

CUT 'N' MIX
CULTURE, IDENTITY
AND CARIBBEAN MUSIC

Dick Hebdige

A Comedia book
published by Routledge
London and New York

1987

Chapter Seven

The roots of reggae: black American music

We've seen how the Rastafarian rhythms run right through the heart of reggae music. But the early ska musicians were just as strongly influenced by modern jazz and black American r&b. And the first time Jamaicans really came into contact with popular black American music was during the Second World War.

Many black American sailors were stationed on the island. And they brought their own musical tastes and record collections to Jamaica. Soon these jazz and blues records were passing into local hands. And before long, a thriving second-hand record trade had sprung up. Throughout the 1950s interest in black American music was fuelled by American radio - particularly by the small r&b stations situated in and around Miami. On a clear day these broadcasts could be picked up fairly easily even on a battered transistor. And in West Kingston, the r&b produced in New Orleans in the southern part of the US became something of a craze amongst those rich enough or lucky enough to have access to a radio.

Fats Domino, Amos Milburn, Louis Jordan and Roy Brown were particular favourites. The relaxed, loping style of their music seemed to cater to the West Indian taste for unhurried rhythms. In fact, the r&b produced in the southern states of America tended to be much less frantic than the music coming out of the black ghettos in the north. The southern stuff almost had a Caribbean tinge. In Professor Longhair's rumba-like concoctions, for instance, you can hear influences which never crossed the Mason-Dixon line (the boundary between the northern states and the south). And the characteristic *shuffle* rhythms were there in all the New Orleans r&b.

As the years passed, the demand for black American r&b in Jamaica grew stronger. But there were no local groups who could play the music competently. So large mobile discotheques called "sound systems" were set up to supply the need. The sound systems played imported r&b records at large dances which were held in hired halls or out in the open in the slum yards. The music had to be heavily amplified at these venues if it was to convey the right sense of conviction. And if people were to dance they had to hear the bass,

which carried the important "shuffle" rhythm. So the systems got bigger, louder and "heavier". Junior Lincoln, a Jamaican record producer, explains:

"A sound system is just like what you call a disco. But the only thing is, it is not as sophisticated as a disco set. The amplifiers are huge, well now amplifiers are as big as 2,000 watts. They emphasise a lot on the bass. And they play sometimes twenty or twenty-four inch speakers. So it really thump, y'know. The bass line is really heavy. You've never heard anything so heavy in all your life."¹

These "blues dances" became a regular feature of ghetto life on the island. Stalls would be set up selling fruit, drink and traditional Jamaican dishes like rice and peas and "curry goat" (curried mutton). And the people would sway for hours to the New Orleans sound clutching their partners and a bottle of Red Stripe beer.

And presiding over the whole affair, mounted on a stage behind the record decks, would sit the all-important disc-jockey. The djs - men like Duke Reid, Sir Coxson and Prince Buster were, as their names suggest, larger-than-life characters - performers in their own right. Like Trinidad's boastful calypsonians they often played with images of violence, presenting themselves in a jokey but nonetheless menacing fashion as criminals, gangsters and legendary bad men. For instance Duke Reid, who ran one of the most successful of the early sound systems, would preside over blues dances dressed in a long ermine cloak with a pair of Colt 45s in cowboy holsters, a cartridge belt strapped across his ample chest and a loaded shotgun slung over his shoulder, with an enormous gilt crown perched on top of his head.

However, behind all the clowning and the fun, the sound systems were a very serious business. There was money to be made here if enough people could be persuaded to buy the entrance tickets. And the scene soon became intensely competitive as rival djs vied for the crowd's affections. Each system had its own retinue of paid helpers (djs, roadies, engineers and bouncers) as well as an army of loyal supporters. And when, as often happened, two systems were booked to play the same hall, the tension between the two groups would build up through the night. Each system would try to "blow" the other off the stage with rawer and rougher r&b sounds. By midnight the dances would sometimes end abruptly in a full-scale battle just like the steelband dances in Trinidad during the 1950s. And it's rumoured that at such times, at the dances where Reid's system was playing, the Duke himself would restore order by casually lifting the shotgun off his shoulder and firing just above the heads of the brawling mob.

Part of the rivalry between the systems centred on the records themselves. Lee "Scratch" Perry (nicknamed the "Upsetter") remembers how each system tried to win over the crowds by playing the pick of the US imports. Perry began his career in the record business as a "gofer" ("go for" - a messenger boy) for Clement Dodd's Downbeat system. And in the early days, the undisputed "boss sound" was Duke Reid's:

"Start time we was definitely the smallest of the systems. Duke had some big bad guys operating for him. So my job was to fight down this... go out and find the best sound. We go out and find them and really upset Duke and them others. It come up we start to have top record all the while and sometime we meet other systems in a club, slug it out toe for toe. Soon we a top shape."²

The crowds demanded newer and newer sounds and each system would send off a team of "scouts" to mainland America to search out the cream of the recent r&b releases. The systems looked upon these records as exclusively their own. To ensure that no other system could get hold of these "sides", they scratched off the labels or stuck on new ones to mislead the competition. Occasionally even more devious tactics were tried. Lee Perry describes one trick he played on his arch-rival:

"One time we put it about that so and so have some real dread sides. Fire sides on a white label. And Duke [Reid] run to the man fe buy them. Such a hurry him didn't even play fe check them. And they all old stuff, duds!"³

Ska and the early Jamaican record industry

Bunny Lee: The heat is on.

Lee Perry: You can say that again. Then how business go?

Bunny Lee: Can't be worse. I good fe bankrupt any moment now.

Lee Perry: Then you kyaan [can't] get a loan?

Bunny Lee: Wha! Any bank you check now all you can hear is the bank manager amooan and the teller them agroan.

Lee Perry: Man! It look like them a kill us softly..."

(*Lee Perry and Bunny Lee, Labeish*)

By the late 1950s, the stream of r&b imports from the States was beginning to dry up and three sound systems men - Duke Reid,

Prince Buster and Sir Coxson Dodd - began to produce their own primitive r&b recordings using local session musicians. To begin with, these records were called *rudie blues*. They were definitely not for public sale. Like the r&b imports, they remained the cherished possession of the sound system owners who had financed the recording. Most of these early rhythm and blues tracks were purely instrumental cover versions of old r&b favourites or original compositions in the New Orleans style. The vocal accompaniment was added live by the djs themselves at the blues dances. They would "scat" or "toast" (improvise lyrics) over the record as it played. And they tended to stick to a few simple slogans - encouraging the dancers with cries like "Work it! Work it!" "Move it up!" or just screeching out a repertoire of stock phrases, some of which derived from non-conformist Church worship: "Good God Almighty!" Eventually, the djs' vocal "toasts" were themselves recorded. And in time, the improvising dj style gave rise to two important types of reggae music - *talk over* and *dub*.

But even on these early "rudie blues" recordings, the original r&b sound had been modified by the Jamaican session musicians. The shuffle rhythms of New Orleans remained, but they became somehow flattened out - the beats became more *even* than in r&b. And all the instruments seemed to linger for a longer space of time on the off-beat. By 1961 the Jamaican rhythms could be easily distinguished from the r&b sound and a new musical form emerged. Soon this new form of pop music, unique to Jamaica, had its own name - ska. No one knows exactly why ska developed in the way it did, but it seems likely that Jamaican musicians brought their own traditions to American music. And as we've seen, an important part of those Jamaican traditions was the drumming of the Rastafarian cult. The transition from the "second hand" rudie blues to the original sound of ska was partly brought about through the influence of Rasta and Burru drumming.

Count Ossie himself was involved for a time in the sound system scene which gave birth to both ska and the Jamaican record industry. During the mid 1950s, Ossie played at the ghetto blues dances. At midnight the sound system would pack up and the Rastafarian drummers would settle down to play righteous music and heartfelt songs till dawn came and the dancers staggered home. Even at the height of the r&b craze in Jamaica, the Rastafarian rhythms were still popular in downtown Kingston. And those rhythms played their part in inflecting (changing the character and accent of) black American music. According to Joe Higgs, a reggae veteran whose career as a singer goes back to the 1950s, ska was "more to the African touch... more relevant to the drums" than r&b.⁴

During the early 1960s, the most successful ska sound system was run by Prince Buster. Buster was an ex-boxer who began his career in the record business – like so many other Jamaican producers and recording engineers – working for a big sound system. He started as a bouncer for Duke Reid, but was soon promoted to dj. After buying a record shop on Orange Street – Kingston's Tin Pan Alley – he set up his own sound system and started making his own records. In 1956 he made *Little Honey* and later *Wash Wash* and *Lion of Judah*. In *They Got to Go*, he criticised the big systems, run at that time by older men, who tended to support American music at the expense of local ska.

But the success of Buster's sound soon established ska as the most popular music in Jamaica. Buster went on to develop his own distinctive vocal style based on the old dj "toasts". Over a backing of raucous horns, driving shuffle drums and a thumping bass, Prince Buster would brag about his prowess as a fighter and a lover.

On *The Ten Commandments*, for instance, he lays down the law for "his woman" in a blustering manner which recalls the swaggering male chauvinist style of Trinidad's Mighty Sparrow:

"Remember to kiss and caress me, honour and obey me
In my every whim and fancy, seven days a week,
And twice on Sunday."

On *Earthquake*, he throws down a challenge to anyone on Orange Street – "the street with a the beat" – who wishes to challenge his supremacy:

"Man stand up and fight if you're right!
Earthquake on Orange Street!"

And finally, on *Al Capone*, Buster assumes the role of the most famous gangster of them all. Against a background of screeching tyres and sporadic bursts of machine-gun fire, he issues the following warning:

"Don't call me Scarface. My name is
Kerpown-C-A-P-O-N-E-Kerpown!"

For Buster, ska was always nothing more than good music to get up and dance to. And the kind of dancing associated with ska was strongly rooted in Jamaican folk traditions. In Buster's own words:

"The proper dance in Jamaica to ska music was the bebop dance. Push and spin and natural Jamaican things like flashing [snapping] the fingers and pickup moves from Pocomania and mento."⁵

In fact, Prince Buster sometimes drew directly on these Jamaican folk traditions. On one of his early records called *Ghost Dance* he recreates the atmosphere of a Cumina or Pocomania gathering. He summons up "spirits", sighs and begins "trumping" like a worshipper in the throes of possession, whilst in the background a mournful trombone flits in and out of earshot like a restless ghost.

But not all ska had such an obviously Jamaican flavour. Many records were produced with the mainstream market in mind. Owen Grey's *Darling Patricia*, Jackie Edward's *Tell me Darling* and Jackie Opel's *Cry me a River* – all ska or pre-ska hits – fall into this category. They were uptempo ballads with the strong romantic themes which are common to all forms of modern pop music. Millicent (Millie) Small was the first Jamaican artist to break through to an international audience in 1963 with *My Boy Lollipop*. This was a coy love song with toned-down ska rhythms but it entered both the British and American charts.

From the very earliest days, people like Eddie Seaga of Federal Studios attempted to clean up ska and make it acceptable to white audiences abroad. Seaga later became leader of the opposition Jamaica Labour Party. He began promoting Byron Lee and the Dragonaires – a group who tried to graft the ska beat on to familiar Caribbean classics like *Yellow Bird* and *Island in the Sun*. However, the group failed to make a favourable impression at the 1964 New York World's Fair. And on the island itself, the ghetto audiences still preferred to move to the rawer sound of undiluted ska. Apart from Prince Buster, groups like the Skatalites, Justin Hines and the Dominoes, and the Vikings (who backed the early Wailers and the Maytals) were very popular during this period.

Throughout the early 1960s the record industry continued to thrive. Every day new talent would be discovered. New singers would turn up at the crowded Orange Street record shops armed with a sheet of lyrics and a lot of nerve. Singers presenting themselves in this way would have to suffer a long, humiliating wait before the producers would listen to their compositions. Often the producer would dismiss them before he even heard the first line of the song if he wasn't in the right mood or the singer's face didn't fit. This is how Jimmy Cliff, who later had big hits with songs like *Wonderful World*, *Beautiful People* and *You Can Get it if You Really Want*, began his recording career. Almost as soon as he arrived in Kingston at the age of thirteen, Cliff determined to break into the record business as a singer. After cutting a few exclusive sides for various sound systems, he managed to get a song called *Daisy Got me Crazy* issued in 1962 when he was fourteen years old. Like many other early Jamaican

artists, he received no payment. But he went on to write a song called *Dearest Beverley* and set out to convince a local businessman named Leslie Kong that it could be used to promote Kong's record store, which was also called Beverley's. Kong agreed, hired a studio and cut the record, which became a minor hit. Afterwards, Kong remained in the record business as a highly successful producer till his death in 1971.

Soon producers like Kong began competing with Prince Buster for control of the ska industry. During these years, Lee Scratch Perry, went on working for Sir Coxsone Dodd, who had opened up his own studio - Studio One:

"From since 59 coming up 60, me start audition in [Dodd's] little shop down Orange Street. Any artist me feel good enough, me say [to Dodd] 'select this one fe session, record him' ... Like Toots [Hibbert] come for audition and I the man force Dodd take on Toots ... We go to the studio and he give *Six and Seven Books of Moses* and *rip* it up."⁶⁶

Later, the ska beat became properly established and Prince Buster's soon became the "boss sound". Scratch and many of the younger men on the sound system scene joined ranks with Dodd and set out to topple Buster:

"We young guys would go along and write songs to counteract Buster's sounds - sounds like Delroy Wilson's *I Shall Never Remove* and *Spit in the Sky* and *It Fall in Your Eye*. And we a killing off Buster backwards."⁶⁷

Today's record business owes much to the early hectic years of ska. Record production is still an intensely competitive and sometimes literally cut-throat business. Many producers carry facial scars won in the pursuit of bigger profits.

Present-day producers, many of whom grew up in the ghettos to the sound of ska, are also often talented all-rounders just like the old sound system men. For instance, Prince Tony is a successful record producer. Though born in the slums of Princess Street and still only in his early thirties, he has already owned at different times a sound system and two record shops. At the moment, he is in the process of buying his own manufacturing plant. He has produced records by top dj stars like U Roy and Big Youth, managed the reggae group The Gladiators, produced their best-selling album *Trench Town Mix Up*, and personally promoted all these artists and their records throughout Jamaica, Britain and the States.

The producers have usually had to be extremely tough and wily to rise to the top in such a competitive business. Indeed the ruthlessness

of some of them is legendary. Young reggae musicians are still sometimes forced to work for a pittance. To give just one example, Barrington Spence, a Jamaican reggae singer, claims to have earned only £15 for his song *High Blood Pressure*, which sold at least 12,000 copies. Resentment over unpaid royalties is so much a part of Jamaica's record scene that it's even been included as a theme in the reggae film *The Harder They Come* (Warner Bros, 1972). In the film, the hero, Ivan O Martin (played by Jimmy Cliff) is paid only twenty dollars for his number one hit, *The Harder They Come*. The young man's frustration with the record business contributes to his decision to take to violent crime - a decision which leads to his death in a hail of police and army bullets in the final reel.

In a lighter vein, the vocal trio, Culture, fell out with their record producer, Joe Gibbs, and his engineer, Errol (ET) Thompson, after releasing a successful LP in 1977. In an interview with the magazine *Black Music*, Joe Hill, the group's lead singer, hurled insults at his former associates alleging all manner of dirty tricks. Finally, he delivered a prophecy in the style of his hit record *Two Sevens Clash*:

"... until the day when the sun start rises from the West and set in the East, I'll never sing a single line for him no more.

And I hereby prophesy and I say: 'Joe Gibbs and engineer name Errol Thompson, one of these days you'll want the tape I *laugh* on ... And you won't get it brothers!'"⁶⁸

In 1974, two reggae producers, Lee Perry and Bunny Lee, produced a comic record called *Laberish*. The two men gossip over a rhythm track and give *their* version of the business rather than that of the artists. They come across as a pair of amiable rogues. Instead of pleading their innocence, they set out to confirm the popular idea of the producer as a pirate. They laugh at their less successful competitors and moan about their finances. Finally, in a stroke of self-directed humour, they accuse the "greedy artists" of bankrupting Niney, a rival record producer:

"Bunny Lee: Wha' happen to Niney?

Lee Perry: He got no clothes 'cos him pay him artists 12½ per cent royalty."

Producers like Scratch Perry and Clement Dodd, whose careers began with ska, went on to far larger studios producing a much more polished sound. And artists like Jimmy Cliff, the Wailers and the Maytals who started recording at the same time, went on to bigger and better things. But the reggae industry remains as competitive as it ever was. It grew up alongside ska and much of its cut-throat character derives from the sound systems and the early days of

