lexus" and girls massaging his shoulder and pouring his coffee. But he has ignored his family and friends at home, only to be deported as a criminal, and arrives broke and friendless:

> Yuh neva used to spen' no money come a yard
> Yuh wretch you, yuh spen' di whole a it abroad
> Squander yuh money now yuh livin' like dog
> Boy get deport come dung [down] inna one pants . . .
> Mama dung inna di hole, an' 'im don't buy her a lamp
> Not a line, not a letter, nor a fifty cent stamp.

Unlike some roots reggae songs that ethereally praise a mythical Africa or bewail Babylon, "Deportee" portrays, with specific, concrete imagery, the ups and downs and moral failures of a real-life individual who seeks success in Brooklyn or Notting Hill rather than Ethiopia. Many other dancehall songs can be seen as perpetuating, albeit with more detail, the orientation of ska and roots reggae toward the shantytown "sufferers," as in Bounty Killa's verses:

> Born as a sufferah, grew up as a sufferah
> Struggle as a sufferah, make it as a sufferah
> Fight as a sufferah, survive as a sufferah
> Yutes inna di ghetto, well di most a dem a sufferah.

In songs like "Untold Stories," Buju Banton seemed to be taking up the mantle of Bob Marley in his poignant depiction of the travails of the underclass:

> What is to stop the youths from getting out of control?
> Filled up with education yet don't own a payroll
> The clothes on my back has countless eyeholes.

In such conditions, the quest for street-corner status generates another favorite song topic: gun talk. Many '60s songs, like Marley's "Simmer down"

and Desmond Dekker's "007," had sung of the rude boys in a noncommittal manner. Overshadowed in the '70s by the spirituality of Rasta roots reggae, in the '80s rude boy culture came back in the music with a vengeance and was often unequivocally celebrated, as in Vybz Kartel's "Guns like Mine":

> Dem nuh got no guns like mine, no KG-Nine
> A coppershot a buss dem big head and bruck spine
> Me gun will tear yuh like a table cloth . . .
> People find yuh body piece piece and think a chicken parts.

The glorification of guns and violence may be primarily rhetorical, especially insofar as it expresses the theatrical rivalry between deejays. As Shabba sings, "When me talk about gun it is a lyrical gun, a lyrical gun dat people have fun." Similarly, producer Scatta Burrell says, "It's better than taking up a gun a pointing it in a man's face."[2] But it is also more than just metaphor. Fistfights have erupted on stage between artists, such as celebrated ones between Bounty Killa and Beenie Man and between Ninjaman and Vybz Kartel. A number of artists, including Peter Tosh, Tenor Saw, Mickey Simpson, King Tubby, Henry "Junjo" Lawes, Bogle, and Pan Head, have been murdered, and Marley himself was shot in 1976. Accordingly, counterbalancing the gun-talk songs is the equal number of songs—by some of the same deejays—that call for unity, peace, and an end to street violence. Hence, Buju Banton, grieving the loss of Panhead and Simpson, sang in "Murderer":

> Murderer! You insides must be hollow
> How does it feel to take the life of another?

The macho gun talk overlaps with another favorite theme, consisting of the boasting of the deejay. In rude-boy tradition, many deejays assume mafia-style sobriquets, like Bounty Killa, Ninjaman, or Shabba Ranks (the name of a famous gunman). Deejays can boast about their abilities as fighters, their skill "'pon the mike" (as proved by the song itself), or their popularity with the ladies. Hence, Shabba is "Wicked inna bed," and Super Cat says, "Me big an me large, nuff gals gimme massage."

The contrast of such lyrics with those of Rasta-oriented roots reggae is striking. Some people regard them as shallow and narcissistic compared with the idealism of the Rasta singers, but such songs also reflect what could be seen as a healthy sense of self-empowerment. Rather than singing of the ancestral victimhood of slavery, or the righteous defiance of the Rasta, the quintessential dancehall deejay might more typically celebrate his worldly success and attainment, as embodied in his Benz, his vocal skills, and his "truckload a' girls."

Indeed, whatever dancehall's merits or shortcomings, dancehall is the music of the new generations of downtown sufferers and rudies, and it speaks resolutely to their own experience and does so in the contemporary language of the still growing Kingston underclass. Many youths of this class defiantly adopted the derogatory term "ragamuffin." In the words of the ragga singer Half Pint, "Raggamuffin [is] a youth who grow up outside where him can stand the weather and no havin' no flu, him can stand hunger, him can stand a pain, him can endure."[3]

The affirmative and upbeat tenor of dancehall is also evident in its orientation toward dancing (as the name suggests). Innumerable songs, especially by artists like Elephant Man, concern dancing itself. The music is intended to be heard not on an iPod in the subway but in a yard or club, where women joyously display their bodies and custom-made attire and dominate the dance floor, often dancing together rather than with men. New dance moves emerge every few months. The basic movements of Latin styles like salsa/*son* and merengue have been around for seventy years, but each year sees several new dancehall styles. Women are particularly active as performers, promoters, and sometimes even creators of the new styles, which they learn from friends, videos, or demonstrations at stage shows. Some of the most popular dances are inventions of professional choreographers, such as John Hype, who promotes some of his creations in the context of shows and videos with Beenie Man. All the dances have names, such as Bogle, Pedal an' Wheel, Sesame Street, and Jerry Springer. Some, like Thunder Clap, are associated with particular riddims. Many are mimetic, such as Signal da Plane (light up your cell phone, wave it around), Internet (move your fingers as if typing), Butterfly (flap your knees like wings), Mock di Dread (whip your hair around like a Rasta), and Log On (pretend you're stomping on a gay man—more about that later). But don't go trying these dances, as they're already out of date, and as Sean Paul warns:

> So from ah gyal nuh up to date we deport dem
> Cyar [can't] keep up to de change we report dem.

It remains to mention the broad category of dancehall songs that concern "slackness" (lewdness, ribaldry), as opposed to "consciousness" or "culture." Slackness, far from being new, was a prominent feature of traditional mento, and it certainly persisted in classic roots reggae–from Marley songs like "Bend Down Low" and "Lick Samba" to Clancy Eccles's "Open up!" (You pussy sweet, gyal!). However, in the roots reggae period, slackness was to some extent overshadowed by more spiritual songs. But in the early '80s, when Yellowman asked his audience what they wanted, consciousness or slackness,

the crowd's shouted answer was unanimous and for many yardies represented a gleeful and explicit rejection of the pristeen snobbery of the "uptown" bourgeoisie. Hence, the paeans to pumpum, the sexual braggadoccio, and the anatomical details of "Titty Jump." As one Jamaican student pithily wrote in a term paper, "Dancehall artists sing about everything from politics to punanny. Mostly punanny." Sizzla's songs, for example, range from the pious "Explain to the Almighty" to the X-rated "Pump Up Her Pum Pum." The very name "dancehall" ultimately derives from its slackness, which kept much of it banned from the radio ("Not Fit for Airplay," or NFAP) and hence relegated only to the dance venues. But ultimately more important than the degree of slackness in dancehall may be the *kind* of slackness and the ways that men and women are portrayed—a topic that needs further comment here.

FEMALE DEGRADATION OR LIBERATION?

A foreign critic looking for instances of what at least *looks* like sexist objectification in dancehall culture could write volumes. Videos typically portray the male stud surrounded by scantily clad models; CD compilation covers look like porno ads; and lyrics routinely objectify women as punnanies rather than personalities. The portrayal of sex often seems violent and aggressive. "Me ram it and a jam it till the gal start to vomit," sings one deejay, while Buju chants, "Gal me serious, haf to get ya tonight, haf ta get your body even by gunpoint." Other songs have titles like "Bedroom Bully" and "Kill the Bitch," and deejays like Beenie Man (in "Yaw Yaw") boast about how many women they impregnate. The image of having a "trailorload a' girls," while indeed a reality for a few stars, could be seen as catering to the most adolescent male fantasies. Several songs by male deejays, perpetuating a rich African American art of witty insults (as in the "dozens"), mock women for their perceived imperfections, as when Elephant Man sings:

> Tanya Stephen, Lady G, Lady Saw wi love dem,
> Saw knee knock, G have a belly problem,
> Tanya Stephens foot big like Captain Bakery bread dem.

However, the ambivalence in such verses can also reflect how dancehall culture is contradictory and in many ways celebratory in its portrayals of women. Rastafari, as articulated by reggae singers, kept women in the background and had a certain streak of misogyny, with Peter Tosh calling women "instruments of the devil," and Marley saying, "Woman is a coward, man strong." But dancehall, for all its frequent vulgarity, foregrounds women, and especially their sexuality, in a way seldom encountered in classic reggae. Hence,

Beenie Man's "Slam" praises the sexual prowess of ghetto gals, and songs like his "Girls dem Sugar" and Buju's "Gal ya Body Good" eulogize women with a hefty "Coca-Cola bottle shape." Songs like "Tight Pum Pum" may objectify women, but they also praise them—or, at least, parts of them—and women are well aware that their sexuality and desirability can enable them to exert a sort of power over men. Women at dances who strut their stuff in batty-riders (tight shorts) and "bare-as-you-dare" outfits revel in the desire they can stimulate, as articulated in songs like Red Rat's "Tight up Skirt":

> Hey you girl inna tight up skirt, ya mek me head swell til me blood vessel burst
> Hey you girl inna de tight up shorts, ya speed up ten more beats to me heart
> hey you girl inna de tight-up blouse, everytime you pass me you get me aroused.

As Carolyn Cooper points out in her book *Sound Clash,* the lyrics of several songs by Shabba Ranks, for all their slackness, encourage men to respect their women and urge women to demand good treatment from their men. The specific favors in question can be more pragmatic than sentimental, as when he enjoins women, in inflationary times, "Aren't you gonna raise the price of your pussy too?" Similarly, in "Flesh Axe" he tells men,

> But every woman need mega cash fi buy pretty shoes an pretty frock
> Woman love model an dem love fi look hot
> She can't go pon di road and look like job lot
> Every woman a go call her riff-raff look like a old car mash up an crash.[4]

There are only a few female artists around to challenge the male fraternity of deejays, and their songs present different sorts of female perspectives. The message of Ce'cile's "Respect Yuh Wife" is as straightforward as its title suggests, and equally assertive is Tanya Stephens, who, mocking her ex's "toothpick," tells him, "Well you used to work me once but you can't touch me no more." Often the images are more controversial, as in the case of Lady Saw, who embodies some of the contradictions of dancehall as a whole. Saw is a powerful and talented singer who can "ride the riddim" as well as the best male deejays. She sings in different styles about a variety of topics but is best known for songs like "Stab out the Meat," in which she describes her lovemaking at a level of detail that makes Yellowman sound like an altar boy. In her stage shows she is liable to grab the nearest man, throw him to the floor, and simulate sex with him. From one perspective, such antics constitute a soft-core porn show, aimed at the male gaze of hooting and hollering men. From another view, though, she presents the image of an empowered woman,

in full control of her sensuality, demanding that her man be strong and "solid as rock." Far from being a passive boy toy, she sings,

> When me waan me man me just demand me ride
> take out me whip and like a jockey me a glide.

Whether her persona is liberating or degrading to women may depend on one's point of view.

The general status of women in Jamaican society suggests another perspective on dancehall. Many Jamaican women are economically dependent on men, but they are proverbially strong rather than submissive and are celebrated for the rhetorical skill and vigor with which they can "trace" or verbally humiliate men with a torrent of abuse. Moreover, there is a strong tradition of women's independence (bred in part by generations of absent fathers). Many women have been owners of small farms since the 1800s, and many operate market stalls. More significant, for several decades women have constituted about two-thirds of college students and graduates and are increasingly coming to rival male dominance of urban white-collar professions. From one perspective, the up-front sexual politics of dancehall represents a sort of grassroots negotiation of positions in a changing society.

LOVE MUSIC—OR HATE MUSIC?

In fall of 1992, Buju Banton's song "Boom Bye Bye" was enjoying steady airplay in New York, and its verses, unlike those of many dancehall songs, were sung slowly and clearly. When a "translation" was circulated, explaining that "batty boy" meant "gay," many listeners could easily follow the vicious message:

> Two men necking and a lay down inna bed . . .
> send for the 'matic and the Uzi instead
> shoot the batty boy come let we shoot dem . . .
> Boom bye bye in a batty boy head.

Complaints were made, the media took notice, and a minor uproar ensued. The *New York Post*'s headline screamed "Hate Music," and protests were staged against the stations that played it. When Shabba Ranks defended Buju and offered the humble opinion that gays should be crucified, his scheduled appearance on the *Tonight Show* was canceled, and he was dropped from a high-profile tour with Bobby Brown. With the cancellation of a prominent New York concert, Buju's own international career had also definitely hit a speed bump. And when he stated that he didn't actually advocate anti-gay violence, he was derided by Jamaican deejays and journalists for kowtowing

to the "special interest" group of panty-clad Yankee "chi-chi men," and he subsequently revoked his apology.

In retrospect, what seems remarkable is not Buju's song but the fact that it was singled out among so many hundreds of other gay-bashing dancehall songs such as are still played on U.S. radio and that often have titles like Capleton's "Burn Out the Chi Chi." Despite—or perhaps because of—the increasing public space being achieved by gays in Jamaica, homophobia is one of the most common and popular themes of dancehall. Sometimes most of an entire night's show, presented by several deejays, will be devoted to lyrics that incite hatred and violence against gays. Mike-men routinely shout, "Everyone who hates batty boys put ya hand up in de air!" Most of the top deejays reiterate such sentiments in several songs, as in the following:

Beenie Man:
> A from me burn chi-chi man and we go burn sodomite
> And everybody bawl out say "that's right" . . .
> Cause when we burn chi-chi man nuttin' nuh wrong
> ("That's Right")
>
> Batty man fi dead, shoot up dem bloodclaat
> ("Batty Man fi Dead")
>
> I'm dreaming of a new Jamaica, come an' execute all the gays!
> ("Damn")
>
> Hang chi-chi gal wid a long piece of rope
> ("Han up deh")

Sizzla (when not singing "Love amongst my Brethren"):
> Nuff girl out dere . . .
> So how come some bwoy turn out batty man?
> Me say, cock the gun and kill out every one
> ("Nuff Girl out There")
>
> Shoot batty bwoy, my big gun boom
> ("Pump up")

Elephant Man:
> Battyman fi dead! Gimme the tech-nine, shoot dem like bird!
> ("A Nuh fi we Fault")

Bounty Killa:
> Burn a fire 'pon a puff and mister fagotty
> poop man fi drown an' dat a yard man philosophy
> ("Another Level").

T.O.K.:
> Chi-chi mon, from dem a par inna chi-chi man car
> Blaze di fire make we bun dem!
> ("Chi Chi Man")

And even the uptown heart-throb Sean Paul:

> Den yuh got some fuh-funky guy weh a try imitate ooman,
> Dem dey fassy deh we nuh want dem up inna we island . . .
> from yuh nuh like dem guy deh mek a hear shout BLAM BLAM.

As with gun-chat songs, reality often parallels the rhetorical violence. Between 1997 and 2004 alone, more than thirty gay people in Jamaica—including the country's leading gay-rights activist–were murdered, and many more were savagely beaten. A few were doused with acid and set afire by mobs shouting, "Fiya burn!" In summer 2004, Buju Banton himself was facing arrest for taking part in a group assault on six Jamaican gay men.[5]

Explaining the obsessive homophobia of the deejays and many other Jamaicans may be a task for sociologists and psychologists, although we can well imagine what Freud would say about it. Many onlookers have wondered how people historically victimized by bigotry and intolerance can show the same traits themselves. For their part, the deejays, deeply religious as they say they are, generally cite the biblical injunction against homosexuality (though they don't seem to cite the command that anyone who is rude to his parents or works on Sunday should be killed, or the Levitical instructions on selling your daughter into slavery). From another perspective, in a post–Cold-War, globalized economy, where the traditional neocolonial enemies have evaporated, gay-bashing gives Jamaican deejays a way to portray themselves as waging a new sort of righteous moral crusade—in this case, against the decadent sodomites of Babylon and their deluded defenders. Both doggerel about punanny and gay-bashing macho gun talk can thus be seen as honorable and virtuous.

In recent years, dancehall stars like Bounty Killa, Beenie Man, Sizzla, and Capleton have been finding their European and North American concerts canceled because of protests or being tolerated only if they promise not to vent their homophobia. Singers can also face legal charges in Britain and Canada, where songs that advocate killing gays violate hate-speech laws. Artists are increasingly finding themselves obliged to choose between catering either to the rudies in the yard or to the foreigners, who include not only handfuls of outspoken gays but also other open-minded people who care about things like human rights.

SOUND SYSTEMS AND SOUND CLASHES

Sound systems, as we have seen, play an important structural role in reggae culture. Typically, when one goes out on a Saturday night to a dance—be it

in Kingston, New York, or Birmingham—one goes to hear a sound system rather than a live band. The system will bring its own equipment, whose key elements are a vast record collection and a towering wall of speakers, whose bass vibrates your chest and the beer in your bottle and in Jamaica can often be heard two or three towns away. More or less as in the '50s, the system also has its own personnel of "selector" (who spins the records), a mike man who hypes up the crowd between or perhaps during songs, various gofers, and possibly one or more deejays (vocalists). The mike man (MC or "mike-chatter") must have a lively stage presence, rousing the crowd with shouts of "From a bwoy nuh badda dan you, han' up in di air," or, more pithily, "Bumba-claat!" (a favorite all-purpose exclamation).

Let's hear how a visiting Jamaican American woman, who as a New York clubgoer is familiar with the latest dances, describes a Saturday night dance—in this case, a "Passa Passa" sound-system dance in Kingston's Tivoli Gardens:

> First I went shopping with my girlfriends to get the sexiest outfit that I could conjure. Then, on the way to the session, I thought that we were nearby when we heard the music very clearly, but it turned out that we were not close at all, but the music was just that LOUD. Reaching the session, we saw that it was not in a dancehall but in the middle of the road. But unlike in American block parties, the road is not blocked at all. The speaker boxes are stacked high on the sidewalk and you have the choice of either going deaf there or dancing in the road. Most, including myself, chose the latter. However, while dancing in the road you may be interrupted by a passing bus, car, or handcart, but once they have passed the pulsating music sweeps you up once again and you continue dancing. Most of the session can be compared to the "Electric Slide" song being played at an American party. Everyone knows the songs and the dances that accompany them. Whether you are in high heels or Timberlands, all across the road everyone joins in, expertly dancing the moves announced by the [deejay], like "Signal di Plane," "Summer Bounce," "Thunder Clap," or "The Blaze," among many others. It was the most exciting dance experience I have ever known![6]

In addition to providing music at dances, sound systems release records (whether legitimate or pirate compilations) and often have associations with specific producers and deejays. However, the most distinctive sort of event featuring the sounds is the sound clash. This is a musical duel between two (or possibly more) sound systems, held at a club or yard and attended by hundreds of enthusiastic "sound followers." While the sounds may play some familiar songs, on the whole the emphasis in a sound clash is on a uniquely Jamaican entity called the "dub plate."

A dub plate—also known as a "special"–is a short recording made by a deejay (or "artist") in which he sings a few lines, usually to the tune of a

familiar song of his, substituting new verses that "big up" a particular sound system, which he mentions by name. The dub plates are not mass-produced or sold in stores; instead, a sound system will contract a deejay to make the dub especially for it. Cheap dub plates can be gotten from the small-time, aspiring deejays who hang out around Jamaican studios, but a big name like Bounty Killer may charge a few thousand dollars for a dub plate. (He may also take his pretty time to get around to recording it.) Audiences thrill to hear new dub plates by current stars, but they also enjoy dubs by deceased figures like Tenor Saw and Garnett Silk (d. 1994). Such recordings can be heard only at the sound clashes (or on the videotapes of them that circulate widely), as they are the exclusive property of the sounds.

Accordingly, the most popular sound systems are those, like Killamanjaro, Bass Odyssey, and Stone Love, that have been around for a few decades and have managed to accumulate hundreds of dub plates from artists so that they have a box (of dubs) that is "deep as the ocean." Jamaican pride notwithstanding, respected sounds come from all over, including David Rodigan (a white Brit), Mighty Crown Disco (from Japan), One Love (from Italy), and Massive B (from New York). In fact, even many Jamaican fans prefer the non-Jamaican sounds, as they tend to have more money and can acquire dub plates from all the top artists, sometimes arranging special duets.

A clash generally starts with rounds in which the sounds alternate in thirty-minute segments, then proceed to fifteen-minute segments, and then battle "dub fi dub" to put a "murderation" pon one another. Audience members—who tend to be mostly male—don't come to dance during the clash proper, especially since the dub plates are short and are perpetually interrupted by the MC's shouting. Instead, fans come to hear the dub plates and the lively banter of the MCs and to savor the competitive spirit of the event. If fans like a song, they may light and wave lighters and cell phones, shoot guns in the air, and shout for a "forward"—that is, for a repeat of the song. Conversely, a song deemed lame will elicit calls of "Next selectah!" or "Rinse the bloodclot tunes!" The excitement reaches a climax in the dub-fi-dub section, when the best dub plates are brought out. Generally, a panel of judges decides the winner on the basis of audience response.

Much of the fun of the clash scene comes from the rivalry, which rages not only at the clashes but also in international cyber-forums like the Internet, whose participants might as easily be Malaysian as Jamaican. To get a sense of the connoisseurship involved, let's tune in on a typical chat-room argument, in this case about the standing of Killimanjaro ("Jaro") and its MC, Rickie Trooper, vis-à-vis other sounds. (Reader beware: X-rated diction follows!)

Boomshaka: Bass Odyssey cyaan bakkle [can't battle] wid Jaro inna tune fi tune when Trooper play Tena Saw weh Odyssey a go play dem weak-ass Garnet Silk. Yes dey have Garnet pon dub, but Odyssey box is a dibby-dibby wading pool next to Jaro.

Maddog: Fly up now, John-crow! If Jaro box so deep, why Rickie playin the same dubs in every clash? And the old ones, Jaro studio couldn't cut a clean dub. Every truck and van pass you can hear it on the dubs dem—horn, tires, everyting. And besides a few Tenna Saws from '85 he cyaan go much deeper.

Boomshaka: I see you have started to disrespect. You is de same likkle yute who I had to put in his place on dancehallreggae.com. You is nothing but a cassette bwoy, you just buy tapes and listen. You don't know a ting bout yard. You don't know what tunes Jaro got, only what tunes they bring! How the hell can you expect them to carry 20+ crates of dubs and play maybe 50 songs? Tell Freddy next time two sounds buck up, just call for Saw fe Saw, I guarantee you it won't be a pretty site, cause blood will diffenately spill, an mi dun talk.

Maddog: Bwoy a get shame, change your ways! You just scout every website like a bobo duppy, saluting Trooper. Ho God, people, I believe Trooper a slide him rod inna u pum-pum. Jaro cannot go deep with sounds that cut in the '80s, and anyhow, Tenor was just a likkle above average, dem man da career take lead, skyrocket after death.

Boomshaka: Bumbaclot! You deserve to be banished to a world of AOL 3.0 with a 56K dial-up modem![7]

Whoa! We'd best exit before we're splattered with cyber-blood. Let's return to our look at dancehall and its contrasts with roots reggae.

DANCEHALL INNA FOREIGN

In many respects, dancehall, compared with the overtly international orientation of roots reggae, represented a sort of turning inward. The focus shifted from Africa and white foreign fans to the humble yard, with songs rendered in a thick patois that is often only barely intelligible to outsiders. Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s dancehall had acquired an international presence that surpassed that of Marley and Jimmy Cliff. The boom started, not surprisingly, in neighboring West Indian islands, where dancehall quickly became the youth music of choice, despite being denounced by elders and moralists as a degenerate expression of dysfunctional Jamaican ghetto culture. Dancehall soon

spread to the United Kingdom, where a sizable West Indian population had existed since the 1960s. By the '80s, New York's Brooklyn and the Bronx had emerged as rival epicenters of reggae's international emergence, and by the mid-'90s, many dancehall songs were riding the crest of the U.S. and U.K. mainstream pop charts.

Dancehall's popularity in the United States rests on a number of factors apart from the sheer richness of the music. The substantial Jamaican and other West Indian communities that had evolved in New York and elsewhere by the '80s provided an initial foothold, including for the handful of dancehall studios and sound systems that appeared in this period. More important was the growing appeal of the music to African American New Yorkers and, subsequently, to Americans as a whole. Although Jamaican patwa can be initially unintelligible, many non–West Indians have managed to learn to follow it, especially after getting used to common words and phrases like "nuff a dem" (lots of), "likkle" (little), and "unu" (you all, from Igbo). Dancehall and hip-hop further share a history of West Indian participation (including Kool Herc and Africa Bambaata) and an orientation toward the lumpen ghetto milieu of marginality, machismo, guns, and drugs. They also share a convention of using records and turntables as musical instruments and of rapping, singing, or otherwise voicing over ostinatos, whether called riddims or breakbeats. By the late '80s, New York's dancehall scene featured local West Indian performers like Shinehead and Shaggy, recent immigrants like Super Cat, formidable sound systems like Bass Odyssey, and a network of clubs, record stores, and radio programs.

It was on this base that a number of crossover hits started to appear in the early '90s, often pairing Jamaican deejays like Maxi Priest and Foxy Brown with black American rappers or singers. The combo format of singer and deejay became widely popular via songs like "Murder She Wrote," as did a new hybrid of ragga-hiphop. Shabba Ranks was the first deejay to enjoy true American stardom, with his U.S.-oriented remixes and duets opening the way for a series of others. In 2004, leading the pack was Sean Paul, an uptown, fair-skinned, mixed-race Jamaican whose good looks, tuneful hits, toned-down patwa, and collaborations with Beyoncé, Snoop Dogg, and others put his music at the top of the charts, enjoyed by white preteens in Peoria as well as by B-boys in Brooklyn. For their part, Jamaicans themselves continue to debate whether such "Jamerican" artists are selling out and losing their yard credibility or whether they are the yardstick for local artists.

With dancehall, as with other musics, the foreign appeal of local—in this case, Jamaican—performers represents in some ways only an initial step in the music's globalization. The next step, which is well under way, is the music's cultivation by non-Jamaicans, in different languages. In the Americas, the most prominent example of this is *reggae en español*, or reggaetón (discussed in chapter 4), which thrives vigorously in Puerto Rico, New York, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere. But dancehall has already become a global idiom everywhere from Malaysia to Malawi, where local artists inspired by Beenie and Bounty sing not only in English but also in local languages about local themes. Reggae has truly gone a' foreign.

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