

CUT 'N' MIX
CULTURE, IDENTITY
AND CARIBBEAN MUSIC

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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, Laberish*)

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

Jamaican popular music. And though the music has changed pace and direction, the basic rhythm still has its roots in the old ska sound. As Buster himself has said:

“All of reggae music is still basically ska. The strongest sellers still have that good afterbeat.”⁹

Chapter Eight

Rocksteady and the rude boy era

“Walking down the road with a pistol in your waist
Johnny you're too bad.

Walking down the road with a ratchet in your waist
Johnny you're too bad.

You're jesta robbing and a stabbing and a looting and a
shooting

You know you're too bad.”

(The Slickers)

Ska continued to dominate the Jamaican pop music scene until the summer of 1966. Then the music suddenly began to slow down to a “stickier”, more sinister rhythm. A completely new dance style emerged. Gone were the fast, jerky movements of ska. Instead, a slinkier, cooler dance called the *rocksteady* became popular. According to Sonny Bradshaw, a veteran musician from the ska days, the rocksteady rhythm caught on because it was much “slower and gave [the dancers] more time to do what they wanted to do”. In rocksteady, ska's rumbling bass lines became deeper and still more noticeable. The brass was phased out to be replaced by guitar and keyboard set-ups. The main solo instrument of early ska – the trombone – disappeared virtually overnight, although saxophone breaks in the Latin American style were featured on many rocksteady records.

There were also changes in the way the recordings were made and mixed. In the early days, when the sound system operators first began making records, the studio facilities had been very primitive. Usually the music was played by session musicians and the recording was made in one take. Before long, vocal tracks were added too. The instrumentals were recorded on one track of the tape and this was later pressed as a record. But as the industry evolved and became more sophisticated, so too did the recording equipment. Soon it became possible to mix together a number of musical tracks to build up a more complex and interesting sound. At the same time, the engineers experimented by mixing the tracks together on the final tape in different ways. For instance, ska and rocksteady records were mixed differently. In ska, the vocal track had been given prominence,

and this is still the case with most forms of modern pop music where the lyrics are considered important. But on the new rocksteady records, the singers' voices tended to be treated like any other instrument. Instead, pride of place was given to the bass guitar.

A new generation of artists and producers was thrown into the spotlight by the rocksteady craze. Alton Ellis produced the first rocksteady record, called simply *Rocksteady*, in 1966. He followed its success with a string of hits including *I'm Just a Guy* and *I'm Still in Love* which dwelt on the themes of love and courtship. Delroy Wilson was the most successful newcomer with hits like *Dancing Mood* and *I'm Not a King*. And there was even an instrumental group called The Soul Vendors who more or less did for rocksteady what the Skatalites had done for ska. The Soul Vendors produced a number of popular dance tunes such as *Ba Ba Boom*, *The Whip* and *Ram Jam*.

All the popular rocksteady numbers mentioned so far were conventional dance tunes, and the lyrics, if any, tended to be fairly predictable. But in 1966, two new words entered the vocabulary of Jamaican pop music to go with the new rhythm. The words were "rude boy", and they referred to a group of youths who hung out on the slum street corners. They were mostly unemployed and had taken to carrying German ratchet knives and hand guns. They could be anything from fourteen to twenty-five years old and came from all over West Kingston. And above all, the rude boys were *angry*. Conditions in West Kingston had hardly improved with the passing years. Rather than buckle under to a life spent doing menial work or no work at all, the rude boys took to the streets and to crime.

There was a certain style to it all. The rudies wore very short green serge trousers, leather or gangster-style suit jackets, and their eyes were often hidden behind moody pairs of shades. If they were "rough, tough" and rich enough, they would ride around on light, stripped-down motor cycles which were covered in chrome. Apart from stealing, scuffling or hustling, the rude boys might spend their time playing an aggressive game of dominoes or "tram hopping" – leaping (sometimes backwards) onto the bars at the rear of the trams as they rattled through the city streets. The point was to be as cool as possible. But sometimes, particularly at the blues dances, the "pressure" would get too much – fights would break out and guns and knives would be drawn. I Roy, a popular talk-over artist, still remembers what it was like when the dreaded rude boys "crashed" a dance:

"They used to come to open air dances and they buy six beers one time – Red Stripe beers, bottles with long necks ... A man had three beers in this hand and then three beer [in the other]. And a certain tune play and he's really crazy

about this tune, and he just *crashes* the six bottle. And then people start running all section ... It was a sort of style, y'know? Man says 'Why the rude boys passing through the dance last night. Them really *hack* it up, y'know? People had to jump [over the] fence and all them thing there!'"

The rude boy style had been a part of the sound system scene even in the early 1960s: there had then been the "rudie blues". And Roland Alphonso released an early ska record in 1962 which dealt with the rude boys. However, it wasn't until 1966, when the Wailers produced *Rude Boy* for Clement Dodd, that the cult really took off inside Jamaican pop music. The Wailers followed this with a string of minor rudie hits which included *Rule Them Rudie* and the classic *Steppin' Razor*. Other groups and artists soon followed with rude boy songs. Like the 1967 the Jamaican charts were filled with rude boy songs. Like the saga boy calypsoes of the late 1940s they tended to glamourise crime and rebellion. *Everybody Rude Now* by Keith McCarthy, *Tougher than Tough* by Derrick Morgan and Dandy Livingstone's *Rudy a Message to You* were all hits during this period.

Not to be outdone, Prince Buster released a string of rudie anthems, including *Too Hot*, in which he presented a rude boy boast in his usual mock-serious manner:

"Rude boys never give up their guns,

No one can tell them what to do.

Pound for pound they say they're ruder than you.

Get out insurance and make up your will

If you want to fight them."

Buster went on poking gentle fun at the rude boys throughout the period in the guise of Judge Dread, a terrifying Ethiopian magistrate. The Judge is determined to clamp down on youths who go around beatin' up black people. On *Judge Dread*, Buster sentences a group of rude boys who can be heard weeping and pleading for mercy in the background ("Order! Order! Rude boys don't cry!") to 500 years and 10,000 lashes. However, in the follow-up, *Barrister Pardon*, Buster relents and, whilst the trombones blare out typical ska riffs, the judge grants them a pardon and throws a party to celebrate their release.

After a time, the rude boy craze died down. But in 1971 there was a revival of interest in the cult sparked off by the release of the soundtrack to the film *The Harder They Come*. This album contained the Slickers' *Johnny Too Bad* and a re-issue of Desmond Dekker's 1967 hit, *Shanty Town* (007):

"And now rude boys have a wail

Cos them out a jail.

Rude boys cannot fail

Cos them must get bail.
Dem a loot, dem a shoot, dem a wail
In shanty town."

The rude boy style continued to be popular right through the reggae period. Even now, many reggae stars, particularly dj artists, project an image which is reminiscent of the old rude style. Big Youth and Dillinger have both produced discs which deal with the motorcycle subculture. On *Ace Go Skank*, Big Youth warns any aspiring rude boys: "If ya ride like lightning, ya crash like thunder". And Dillinger's reputation as a reggae star rests largely on his hit *CB 200* which was named after a Honda bike.

In the tough areas of West Kingston, the motorcycle, the gun and ratchet knife are still a way of life for some black youths. The slums can still be a dangerous battleground. The level of political violence in the run-up to the 1976 elections got so high that the Prime Minister declared a State of Emergency. A Gun Court was set up in the centre of Kingston and a law was passed whereby anyone found carrying a gun could be immediately arrested and detained for an indefinite period. Bob Marley himself was wounded by a gunman at the end of the year and an attempt was made on the Prime Minister's life. The situation only began to improve when Claudie Massop and Buckie Marshall, the rude boy gunmen for the two political parties in Kingston's slums, signed a truce and decided to work together to improve local conditions. This move for peace was started largely by the Rastafarians. The shift from violent to peaceful solutions to Jamaica's problems was reflected in the next phase of the island's pop history - reggae.

Chapter Nine

Reggae

"One good thing about music, when it hit you you feel no pain."

(*Bob Marley and the Wailers, Trench Town Rock*)

Around 1968, the music shifted down another gear, becoming even slower and "heavier" with an even greater emphasis on the bass. The new rhythm was certainly there on Toots and the Maytals' hit *Do the Reggay*. But it can also be heard on a slightly earlier recording entitled *People Funny Boy*, which had been produced by Lee "Scratch" Perry. By this time Scratch had left Sir Coxson's Studio One label and was striking out on his own. As far as he reflects, the idea of the reggae beat came to him as he was walking past a Pocomania Church:

"... See, at them time, me used to go out town and stay late, drink some beer, thing like that. And one night me walking past a Pocomania church and hear the people inside a wail. And me catch the vibration and say, 'Boy! Let's make a sound fe catch the vibration of the people!' Them was in the spirit and them tune me spiritually. That's where the thing come from, 'cos them Poco people getting sweet!'"¹

At the same time, Scratch wanted to break away from the ska and rocksteady rhythms which he felt were becoming too familiar and clichéd. Above all, he wanted to produce a sound which would "upset" his rivals, particularly Sir Coxson's Didd:

"'Cos they were doing something same all the way, man. All of them a just go 'ska-aska-ska-aska'. And when the people hear what I man do them hear a different beat, a waxy beat - like you stepping in glue. Them hear a different bass, a rebel bass, coming at you like sticking a gun."²

The "waxy beat" and "rebel bass" proved a killing combination. And the reggae rhythms proved so popular that the word "reggae" now applies to virtually all forms of Jamaican pop. Scratch went on to produce artists like the Wailers, the Upsetters, U Roy, Junior Murvin and Max Romeo, and soon became the acknowledged master of heavy "roots" reggae.

But not all reggae sounded like a gun being placed against the eardrums. The kind of reggae which was most popular in Jamaica at this time was generally lighter and less menacing. The lyrics dealt mainly in the language of love and broken hearts. Singers like Alton Ellis, John Holt, Pat Kelly and Ken Boothe began recording smooth romantic ballads, sometimes with a lush accompaniment of strings and a full orchestra. These were very popular with the slightly older age group. And they also sold outside the usual reggae market. Albums by singers like Holt continue to sell quietly but steadily. For many years, the record industry tended to promote mainstream "commercial" reggae at the expense of the "ethnic" roots product. This was merely an extension of the old policy of diluting Caribbean music for the international audience.

As far as the international record companies were concerned, Jamaica's heavy stuff was too rough and rude for white ears. When Max Romeo's *Wet Dream* began creeping up in the British charts in 1969, the BBC banned it because of its blatantly sexual lyrics. It's therefore hardly surprising that when reggae *did* finally cross over into the international market, it was the commercial product that won through first. *I Can See Clearly Now* by Johnny Nash made a big impact on the British and American charts in 1971. And if the record sounds only remotely related to "roots reggae", that's because Nash, an American singer, had specialised in middle of the road romantic ballads before turning to the new Jamaican rhythm.

But gradually, in Jamaica itself, a new harder type of reggae began to win over the younger audiences. For instance, in 1971, Eric Donaldson won the Jamaica Song Festival with a number called *Cherry Oh Baby*. This was fairly traditional as far as the lyrics were concerned. But the faltering beat and thumping bass line, together with Donaldson's yearning falsetto voice, gave the record an eerie, haunting quality which was difficult to resist. Meanwhile, Toots and the Maytals were transferring more and more complex harmonies from the church to the recording studio. In *Sweet and Dandy* (1969) and *Pressure Drop* (1968), the voices of Toots, Jerry Mathias and Raleigh Gordon weave together in a call and response pattern against the fast, driving rhythm of the backing band to create an effect not unlike that of a Baptist congregation in full swing. And in 1968 the group released one of their most powerful recordings, *54-46 That's my Number*, which was based on Toots' own experiences as a prisoner, when he served a sentence for the possession of ganja in 1966.

However, there was an even more significant development. Many of the younger reggae stars became more and more committed to the social and religious ideals of the Rastafarian cult. Gradually, the

Rasta themes of peace, solidarity and black pride began to work their way into reggae songs. One of the first really successful records to publicise the Rasta creed was *Blood and Fire* by Niney the Observer (who went on to become a record producer and dub master). *Blood and Fire* was produced in a single hectic session at Randy's studio one December night in 1970. Niney could only afford to book the studio for an hour and was forced to race across Kingston to another studio - Dynamic - to pick up some session musicians:

"We set up . . . and record the tune and me take three quarter hour to make the rhythm and voice it. True me never want to sing that tune 'cos I just have the idea but . . . I *force* to sing it myself. And I need harmony but there was no one to give harmony. But as we in Randy's half hour I see Buster Brown and Dobby Dobson and Lloyd Charmers and I say 'I need harmony' and them say 'Well, that alright' . . ."

Strangely enough, given the conditions under which it was made, *Blood and Fire* turned out to be technically brilliant. It opened up new possibilities for both producers and lyric writers. The bass bubbles along as the lead guitar repeats the same jagged riff over and over again. To a background chorus of "Let it burn/Let it burn/Let it burn, burn, burn" sung in a surprisingly unconcerned, melodious style, Niney himself mutters his ambiguous prayer:

"Blood, blood, blood, blood and fire.
Rasta hail pipe.
Blessed is the pipe that is always light
In the house of Jah Rastafari.
Blessed is the weed of the ganja seed
That keeps breeding the ganja breed.
Blood and fire, let it burn.
All weak heart shall leak out and split up
All righteous shall stand.
Hail, Rasta, hail and wail
Hail, Rasta, don't quit.
Blood, blood, blood, blood and fire.
Let it burn."

Blood and Fire went on to become a major hit in Jamaica (though typically, Niney claims he was cheated out of his rightful profits by the man who ran the record-pressing plant). The cult of Rastafari had finally surfaced in popular music. But it was left to another man and another group to promote roots reggae and the Rasta message to the world. The man, of course, was Bob Marley and the group were the Wailers.

Bob Marley and the Wailers

Robert Nesta Marley was born in 1945 in the parish of St Ann, deep in rural Jamaica. His father, a retired major in the British army, left the household soon after his son's birth. The boy was brought up by his mother – a local woman. On leaving school at fourteen, the young Marley headed for Kingston where he settled in Trench Town at the family home of Bunny Livingston, who was later to become the Wailers' high harmony singer.

Marley served the usual reggae apprenticeship – hanging around, doing odd jobs, cutting a few forgotten r&b records for a local producer. And then in 1964 he met two men who were to influence his life profoundly – Joe Higgs and Mortimer Planno. Higgs, one half of the Higgs and Wilson recording duo, introduced Marley to harmony and showed him how to arrange his songs. Planno, a much older man, initiated Marley into the mysteries of the Rasta faith: Planno was very highly regarded in Rasta circles. He introduced Marley to Alvin Patterson, a Rasta drummer who taught Marley the importance of “ridim” and time. Planno claims to have foreseen Marley's future success and he regards music as a valuable “weapon for peace” – a means of spreading the Rasta doctrine without bloodshed.

In late 1964, Marley formed a group called the Wailing Rude Boys with himself as singer and guitarist. Bunny Livingston and Peter MacIntosh (Tosh) were signed up as support vocalists. The trio recorded a few tracks for Clement Dodd and then, in 1967, Marley left for America. However, he was soon drawn back to Kingston and the reggae business. In 1968 he joined forces with the Upsetters, Lee Perry's resident studio band, who have backed many of Jamaica's top vocalists as well as laying down some of the strongest rhythm tracks on Scratch's famous dubs. Carly Barrett, the drummer and his brother, Family Man, the bassist, were recruited as the Wailers' backing group. As Family Man puts it:

“The Wailers was the best vocal group anywhere in Jamaica, and I group [my group] was the best little backing band, so we say, ‘Why don't we come together and mash up the world!’”⁴

By this time, the Wailers had discarded their rude boy image. They began wearing the Ethiopian colours and growing the dreadlocks which were to become a trademark of roots reggae. And the lyrics of their songs became increasingly militant and concerned with the issue of social and racial inequality. With Lee Perry, the Wailers recorded some of their strongest, most politically conscious numbers including *Small Ax*, *400 Years*, *Get up*, *Stand up* and *Trench Town Rock*.

Eventually Marley and the Wailers met Chris Blackwell, who had set up one of the most successful reggae labels – Island Records.

Blackwell, the son of a white Jamaican plantation owner, was an extremely shrewd businessman. He had been one of the first to recognise the potential for growth of ska in the UK where large numbers of West Indian immigrants had come to settle during the 1950s and 1960s. He started in the record business in 1962, when he began promoting and distributing ska records in London's West Indian ghettos and it was Blackwell who in 1963 scored the first Jamaican hit in Britain with Millie's *My Boy Lollipop*. In 1972, after building up Island into a highly profitable concern, he decided to invest in the Wailers' first LP.

Blackwell broke all the rules as far as reggae producers were concerned. Instead of restricting the group by giving them tight deadlines and low budgets, he allowed them to produce their own kind of music in their own kind of time. There were, of course, good business reasons for all this. By this time, he was interested in developing the “cross-over” (i.e., white) market. But he was far more imaginative than most of the record company executives who had previously tried to promote reggae outside Jamaica. Blackwell realised that the strength of the roots product lay in its uncompromising quality and that the young white rock audience would respond to Marley's “rebel music” in its pure Jamaican form. Instead of trying to tone down the social and political content of the Wailers' lyrics, he went out of his way to underline it. Instead of insisting that the group wear shiny suits and ties, he positively encouraged them to grow their hair and adopt the Rasta image.

But he also realised that, if reggae were ever really to cross over, it would have to be produced, promoted and packaged like any other pop or rock music. Instead of issuing one-off singles, Blackwell concentrated on well-produced stereo LPs aimed at the hi-fi market. He calculated quite correctly that white fans with hi-fi systems were far more likely to add a glossily produced reggae LP to their record collections, than to buy a few imported singles which were expensive and difficult to get hold of.

The Wailers were to be sold to the public. No expense was to be spared – posters, publicity, press releases, television appearances, radio and newspaper interviews, international tours – all these would serve to keep the group in the public eye. So it was that when *Catch A Fire* finally reached the record shops, it benefited both from the rootsy feel of the music and from the sophisticated recording and promotion techniques which Blackwell placed at the group's disposal. The consumer had the best of both worlds – a product which was at one and the same time “polished” and “gritty”. The album

cover carried a portrait of Marley which emphasised his burning eyes and flying locks in a way which was designed to appeal to the rebellious instincts of the young rock fans. And in the same way, the record itself combined raw roots reggae with a polished studio sound. The original recording was mixed in a Kingston studio by the group themselves. But Blackwell considered it a little too heavy for the white audience, so he re-mixed it in London. He brought Marley's voice forward and toned down the distinctive bass. He also added some flowing rock guitar riffs recorded by local British session men to the original tape.

But the words of the songs were left intact. Many of the numbers originally recorded for Scratch were included on the LP. And the lyrics were completely uncensored:

"Slave driver the table is turned.
Catch a fire so you can get burned."

And just in case white listeners unaccustomed to the Jamaican patois missed the point, the lyrics were reprinted on the album sleeve. Throughout the whole LP, Marley, in his unearthly, wailing voice "chants down Babylon" and prophesies destruction for the wicked. The Rasta images of vengeful fire and Babylon falling continued on the Wailers' second LP, *Burning*, which was also released on the Island label. As with Niney's *Blood and Fire*, the LP's title managed to suggest that by burning the ganja weed, the Rastas were merely looking forward to the time when Babylon itself would be consumed in flames sent by God on Judgement Day.

Marley was eventually to emerge as the first reggae superstar, although the Wailers' success caused frictions inside the group. Before the third album, *Natty Dread*, was released in 1974, Tosh and Livingston were refusing to undergo yet another gruelling tour of Britain and the States. Marley changed the line-up for the 1975 tour, hiring musicians and adding a female backing group, the I-Threes. He toured Africa, Europe and North America over the next few years; produced a live album (*Wailers Live*) and three other LPs for Island Records - *Rastaman Vibration*, *Exodus* and *Kaya*, and in his last years, Marley won respect not only in Jamaica but from music critics and fans throughout the world.

But this situation had created new problems for Marley. His fame made him a prime target for politically motivated violence. After the attempt on his life in 1977, he was forced to leave Jamaica for his own safety. Marley's live performances were among the most exciting and compelling in rock music. When Marley raised his hands, shook his shoulder-length locks and began playing *Exodus* on British television's *Top of the Pops* in 1977, it was indeed an historic occasion.

Against a huge painted backdrop of Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie, Marley sang the song which tells the story of the "movement of the Jah people" from Africa to Jamaica and on towards "Holy Mount Zion". And this in the hallowed studios of the BBC at the heart of the old British Empire!

Other Jamaican artists have benefited from the interest in roots reggae which Marley has stimulated. Groups like the Mighty Diamonds, the Gladiators, Third World, Burning Spear and Culture have all toured outside Jamaica and attracted a large following amongst young white rock fans. Peter Tosh and Bunny Livingston have both gone on to produce successful solo albums, and both artists have refused to stray far from their roots. On *Legalise It* and *Equal Rights*, Tosh showed himself to be just as angry as in the old Wailers days when he wrote songs like *400 Years* and *Get up*. And Bunny Livingston's album *Blackheart Man* was a tribute to his fellow Rastas. Records by both ex-Wailers have sold well in Europe and the States. Tosh even overcame his aversion to touring when he visited Britain in 1979. Even Ras Michael and the Sons of Negus, whose music is based on traditional Rasta drumming, have toured Britain and played to white audiences.

All these successes are ultimately due to the larger success of Marley himself. But part of the reason why Marley's music broke through in this way is that his songs are basically melodic. The music always sounds sweet, even when the lyrics include scathing attacks on the colonial system. Like the calypsonians, Marley knew how to drive his message home behind a lilting refrain or a jaunty beat. It's the classic Caribbean package of bitter social commentary wrapped up in a light, refreshing rhythm. In effect, Marley was making the Western world dance to the prophecies of its own destruction.

But by the early 1970s singers and musicians in Jamaica were reviving the old forbidden "ridims" by bringing up the bass and the drums. And they were out to make music which was so "heavy" that the listeners would be left in no doubt as to its real meaning. In the words of Big Youth, the spokesman for the new style: "No more songs about girls..."³⁵

Chapter Ten

Dub and talk over

"Me love dub and but I and I don't get involved with it too much. Dub means right and tight, the perfect groove. When Wailers say *dub* this one, dis mean we gonna play it right and tight." (Bob Marley)

"You can copyright a song, but you can't copyright a rhythm."

(Dermott Hussey, Jamaican record producer)

We have already seen how, in order to get through to the wider audience, the Wailers' LP had to be remixed so that the overall sound was brought into line with the expectations of the white rock audience. Many of the reggae LPs produced with the foreign market in mind are still remixed in this way. For example, some producers speed up the tapes slightly for reggae records destined for the American market, because the American rock and soul audiences who are likely to buy reggae prefer the faster rhythms. However in Jamaica the slower, heavier rhythms continued to be popular and around 1974 reggae began to slow down yet again until it began to sound even more menacing.

The new "dread riddims" were called *rockers*. As with every other shift in Jamaican pop music, the new sound can be traced back to the way the drums and bass guitar were featured on recordings. In rockers, the bass was as heavily amplified as ever and continued to provide the basic background throb – reggae's heartbeat. But the bass patterns also became more complicated and experimental. In some types of heavy reggae (especially in instrumental or "dub" music) the bass takes over the prominent role normally reserved in rock music for the lead guitar. Robbie Shakespeare, a session musician who plays for the studio band The Aggravators, is held largely responsible for the new bass style. The drumming, too, became more complicated in rockers' music and again the change is generally attributed to the work of another session musician – Sly Dunbar.

You can hear Dunbar's drumming on many of the instrumental LPs. While Sly uses the bass drum to supply a steady, marching beat, he improvises on the cymbals, the snares and the tom toms to produce a multi-layered effect, rather like West African religious drumming.

Again, Rastafarian "riddims" have played an important part in this development. Dunbar has himself been influenced by Rasta drumming patterns. His style is partly modelled on the work of an older session man, Leroy "Horsemouth" Wallace who now plays for the successful reggae group, Inner Circle. Wallace seems to have invented the rockers' rhythm for an early recording made in 1969 for Sir Coxsonne Dodd entitled *Things a Come up to Bump*. And Wallace had been part of the original ska generation. He had attended the Alpha reformatory alongside Roland Alphonso and Don Drummond and, as we've seen, it was this group of musicians who led the way for the ska sound by combining Rasta "riddims" with black American music.

But to understand the development of rockers and heavy instrumental dub, we have to go back to the early days of the sound system recordings. We have seen how djs like Duke Reid and Prince Buster used to add spice to the instrumental records they were playing by shouting out their favourite catchphrases over the microphone. These talk overs or toasts soon became a popular feature of the blues dances. After a while, the djs began adding electronic sound effects – echo and reverb – to make the records sound even more unusual. Gradually, as we've seen, more sophisticated recordings were made, using a number of different instrumental and vocal tracks.

One day, King Tubby, a record engineer, was working in his studio mixing a few ska "specials" (i.e., exclusive recordings) for Sir Coxsonne's Downbeat system. He began fading out the instrumental track, to make sure that the vocals sounded right. And he was excited by the effect produced when he brought the music back in. So instead of mixing the specials in the usual way, he cut back and forth between the vocal and instrumental tracks and played with the bass and treble knobs until he changed the original tapes into something else entirely. These were the first ever dub records, and they soon helped to draw the crowds to Coxsonne's sound. Soon other producers were experimenting with these *dubs*. By the late 1960s, Bunny Lee was putting a dub "version" of the title track on the flip side of all his singles.

On the dub the original tune is still recognisably there but it is broken up. The rhythm might be slowed down slightly, a few snatches of song might be thrown in and then distorted with echo. The drums and bass will come right up to the listener and demand to be heard. Dermott Hussey, a Jamaican record producer, explains what modern dub is like:

"The dub now is just the bare bones, the rhythm played, bass line of course over-emphasised. And it's just a naked dance rhythm."¹

Nowadays, Jamaican studios contain equipment which can handle up to twenty-four tracks instead of just two, and the potential for experimentation in dub is vast. Over the past few years, some producers like "Scratch" Perry and Joe Gibbs have experimented with dub to such an extent that the music is beginning to resemble modern, free-form jazz. The original tune is stretched, broken and bent into the most extraordinary shapes by all kinds of electronic wizardry. For instance, on *Africa Dub*, in addition to the usual echo and reverb effects, producer Joe Gibbs has added what sound like car horns, cuckoo clocks, electronic buzzes, bells and pips, and even bomb blasts, to make the record sound unique.

But the early sound system recordings gave rise to yet another type of music within reggae – the dj talk over. As we've seen, Prince Buster's style had been loosely based on the dj "toasts". But it wasn't until 1967 that anyone tried to make recordings in the talk over style. In that year, Lester Sterling produced *Sir Collin's Special* in which he actually *spoke* over the rhythm. King Stitt followed one year later with three dj hits.

Then in 1970, the first big talk over star, U Roy, emerged. U Roy (real name Ewart Beckford) had begun as a dj for King Tubby's system. The weird rambling monologues which he spoke into the microphone over Tubby's sound soon won him a large following. Eventually, he decided to cut some toasting records. He would take a popular rhythm track, phase out the singing and add his own stream of screeches, yelps and muttered catchphrases. The records were an immediate success and U Roy went on to produce a number of classic talk overs with titles like *Wear You to the Ball*, *Flashing My Whip* and *Tom Drunk*. It's hard to find words to describe U Roy's outlandish style. Stephen Davis suggests that it sounds like "a hundred severely ruptured parrots".² These early talk overs are certainly wild; at times U Roy sounds almost possessed. U Roy's toasts resemble the inspired ravings of a worshipper "trumping in the spirit" at a Pocomania gathering.

By 1972, other dj artists were challenging U Roy's leadership of the talk over scene. The "King" was soon displaced by younger men. But he made a comeback in 1975 with an LP called *Dread in a Babylon* which sold well both in Britain and Jamaica. As the title suggests, U Roy drew on the Rastafarian imagery of dreadlocks and ganja for this LP. But his style remained basically unchanged. The toasts were just as crazy and full of blistering asides as they had ever been. And for a while the album reinstated U Roy at the top of the toasting league.

In the meantime, other talk over stars had emerged. Dennis Alcapone enjoyed a brief period of success around 1974, when he had

hits with records like *Cassius Clay*. But the two major challengers for U Roy's title were I Roy and Big Youth. I Roy (real name Roy Reid) was extremely popular during the mid 1970s. His voice was somewhat deeper and fuller than U Roy's. He would lace his toasts with snatches of song and nursery rhymes. Though his talk overs are frequently comic (listen, for instance, to the early *Welding*), I Roy also presents himself as a wise man "cooling out the youth". For example, I Roy's 1977 album *Crisis Time* was filled with sincere fatherly advice. And on his classic single *Black Man Time* (1974) I Roy solemnly counsels the youth to leave the street corners and to support the literacy programme which the government had just launched. Against a strange, discordant, almost oriental-sounding background of electric violins, I Roy delivers the following sermon:

"I talk to break oppression and set the captives free
So you got to understand I talk to rule the musical
Nation with justice and equality.
So black man you got to be free like a bird in a tree,
And live in love and unity for I and I.
So maybe you can make it if you try.
Say it's a black man time. It a black man time."

Again, you can hear echoes of the old African boast songs in talk over reggae. Just like Trinidad's calypsonians, the djs often strike "bad man" poses. They also tend to mock their rivals with jokey insults and put downs, just as in the 1940s Trinidad's singing stars carried out boasting battles in the *sans humanité* calypsoes. A whole string of I Roy's hits attacked another dj star, Prince Jazzbo, and Jazzbo retaliated by using his own insulting talk overs. In *Straight to Jazzbo's Head*, I Roy taunts his rival with the line: "Jazzbo if you were a jukebox, I wouldn't put a dime into your slot". Jazzbo's counter-attack was rather lame by comparison. In *Straight to I Roy's Head*, he accused his "enemy" of copying U Roy's style: "I Roy, you a boy – move out de way – 'cos you imitate the great U Roy".

But the most popular dj of recent years has undoubtedly been Big Youth. Big Youth (real name Manley Buchanan) is the spokesman for the Rasta influenced youth. His early *skank* records (*Ace 90 Skank*, *George Foreman*, *Foreman and Frazier*, *Screaming Target*, etc.) were basically dance tunes and dealt with the usual rude boy concerns of motor bikes, boxing and "keeping your cool". But his later albums, particularly *House of Dreadlocks*, *Dreadlocks Dread* and *Natty Cultural Dread* made him almost as popular as Bob Marley with the Rastafarian youth. His style is peppered with grassroots patois and secret Rasta phrases:

"When the Lion is sleepin' don't try to wake him, baby...
Then you walk with the idren, down in a Babylon,
You talk with the idren, down in a Babylon,
You can't walk free, down in a Babylon."

Big Youth stresses "dread" and vengeance. His "toasts", in contrast to I Roy's, are filled with threatening prophecies and images of brooding violence which are underlined by the heavy reggae rhythms:

"and di blood goin' flood and di blood goin' run
Blood up town an' blood down town.
An' di blood roun' town.
Blood in di woods and di blood in di country
Marcus Garvey word."

The sinister tone of Big Youth's records calls to mind some of the poems of the Haitian Griot group. Both Griot poetry and Big Youth's dread sounds show a deep awareness of social injustice and racial discrimination. Both teach black pride and fight fire with fire using the idea of Africa to summon up images of darkness and blood.

On *Lightning Flash*, for instance, Big Youth flashes (shakes) his dreadlocks and waits for Judgement Day when, the Bible says, the wicked will suffer and "the righteous black man stand". And the rhythm track in the background fairly pulsates with dread. In fact, it is possible that there is a direct connection with Rasta riddims. One writer has claimed that Big Youth uses his voice to improvise across the reggae rhythms like the repeater in Rasta drumming sessions. The way that he does this derives directly from the Rastafarian Grounation ceremony, in which a singer will lead the other brethren in prayer by toasting over the drums.

Talk over and dub have had a mixed reception from the reggae audience. The music is extremely popular with the young sound system fans. But the Jamaican radio stations have banned it because of pressure from the musicians' union. The union is indignant that the musicians who record the original versions (which then get transformed into dub and talk over records) don't get any royalties. And one tune, one set of riddims, can spark off a host of different versions.

There has always been a relaxed attitude to musical ownership and copyright in Jamaica. In many ways, it was because the island's music scene was so chaotic and disorganised in the early 1960s that reggae could develop from such a wide range of sources. And the Rastafarians had set the tone by "capturing" European hymn tunes and using them for their own purposes. Thus, the Mighty Diamonds feel quite happy about basing their hits on other people's riddims:

"It's not like we stealing anything from anybody. We take a riddim and update it and re-record it. And then we apply our new ideas to it. We call it 'anointing' the riddim with our own magic."³

But dub has taken this tendency a lot further. At one time in 1976 there were no fewer than twenty-five different versions of the tune *I'm Still in Love with You* by, among others, Marcia Aitken, Trinity, the Mighty Two, Clint Eastwood, Junior Murvin, the Mighty Diamonds, I Roy, Ranking Trevor, Alton Ellis, Hortense Ellis and Queen Tiney. And many of these artists are talk over DJs.

Others accuse talk over of reducing reggae to a set of predictable clichés. Big Youth has spawned a thousand imitators, all claiming to be the true representatives of roots and the Ethiopian connection. And in the last few years there has been a glut of toasting records, many of which are dull. However, Tapper Zukie has won a formidable reputation and more recently Prince Far-I and Prince Hammer have released records. And Dr Alimantado (Winston Thomson) is a true original, with eccentric toasts such as the mysteriously named *She Weng Yep* (also known as "Best Dressed Chicken in Town").

But quite apart from the contributions of individual artists, dub and talk over are important because they are the basic material of the sound systems. And it is the sound systems which are largely responsible for keeping the traditions and the spirit of reggae music alive. It is here at the grassroots level that many of reggae's fads and fashions emerge – new dances, new attitudes, new tastes and trends. In 1976 one London sound system operator talked about the popularity of dub:

"The people dem love fe hear strictly dubwise music 'cause dread dancing is comin' back into fashion. More rocking and swinging kinda movements – and steppers too."⁴

The sound system provides an opportunity for the grassroots people to talk back, to respond, to choose what they like and don't like. At the blues dances, the people can dictate the DJs' choice of sounds. And each sound system has its own toasting heroes who can express the feelings of the crowd. I Roy puts it this way:

"We work as the media through which the people speaks, y'know. It's not just us suffering 'cos we're thinking for everybody."⁵

And often the talk over artist, like the calypso singer, can help to clarify local opinion on social and political issues. For instance, Big

Youth, who has been called the "human *Gleaner*" (the *Gleaner* is Jamaica's most popular daily newspaper), produced a record called *Green Bay Killing* about a murder that had occurred on the island a few days before. Within a week, Big Youth's version was matched by Jah Lloyd's *Green Bay Incident* – another dj commentary on the same event. In the same way, Tapper Zukie produced a record called *Ten Against One* about the riots in 1976 at London's Notting Hill Carnival, which was being distributed within days of the disturbances. Often in Jamaica, talk over is a way of getting round the libel and sedition acts. I Roy explains:

"The music is a way of getting the thing across because... you couldn't come out in public and say bluntly maybe somebody would hit you on the head or a copper would take you in for public mischief. [But] you can say it on record and get away with it. Y'know, it's a way of protesting against certain things, against certain physical and mental things that we Jamaican people have suffered."⁶

This process of feed-back – of three-way flow between artists, record producers and the audience – is what helps to make reggae different from other types of pop music. The distance between the performer and the fans is never allowed to grow too great.

And it is at the sound system that the barrier between the fans and the stars is least noticeable. There is always a chance that a record company will discover local talent "toasting a version" over the microphone of a small sound system in a hired hall or club. That is how Glen Sloley, a young talk over artist, began his recording career in England. The old competitive atmosphere of the blues dance still survives in Britain, where sound systems were set up in every ghetto area where West Indians settled. Sloley was a regular at London's Bouncing Ball Club. Every Friday night, Admiral Ken, the resident dj, would play a dub and invite members of the audience to do a version over the microphone. Glen was keen to win and used all his spare time to practise for the next week's competition:

"... is just pure hands vote, y'know. Ken and two other men count the people's hands. The winner would get about £20 and second get nothing, and Bank Holidays it went up to £30 or £35... hard practice a rhythm for the weekend that was truly my work: indoors going over and over the rhythm till I get it perfect. 'Cos I knew that when Friday come if I win there's a money in my hand."⁷

And eventually, after winning eight competitions in a row, Sloley was spotted and signed up by a record company. So dub and talk over

help to keep reggae healthy and alive by providing an opportunity for ordinary people to talk back to the industry either as fans with preferences for certain kinds of music, or more directly as talk over djs.

Dub and talk over have had one more effect on the Jamaican record industry which may seem, at first sight, to conflict with the point that's just been made. The stress on recorded riddims in dub has tended to concentrate even more power in the hands of the producers. We have seen how reggae has always been basically recorded rather than live music (though groups like Third World and Bob Marley and the Wailers have opened up the possibility of reggae performance). But both the Jamaican record industry and the music itself grew out of the sound systems. And for the most part, reggae still develops in accordance with the needs of the sound system operators and their fans.

In recent years, because of dub, reggae has become even more studio-based. Each studio has its own recognisable house-style dictated by the producer. For instance, Augustus Pablo at King Tubby's studio produces what he calls the "Far East Sound" featuring an instrument called the melodica. Meanwhile in the mid-1970s, Lee Perry's Black Ark studio released a string of records all with the same identifiable sound – slow, thudding bass lines and heavy riddims. This batch of records included Junior Murvin's *Police and Thieves*, Max Romeo's *War in a Babylon*, the Upsetter's best-selling dub LP *Sugar Ape* and a talk over LP by Jah Lion (Pat Francis) entitled *Columbia Cally*.

But this emphasis on the studio sound doesn't mean that the music has become narrower and more "commercial" as a result – far from it. As we've seen, the situation is still flexible. Musicians move from one session to the next and jam in different combinations and different studio bands. And the producer is not just a manipulating Scrooge, feeding off young talent. For in dub the skill of the record producer and the studio engineer in using the electronic medium is so great, and so crucial, that they have become genuine artists in their own right.

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4. Michael Thomas, "The Wild Side of Paradise", in *Rolling Stone*, 9 July, 1973.
5. John Plummer, op. cit., 1978.
6. *Ibid.*

7. Verena Reckford, "Rastafarian Music - An Introductory Study", in *Jamaica Journal* vol. 11, nos. 1, 2. Quarterly of the Institute of Jamaica, August, 1977.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Rico Rodriguez interviewed by Carl Gayle in "The Man from Wareika", *Black Music*, May, 1977.
11. *Ibid.*

Chapter Seven: The roots of reggae: black American music

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2. Lee Perry quoted in Chris May, "Starting from Scratch", *Black Music*, October, 1977.
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Chapter Eight: Rocksteady and the rude boy era

1. I Roy interviewed in "Rastas and Rude Boys", Programme 2 of 3 for BBC Radio and Open University (see note 3, Chapter 6).

Chapter Nine: Reggae

1. Lee Perry quoted in *Black Music*, October, 1977.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Niney quoted by Chris May in an article entitled "Blood and Fire" in *Black Music*, July, 1978.
4. Family Man quoted by Carl Gayle in an article entitled "Dread in a Babylon" in *Black Music*, September, 1975.
5. Big Youth quoted in S. Davis, op. cit., 1977.

Chapter Ten: Dub and talk over

1. Dermott Hussey quoted in "The Sound System", Programme 3 of 3 for BBC Radio and Open University (see note 3, Chapter 6).
2. S. Davis, op. cit., 1977.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Black Music*, 1978.
5. I Roy interviewed in "Reggae - The Beginnings", Programme 1 of 3 for BBC Radio and Open University (see note 3, Chapter 6).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Chris May, "Sloley Does it", *Black Music*, September, 1978.

Chapter Eleven: Dread in a Inglan

1. Junior Lincoln in "The Sound System", Programme 3 of 3 for BBC Radio and Open University (see note 3, Chapter 6).
2. Count Shelley quoted in Chris May, "British Reggae 2", in *Black Music*, 1978. (This and the references cited in the following five notes together with those cited in notes 9 and 10 are only approximate. All the quotations come from a series of three articles on British reggae written by Chris May and published in the now defunct *Black Music* sometime between 1976 and 1978. I apologise for the imprecision but the intervening years - between writing the *Original Cut* and getting it published - have played havoc with my filing system!)
3. Philroy Mathias quoted in Chris May, "British Reggae 3", in *Black Music*, 1978.