‘Dance a yaad before you dance abroad’:
reggae as a production culture in Jamaica and the UK, 1969 – 1981

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Abstract

This doctoral research project uses ethnographically-informed media and cultural history to explore reggae's past and think about ways we might study it.

The study offers insights into a number of issues of debate within media and cultural studies about the study of popular music as a mediated signifying culture and the importance of the past to the present. By focusing on aspects of reggae's past that have been marginalised in its extant histories, we can explore sound as an act of signification and pluralise the ways in which the meaningfulness of this music culture, both during its 'golden age' and in our current conjuncture, is conceptualised.

The central thesis of this research is that the transnational nature of reggae production culture, its construction in mediated discourses, and the contributions of its musicians, are examples of such marginalised aspects, despite being (and remaining) crucial influences on the ways reggae has sounded to multiple audiences. Additionally, the research makes the case for the significance of reggae's past into its cultures today.

In surveying the field, the thesis is built on a review of literature from reggae history, popular music studies, media and cultural studies, ethnomusicology and history studies. Primary data was identified or created through archival searches in Jamaica and Britain, oral histories and ethnographic observation and participation in two locales of reggae's transnational world. These materials were analysed using discourse analysis of historical narratives and verbatim speech, textual analysis of press and televisual material, (auto)ethnographic writing, and political economy.

The findings are presented through five micro-histories of commercial recordings, which set out rich detail on the temporal cultural location of each record, before expanding outwards to make some broader points about the dominant but contested stories of reggae's past, the agency of musicians in creating this culture and their part in the creation of reggae in its transnational locales. The micro-histories also allow the testing of (auto)ethnographic methods as a way to extend our understanding of reggae's past in the present. These approaches could be applied to other musics and music cultures in popular music and jazz studies. Beyond its significance to the academic study of reggae, this research contributes to an expanded framework for the preservation and contemporary dissemination of reggae that highlights its transnational nature, its mediation and the agency of musicians.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memories of Desi Jones, with whom I once briefly had the honour of sharing the stage, and of Jimmy Solo, who always welcomed me into the Jazz Hut with a smile.

Contents

Introduction Page 1

Chapter One: Conceptualising reggae, music, and culture Page 17
Conceptualising how reggae sounds
Conceptualising how popular music sounds
Conceptualising the sound of (reggae) (consumption) culture

Chapter Two: Musicians matter(s) Page 42
Writing about reggae musicians
Ethnomusicological approaches to the study of musicians
Model approaches to the study of musicians

Chapter Three: Entering and mediating the musical past: method and history Page 59
Finding things out about reggae's past
Writing the past
Model histories

Chapter Four: 'Return of Django' Page 79
– the mediations and meanings of an early reggae record
Roots, Rock, Reggae: Mediating Perry at the Black Ark
'Spotlight on reggae': mediating early reggae for a readership of rock fans
'Return of Django': a history beyond the greatness of Perry

Chapter Five: 'Hurt So Good' Page 100
– a British hit single from the 'Creative Echo Chamber' of Kingston
'Hurt So Good': a Jamaican cover of a US record hits in Britain
The makings of a reggae bass player
Musicians in the 'creative echo chamber'

Chapter Six: *Catch a Fire* Page 123
– the Wailers' Island debut and the contested legacy of reggae's superstar
The 'Album room' – gold records, crossover hits, and academic the treatment of *Catch a Fire*
Tuff Gong: a new type of transnational production culture
Turn your lights down low: Bob Marley, sexuality, and gender

Chapter Seven: 'Silly Games' Page 145
– conceptualising the sound of lovers rock beyond gender and nation
Small Axe: Steve McQueen's mediation of a lovers rock classic 40 years on
Sounding out the discourse of lovers rock (and roots reggae)
Historicising the sound of 'Silly Games' in lovers rock culture

Chapter Eight: *Signing Off* Page 166
– embodied knowledge, discourse, and UB40
What's in a setlist? Learning the song and the setlist as a discursive artefact
'How reggae' are UB40? The discourses that construct a band
The production and mediation of *Signing Off*

Conclusion Page 189

Appendices
Chris Welsh. 'Spotlight on reggae'. *Melody Maker*, November 8th 1969.
UB40 2023 Set List
Torrens, B. (2025). 'The mediation of reggae during its "golden age" in the British music press.' in *TMG Journal for Media History*. 28/1.

Introduction

February 2024, Shepherd's Dene, Northumberland.

I am standing in the cavernous central hall of the Official Museum of Reggae History. It is after hours. At a glance, the hall's moonlit scale and grandeur would seem to befit a musical culture of reggae's significance. But as I step forward, into the music's curated history, my footsteps echo off the glass, the polished marble, the cold, hard stone. The acoustics are all wrong. I can hear music, but there's no definition; no clarity; no bottom end. Reggae doesn't *sound* right in here.

Details come into sharper focus as I progress. The museum narrates reggae history through a set of artefacts trapped behind glass display cabinets: Bob Marley's Gibson Les Paul; the mixing desk from Studio One; Lee "Scratch" Perry's Mu-Tron Bi-Phase unit; Jah Shaka's earth-shattering sound system. Boys and their toys. The temperature and humidity of the air in the cabinets are meticulously monitored to ensure these relics remain preserved for future generations to observe, from behind glass.

As I continue through the hall a door comes into view on my left, spotlit and cordoned off. A security guard recognises me and unhooks the velvet rope. I am granted Access to All Areas.

I walk through the door and emerge into another hall, bigger still. I am backstage in a huge stadium. There's a big show happening tonight, and I'm performing with the headline act. The crew notices me. Someone lights my way; their torch shines a path for me to follow up a short flight of stairs and onto the left-hand side of the stage. The production crew and their equipment are hidden from the audience behind huge black drapes.

Every gig is the same: I always come on stage from the left-hand side. I am handed a bass guitar as I near the curtain. There is no need to ask if my instrument has been tuned up for me.

Every musical and logistical detail has been prepped and practiced in order to provide us with the best shot at what we all hope will be a seamless performance. We have rehearsed, musicians and crew alike, *ad nauseum*. The setlist has been methodically cultivated over decades of nights like this one. There will be no deviation from its instruction.

I step out on stage. The drummer counts us off. We begin.

This media and cultural studies research is about how we tell the story of reggae's past. The dual objects of study in this thesis are reggae's past and the ways we study it. As a reggae bass player, I am part of that history, and it is alive in the music I play. I have, though, long been aware of the role of reggae in black Jamaican culture, and the politics of being a white British bass player studying a black music form.

The passage above recollects a vivid and peculiar dream I had while attending a residential writing retreat. There was nothing to do in the Northumberland countryside but write, discuss, reflect upon, and dream about my ongoing doctoral research. I had this dream not long after a brief stint playing bass with UB40 in front of an audience upwards of 10,000 people toward the end of 2023. It was a privilege of being called to play bass for two gigs for UB40 in Switzerland and the Netherlands. As a bass player in a reggae band active in the UK reggae scene, I had played the occasional show in front of audiences of this size before, but always as part of a support act. This gig was different; the stakes felt much bigger than those to which I was accustomed. This was halfway into this research project and over a decade after I had started to explore the history of reggae and its musicians from 'Spider' Johnson, a mentor to my band of young multicultural Brummies learning to play reggae. It was these experiences that motivated me to undertake a more systematic study of reggae's past that would allow me to work through the tensions and paradoxes that I saw in the things I learnt. I open each chapter using this autoethnographic device to reveal my own position both as a musician and researcher within reggae history.

My dream tells me three things about these subjects.

First, 'depping' with UB40, like undertaking a PhD in reggae history, inspires a tremendous sense of responsibility. The overwhelming emotions I experienced on stage with one of the most globally commercially-successful popular music acts of the last half-century to emerge from reggae culture match those involved in writing reggae's past: I am being swept up in something much larger and more important than my small contribution.

Second, this dream in which I was strongly rooted, reflects my position in this research and symbolises my personal connection to the reggae culture I study. Situated as I am, I have taken opportunities during this research for moments of self-reflection about my entangled careers as a musician and a researcher, and the findings chapters of my thesis each begin with similar autobiographical reflections. This approach to communicating my findings emulates my equally distinct approach to researching reggae's past, and, as an act of dissemination,

makes the case for scholarly writing about music in ways that reflect the profoundly personal and subjective nature of our interactions with it.

Finally, and most substantively, the images and issues that arose in the dream point to a set of central questions about reggae's cultural and musical past and the preservation, for posterity, of its history. What emerges in this vignette, and what my research contributes to, are ideas about reggae, its past, and its institutionalisation as history in museums and archives. There are questions of how we can know and tell things about the past of reggae culture, broadly defined, and the way it changed in scale and in form over decades. How, for example, did a culture centred around the production of records to be played over sound systems in Jamaica come to include live band performances in front of thousands of people in continental Europe?

Unpacking the images of my dream reveals many of the themes that I have been tackling in my conscious research. In the dream, the museum represents a larger set of institutions in/by which reggae has been codified. There are, of course, several extant museums dedicated to reggae, such as the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, Jamaica, which I explore at length over an entire chapter of this thesis. There are also numerous exhibitions dedicated to reggae and other musics of Jamaican origin in institutions like the British Library[1]. Such exhibitions are particularly important and difficult to disentangle given the function of museums and archives within colonial projects, and the anticolonial nature of much of reggae culture. As I explored these museums, and reflected on the work of the curators who organise the exhibitions, a set of questions about reggae's past emerged in my mind: what is constituted by this past, and how to preserve it for future generations of fans and researchers.

Beyond the museum, though, my dream also indicates the degree to which reggae's past is very much alive within and important to its present. Contemporary reggae culture, while by no means being 'stuck in the past', is certainly preoccupied with and suffuse with images of its past. At stake, then, are serious issues of debate. There are questions about the institutionalisation of reggae's past: to whom does reggae history belong, who should have access to it, and who should benefit from its preservation? But there is an adjacent question, to which this research contributes, about the importance of the musical past to our present moment.

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[1] For instance, the *Beyond the bassline* exhibition (26th April – 26th August 2024).

The backstage imagery of my dream is of equal importance to that of the museum, as is the relationship between these two spaces. At a basic level the stage signifies, amongst many things, musicians and musicianship, two aspects which are typically missing from the dominant narrative of reggae history indexed by the museum's exhibitions. It also speaks to the infrastructure in which musicians operate, a network of industry professionals without whom reggae culture would look remarkably different.

The aspect of my dream that remains the most profound, and the trickiest to unpick, is the relationship between a music culture's history and its musicians. Before stepping out on stage as a member of UB40, I felt a tremendous sense of trepidation and of responsibility that moved beyond the typical pre-gig nerves. This was apprehension large enough to result in anxiety dreams weeks after the fact. Upon reflection, what was then and remains most poignant about this anxiety, was that it resulted from my preexisting relationship with UB40, and my understanding of their place in reggae history.

As I explore at greater length in this thesis, UB40 have been and remain a hotly contested band in reggae and popular music discourses. They also have a large and dedicated fanbase, and an expansive body of recorded work, established over a career spanning four decades. As a reggae fan, and a Birmingham-based musician, I was keenly attuned to these aspects of the band. I felt an immense obligation to do a good job because of the regard in which they have been held by their fans for decades. And as a musician entering the world of a 'legacy act', the criteria I used as a matter of course to judge my success was my musical fidelity to recordings made forty years in the past. My individual understanding of reggae history, then, strongly informed my practice as a fan and musician, and commercial recordings have played a significant role in this.

The history of reggae, then, remains an important contemporary issue of debate. It is therefore paramount that when we re-enter and retell reggae's past, we do so having equipped ourselves with criticality, a sharp focus, and a conceptualisation of what history is and what it does. As I detail in Chapter One, reggae histories have been predominantly written by fans-turned-historians. These writers bring the passion, detail, and rigour typical of the professional fan to their historiographic work, emphasising the extraordinary aspects of the music to which they have dedicated their lives. As such, the history of reggae is explained through tropes with which even generalist audiences are likely aware: the prominence of Bob Marley; the importance of Rastafari to reggae and of reggae to Rastafari; the relationship between reggae music culture and the Jamaican political class. But these familiar stories have

been told and re-told with enough regularity to have hardened the history into a familiar narrative, constituting a *singular* way to conceptualise reggae's past, its sound, its meaning and significance as a cultural force.

An orthodoxy has developed over time within reggae discourse, then, and it is towards that orthodoxy that my research is oriented. I arrive at the research as a British musician attempting to better understand how the music I play emerged from a distinct Jamaican context. Emerging as a researcher within the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research, and taking theoretical and methodological influence from ethnomusicology and history, I want to interrogate and explore the recurrent notion in reggae discourse that Jamaican and British reggae records somehow sounded, and still sound, different from one another. This led me to my primary research question, which I outline and unpack next.

My research question: the sound of reggae (records)

This thesis contributes an answer to the following research question:

> **How did reggae sound as a (mediated) culture (of production) in Jamaica and the UK during its 'golden age' in the 1970s?**

This question locates the research within a cultural studies tradition of exploiting the polysemy of words, particularly of the emic terms that form a culture's discursive repertoire. By making reference to the multivalence of a term – in this case, the term 'sound' – my question indexes the plurality for which this research advocates within scholarship. I define my usages of the term below in greater detail and in reference particularly to commercial recordings, but at a more general level what I mean by 'sound' is both a noun and a verb: reggae has 'a sound' that emerges from its production culture, and reggae 'sounds' – that is, it aurally signifies – something to its audiences, albeit through the prism of its mediation.

The question indicates three interrelated dimensions of reggae's past which, as I detail in Chapter One, remain either underexplored or misrepresented within much existing reggae discourse: the production of culture (and cultures of production), transnationalism, and mediation. These three conceptual pillars structure my research framework, shape my data analysis, and underpin the historical narratives I construct throughout the thesis. Rather than adopting these concepts as *a priori* theoretical commitments, each has emerged organically through the research process, either as pertinent conceptual tools to the research opportunities that presented themselves to me, or prisms through which new understanding about reggae's past can be reached.

In what follows in this introduction, I briefly justify the centrality of each concept, outlining how they support this thesis's dual aims: to produce richer, more plural accounts of reggae history, and to offer novel methods for writing the histories of popular music cultures more broadly. In doing so I simultaneously set out the definitions and parameters of my research question.

The production of culture and the culture of production

By foregrounding the 'culture of production' in my research question, I acknowledge a key intellectual debt to cultural studies. I follow the dominant practice within that discipline by differentiating between the production and consumption of a culture, and by locating the production of culture within a culture of production. The summary offered by du Gay et al. (1997, p. 43)[2] remains one of the most succinct and productive articulations of this concept. The authors locate production and consumption as two of five interlinked cultural processes in the 'circuit of culture', the remaining three being regulation, representation and identity. They emphasise that the production of culture occurs within a culture of production, defined as, "the distinctive practices used in the production [of culture] and the way that such widespread practices are represented in terms of specific values, beliefs and patterns of working." The working culture of producers, then, shapes how cultural artefacts are produced, and the kinds of meanings that can possibly become embedded within them.

This concept became foundational to this research due to my positionality as a bass player active in the British reggae scene. I began this research already firmly rooted in one of the two reggae production cultures I study, and with the opportunity to access the analogue in Jamaica. Foregrounding the production of culture and the culture of production in my research has provided me with a model to make sense of the rich and complicated experiences to which I have 'insider' access as a musician researching the history of a culture in which I am embedded (in Britain) and one to which I have been newly exposed (in Jamaica). Emphasising production over consumption has resulted in the additional benefit of addressing an important aspect of culture which remains under-researched; in current literature consumption cultures of reggae have been privileged, as I detail in Chapter One.

A specific aspect of the culture of reggae's production I emphasise is the role played by instrumental musicians. Again, this approach emerges from my positionality, as I argue in

[2] I explore this foundational text at greater length in Chapter One. Here I want to offer a brief precis of their definition.

Chapters Two and Three. But the foregrounding of musicians also addresses an area of need in reggae research. In Chapter One I make the case that the history of reggae is typically either told through biographies of its star singers and important producers[3], or through lists of significant recordings and record labels[4]. Where musicians *are* included in reggae histories, they are typically dragooned in to provide testimony on the genius of star singers and genius producers. Such axiomatic allegiance to those individuals perceived as being particularly gifted or important obviously emerges from and contributes to the 'great man' interpretation of history that has been extensively critiqued in other fields but remains somewhat uninterrogated in reggae writing. Aside from the obvious gendering implications of the 'great man' model, its particular manifestation in reggae histories obfuscates aspects of reggae's past like notions of social authorship, and the crucial role performed by instrumental musicians at the expense of the dominating producer figure and the charismatic genius singer. The marginalisation of instrumentalists in the role of music production cultures is hardly unique to reggae, but what *is* distinct about studio musicians' practices within the culture of reggae's production – certainly in a Jamaican context – is the lack of enforcement of copyright law, and the absence of the arranger and composer[5].

Within the culture of reggae's production, including the discourse of musicians, and reggae culture more broadly, I recognise the notion of authenticity as a central structuring idea in the manner du Gay et al. describe. In this approach I am particularly indebted to Grazian's ethnography of the Chicago blues scene (2003). Grazian argues that the discourse of authenticity structures activities of both production and consumption in that musical culture. Similarly, during my immersion in reggae culture both in Jamaica and Britain this same structuring logic was prevalent. Grazian offers a useful insight into how individuals' knowledge of blues history informs their construction of what constitutes authentic blues, always defined in relation to an earlier, supposedly more authentic, form. Authenticity, in this way, is a claim to fidelity to the past which, in reggae culture, is typically judged against its commercial recordings.

My foregrounding of musicians within the culture of production, and my participatory methodology (on which I expand in greater detail in Chapter Three) also open up possibilities for me to borrow from ethnomusicological theory and method. Some of the histories I

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[3] For example, see Katz (2021).
[4] Such as Barrow & Dalton (1997).
[5] See Hitchins (2014) and Howard (2016). I go into greater depth on this topic in Chapter Five.

produce are written from an autoethnographic perspective, which may seem illogical from a traditional approach to history. But by adopting a broader understanding, such an approach becomes both valid and productive. Following the work of ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman (2008), I show how my movements through reggae culture in Jamaica and the UK during the 2020s prompted my routes of historical inquiry. By way of a brief example, a recurrent topic of conversation among my generation of Jamaican musicians has been the desire to travel abroad for professional opportunities to play – be that for higher gig and recording fees, the want to play for international audiences and the plaudits that follow – coming up against the recurrent issue of sourcing visas. This tension, and other issues like it, constituted the kind of granular, work-a-day issues of importance to today's musicians, which in-turn prompted questions to pose at interview with musicians who had operated in reggae's 'golden age'.

Reggae as a transnational music culture

While this research centres on Jamaican and British cultures of production, I use the concept of transnationalism in order to move beyond dominant a framing of reggae's development along national lines. Typically, reggae discourse positions Jamaica as the music's site of authentic origin and Britain as a peripheral location where reggae was merely adopted, imitated, or diluted. This binary view – Jamaica as the original, authentic crucible; Britain as an offshoot or facsimile – is one of the most persistent and under-analysed tropes in reggae scholarship and wider discourse. In contrast, my research draws on Paul Gilroy's conceptualisation of the *Black Atlantic* (1993) as a framework for understanding reggae as a transnational music culture. Gilroy's foundational work rejects the assumptions that dominated conventional historiography, instead foregrounding the historical and cultural circuits of exchange that emerged from the Atlantic slave trade, and from migration during the colonial and post-colonial eras. This thesis, then, is predicated on the assumption that reggae was, and remains, a product of these transatlantic movements.

In focusing on Jamaica and the UK, the two nations that have received the most emphasis in existing reggae discourse, my intention is not to reinforce this dominant discursive positioning. Instead, I interrogate the assumptions that have made them the prevailing sites of reggae historiography. These are also the two locations with which I am most intimately connected – one as an embedded participant, the other accessed through empirical engagement – and it is their discursive prominence that warrants further critical attention. The relationship between Jamaican and British reggae cultures has historically been represented as linear and one-directional: reggae originates in Jamaica, is exported to Britain, and is then

transformed or consumed. In contrast, I approach these sites as interconnected within a transnational musical culture of the black Atlantic.

My approach to writing reggae history has been informed by musical encounters that indicate the material realities of these connections. For instance, while backstage at the *Reggae Land* festival in Britain in 2024, I encountered several Jamaican reggae musicians with whom I had become acquainted during my fieldwork in 2022 and 2023. The surprise of seeing people, whom I so closely associated with my time in the Caribbean, on a grey day in Milton Keynes was, apparently, mutual. While anecdotal, instances such as this indicate the ways in which movement between the two scenes continues to be a structuring feature of reggae culture. More broadly, I argue that understanding reggae through a transnational lens allows for a more complex account of its development that foregrounds not only the mobility of musicians and audiences, but also the recursive feedback loops of influence, and innovation that have shaped the music across borders.

Integrating the concept of production cultures and cultures of production to this commitment to transnationalism, I conceptualise the cultures of production in Jamaica and Britain as both distinct from one another, and, simultaneously, part of a larger, shared culture of production. In this way my own conceptualisation of reggae echoes Steven Feld's (2012) emphasis on cosmopolitanism in his work on Ghanaian jazz. The notion of place has been similarly helpful here, offering an explanation for the impact of the local on a globally shared cultural formation like reggae.

Reggae as a mediated culture

The concept of mediation plays a central role in the findings chapters of this thesis. I am particularly informed in this regard by scholars like Tim Wall's insightful work (2013; 2025a; 2025b) at the intersection of popular music and media studies and Simon Frith, who has regularly included the mediation of popular music in his foundational books (1978; 1983). Following these scholars, a critical analysis of the mediation of reggae is crucial to my understanding of the music's history and discourse. Extant histories have neglected the notion that reggae is a mediated culture[6]. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Torrens, 2025) writing

[6] A notable exception to this is Jones (2016), whose work I explore further in Chapter One.

reggae history through a media studies lens can result in new historical insights into reggae's past[7].

Many popular music histories are written from out of the pages of publications that have been archived as a matter of course, like *Rolling Stone* and *Melody Maker*, and from radio and televised broadcasts. Rather than treating sources such as these solely as archival artefacts that attest to the truth of a particular past event, the histories I produce seek to understand such as the discursive mediating artefacts they are. In doing so, these artefacts provided windows into the discursive world of the past as much as they do a factual one. What makes this particularly interesting in the case of reggae, and pertinent to this research and its interest in the studio cultures from which reggae recordings emerged, is that the mediations of reggae are almost always mediations of the culture of its production.

I contend, given the centrality of the recorded artefact in reggae culture, that media studies offer useful conceptual frameworks for studies of reggae's past. In reggae discourse, records often serve as the primary materials around which histories are constructed, careers are defined, and aesthetic developments are mapped. The double meaning of the term 'record' is revealing: 'record' simultaneously refers to the recording of a musical performance in a physical medium and indexes the notion of the 'written record' from which histories are written. This research takes seriously the idea that records are not simply sonic documents but mediated (and mediating) commercial objects that carry within them the conditions of their production, circulation, and reception. To this end, we should approach a history of reggae centred around the record with a sophisticated notion of what a record is, how it functions in society, and the processes of mediation that occur.

Building on this premise, I take commercial reggae records to be points of entry into the broader media landscape in which reggae culture developed. This includes not only physical media (vinyl discs, cassettes, CDs) but also the surrounding discursive and institutional frameworks: music journalism, radio broadcasts, television appearances, documentaries, and fan discourse. This research understands these materials not as archival evidence of 'what happened' in the past, but as historical artefacts that themselves shaped what was said, heard, and has since been remembered about reggae.

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[7] Another example is Paul Long, who writes his excellent history of Althea and Donna's 'Uptown Top Ranking' from a media studies background (Long, 2022).

Five case studies; five ways in to reggae's past

The findings of this thesis – and the answer to my research question – take the form of five chapters, each structured of which uses a commercial reggae recording as a door into a particular moment in reggae's past, a sounding object through which broader cultural, historical, and social dynamics can be explored. In examining these recordings at considerable length – not only as sonic documents of a musicological past but as multi-dimensional media artefacts – I use each as a lens through which to reflect on the historical development of reggae culture.

Each chapter applies a different method of research and addresses different aspects of each record, producing histories distinct from one another in form. The histories then extrapolate outwards from this focused approach to make some broader points about the history of reggae's production cultures and mediation in both Jamaica and the UK. Taken together, they offer a multifaceted view of reggae's production cultures and the ways in which the music has circulated, and been understood and historicised.

This model of historical interrogation and writing up has implications beyond reggae research. The role of the record in popular music histories, particularly in reggae, is often paramount. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, records are the artefacts around which narratives are constructed, careers defined, and movements historicised. The double meanings of the term 'record' I identify above indicate the centrality of commercial records to the historical aspect popular music culture more broadly. Given this centrality, I want to offer a way to utilise records that moves beyond what Rasula (2012) calls their "seductive menace". Put succinctly, he warns against the use of commercial recordings as genealogy on the part of music historians. Following Deleuze and Guatarri (2004), Rasula argues for a more rhizomatic conception of the cultural past, as opposed to the "arboreal model" – in which records form the nodes in a tree of musical influence.

Selecting these records

The five recordings I have selected are as follows:

- 'Return of Django' by the Upsetters (1969)
- 'Hurt So Good' by Susan Cadogan (1975)
- *Catch A Fire* by the Wailers (1973)
- 'Silly Games' by Janet Kay (1979)
- *Signing Off* by UB40 (1980).

The selection of each record was deliberate, but not definitive. I do not posit these as the five most important in reggae history. Five different records would have resulted in five different vantage points from which to view reggae's past. Two of these records – 'Return of Django' and 'Hurt So Good' – were produced in Jamaica, and two in the UK – 'Silly Games' and *Signing Off*. *Catch A Fire* emerged from production cultures in both locations, as I detail in Chapter Six. This balance reflects the transnationalism at the heart of reggae culture and of this research.

One shared characteristic of the five records is that each was commercially successful. This, too, was a deliberate choice. So-called 'crossover' records – those which are perceived as moving from a peripheral reggae culture into more central, 'mainstream' culture – are often under-interrogated in reggae history. This reflects a longstanding tradition of the fan-historian to privilege the obscure and perform their credentials as authoritative figures on the subject that has shaped how reggae is written. I argue the opposite, that these records must be taken seriously *because* they reached a large audience, not in spite of it. In this I follow the example of Simon Frith (1996) in popular music studies and Paul Long's (2022) exemplar chapter on Althea and Donna's reggae crossover hit 'Uptown Top Ranking'. In taking the pop-reggae crossover seriously as a historical object of study, I argue that to understand how reggae came to matter to multiple audiences, we need to attend to the records that travelled furthest. These recordings are often highly mediated on television, in music magazines, and on radio playlists, and so provide a richer terrain for the kind of research I undertake in this thesis. Their histories, then, are not so much 'lost' as in the case of some re-discovered musical gem; rather they have been hiding in plain sight.

Sounding out the records

As my research question lays out, this thesis discusses the three concepts I have just outlined through the prismatic concept of *sound*, or sound*ing*. I want to clarify what I mean by this term, both because the word 'sound' has strong connotations in reggae culture[8], and because my use of the term is deliberately open-ended. Broader uses of the word 'sound' elicit multiple meanings. Obviously, the noun sound connotes aural and/or sonic qualities – i.e., the sound of a particular record – and is often used metaphorically – i.e., a musician may be understood to have the 'right sound'. The *verb* sound has multiple meanings: to sound a horn and to sound out an opinion are two very different activities. An idea may be a 'sound' one in the sense that it is well thought through, or has been 'made sound' by virtue of its being made stable and secure, while a 'sound idea' could the initial earworm one has for a sound to be recorded – the idea for a sound.

To reflect the plasticity of sound as a discursive concept in popular music and other discourses, my definition of the term is similarly multivalent. At any one instance, I may use the term 'sound' to refer to the aural, sonic, discursive, signifying, and historical qualities of a piece of music – typically a commercial recording. Indeed, it is commercial recordings around which the findings of this thesis are structured, and this concept of sound can be brought into sharper focus through a brief discussion on how I understand and employ records as case studies.

In this way, I follow Marshall's contention that:

> Records emanate meaning far more than they emanate music. The fact that records can emanate music is, of course, an essential reason why they emanate meaning, but it is not a feature that has to be instantiated very much – if at all – for the object to be socially meaningful and valuable. (Marshall, 2019)

Following this insight, I conceive of records as '*sounding* objects' – not just in the obvious sense, but in that they signify in ways that transcend the commitment of a musical performance and post-production effects to acetate. It is in this way, by asking *what* reggae records sound, as well as the more conventional 'what they sound *like*', that I contribute an answer to my research question.

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[8] A 'sound' is a commonly used sobriquet for a sound system. Also, the tripartite of 'word, sound, and power' are of central importance to Rastafari culture – so much so that Peter Tosh's backing band adopted this for their name. In academic discourse the term 'sounding' has been used productively in recent scholarship on Jamaican popular music in Jamaica (Niaah, 2021).

What I did not anticipate at the outset of this research was how these records sounded over time. I began this research, as I have said, wanting to interrogate the idea that reggae sounds different across space – specifically the Atlantic Ocean – but as I explore throughout this thesis, these records sound temporally as much as they do geographically.

The structure of the thesis

In Chapter One, I review extant academic scholarship on reggae and reggae's popular histories. I make the case that there have been three broadly defined categories of reggae writing. Journalistic histories of reggae, typically written by fans-turned-historians, have mediated reggae history following familiar tropes for a generalist audience. British cultural studies have understood reggae as an important consumption culture and have articulated the intersection reggae culture, identity and resistance in this country, but have ignored reggae's production and its transnational dimension. More recently, scholarship from the Reggae Studies Unit at the University of the West Indies, Mona has emerged, is written from a rich insider perspective. I situate these different approaches to conceptualising reggae, as well as other landmark studies that do not correspond to one of these categories, alongside analogous attempts to conceptualise other popular musics, and to conceptualise culture more broadly.

In Chapter Two, I focus on instrumental musicians and their in/exclusion in studies of popular music. I begin by focusing on the studies of reggae that *do* foreground instrumental musicians. I outline what these studies, which represent a limited but growing body of scholarship, tell us about the role of musicians within reggae's culture of production, and what work is still to be done. I then explore other productive ways in which musicians have been studied by academics from other disciplines and addressing other musical cultures. I identify productive models for studying musicians and useful insights into musicians' practices, all of which have been influential to this musician-focused thesis on reggae history.

Having identified the extant ways of studying reggae, other popular musics, and wider cultures, as well as the musicians that make up a large bulk of those cultures, in Chapter Three I move more explicitly into ways of studying and writing the past. I outline and make the case for my interdisciplinary method, which I call an 'ethnographically-informed media and cultural history'. I also highlight several histories which have been influential as models for my own work. I identify their characteristics and explore the ways in which musical and cultural pasts have been accessed and written up as histories.

The first of these findings chapters centres on 'Return of Django' by The Upsetters. This chapter explores the mediation of this Jamaican reggae record, and its producer, Lee "Scratch" Perry, for British audiences. Through an analysis of Perry's mediation in print and on screen, the chapter sets out the case that many of the dominant narrative tropes of contemporary reggae discourse, which I establish in the literature review, were present in early mediations of reggae. The chapter offers an examination of 'Return of Django' as a mediated, commercial and cultural object that emphasises its impact on a British society at large, moving beyond well-established narratives that foreground the record's importance to a British 'skinhead' audience.

In Chapter Five, I return to Perry's career at a slightly later (and typically more celebrated and mythologised) point, and focus more explicitly on the culture of production within his fabled Black Ark studio. The chapter centres on another of his productions: Susan Cadogan's 'Hurt So Good'. My discussion of this record leans heavily on interview data from Cadogan, and from Boris Gardiner who arranged and played bass on the recording. Cadogan provides an artist's take on Perry's production practices that demythologise reggae's most mythologised figure, as well as insightful reflections on her own career. In exploring the career and practices of Boris Gardiner, I reflect on the uncredited compositional and arrangement duties that instrumental musicians working in the studios of Kingston were required to take as a matter of course. I also consider the impact of a transnational jazz culture, in which musicians moved around all points of the black Atlantic in order to pursue opportunities to play, on the establishment and development of popular music culture in Jamaica during reggae's heyday.

I take a less orthodox approach to popular music history writing in Chapter Six, in which I focus on (Bob Marley and) the Wailers' *Catch a Fire*[9]. The chapter is constituted by an autoethnographic account of my visit to the Bob Marley Museum. The museum, found at the singer's former residence on Hope Road in Kingston, Jamaica, has long since become a site of pilgrimage for fans of reggae across the globe. In this chapter I unpick the way in which the museum mediates Marley and his legacy, and the production culture of Marley's most contested album that the museum indexes. Nuancing a Marxist critique of the album that has been well-established in scholarship, I make the case that, even before Marley's huge

[9] This album was initially attributed to the Wailers upon its release, and then, tellingly, to Bob Marley and the Wailers in subsequent reissues. I explore the primacy afforded to Marley in reggae discourse and its implications at length in Chapter Six.

commercial success that would follow *Catch a Fire*, the distinct, transnational production culture and present absence of Island Records' Chris Blackwell is what resulted in a new kind of sounding object in reggae culture.

Having established the evolving production culture of reggae in Jamaica, in Chapters Seven and Eight I look at reggae production culture(s) in Britain, beginning with 'Silly Games' by Janet Kay. The chapter commences by examining a recent mediation of the record in Steve McQueen's *Lovers Rock* (2020), which re-presents an early-80s blues party in London. I use McQueen's deployment of the record, and critical responses to the film and to the controversial scene that features 'Silly Games' in particular, as doors into the discourse of lovers rock. I then explore this discourse at greater length and unpick assumptions about the music culture along lines of nation and gender. I make the case that lovers rock, commonly constructed as 'Britain's contribution to reggae' and as 'reggae for/by women', is the fault line at which such assumptions around nation and gender that structure wider reggae discourse becomes most explicitly visible. Following Palmer's emphasis of the transnational in lovers rock culture, I offer a history of the record and of lovers rock that attempts to move beyond these limiting assumptions (2011, 2014).

My final findings chapter is centred on Birmingham-based reggae band UB40's debut album *Signing Off*. In this chapter I am most strongly embedded within the culture of production I study, and as such it is the most explicitly autoethnographically informed. I synthesise my own experiences with a simultaneous explanation of the album's production, which I use to make some wider points about the difference in production cultures of Jamaican and British reggae in an effort to define the 'British reggae sound' – that common refrain in reggae discourse which sparked this research – beyond simplistic nationalist explanations. The chapter also explores the intersection between authenticity and history in reggae discourse, and considers how reggae history shapes its contemporary culture.

I conclude this thesis by arguing that the research constitutes a contribution to an alternative historiography of popular music cultures, and make the case for analogous approaches to the study of reggae and other pop histories. I reflect on the current status of reggae research, the need for further timely work, and identify what form this research might take.

Chapter One: Conceptualising reggae, music, and culture

In this chapter, I build on the ideas of cultures of production, transnationalism and mediation, as well as the notion of sounding, which I established in the introduction, to explore how reggae has been understood as music and culture in literature written from diverse perspectives. I identify the broad trends that have defined scholarly and journalistic studies of reggae, and pinpoint aspects currently neglected in the literature that this research addresses. The sections that follow contextualise my conception of reggae within productive debates about studying popular music and culture more broadly, from which I argue studies of reggae as a music culture can benefit. Starting with the historical details provided by extant popular histories of reggae, I show how insights and approaches from what I broadly define as the 'Mona school' of reggae studies, 'outernational' studies of reggae and the 'Birmingham school' of (consumption) cultural studies, could be combined to develop innovative ways to write histories of reggae.

In doing so, though, I critique the consensus of reggae history as it has been written by journalists, arguing for the need to avoid approaches that are reliant on oft-critiqued 'great man' conceptualisations of history. I make the case for a more theoretically-grounded approach established in work on reggae as a British consumption culture – exemplified by work at Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies – to studies of historical cultures of music production. And in doing so, I note the neglect of musicians in current approaches to the culture of production of music. I propose an approach that extends the focused work from the University of the West Indies, Mona, on Jamaican reggae, into a broader and interactive transnational study. Finally, I show how my work is located in broader debates about popular music and jazz studies as an area of cultural studies.

Conceptualising how reggae sounds

I begin with reggae histories written for a broader audience. While Chapter Three covers the act of writing of music and cultural histories in greater depth, I want to set out by looking at these journalistic histories first, as they establish many of the tropes comprising the dominant narrative of reggae's development. These writers occupy an 'outsider' perspective with respect to Jamaican reggae culture that, as I argue below, results in the privileging of certain

aspects of reggae's history at the expense of others. Much of the literature I discuss in this chapter either contributes to, or writes against, this dominant narrative.

Sounding out the journalistic mediations of reggae history

There is a plethora of histories of reggae's development in Jamaica and Britain in book and documentary film form. Walker (2005) has compared such reggae history writing to a cottage industry that includes noteworthy examples like Bradley (2001), Barrow and Dalton (1997), de Koningh and Griffiths (2003), and Katz (2004). Both the stories these books tell and the sources from which they draw are alike. These histories tend to be rich in rigorously researched historical detail, and they have been a valuable foundation upon which I build the histories set out in Chapters Four to Eight. However, they provide a singular understanding of reggae's development and significance, contributing to a narrow conception of reggae that privileges some details over others. Ultimately, they construct a dominant narrative of reggae's development that is accepted, certainly never critically engaged with, by subsequent authors who draw on such ideas.

For these journalistic histories, reggae *sounds* Jamaican, but it also *sounds* Jamaica. Jamaica's culture, its history and the struggles of its musical artists are all signified in the records these writers listen to as much as in the stories they tell. Their narratives highlight three interconnected themes: Jamaica and Britain's colonial and postcolonial relationship; the influence of Rastafari ideology and imagery on Jamaican popular musical culture; and Jamaica's turbulent politics during the 1970s.

The book-length histories of reggae's unfolding story have mostly been written by male British and American writers from fan-journalism backgrounds. They are written with the rigorous attention to detail that is characteristic of passionate musical fandom. They are not, though, usually informed by debates about what constitutes history, the difference between history and the past, and how histories can or should be produced, that have been conducted in the academy since the middle of the twentieth century[1]. These histories also constitute the kinds of totalised narratives that have been implicitly critiqued by Michel Foucault in his own works of history, for instance (1989, 2018). Bar some notable exceptions (such as Augstyn (2020)), these histories mostly depend upon the 'great man' conception of history. This is most apparent in the biographies; most are of Bob Marley, although Katz's authorised biography of Lee "Scratch" Perry is a notable exception. Even the attempts at a broader

[1] For instance, see Carr (1961) and Thompson (1978).

history of reggae, though, depend on a similar conception of reggae as the work of great men inside important studios or dancehalls (Barrow & Dalton, 1997, de Koningh & Griffiths, 2003).

Likewise, these reggae histories marginalise the transnationality of reggae culture. While the edited collection *Global Reggae* (Cooper C. , 2012) highlights the significance and history of reggae across the globe, journalistic mediations of the music typically play down this aspect. This leads to a neglect of the way that people and their cultural practices moved around what Paul Gilroy (Gilroy, 2022) has called the 'black Atlantic' long before the first reggae record had been pressed. For instance, the dominant narrative is that reggae is something that somehow *comes to* Britain from Jamaica. Bradley, for example, provides lots of useful information about reggae in Britain during the mid-late 1970s, and of the recording of Millie Small's smash ska hit 'My Boy Lollipop' in London (2001, pp. 151-2), but his narrative is ultimately of Britain as a kind of outpost for what is essentially a Jamaican culture. There are some counter narratives. For de Konigh and Griffiths (2003), Doumerc (2018), and documentarian Jeremy Marre (2011), British reggae is a thing that can be understood on its own terms with sparing reference to Jamaica.

The marginal position that the British subgenre of reggae known as lovers rock occupies in all of these histories reflects this practice of bisecting and ordering Jamaican and British reggae cultures. By way of example, Barrow and Dalton's treatment of lovers rock is a mere seven pages long in a book of nearly 400 pages, and they categorise the people who purchased lovers rock records as "teenage girls in pleated skirts, clumpy shoes and dark berets (or boys who wanted to attract them to their parties)." (1997, p. 338) Bradley's (2001, pp. 438-446) eight-page section on lovers is more aware of the narratives than Barrow and Dalton, who reify them as a matter of course. But Bradley still compares lovers to the "meaningful, relevant and genuinely roots expression of what it is to be black in Britain in the 1970s" (p. 438) and categorises it as English despite acknowledging that this is debated.

Walker (2005) omits lovers rock from his book completely, despite dedicating an entire chapter to reggae in the Caribbean diaspora which features Aswad, Steel Pulse, and UB40. Katz's (2004) oral history of reggae also omits lovers, despite the author being well-versed in its history (2011). Lovers rock does not sound in these reggae histories because, for these writers, lovers rock is not reggae. Borthwick, meanwhile, devotes about a page to lovers (2022, pp. 139-40), echoing the gendered narrative that lovers "turned the tables, privileging the female voice and concerns of a female audience after many years effectively in a

wilderness". Such an assumption has clearly not taken on board Palmer's (2011, p. 184) critique of Hebdige (1987), who is lauded for attempt to recognise the contributions of black British women, but taken to task over his oversight of the masculinist forces that shaped the production, consumption, and mediation of lovers rock, and the masculine-inflected aesthetic affect that designated romantic lyricism as 'women's work'.

I return to this in greater depth in Chapter Seven. Here I note that such a construction misses the importance of the relationship between Britain and Jamaica and the movement of people between the two countries that had been long-established at the time of reggae's conception. It also miscasts the British appetite for Jamaican reggae. What is interesting about Britain in this story is that it is the place in which reggae, an alien music, was embraced by a massive audience, in often contradictory racialised ways.

This critique of reggae history writing can be brought into sharper focus by way of a brief example. The treatment of one of the records I examine at length in this thesis, 'Return of Django', is indicative of these themes at work. In Katz's biography of the record's producer, Lee "Scratch" Perry, the record is understood diachronically, as a moment in Perry's long career (2021, pp. 88-9). More specifically, its 'crossover' success in Britain, is constructed through the notion of an accidental hit, and is important to the story of Perry because it would result in a financial windfall that would eventually result in the producer arriving in his fabled studio, the Black Ark (the period of his career on which most historians fixate). The discursive notion that a record hits 'accidentally' is a familiar one in popular music discourses, and one that obfuscates the stratified marketing practices of record labels. Equally familiar is the genius myth upon which the inevitability of Perry's rise to the top is predicated, and which 'Django' sounds in this narrative. Indeed, it is only Perry's insatiable sexual appetite, in this telling of the story, that prevents 'Django's inevitable rise to the very top of the British charts. Katz's construction of Perry depends on a notion of genius – and particularly a construction of the eccentric, black, male genius – that has long been problematised in scholarship.

Barrow and Dalton's mediation of the record emerges from the same ideological conception of reggae but takes a different approach (1997, p. 92). While Katz constructs the great man, Barrow and Dalton use a variation of the theme in their history of reggae that is particular to popular music cultures: the important records and record labels (of great man artists and producers). While they clearly draw on the same source as Katz (in this case, an interview with bassist Aston "Family Man" Barrett), their construction is a more synchronic one. They

locate ‘Django’ alongside other reggae recordings that found a market in the UK amongst white working-class young men, constituting what they call ‘Skinhead reggae’, a phenomenon which they categorise as a “misnomer”. Revealingly, for Barrow and Dalton, to whom reggae sounds the way its auteur producers intended, it is inconceivable that the meaning of a set of records could have anything to do with the culture of their consumption.

Analysing the record’s treatments in these two significant reggae histories reveals many of the common tropes employed in popular music discourse: the ‘great man’ conception of history and the genius myth, the binary notions of the novelty crossover hit and the subcultural icon, and the primary importance of recordings to, and in, music history. These constructions occur within a parallel discursive repertoire from which ‘outsider’ histories of reggae commonly draw: reggae as ‘African retention’; reggae as the music of Jamaica’s ‘ghettoes’; reggae as the product of ‘great men’; reggae as the musical vehicle for Rastafari philosophy; reggae as a producer’s medium. ‘Django’ in this context was Perry’s earliest ‘crossover hit’ and represents his contribution to the formation of early ‘skinhead’ reggae.

We can see the extent to which the dominant narrative of reggae has become ubiquitous in television reggae history documentaries like *Reggae Britannia* (Marre, 2011). This film, which focuses particularly on reggae in Britain as part of the BBC’s Britannia series, was first broadcast in 2011 on BBC 4. The totalising narration is established in the first minute of the film:

> When Jamaican music first arrived here in the 60s, it spoke mainly to the West Indian community. Ska and early reggae were little more than novelties, though they offered a new soundtrack for the working-class teens, black and white. But during the 70s, British reggae came out on the streets. It joined forces with rock, and then punk, a rebel sound that was changing British music. Reggae took on Babylon, and by the 80s had become a mirror for the cultural and racial changes that were transforming Britain, while Britain transformed and absorbed reggae into the mainstream.

Like the full documentary itself, the opening of *Reggae Britannia* distinguishes between two time periods: the 1960s, where reggae is seen as limited in British popular music culture to the West Indian community and novelty pop hits; and the 1970s, where it links to social movements in British society and became a mainstay of British pop music sound. However, in making these prime distinctions and utilising a standardised story of British reggae, the programme constructs a totalising history of the music. This process of producing totalising histories of popular music has been explored at greater length (Wall & Long, 2009, Wall & Pillai, 2010). The structuring devices identified in these critiques are especially apparent in *Reggae Britannia*: Reggae in Britain is understood to unfold through a series of ‘dramatic

disruptions', with musical 'roots' in Jamaican music and culture, and ultimately moving 'from the margins' of British popular culture 'to the mainstream'.

To these writers, reggae *sounds* Jamaican, then, but in a way that does not interrogate what that notion might mean. I next address a group of researchers who similarly foreground the production and consumption in Jamaica, but do so from a more sophisticated insider perspective, and one that often emphasises the transnational.

The Reggae Studies Unit at UWI, Mona

Much of the most influential recent scholarship on Jamaican popular music has emerged from the Reggae Studies Unit (RSU) in the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of the West Indies. Despite the emphasis on 'reggae' in its name, researchers at the RSU have produced work on a wide spectrum of Jamaican popular and folk musical forms. The degree to which the RSU can be understood as a singular intellectual project is, however, complex. A useful comparison can be drawn with the earlier work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Whereas the CCCS, broadly speaking, developed a set of methodologies for understanding culture and then applied it to a variety of cultural forms, scholars from the RSU have instead applied a wide range of methods to a single topic: popular music from and in Jamaica. While the work of scholars in the RSU has been broadly within a tradition of cultural analysis established by CCCS writers, it engages in a distinct set of debates and is shaped by a different Caribbean intellectual and cultural context.

Several recognisable qualities recur across much of the scholarship produced within the RSU. One is the prominence of dancehall culture within Jamaican popular music studies. There are two immediate reasons for this prominence. First, the relative age of Jamaica's discursively stratified genres coincided with the increasing acceptance of popular music as an object of serious study within Jamaican academia. By the 1990s, a generation of scholars who had grown up with dancehall records were reaching professional maturity, shaping the research agenda. Second, the term *dancehall* itself is contested. Some scholars adopt a definition that mirrors its popular usage: music following the so-called 'reggae period', marked by the rise of the DJ as the dominant performer and the adoption of digital production techniques. Others, like Sonjah Stanley Niaah, use a broader definition in which 'dancehall' encompasses all periods of Jamaican music, treating the dancehall not as a historical phase but as a physical and social space that connects musical eras (2010).

Another common trait is the strong grounding of RSU scholarship in Jamaican – particularly Kingstonian – culture and society. Many of the researchers bring an insider perspective to their work, and their scholarship reflects an explicit commitment to ensuring that Jamaican reggae culture and history are documented and interpreted from within Jamaica. At the same time, RSU scholars are attentive to the fact that Jamaican popular music is inherently transnational. Different conceptions of this transnationalism appear across their work: some highlight the music's spread throughout the Caribbean; others explore its deep connections with Africa, and with Britain and the United States, influenced by Gilroy's 'black Atlantic' model. This contrasts with what I argue above has the dominant outsider view, which often downplays the transnational flows that have shaped reggae both in its antecedents and in its global influence.

Partly because of this tension, and partly because Jamaica's elite and academic establishment were slow to embrace the country's indigenous music, there has historically been a vacuum of Jamaican perspectives in the academic study of Jamaican music. RSU scholarship often responds to this gap by consciously writing against outsider narratives, producing work that corrects and challenges external framings of the music and its culture.

Another distinctive feature of scholarship from the RSU is its willingness to conceptualise both the production and consumption cultures of reggae. While some studies focus more heavily on one side of this binary, there are also examples that examine both in tandem. Moreover, as Dennis Howard and others have argued, this binary itself can be problematised in a Jamaican context, where the lines between production and consumption are often blurred by overlapping social, cultural, and economic practices (Howard, 2016, p. 91, Toynbee, 1999, p. 72). And a final common trait across RSU scholarship, and one which it shares with the CCCS tradition, is its historically situated approach, even when it is not explicitly historical in its central aims. These texts are frequently informed by ethnography, addressing contemporary Jamaican music cultures while situating them within a broader historical lineage. This differs from my own approach, in which contemporary ethnographic research serves to directly inform the writing of reggae's past, rather than contextualising the present.

The work of Carolyn Cooper, foundational to the RSU, has been particularly influential in the study of dancehall. Emerging from Cooper's scholarship is a way of understanding Jamaican music as text, with lyrics functioning as literal, literary, and communicative acts. Beginning with *Noises in the Blood* (1995) and developed further in *Sound Clash* (2004) as well as through numerous journal articles and her long-running column in the *Jamaica Gleaner*,

Cooper's intellectual project has centred on applying literary analysis and linguistics to Jamaican popular culture, most prominently the lyrics of dancehall artists. In a recent article reflecting on her career to date (2024), Cooper expounds on her navigations between academic discourse and 'the street', highlighting the political motivations for such an approach. She has claimed the title of 'Road Scholar' – an intentional play on 'Rhodes Scholar' – in a succinct example of the linguistic creativity she studies and the subversive power games embedded in Jamaican language use. Her ideas have contributed to, and remain part of, contemporary debates about Jamaican language and its recognition not as a creole dialect but as a language in its own right. They are pertinent to Jamaican popular music scholarship if for no other reason than that lyrical content remains a recurrent and contested issue in Jamaican musical consumption culture.

Other landmark RSU studies include Sonjah Stanley Niaah's *Dancehall* (2010) which examines Kingston's musical geography, culture, and history, focusing particularly on its consumption culture. Niaah's approach is a more interdisciplinary one than Cooper's, but follows in the latter's tradition by restoring a sense of 'the people' to reggae scholarship, constructing dancehall as the music of the masses rather than the music of its celebrated producers. In more recent work, Niaah theorises 'sounding' as an alternative construction to Jacques Attali's concept of 'noise' restoring agency to the participants of a Kingstonian dance by framing their consumption practice as an act of resistance in the face of over-policing and 'the system' (Attali, 1985, Niaah, 2021).

I draw most heavily on the work of two RSU scholars: Ray Hitchins and Dennis Howard. Hitchins's (2014) monograph and (2013) article together constitute a holistic methodology for the ethnomusicological study of Jamaican popular music, both historical and contemporary, from an insider perspective. His scholarship is rooted in his practice as a working session musician in Kingston's studios, and it constructs a definition of reggae as, first and foremost, a studio music. In his account, the 'sound creators' of Jamaican popular music are its instrumental musicians and, especially marginalised in extant histories, its engineers. Entering into a discourse in which reggae is often understood as a 'producer's medium' (Wall, 2013, pp. 83-4; Barrow & Dalton, 1997, pp. 144-6), Hitchins's work can be read as an intervention that foregrounds the contribution of engineers and session musicians to the creative process.

Hitchins's approach is also characterised by a commitment to demythologising Jamaican studio production culture, particularly the assumption that Kingston's sound was shaped by a

lack of access to 'top-end' recording equipment. His research demonstrates that the distinctive sonic character of Jamaican commercial recordings was an intentional aesthetic, crafted by engineers making creative choices rather than constrained by technological inadequacy. In Chapter Three, I explore the productivity of Hitchins's approach as a methodological model in more detail, but it is worth noting here three ways in which his framework is useful for a more nuanced conception of reggae: first, his focus on studios – both bespoke recording spaces and radio studios – expands the scope of reggae scholarship beyond the boundaries of the sound system; second, his proposed periodisation is based on shifts in production culture and recording practice, providing an alternative chronology to the dominant technological or genre-based models[2]; third, his attention to the compositional role of musicians – which I expand upon in Chapter Five – highlights the substantial creative input of engineers and players, often overlooked in popular and scholarly narratives.

Where Hitchins takes a micro-view of Kingston's studio culture, scrutinising in detail the equipment and practices of its sound creators, Dennis Howard approaches the subject of Jamaican popular music from a more macro-perspective. Like Hitchins – and like my own work – Howard places production culture at the centre of his analysis, and he does so with a sophisticated understanding of its relationship to consumption cultures. He recognises the relationship between production and consumption cultures, exploring their interaction in a distinct Jamaican context that sometimes blurs the dominant boundaries of each. This is particularly evident in his attention to the 'hidden' aspects of Jamaican popular music history, such as jukebox culture and radio (2016, pp. 149-160), which is often overlooked in dominant narratives centred on recording studios and the dancehall. By foregrounding these less-documented practices, Howard provides a fuller and more socially grounded picture of how Jamaican popular music has been created, circulated, and experienced.

Like Hitchins, Howard offers a distinctive conceptualisation for the periodisation of Jamaican popular music. While much scholarship and journalism refer to the 1970s as reggae's 'golden age', Howard instead terms this period the era of internationalisation (2016, pp. 52-61). This reframing shifts the focus to an emphasis on the transnational processes that shaped the music during this decade. For Howard, the 1970s were not the high-water mark of reggae's

[2] Hitchins proposes the following chronology: The single microphone/single-track recording model (1948–1958); the multi-microphone/single-track recording model (1958–1963); the multi-microphone/multi-track recording model (1963–1982); the serial multi-track recording model (1982–1992); the computer-based recording model (1992–present). This offers a productive alternative conception compared with the dominance of the ska – rocksteady – reggae – dancehall chronology.

aesthetic, but a period in which Jamaican music became embedded within global networks of production, distribution, and consumption. This conceptualisation aligns closely with my own emphasis on the transnational currents that define reggae's history, and it offers a useful counterpoint to nationalist or insular framings of the genre's development.

Coinciding with the inception of the RSU, academic studies of Jamaican popular music, written from an outsider perspective have seen a similarly productive turn towards interdisciplinarity. I now turn my attention to some of the most productive examples of such work that have been particularly influential to this thesis.

'Outernational' approaches to reggae scholarship

I begin by looking at two examples of what I broadly define, following the language of Rastafari culture, as 'outernational' media studies of commercial reggae recordings. The first is Long's analysis of Althea and Donna's 1978 hit, 'Uptown Top Ranking' (2022), which has been particularly influential on my approach. Despite not emerging from the kind of ethnographic work I have undertaken, Long's chapter most closely resembles in form my findings in Chapters Four through Eight. Long situates the recording within the broader political economy of reggae's transnational circulation, tracing its trajectory from its beginnings as an 'answer record' in Kingston's music scene to the top of the UK charts, examining the cultural, industrial, and media contexts that facilitated its success. Long uses this case study to illustrate the ways in which reggae operated as a transnational commodity, shaped by the dynamics of its production, distribution, and consumption across Britain and Jamaica, explores the plurality of meanings that result from such a set of processes. For Long, 'Uptown Top Ranking' plainly sounds differently across the Atlantic than it does in Jamaica. Long's chapter also convincingly makes the case for using commercial recordings as case studies through which to explore ideas beyond the genius of the record's producers.

The second (Huss, 2000), has been equally significant to my work for several reasons, beginning with the interrogation of authenticity as a constructed and contested category. Huss demonstrates how the act of constructing authenticity in reggae's culture of production is shaped by the expectations of different markets, producing multiple, conflicting authenticities. In Huss's formulation, this tension plays out in a specifically transnational context, where Jamaican understandings of what constitutes authenticity often diverge from the assumptions of record-buying audiences in the UK and US. By foregrounding album cover imagery, Huss demonstrates how records sound beyond their ability to record music.

His analysis exposes how the encoding and decoding of visual meaning into commercial records depends upon the same kind of discursive tropes as the dominant histories I identify at the start of this chapter. In other words, Huss tells us that reggae culture *looks* like it *sounds* to the eyes and ears of its global North markets.

Just as Huss demonstrates, the construction of authenticity in reggae is always mediated by the expectations of different audiences, with Jamaican conceptions often diverging sharply from those in its key overseas markets in the UK and US. Louis Chude-Sokei identifies a parallel dynamic in relation to Africa, an element of the black Atlantic that remains under-researched in reggae scholarship despite its prominence as a source of ideological inspiration in reggae's lyrical, visual, and political culture (Chude-Sokei, 2011). Chude-Sokei's intervention is particularly valuable in showing how the "Africa" evoked in reggae is itself a constructed symbolic space, no less removed from African lived realities than, as Huss notes, UK and US audiences' imagined versions of Jamaica. Using the case of South African reggae artist Lucky Dube, Chude-Sokei demonstrates how these symbolic constructions operate differently across contexts – Jamaica, Africa, and the global North – while sharing a tendency to conflate place with ideology. In this sense, Chude-Sokei reinforces and extends Huss's argument: Africa in reggae functions, like Jamaica in the global North, as both a sounding object and a signifying object, its meanings refracted through the cultural position of the listener.

Jason Toynbee's book on Bob Marley (2007) can be read as a worked-through application of the approach he first set out in his earlier *Making Popular Music* (1999), which I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. In the Marley study, Toynbee treats the artist as a 'social author', situating his creative output within the political economy and cultural practices of reggae's production and reception. Drawing on detailed analysis of Marley's work in Kingston's studios and his engagement with international audiences, Toynbee demonstrates how the meanings attached to Marley's music were shaped by the interplay between local production cultures and transnational circuits of distribution and consumption. This aspect has also been fertile ground for another scholar, Mike Alleyne, and I examine the work of both in detail in Chapter Six. The strength of Toynbee's work lies in its integration of musical, industrial, and socio-political analysis into a cohesive account that resists biographical myth-making, showing instead how Marley's authorship emerged through a network of collaborative and mediated practices. In doing so, Toynbee provides a model for

studying popular musicians within a Jamaican context that moves beyond celebratory narratives, focusing instead on the structural and cultural conditions that enable their work.

Beginning in an important article (2011), and developed over a following book chapter (2014), Lisa Amanda Palmer has produced foundational work on lovers rock culture in the UK. Her insight has been particularly influential to my thinking, and I return to her work in detail in Chapter Seven, where I explore its implications for wider reggae studies. For the purposes of this section, what is most significant is her critique of the dominant notion that lovers' rock is the 'British contribution' to reggae. Palmer demonstrates instead that the production of lovers had it roots in Jamaica before taking on its distinctive form of consumption in the blues dances of Britain. Palmer's foregrounding of the black Atlantic reframes lovers' rock not as a secondary or derivative form, but as a culturally and politically significant manifestation reggae with its own transnational genealogy.

Led by principle investigator Mykaell Riley, founding member of British reggae band, Steel Pulse, the AHRC-funded project *Bass Culture Research* has made substantial contributions to our understanding of the ways in which Jamaican musical culture has, and continues to, transform British life. With a focus on multimedia outputs with a large reach, including podcasts (from which I draw extensively in Chapter Seven) and a long-form documentary, the project has helped to establish this topic as key issue of debate in academic and wider public discourses.

In addition, several other studies, while less directly influential on the specific arguments of this thesis, nonetheless warrant mention for the perspectives they bring to reggae scholarship. Henriques's (2011) *Sonic Bodies* is also important in the way he develops a distinctive sensory methodology for understanding sound system culture, emphasising its embodied, spatial, and affective dimensions. Henriques theorises three 'wavebands', the material, the corporeal, and the social. Daynes's (2010) work on reggae and memory examines the genre as a vehicle for the preservation and negotiation of personal and collective histories. Stolzoff's (2000) ethnography of dancehall offers a detailed account of the music's social, cultural, and economic dimensions in Jamaica, situating it within wider debates about popular culture and class. Veal's (2007) classic study of dub remains one of the most comprehensive examinations of that genre's sonic aesthetics, technological practices, and cultural contexts. While this list of sources is far from exhaustive, they productively reveal how reggae's meanings have been constructed and reconstructed across transnational contexts, and how

questions of production, consumption, and representation intersect in that process. In the next section, I turn to work in popular music studies that, while not focused on reggae, offers theoretical and methodological tools that can help address the gaps identified here and expand the scope of reggae scholarship.

Conceptualising how popular music sounds

Broadly speaking, Anglo-American popular music studies have not turned their attention to reggae. By the time popular music studies coalesced into a recognisable field in the 1970s, its scholars were preoccupied with rock and limited most other genres to the periphery, be they the jazz and jazz-influenced precursors to rock, or the genres with which rock shared the charts, like reggae[3]. And reggae studies, as I have demonstrated above, tend not to be rooted in popular music scholarship[4].

Despite the rock bias within popular music studies, I argue that the field still has some productive frameworks to offer, which studies of reggae have not yet taken up, and that taking reggae as an object of study presents popular music studies with a set of distinct questions that need answering. Much like the well-established and oft-critiqued narrative that popular music starts with rock, it is equally unhelpful to assume that popular music scholarship begins with the inception of popular music studies as its own recognisable field. For this reason, I begin my outline of studies of popular music (rather than popular music studies) from which this research borrows with an earlier, foundational essay by Theodor Adorno.

Influential studies of popular music

Theodor Adorno's influential 1941 essay 'On Popular Music' has been foundational to this thesis, particularly because linking production and consumption is key to my concept of sound(ing). In the essay, Adorno identifies standardisation and pseudo-individualisation as the defining formal qualities of popular music. For Adorno, these features result from the

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[3] Matt Brennan makes an analogous point about the exclusion from jazz within popular music studies (Brennan, 2017, pp. 11-18). I explore Brennan's work, which foregrounds the mediation of popular music cultures, in Chapter Three.

[4] Several studies, which I have already covered above, have bucked this trend. Toynbee is an established researcher in popular music studies who has dedicated a book to the study of Bob Marley through some foundational principles of popular music studies. Howard's book builds upon existing models of the popular music industry, adapting them to suit a Jamaican context (and revealing their Anglo-American bias simultaneously). Hitchins's work directly engages with popular music studies, in particular a branch that has developed in the 21st century that looks at studio production (2014).

mass production of popular music in a capitalist economy: the industrial processes that produce popular music constrain its form and impose uniformity. Simultaneously, the mass production of popular music and its standardised form shape the practices of its consumption culture. Popular music, in Adorno's terms, sounds, and sounds like, the culture of its production *to* its culture of consumption: the sonic form directly signifies the economic and productive practices that create it.

'On Popular Music' remains one of the most influential starting points for thinking about the relationship between production, consumption and musical form. This is despite – or because of – a slew of rebuttals from critics angered by Adorno's choice of language, or frustrated by the fact that Adorno's articulation of pseudo-individualisation seems to have pre-empted any counter to his argument[5]. In this context, Bernard Gendron's (1986) 'Adorno Meets the Cadillacs' has been invaluable, modelling a way to incorporate Adorno's insight without being trapped by its deliberate limitations (Gendron, 1986).

Gendron applies Adorno's concepts of standardisation and pseudo-individualisation to the case of 1950s doo-wop, making an inspired comparison to the manufacturing processes and form of various models of Cadillac from the same period. He retains Adorno's core insight that production processes and musical form are intimately connected, but distinguishes between different kinds of standardisation, identifying the meaning in variation across elements that are functionally identical but formally distinct. Gendron also makes an important distinction between synchronic and diachronic standardisation. Grounding his study of The Cadillacs (and Cadillac cars) in historical specificity allows for an account of popular music that manages to interlink consumption and production, embrace the concepts of standardisation and pseudo-individualisation, and acknowledge the agency of producers and consumers.

Thinking through Gendron's insight using reggae records as an example tells us how the similarities across the form of reggae recordings – the sonic features that identify a record as a reggae record – emerge from its distinct cultures of production and consumption. But, as Gendron's critique of Adorno suggests, understanding how the variation across these elements are meaningful to its audiences requires consideration of musician creativity and the meanings audiences construct in specific consumption cultures. Using Adorno's

[5] Susan McClary succinctly sums up this phenomenon in a memorable book review of Richard Middleton's *Studying Popular Music* (1990): "The more you punch at [Adorno], the more his arguments adhere to your own attacks, rather as though you were wrestling with the tarbaby." (McClary, 1991)

understanding, through the lens Gendron provides, preserves the link between form (or, in the case of this research, sound) and production while allowing for the historical contingency, specificity, and change.

Simon Frith's work has provided another set of important conceptual tools for this study. Frith, like Adorno, understands production and consumption as central tenets of popular music culture, but incorporates a third element. Beginning with his *Sociology of Rock*, Frith partitions his study into the consumption, production and ideology of rock (1978). This book was rewritten as *Sound Effects*, changing his model to rock meaning, rock production, rock consumption (1983), indicating an iteration in Frith's conceptualisation. Frith develops a model for understanding popular music culture beyond the notion that the meaning of popular music is somehow wrapped up in its 'texts'. In many ways, Frith can be seen as applying a similar approach to Adorno and Gendron – two scholars whose objects of study were considerably broader than 'just' popular music – to thinking through the questions of popular music culture.

I have also been influenced by several of Frith's many essays, widely anthologised in popular music readers, which provide valuable moments of specificity in contrast with his more top-down models of popular music culture. They range cover a broad range of popular music genres – although notably not reggae – and address questions of politics, musical value, and the organisation of the music industry. While reggae does not feature prominently in his writing, his frameworks are adaptable and productive for this study, and two of these essays have been particularly useful. In 'Why Do Songs Have Words?' (1988), Frith challenges the common assumption that lyrics function primarily as carriers of meaning, separate from the music. Instead of dissecting the lyrics of a song as though they were poetry, Frith argues that we should conceptualise them as lines of a play, to be delivered, and that a song's lyrics are important only insofar as the consumption culture of that song identifies them as important. This insight represents a valuable intervention in reggae scholarship, in which lyrical analysis has been dominant. His piece on Bruce Springsteen has equally shaped my thinking about manufactured authenticity in popular music cultures (1988). In the essay, Frith describes how Springsteen constructs authenticity and a sense of 'realness' through his anti-capitalist populism, his songwriting, and even his sweat (connoting a sense of his working-class image), rather than as an inherent quality. As I set out in the introduction, authenticity is a central tenet of reggae discourse, making Frith's essay an exemplar model.

My conceptualisation of reggae production cultures also builds on the work of Keith Negus, David Hesmondhalgh, and Tim Wall, all of whom have moved post-Frith popular music studies forward in various ways. Each has developed models for studying popular music culture that incorporate its political economy, while also attending to questions of meaning and mediation.

Negus's approach to studying popular music foregrounds the structures and practices of the music industry (1992; 1999). His work is an exemplar of how concepts from political economy can be applied to the workings of the music business. Negus demonstrates how industrial practices shape musical production and consumption, revealing the mutual imbrication of creative work and commercial imperatives. His analyses provide a framework for situating musical texts within the organisational and economic contexts that make them possible.

David Hesmondhalgh has been similarly influential. His research into popular music culture is impressively broad, incorporating insightful considerations into the effects of technology and digital platforms, the economics of working as a musician, and popular musical meaning (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Hesmondhalgh, 2022). I am particularly influenced by his article on record labels, which remains one of the most incisive studies available on the subject, demythologising the indie–mainstream binary that dominates much popular music discourse (1999). Hesmondhalgh challenges romanticised narratives of independence and exposes the continuities between ostensibly alternative and mainstream sectors. Given the prominence afforded to record labels that I have outlined above, such insight is particularly pertinent.

Wall's model for studying popular music culture, as well as several articles and chapters, have been formative to this thesis (2013; 2025a; 2025b). Like Negus and Hesmondhalgh, Wall's framework considers production, consumption, mediation, and meaning as interrelated dimensions of music culture, but his work is probably the most historically-grounded of the three, integrating detailed historical research with conceptual models that bridge media and cultural studies, popular music studies and history. Taken together, Wall's two more recent chapters are exemplars of his larger model in action, understanding the production culture of popular music through its commercial recordings, both synchronically and diachronically. They also exemplify a popular music studies approach to jazz culture, despite that music having its own long tradition as an object of academic study, to which I now turn.

Incorporating jazz studies

Jazz studies and reggae studies make for an instructive comparison. Jazz studies is the more established field globally, even while retaining a sense of itself as having had to fight for legitimacy in the academy. Yet because of its longer scholarly history, and the numerous similarities between jazz and reggae – as transnational musics of the black diaspora, as mediated popular musics, and as oftentimes overlapping genre cultures performed by the same musicians – jazz scholarship has already navigated a set of ideological and methodological debates from which reggae studies can take influence. Here I identify four works of jazz scholarship that have been particularly useful to this research.

I begin with Steven Feld's *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* (2012). As an exemplar of an ethnographic and ethnomusicological study of a culture of production built on sustained relationships with Ghanaian jazz musicians, this has had a substantial influence on this project. More specifically, Feld's approach has been influential in three ways. First, he uses storytelling as both a research method and a mode of writing that reflects the cultural practice of the musicians he studies. In doing so, Feld demonstrates the benefits of centring what I call in Chapter Three 'musician-to-musician dialogue' as an object of study. His positionality is broadly analogous to my own in this research: his musical proficiency situates him as an 'insider' jazz musician, while he remains an 'outsider' in a Ghanaian context. Feld's writing blends the etic and the emic in profound ways, offering a model of how white, Western researchers might navigate the recurrent ethical, representational, and political challenges of studying non-Western musics.

Second, his emphasis on cosmopolitanism has been consistently useful, particularly given our shared focus on musicians. Feld reminds us that while rigid genre stratification remains prevalent within music industry and consumption practices (as detailed in Negus, 1999), the working lives of musicians rarely reflect these structures. As both his and my own research demonstrate, musicians regularly traverse and fuse genre boundaries, or inhabit multiple genre cultures at once. A perfect example of cosmopolitanism (across jazz and reggae cultures no less) is one of Feld's interlocutors, Nii Noi Nortey, a Ghanaian multi-instrumentalist, sculptor, and Coltrane obsessive, who spent time as a touring member of leading British reggae band Misty in Roots.

Third, Feld's concept of acoustemology – knowing the world through sound – has also broadly informed my own notion of sound(ing). While acoustemology emerged from an

anthropological context, I adapt it to the study of a popular music culture of the past, asking instead what we can know about the world of the past through the sound of its commercial musical recordings (and their mediation, on which I expand in Chapter Three

A more recent example of this exact approach from jazz studies is Darren Mueller's *At the Vanguard of Vinyl* (2024), which offers a compelling model for studying a music culture through its recorded media. Mueller structures his history around a set of long-playing records, understood not as material manifestations of 'the music itself' but as artefacts whose format, marketing, and circulation shed light on patterns of production, consumption, and mediation in the past. In a masterful synthesis of the agency of music industry personnel and musicians, Mueller's account narrates the move to long-playing records in jazz not merely as an industrial imposition but a shift in which musicians were active participants. Rather than being cast as industry pawns or passive recipients of commercial trends, jazz musicians recognised the opportunities the LP afforded – in particular, the chance to frame their work as 'high art' within a popular form, thereby expanding the creative scope of their recordings.

With records as doors into a musical past, Mueller employs theoretical frameworks that mirror my own, making it particularly resonant for this thesis. His focus on the music industry, mediation, and the agency of musicians results in a study that feels as aligned with the best of the post-Frith popular music studies I have outlined above. His synthetic methodology reinforces my own arguments for studying reggae through its recorded media, and from approaches developed in adjacent fields.

Tony Whyton's 'Jazz as Diaspora Space' (2025) offers another useful conceptual resource. Whyton observes that the term 'diasporic' in jazz studies has rarely been grounded in the broader discourse of diaspora studies, instead signalling the music's transnational cultures outside the United States. He calls for a more explicitly decolonising approach, one that recognises African American centrality while attending to the music's entanglement with multiple histories and geographies. This approach offers a productive parallel for reggae, as a Jamaican music shaped from its inception by transnational flows of people, recordings, and capital. As has been noted in scholarship (Neely, 2007), and as I demonstrate throughout this thesis, reggae's emergence from the Jamaican recording industry was as much about producing music for tourist and international markets as for local sound systems, despite the prominence of the latter in the dominant narrative of reggae history. Further, the similarities in musical and cultural form between jazz and reggae's precursor, ska, has been identified by

some musicians and commentators, including interlocutors in my own research[6]. This musical connection suggests a further pertinence for employing models like Whyton's to the study of reggae as a transnational music while honouring its specific cultural origins.

Finally, Sherrie Tucker's article (2005), which has had a lasting influence of on jazz studies, offers a historiographical stance that has informed my own. Tucker critiques the 'great man' model that has long dominated jazz history, replacing it with an intersectional approach that emphasises the ways in which gender, race, and class shape the production of musical histories. There are obvious parallels between the jazz histories Tucker critiques and the reggae histories I have critiqued above, locating Tucker's model for how to question dominant narratives in music history as a particularly helpful one to this research. I explore an analogous version of this debate as it played out in cultural studies below.

I now turn to conceptualisations of culture, and in doing so return to writing about reggae. In the next group of writers I address, though, the sounding has changed from the reggae writing I discuss above, as the focus shifts from reggae's production in Jamaica to its consumption as a deracinated music in a hostile society.

Conceptualising the sound of (reggae) (consumption) culture: the CCCS turns to reggae

Much early scholarship on reggae from outside Jamaica came from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. The cultural impact of Jamaican popular music on British society was a continuous source of inspiration for CCCS researchers, particularly Paul Gilroy and Dick Hebdige, who returned to the topic repeatedly over their careers (Gilroy, 1991; 2002; 2022; Hebdige, 1987; 2010). Where the journalistic histories discussed above tended to focus on the production of records in Jamaica, CCCS scholarship was largely concerned with the consumption of that music on British dancefloors. This focus on the consumption cultures of reggae is unsurprising given the wider intellectual contribution of the CCCS, which moved away from an assumption that meaning is embedded within a cultural text and towards a position that recognised increased meaning-making and agency in acts of consumption. These consumption cultures revealed a fault-line at which many of the centre's theoretical preoccupations surfaced: the race, gender and class; representation and the media; power and ideology. These scholars' treatment of reggae echoed the journalistic mediations in their emphasis on reggae's Rastafari connections and its

[6] As one of my interviewees would succinctly put it: "Ska… it's basically just Jamaican jazz, bro!"

cultural signification of resistance, but shifted their focus from Jamaican production to British consumption. When these writers did engage Jamaica and Jamaican reggae specifically, it was usually in historical rather than ethnographic or theoretical terms. Their accounts – like the first half of Simon Jones's *Black Culture, White Youth* (2016) or Hebdige's brief histories of reggae in *Subculture* (1979) and *Cut 'N' Mix* (1987) – followed familiar narratives that had been widely available for some time. What distinguished CCCS work was the sociological and cultural theory it through which it examined contemporaneous British reggae consumption cultures, something missing from their historical sketches.

Paul Gilroy's *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (2002) is among the most important CCCS-era works to address reggae. In a sub-chapter entitled 'Black and White on the Dancefloor', Gilroy situates British reggae consumption within a progression of cultural forms that helped shift black Britain 'from migrant to settler status' (2002, p. 211). These forms, he argues, were defined partly by the interaction between black and white groups – itself a consequence of the geographical dispersal of black Britain, which meant that black-owned clubs often accommodated white youth – and partly by the importing and licensing of records from abroad, resulting from black music producers' restricted access to recording studios.

One of Gilroy's most important contributions to this research is his articulation of how records themselves function in reggae consumption cultures. His formulation helps move beyond seeing recordings merely as static artefacts or as by-products of live performance. Instead, they are central to the "public performance of recorded music" (p. 217), a phrase that resonates strongly with my own framing of records and sounding. In Gilroy's account, the record is not a neutral carrier of music but an active medium that takes on new meanings as it circulates through sound systems, pirate and community radio, and domestic spaces. Sound system culture in particular "redefines the meaning of the term performance by separating the input of the artist who originally made the recording from the equally important work of those who adapt and rework it so that it directly expresses the moment in which it is being consumed." (2002, pp. 217-8) This recognition – that a record can sound differently depending on its mediation, setting, and the agency of those who play it – aligns with my argument that records are not simply documents of a past performance but are themselves catalysts for agency in the production of cultural meaning.

For all its strengths, the book nevertheless reproduces the familiar 'rise-and-fall' narrative of reggae in Britain. Following Marley's death in 1981, The Police (the band) are positioned as

emblematic of reggae's absorption into the pop idiom rather than as evidence of its continued vitality as a distinct form (p. 204). Yet much as Gilroy himself stresses that aspects of Rastafari livity did not "simply evaporate, or degenerate into redundant, anachronistic forms" after their moment of greatest visibility (p. 234), the same is true of reggae — *Regatta de Blanc* notwithstanding. While the histories I produce in this work do not address the post-1981 period, my recent fieldwork departs from this framing by demonstrating a continuation in which records, performances, and mediations remain active in shaping reggae's histories *and* contemporary practice.

Where *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (2002) is grounded in a specific temporal and national (one could argue London-centred) context, Gilroy's later classic text *The Black Atlantic* (2022) expands his framework into a transnational, diachronic theory of black expressive cultures. Here, black cultural forms, including reggae, are understood as products of continuous movement across the Atlantic world, shaped by the circulation of people, commodities, and ideas. The book's central metaphor of the Atlantic as a space of cultural hybridity offers a conceptual architecture for my own approach: reggae is not a bounded Jamaican or British form, but part of a much broader cultural formation that is constituted through routes rather than roots.

I have already discussed *The Black Atlantic* and its central importance to my understanding of transnationalism in the introduction to this thesis. Here, I want to pause on Gilroy's chapter on music, which topic Gilroy uses to think through what he calls the politics of authenticity. In this chapter, he outlines his concept of anti-anti-essentialism, suggesting that anti-essentialist readings of black music culture – a default stance within much of cultural studies – often misapprehend the strategic essentialism that black creators employ. For Gilroy, recognising this dynamic is essential to understanding how black expressive cultures operate: claims to authenticity, while open to deconstruction, can function as vital resources for identity, solidarity, and political engagement. This insight resonates with and anticipates Stuart Hall's reflections on strategic essentialism, which I discuss below.

Dick Hebdige's (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* has become one of the canonical CCCS outputs. In concise terms, Hebdige's thesis is that the style of a subculture – its sartorial sensibilities, its argot, its gait – constitutes a text that can be read. His method draws together several of the CCCS's key intellectual influencers: Raymond Williams's dual conceptualisation of culture as both a whole way of life and the best that life has to offer;

Barthesian semiotics; Althusserian ideology; and Gramscian hegemony. Hebdige uses a series of case studies to demonstrate this method before offering broader reflections on subcultural theory. The first of these case studies centres on black British reggae and Rastafari culture. Hebdige offers a sophisticated articulation of what reggae, Rastafari, and blackness signified to white society – how the dread aesthetic evoked "the worst white chauvinist fears" (p. 66) while simultaneously appealing to white punks who incorporated its ideology as an "present absence" in their own aesthetic (p. 70).

While *Subculture* has proved to be an enduring text because of its innovative methodology, Hebdige's history of reggae in Jamaica is less sophisticated. It overemphasises the spectacular, drawing a clear line from Rastafari's emergence to the music's political and stylistic influence. This framing makes sense in a study concerned primarily with how cultural signs are taken up, reworked, and made meaningful in new contexts – here, in the styles of white British youth. But in centring the extraordinary, *Subculture* obfuscates the granularities of reggae's history. These emphases also reflect Hebdige's broader positionality as a researcher: he writes about music cultures from outside them, decoding the meanings of their styles without explicitly problematising his 'outsider' position. That distance enables a critical yet sympathetic account of the working-class male youth subcultures he studies, but it also means that reggae appears largely in terms of what it signified to those audiences, rather than as a culture in its own right. This research owes a debt to Hebdige's insights, particularly in acknowledging reggae culture's active changing of wider British society, but without losing sight of the 'ordinary' aspects of reggae's production and reception, and approaching the music not only as a resource for other subcultures but as a culture in itself.

A necessary feminist critique of Hebdige's text came from Angela McRobbie, a colleague of Hebdige's at the CCCS, who addressed the absence of women in his reading of subculture (McRobbie, 1990). McRobbie identified several unexamined assumptions in *Subculture*: that the style of a subculture is always the style of its men; that mediations of subcultures are sexist; and that what happens once participants leave the public space and return to domestic life is as important as the more extraordinary aspects Hebdige highlights. While McRobbie's critique of Hebdige does not address the latter's treatment of reggae, it has important implications for this study. Hebdige's constant references to the prevalence and importance of Rastafari and Jamaican music in Britain refer implicitly to men – Marley, young black men styled after him, young white men who turn to black men for inspiration. As such, in common constructions of reggae, the music *sounds* the way its men are assumed to have intended.

McRobbie's identification of the absence of women also points to another omission in *Subculture*: that lovers rock, a style of reggae commonly associated with women singers and audiences, is not discussed, despite its significance in the years leading up to the book's publication, is a telling absence.

Hebdige revisited Jamaican music several years later in *Cut 'N' Mix*, expanding his scope considerably (1987). He has clearly taken McRobbie's critique seriously, with lovers rock covered at some length. The chapters on 'UK fast style', 'Trinidadian music', and 'the reggae–hip hop connection' reflect an emphasis on transnationalism and production cultures, both of which are central concerns of this thesis, and represented a needed shift in writing on reggae from within British cultural studies. The result is a far more developed and nuanced account of Jamaican popular music than in *Subculture*. However, *Cut 'N' Mix* retains one of the key limitations in the earlier book, in that Hebdige writes from a self-acknowledged distance: "Everything I know about Caribbean music I've learned from listening to it on record and tape, by going to see it played and performed, by talking to other people or by reading about it. I've never been to the Caribbean." (p. 14) The issue is not the lack of empiricism, but that Hebdige's position is not explicitly examined in the text. By championing an external perspective without interrogating its implications, the book inevitably engages with preexisting narratives of reggae, even if it represents a step forward in reggae scholarship from an 'outernational' perspective.

The same criticism cannot be applied to *Black Culture, White Youth* (2016), which exemplifies the value of an ethnographic approach to reggae culture. Jones's two-part study combines a history of reggae in Jamaica and the UK with a study of white participants in a Birmingham reggae consumption culture. While his ethnography covers a period later than the one addressed in this thesis, its method and framing are particularly instructive. In contrast to much reggae writing from outside Jamaica, Jones attends closely to the everyday contexts in which reggae is lived and experienced, focusing on its consumption in localised and habitual settings. In doing so, he provides the kind of granular empiricism missing from Hebdige's *Subculture*, showing how meaning and identity intersect with reggae, and explicitly with Britishness and whiteness.

What I take from Jones, and what makes his work distinctive within this body of literature, is the way it realises a principle set out decades earlier by Raymond Williams[7]. In 'Culture is Ordinary' (2014), Williams defines culture both as a "whole way of life" and as "arts and learning," insisting on both perspectives as part of a full picture. This formulation legitimises the study of reggae as culture and challenges us to look beyond spectacular events or canonical recordings to the ordinary circumstances in which the music is produced, circulated, and made meaningful. Jones's attention to these ordinary contexts – on Birmingham dancefloors, in the pages of specialist magazines, over the airwaves of pirate radio – offers a model for how reggae can be understood as part of everyday cultural practice, without losing sight of its political and historical contexts.

The final work I want to cite here is Stuart Hall's essay, 'What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?' (2019). Echoing Gilroy and his notion of anti-anti-essentialism, Hall addresses the tension that arises between an anti-essentialist discourse, which resists and deconstructs fixed definitions of culture, and the strategic deployment of essentialist narratives within black cultures. Following Gayatri Spivak's notion 'strategic essentialism' (Hall, 2019, p. 91), Hall argues that such narratives can be politically necessary for sustaining identity and solidarity, even as their constructed nature is acknowledged. For reggae studies, Hall's work provides a vital imperative to not simply deconstruct narratives of authenticity that discursively construct the music, but to understand their importance as sources of creativity and agency from which to draw.

Outroduction

Reggae, then, has sounded differently to those who have written it. To fan–journalist–historians writing Jamaican musical histories from overseas, it sounds like the work of its iconic figures – Marley, Perry, and others whose genius is narrated as the key to the music's development. I build on these writers' rigorous mastery of factual detail, valuing the precision and breadth of knowledge their accounts preserve, but approach history with a more critical frame informed by scholarship, including methodological and theoretical insights from popular music and jazz studies.

[7] Williams's influence on my own work is similarly deep. His anti-elitist stance and cultural materialist attention to production have influenced my case-study approach, and selection of more commercially-successful – and therefore dismissed by fan historians – crossover hits for what they reveal about how reggae sounded broadly.

To scholars at the CCCS, reggae sounded as subcultural resistance, a symbolic resource for youth cultures negotiating race, class, and power in a hostile society. I draw on their theoretical contributions and sophisticated accounts of reggae's consumption in Britain, but shift focus toward cultures of production, asking how the dynamics they identified in consumption and mediation are also at work in the making of records.

I align myself most closely with what I have called the 'Mona school' of reggae scholarship. To these scholars, and in this work, reggae sounds distinctly like Jamaica's cultures of production and consumption, grounded in political economy and shaped by the agency of musicians and producers.

In this chapter I have emphasised transnational relationships when exploring these different conceptualisations of reggae and its sounding. In the next, I address the imbalance toward consumption cultures in reggae scholarship. To do so, I explore productive ways in which we might study musicians and their role within a culture of production.

Chapter Two: Musicians matter(s)

Having explored the ideas of reggae, music and culture that lie at the heart of my study, I now turn to the ways we can understand the place of transnational reggae musicians in the music's production culture. In the last chapter, I highlighted the value placed on certain music-makers like Bob Marley or Lee Perry in the dominant stories of reggae's past, and argued that these are too often 'great man narratives', distorting our understanding of the agency of these (and other) musicians and producers. At the same time, I showed that the culture of consumption focus of most theoretically-developed reggae research excluded consideration of the cultures of production, and therefore of reggae musicians.

This is not just a phenomenon within studies of reggae. Simon Frith has argued that musicians as objects of study have been a perennial blind spot for most scholars of popular music (2007, p. 21). He contends that this absence in the literature has resulted from the influence of concepts and preoccupations from cultural studies on researchers in the International Association for the Study of Popular Music and its journal *Popular Music*. Using jazz studies as a point of comparison, Frith argues that popular music studies have eschewed studying musicians in favour of a focus on audiences and the uses of pop, and jettisoned a historical interest in favour of the contemporaneous.

In this chapter, I explore the way other writers have re-inserted musicians back into reggae scholarship in an effort to address the imbalance between studies of the music's production and consumption, in a way that moves beyond oft-criticised 'great man' histories and the genius myth. I begin with extant studies of reggae musicians, which, much like the more all-encompassing histories outlined in the previous chapter, tend to be remarkably rich in detail but not in theoretical insight. I, therefore, then recount the development of ethnomusicological conceptualisation and study of musicians beyond reggae from which I have drawn as a conceptual methodological resource. I finish with three productive examples from adjacent disciplines that offer some equally productive ways of studying a music culture through its music makers: Steven Feld's from anthropology (with a very ethnomusicological method), David Grazian's from sociology, and Jason Toynbee's from popular music studies (Feld, 2012; Toynbee, 1999; Grazian, 2003).

Writing about reggae musicians

There are extant attempts to write histories of reggae that position musicians as their primary focus. These works document and foreground the creative labour of instrumentalists who are often overshadowed by reggae's heralded singers and producers in the widely circulated narrative I outlined in the previous chapter. They typically do not extrapolate outwards from the stories they unearth into broader theories around the cultures of production in which these musicians operated. Nonetheless they represent a small but significant form of scholarly activism in the face of the 'great man' model that dominates most reggae histories.

In this section, I identify several of these reggae histories that foreground musicians and attempt to tell the stories of those who are often absent or peripheral in wider accounts. I also highlight a little-known autobiography by a British reggae musician whose band enjoyed modest success, and whose story emphasises the kinds of quotidian aspects of musical life this research addresses. I begin, however, with Howard and Hitchins, whose work has been formative to my own, as I have already indexed in Chapter One. Unlike the other works I cite in this section, their scholarship emerges from Mona's Reggae Studies Unit, and explicitly theorises and models the culture of production of Jamaican popular music. As such, each warrants further discussion at this point in my argument, with particular attention paid to how each scholar studies musicians.

The 'creative echo chamber' and its 'sound creators'

When taken together the works of Ray Hitchins (2014) and Dennis Howard (2016) provide a systematic model for understanding the creative labour of reggae musicians. Hitchins enables a close analysis of what musicians and sound engineers did and continue to do in Jamaican recording studios, while Howard situates these specific practices and the recordings that result within broader formations of cultural production, consumption, and circulation.

Howard's *The Creative Echo Chamber* advances a conceptual framework of the same name for Jamaican popular music culture. He identifies two distinct modalities within Kingston's historical culture of production: the 'Beat Street' mode, centred on producing 7-inch singles for the local market, including for sound system deejays and jukeboxes, and the 'Catch a Fire' mode, producing albums intended for licensing to international independent or major labels. Borrowing from popular music studies, particularly Keith Negus, Howard situates these modalities within the symbiotic relationship between independent and major record labels across the black Atlantic. Musicians appear here as creative labourers within a 'creative

echo chamber,' where repetition, communal authorship, and mutual influence defined the process of music-making. Producers depended heavily on the contributions of musicians, while Western notions of copyright were complicated by these collective practices. Although often noted in relation to lyrical borrowing, Howard demonstrates that such practices had equally significant implications for instrumental musicians, shaping the sonic identity – the sound – of Jamaican reggae.

Hitchins, by contrast, offers a diachronic approach rooted in close analysis of the studio and the creative labourers that populated it. He frames his study around the different models of record production that came to dominate at various moments in reggae history, arguing that these represented not an 'inferior' imitation of Anglo-American studio practices but an active rejection of them. Within this framework, musicians and engineers are repositioned as 'sound creators', responsible for much of the composition, arranging, and other (often uncredited) creative labour. Crucially, what defines Jamaican production cultures for Hitchins is the absence of a corporate-appointed producer or A&R. While producers in Jamaican cultures would usually select artists they would pay to record, they left the musicians to compose the material they performed on the spot. In this way, Hitchins highlights the distinctiveness of Jamaican studio culture, where collective creativity rather than individual authorship drove the production of popular music.

Histories of reggae's musicians

If Howard and Hitchins provide theorised models of reggae's production cultures, the works I turn to next are less concerned with conceptual frameworks and more focused on documenting the lives of the individual musicians who populated the studios of the 'creative echo chamber'. While several of these works do not resemble the typical scholarly monograph, they nonetheless make important contributions by recovering overlooked figures and preserving narratives that would otherwise remain undocumented. In so doing, they extend reggae historiography beyond its prevailing focus on iconic singers and producers, offering insight into the creative labour of instrumentalists and the social conditions that shaped their lives.

Kenneth Bilby's photobook constitutes perhaps the most extensive single attempt to foreground the voices of Jamaican musicians themselves. Best known for his anthropological studies of Caribbean music – often oriented toward 'roots' traditions – Bilby here turns to popular music. His project is formidable in scope: to retrieve the oral history of as many such

musicians as possible. The resulting book pairs portraiture with interview transcripts from more than one hundred instrumentalists who have worked in Jamaican reggae culture.

Bilby's introduction is especially significant for understanding his perspective on Jamaican popular music. He underscores the crucial contributions of musicians to Kingston's production culture, warning against the tendency to deify producers, and highlighting the feedback loop between local production and consumption. He situates roots reggae both as a youth movement within Kingston and as part of a broader Rastafari consciousness, while also recognising the centrality of migration to the music's development. Taken together, the book's introduction and its collection of short interviews provide an invaluable archive of perspectives rarely represented in more familiar accounts. Although the individual testimonies are necessarily brief, they offer granular insights into the everyday experiences of reggae's instrumentalists, reminding us of the scale and diversity of the creative labour underpinning the music.

Heather Augustyn has devoted much of her work to recovering the lives of figures at the margins of reggae's story. Her studies of instrumentalists, such as her history of Alpha Boys' School and its influential music program (Augustyn & Reeves, Alpha Boys' School: cradle of Jamaican music, 2018) provide correctives to a literature that has overwhelmingly privileged singers and producers. Her biography of trombonist Don Drummond – an oft-cited figure but one who has rarely been studied at such length – was among the first to treat an instrumentalist with the sustained attention usually reserved for vocalists or producers (2013). Equally significant is her book on women in Jamaican popular music (2020), which constitutes a response in reggae scholarship to Angela McRobbie's identification of the gendered exclusions of (sub)cultural studies that I have discussed in Chapter One. Augustyn demonstrates that while singers have been central to reggae's dominant narrative, it is male singers in particular who have been privileged. Her work not only underscores the near ubiquity of male instrumentalists but also raises productive questions about how gender structured the recognition of and access to different musical roles.

Sandra Mayo's important essay on the Alpha Boys School begins to offer an answer to such questions (Mayo, 2013). The Catholic institution trained many of Jamaica's most prolific instrumentalists, and the simple fact of its being a boys' school goes some way toward explaining the absence of women from reggae's instrumental history. Alpha thus represents one structural reason why the 'sound creators,' to borrow Hitchins's phrase, were overwhelmingly male.

Beyond the question of gender, Mayo's article provides a broader account of the conditions in which Jamaican musicians came of age. She demonstrates how Alpha provided pathways for working-class boys to access musical instruments and training at a time when such opportunities were otherwise scarce. Her oral histories with former pupils indicate the formative role of Sister Ignatius – a teacher, sound system operator, and mentor-figure for many young musicians-to-be – but also a wider sense of Jamaica's live music culture, encompassing theatres, talent competitions, and sound systems. Mayo situates Alpha's musical programme within its colonial history, noting how 'respectable' European musics were prioritised over folk and popular traditions, and how performances for largely white audiences often carried a "zoo-type" (p. 59) quality, as one alumnus recalled. Simultaneously, then, her account provides a nuanced illustration of the intersection of race, class, and gender in shaping the conditions of possibility for becoming a musician in mid-twentieth-century Jamaica. Alpha is constructed as both a product of colonial education and a crucial incubator of reggae's instrumental sound.

All the sources cited so far have focused on musicians operating in a Jamaican context. There have been no comparable scholarly studies of musicians working within a British reggae context – although Augustyn has written on women musicians in the 2 Tone ska revival of the late 1970s and 1980s (2023). In the histories of reggae in Britain considered in the previous chapter, instrumental musicians tend to occupy a peripheral role at best.

Given this absence, Owen Broomfield's autobiography (2017) offers a distinct and valuable perspective on the life of a British reggae musician. A keyboardist for a reggae band, Unity, that have not endured in the manner of those that feature in canonical accounts, Broomfield's and his band's story provide complementary insight. His book reconstructs a 1970s Birmingham suburb in which musical participation was central to cultural life but an insufficient source of income to enable full-time professional careers. He recalls, for example, his parents guaranteeing a loan for a Fender Rhodes and amplifier, his pursuit of an apprenticeship after school, and the search for a basement rehearsal space. The story he tells is one of amateurism moving toward semi-professionalism, illuminating the realities of musical life for many British reggae musicians whose careers fell outside the spotlight.

Extant studies of reggae musicians and musicianship, then, provide this research with a platform on which to build. Indeed, Bilby has already sounded the call to document and incorporate the recollections and perspectives of instrumental musicians from reggae's 'golden age', many of whom are now deceased. Of the works I have referenced here,

however, only Howard and Hitchins go beyond biography and oral history. In order to provide a more sophisticated theoretical framework for my work and its emphasis on musicians within cultures of production, I have been influenced by some classic texts and ideas from ethnomusicology, to which I turn next.

Ethnomusicological approaches to the study of musicians

This research builds upon several concepts taken from ethnomusicology, which in comparison to other disciplines has most explicitly taken musicians as its object of study, and as a body of literature contains productive ways of thinking and researching musicians. But the discipline also comes with its own set of long and complicated debates about the evolving nature of its object and method of study, and the relationship between its scholars and the communities whose musical practice they research.

This research has drawn on ethnomusicological contributions and method for two reasons, both of which have to do with a perennial question in that scholarship: whether ethnomusicology is defined by its object of study (human musical activity; primarily musical cultures that have been disregarded by the academy), or its method (participatory musical ethnography).

The first reason is that, of all those who study music in an academic context, ethnomusicologists have most prolifically and explicitly studied musicians. Where popular music studies, at least for Frith as I have noted above, have marginalised musicians in favour of audiences and, ethnomusicology places musicians at the centre of its debate[1]. This is one way to comprehend the *ethno* in ethnomusicology, an anthropological conceptualisation that we can study music as a human activity through something called musical ethnography[2].

The second reason, following on from the first, is simply that I fit the criteria of an ethnomusicologist: I can play the music of the culture I study[3]. This allows me to incorporate not only what ethnomusicologists have said about musicians and their socio-cultural contexts,

[1] Consider, for example, the thirteen definitions of ethnomusicology offered by Timothy Rice in his overview of the subject (2014, pp. 9-10). Over half make explicit reference to the rather obvious (and yet often overlooked) fact that music needs human beings to make it.
[2] The other in which the *ethno* in ethnomusicology has been interpreted is that it is the study of music which is thought of as somehow eth*nic*. Such an assumption is implied of one of Rice's definitions: "the study of all the world's music", and made explicit in another: "traditional, non-Western, or world music". What Rice really means, then, is the study of all the world's music that hasn't already been addressed by musicologists.
[3] One of the leaders in the field, Bruno Nettle, has argued that, "the greatest difference between ethnomusicology teaching and research in 1950 and today… would have to be the addition of musicking as a principal component." (2017, p. 59)

but what they have said about how best to study them. I expand on the latter in the next chapter, in which I articulate my methodology. Here I discuss some of the trends of ethnomusicology's conceptualisation of musicians and their study, over four classic texts from the field.

As I will argue, though, and as is indexed by Norman Hesselink's recent article, the relationship between ethnomusicology and popular music has been sporadic and contested. Hesselink acknowledges the discipline's tendency towards self-reflexivity and challenging the elitist musical/musicological orthodoxy of the European concert hall. But he issues a warning to his colleagues, following Alan Merriam, that "we must be careful to distinguish between what ethnomusicology ought to be and what it is and does." (Hesselink, 2021, p. 560) Tellingly published in *Popular Music and Society*, rather than a more explicitly ethnomusicology-facing journal, the article analyses the most prominent anglophonic ethnomusicological publications and finds a startlingly low number of articles addressing popular music (for example, in the discipline's flagship journal *Ethnomusicology* only 24 articles on Western popular music were published between 1958-2019). The founding of the Popular Music Section of the Society for Ethnomusicology in 2014 indexed acknowledgment and effort on the part of academics within more recent years to expand ethnomusicology's topics of study and popular music studies' methodological toolkit, but according to Hesselink this faction is already diminishing in importance in the wider discipline.

Hesselink's analysis of the field's lack of attention to Western popular music is important here for two reasons. First, his evidence points to an omission on the part of academics whose self-proclaimed goal is to study 'all the world's musics'. His argument is not that we must privilege 'Western popular' over 'non-Western (non-) popular', but that ethnomusicologists *have* privileged the latter over the former. What implications has this had, then, for their methodologies and conceptual tools when applied to a culture such as reggae? In this section, I highlight some classic texts from some of ethnomusicology's key thinkers, articulate the ways in which they have studied musicians, and explore their potential for application to my object of research. My contention is that, despite some disciplinary limitations, ethnomusicologists have developed productive ways of talking to and playing with musicians that have been fundamental to my research design.

John Blacking - *How Musical is Man?*

I begin with John Blacking's *How Musical is Man*, one of the defining works of ethnomusicology from the last half-century (1973). The book is an attempt to set the agenda for the discipline. The book was well received at the time of its publication; Blacking's colleague Alan Merriam certainly constructs the text as indicative of a broader school of thought within ethnomusicology that was 'controversial' to the orthodoxy of the discipline at the time but would go on to be influential (Merriam, 1974). Because of its lasting impact and the general school of thought Blacking's work indexes, I use this book to make some broader points about ethnomusicology, and the dominant way in which musicians are conceptualised and studied in the discipline.

Blacking provides an influential and insightful critique of what he describes as the "elitism" of musicology, and an early call to understand the western canon as an "ethnic" music in the same way as the music cultures typically studied by ethnomusicologists (p. 4). But he is preoccupied by an earlier goal from the ethnomusicological project: to ascertain a structure that explains the connections between all the musical cultures of the world. As such, his thesis is that ethnomusicologists need to understand the symbiotic relationship between music, society and culture (or society, culture and music) in order to get at an answer to his question of humanity's inherent musicality. For Blacking, the formation of a society structures musical cultures, but is also (partly) organised around them. This conception is rooted firmly in the anthropological/ethnographic wing of ethnomusicology, although his work does feature musicological analyses of transcribed music.

Blacking does not provide such a thing as a definition of musicians or propose methods in which we might study them; his working assumptions must be inferred. The most succinct summation of his thesis on music is as follows:

> The most important thing about a cultural tradition at any time in its history is the way in which its human components relate to each other. It is in the context of these relationships that emotional experiences are had and shared. Artistic enjoyment is "based essentially upon the reactions of our minds to form"… but the forms are produced by human minds whose working habits are, I believe, a synthesis of given, universal systems of operation and acquired, cultural patterns of expression. Since these patterns are always acquired through and in the context of social relationships and their associated emotions, the decisive style-forming factor in any attempt to express feeling in music must be its social context. If we want to find the basic organizing principles that affect the shapes of patterns of music, we must look beyond the cultural conventions of any century or society to the social situations in which they are applied and to which they refer. (p. 73)

Blacking, then, conceives of musicians (and their audiences) as 'human components' of a 'cultural tradition', whose relations to one another constitute the determining structure in a

musical society. It is the role that musicians play in a society, and the role that society plays in a musical culture, with which Blacking, and his contemporaries, are preoccupied.

This conception is useful but is ultimately limited, and problematised by its application to Western popular music cultures (a theme to which I will return at the end of this section). It is useful because Blacking studies musical cultures in which the social organisation of participants problematises the dominant musicological conceptions of Western music (great art is made by great composers, the meaning of which audience members passively 'receive' rather than actively 'construct'). An ethnomusicological study of reggae, then, might ask how we can understand a reggae culture whose musicians, producers, deejays, and dancers are equally important in determining its meaning and organisation.

But there are notable limits to Blacking's framework. There is no sense of music's mediation, nor its commodification, in this work or in the wealth of ethnomusicological literature it would influence. We are left wanting for an understanding of the role of musicians in political economies (or, following Blacking's own dualistic style, the role of money in the lives of musicians), and the role played by institutions of mediation in a musical culture.

Thomas Turino

I understand Thomas Turino's *Music as Social Life* as iterating on the kinds of ethnomusicological aims and approaches that Blacking and his colleagues instigated decades earlier. Like Blacking, Turino is preoccupied with the relationship between music and society. Music is important because of, and its meaningfulness is located in, its social function. But he applies a worked-through framework to ascertain that social function and its representation in music. He combines the psychological concept of 'flow'– the notion that a person's (a musician's) task can result in a heightened level of concentration and a therefore less-mediated version of the self – with Peircean semiotics – the notion that things (musical sounds) can iconify, index or symbolise other things (social functions).

Turino's conceptual framework is more developed than Blacking's, particularly in his distinction between cultural cohorts and cultural formations. He defines the former as a group defined by a common habit relating to an aspect of the self – age, gender, etc., and the latter as a group defined by multiple habits – a family or a nation state. This kind of stratification is an example of the kinds of useful anthropological work that ethnomusicology can provide to the study of music, particularly in light of the preoccupation with male youth subcultures that have dominated many cultural studies of music, as I identified in the previous chapter.

Another of Turino's conceptual frameworks, the four distinct fields of music making (participatory, presentational, high fidelity, and studio art), offers a useful starting point for analysing how music operates in social contexts. However, when this model is applied to popular musical practices, its limitations become apparent. Although Turino notes that his categories are not intended to be rigid or teleological, the framework still imposes a structure that can obscure the fluidity and hybridity present in many music cultures. I now illustrate this with the case of dub reggae, which challenges the neat compartmentalisation of musical activities into distinct fields. A typical dub recording might begin as a studio performance by a live band (aligning with Turino's "high-fidelity" field) and then be subjected to extensive sonic manipulation using effects and mixing techniques (corresponding to the "studio art" field). Yet dubbing itself is often a live, performative act carried out in a single take by the engineer – effectively a live performance of studio manipulation. The final product is thus a performance of a performance, recorded and reproduced. The complexity increases when these dub recordings are played by sound systems, where selectors and deejays contribute further layers of live performance. A deejay toasting over a dub track transforms the recording again, turning it into a live event experienced by an audience that responds both actively. This scenario illustrates an overlap of all four of Turino's fields – demonstrating how music can simultaneously inhabit multiple categories in ways that the model struggles to account for.

This is not a unique feature of dub reggae, but a reflection of broader limitations within ethnomusicologists' tendency to want to categorise. The model's difficulty in encompassing such cases stems from its origins in a disciplinary tradition that has historically privileged certain types of musical practice – often those seen as clearly bounded, community-based, and culturally distinct. In attempting to establish a universal theory of music's role in society, ethnomusicology has sometimes overlooked the economic, technological, and industrial conditions that shape musical production and consumption.

For instance, dub emerged partly from economic necessity: to fill the B-side of a record without incurring the costs of additional studio time or musicians. Its reception varies widely – some listeners treat dub as experimental sound art, while others emphasise its roots in dancehall culture. Such a multifaceted nature resists the act of classification that ethnomusicologists tend to impose on the culture they study.

Bruno Nettl

In a discipline that been almost defined by its self-reflexivity, Bruno Nettl has been one of the ethnomusicology's most self-reflexive thinkers. Here I draw attention to two more recent of his many overarching meditations on the discipline. The first (Nettl, 2015) is the third edition of his comprehensive address to his colleagues and students, amongst whom the book is so ubiquitous as to have become affectionately known as 'the red book' (Kidula, 2016). In the book Nettl identifies and wrestles with many of the issues ethnomusicology has come up against since the second half of the twentieth century, dedicating a chapter to each. He compellingly writes histories of and ruminations on various ethnomusicological concepts, definitions, and problems.

One of these chapters is devoted to the study of individual musicians, both "exceptional" and "ordinary" (pp. 188-98). Nettl begins to offer some ways of ethnomusicological conceptions of the individual musician that avoid the kinds of 'great man' theory I discussed in the previous chapter. But he also emphasises the danger of the other side of that coin as specific to ethnomusicology: the equation of an individual musician with the whole of a (presumed) homogenous musical culture. Given ethnomusicology's past links with colonialism and the othering of its subjects, this is an area in which particular care must be taken, particularly by 'outsider' researchers.

In a more recent article, in which Nettl reflects on a remarkable six decades in the discipline, he again addresses the role of the individual musician, elaborating on his earlier warning about equating an individual with a society:

> Ethnomusicologists [are interested in] what members of a society had in common… while music historians were interested in the uniqueness of individual composers and performers… the purpose of working with an individual in the one case was to study the norm, and in the other, the exceptional… There are some things on which all or most people who share a culture agree, and this is true of complex as well as smaller societies, of urban as well as Indigenous peoples. It may, however, be equally, or more important, to study and understand the diversity of views and ideas about music and individual creativity in each society. (Nettl, 2017, pp. 59-60)

Nettl's proposed solution is to study a musician's biography, personal repertory, and personal performance practice. His insight into writing biography from an ethnomusicologist's perspective is particularly influential on this research. For Nettl, ethnomusicological biographies are almost always autobiographies; they are written from interviews with musicians in the field and corroborated where possible. Ethnomusicologists stand to gain from asking their interlocutors about their own lives rather than their cultures because musicians are more likely to provide a much more structured, triangulable account of their

own story compared to a retelling of decades of musical-cultural-societal change. From these stories, ethnomusicologists can extrapolate outwards: "it's the way in which… biographies relate individual musicians to their culture and help provide an understanding of musical culture as a whole that distinguishes them as ethnomusicology." (2015, p. 190) At this point, a discourse analyst might interject with the notion that we should interrogate rather than re-tell such narratives, but Nettl pre-empts such critiques: claims to transcendent musical ability or cultural significance on the part of musicians are yet more clues as to the kinds of society in which a musician operates. This is a particularly astute way to conceptualise the *words* of musicians, to which I attend in the next chapter.

Implicit in Nettl's argument is the notion of history. I expand upon the historical in the next chapter, but I note here that when ethnomusicologists turn their attention to the historical, like journalists they tend do so through the study of individuals 'in their own words'. For ethnomusicologists, though, that is because this is the sort of historical data that can be accessed in the field. But their emphasis is different from that of the music journalist-historian. An ethnomusicologist following Nettl might ask not 'what happened', but 'what was happening?' – a subtle but meaningfully distinct inflection that emphasises plurality and the macroscopic over the particularities and the genius individual.

But for all Nettl's insight, his arguments come a cropper when applied to Western popular music. In this case, his construction of musical stardom makes no reference to the 'star system' on which much Western popular music, including reggae, has been based[4]. He asks how stars are important to music cultures, and how music cultures are important to its stars; he does not ask who makes a star a star, how they go about doing so, or for what purpose. These are perennial questions in popular music cultures like reggae, which as my findings chapters demonstrate, has been constantly defined by the paradoxical relationship between its star singers and producers, and the notions of communal ownership that partially defined Kingstonian reggae production cultures.

So far, I have argued that the 'classic' texts of ethnomusicology often reach the limits of their usefulness when applied to Western popular music cultures. I have already indicated the usefulness of Hesselink's intervention into the field above; I now finish this section looking at the work of an ethnomusicologist who has directly addressed such cultures.

[4] See, for example, Wall (2013, pp. 210-9).

Harris Berger, who is another of the discipline's leading thinkers, has advocated for adopting a phenomenological approach to the ethnomusicological study of reggae. While his own research has centred around Western popular cultures, he addresses the subject most explicitly in an important chapter (2008). Berger defines a phenomenological approach to ethnography as understanding music in the terms of those who produce and consume it, rather than music as text, music as practice, or music as social. His concept of the 'organisation of attention' – a way of using (and respecting) musicians' testimony (the story 'in their own words') and saying something academically rigorous about it – and his deliberate attempts to engage in critical conversations about music have proved particularly insightful to this research.

Berger's chapter, though, is limited by his reading of cultural studies from the 1980s. The picture he paints of cultural studies is a flawed one, creating a caricature of cultural studies that accuses people who make and listen to music of being "ideological dupes enacting cultural scripts." (67) He accuses cultural studies of abandoning ethnography, despite well-worked examples of exactly the kind of method for which Berger argues, such as Jones's cultural study, which is well-rooted in ethnography (2016)[5]. Despite this shortcoming, though, Berger's aim to restore agency to his research participants and his commitment to bringing the ethnomusicological toolkit to bear in a popular music context have been influential on the design of this research in both its practical method and its ideological goals.

Model approaches to the study of musicians

Finally, I turn to three model studies, one from Feld in anthropology – but with a strongly ethnomusicological approach, one from Toynbee in popular music studies, and one from Grazian in sociology. Each work places musicians at the centre, yet keeps mediation, political economy, and history firmly in view, inspiring the synthetic approach this research takes.

Steven Feld *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra*

The question of whether Steven Feld's work belongs within/to ethnomusicology is an interesting one. His publications have certainly been influential on the field, beginning with his work in Papua New Guinea, which eventually begat his important concept of 'acoustemology' which I have discussed in the introduction. His work has been published in the field's leading journal, *Ethnomusicology*, and his own website lists him as an

[5] Jones's study was first published in 1988.

ethnomusicologist. However, he has taught in an anthropology department, has been described as an anthropologist of sound, and has posited acoustemology as a 'post-ethnomusicology alternative' (2017). I separate his work here from the corpus of more explicitly ethnomusicological works identified in the previous chapter because of this ambiguity about Feld's disciplinary positionality, because of his specific addressing of a popular music culture, but also because I do not conceive of his work as 'typically' ethnomusicological.

In *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* (2012), Feld the researcher positions himself less as ethnomusicological observer or theoretician and more as professional collaborator and storyteller. His work reflects an investment in musical encounters not merely as field data but as co-created experiences. Feld's mode of inquiry emphasises relationships with musicians and seeks to foreground the dialogic nature of ethnographic research. Importantly, his outputs are not confined to academic writing; they include recordings, photographs, and film, reflecting a commitment to making the research beneficial to those within the communities he studies. This multimodal strategy enriches the documentation process and challenges the textual dominance often associated with academic knowledge production.

Feld's approach offers a compelling example of how studying individual musicians can yield complex insights into broader cultural, historical, and philosophical discourse. During collaborations with artists like Nortey, meaning emerges from shared dialogue rather than from arm's-length analysis. Nortey's reflections – on Beethoven's possible African ancestry or the spiritual resonances of John Coltrane's music – are not treated as curiosities but as valid epistemological claims rooted in specific cultural logics. Echoing both Nettl's and Berger's approach, Feld's role is not to arbitrate the 'truth' of these claims, but to explore their significance within a broader conversation about West African musical practices and diasporic cosmopolitanism. This concept – cosmopolitanism – is central to Feld's thesis, particularly what he calls a 'cosmopolitanism from below' (2012, p. 7), and when employed to make sense of a musician's own stories, exemplifies the study of individual musicians without resorting to uncritical hagiography or, by contrast, dispassionate deconstruction.

David Grazian's *Blue Chicago*

Like Feld's study, David Grazian's *Blue Chicago* (2003) takes a genre culture within a single city as its object of study. If Feld's contribution lies in legitimating storytelling as both method and object, Grazian provides a complementary model of how a music culture is

produced, consumed and mediated within the cultural economy of a city, and through the discursive prismatic concept of authenticity. Grazian's work emerges from sociology rather than ethnomusicology, but like Feld he combines participant observation, interviews, and (to a lesser extent than Feld) musical participation to produce his ethnographic account of how a musical culture operates. Like Feld, Grazian privileges the dialogic exchanges of musicians, but he is as interested in the broader infrastructures of clubs, tourism, and festivals that enable a specific set of sounds to circulate and acquire meaning.

Blue Chicago is structured around an ethnography of Chicago's live blues scene, but its central concerns are not limited to blues as a musical style. Instead, Grazian examines the multiple actors involved in producing the city's reputation as the 'home of the blues': musicians, club owners, promoters, tourists, journalists, and local institutions. His central claim is that Chicago blues functions as a mediated performance of authenticity, manifesting in blues clubs and elsewhere as a carefully staged cultural product, produced in response to the expectations of paying audiences, tourist imaginaries, and civic branding.

This framing plays up the ways in which music is constructed as authentic. (Grazian does not cite Frith's article on Bruce Springsteen, but certainly writes from a similar perspective). Grazian highlights how promoters deploy tropes of the gritty, working-class city to market blues performances, and how journalists recycle these images to reinforce Chicago's place in the global blues imaginary. Musicians themselves participate in this process, tailoring their repertoires and stage personae to what audiences expect a 'real blues' performance to look and sound like. In this respect, Grazian treats mediation not as a layer added after the fact but as constitutive of the musical experience itself.

Methodologically, Grazian's study offers two valuable lessons for this thesis. First, it demonstrates how attention to the social geography of a city can illuminate the contexts in which musicians work and the stories that are told about them. 'Place' is not merely a backdrop for Grazian but an active participant in the production of meaning: the significance of Chicago itself informs the ways in which authenticity is performed and contested. Second, his analysis underscores the importance of considering how external actors – club owners, critics, municipal bodies – shape the working conditions of musicians and the narratives attached to their labour.

At the same time, Grazian's approach is less concerned with the close description of musical practice than with the cultural logics that surround performance. He does not linger on the

sonic analysis of blues records or live performances, but instead on the discursive assumptions through which the material and performed aspects of blues culture in Chicago are constructed as authentic. For this project, then, Grazian provides a model for analysing how reggae's histories have been mediated through particular places, institutions, and discourses, complementing the more musician-centred approaches of Howard, Hitchins, and Feld.

Jason Toynbee

Jason Toynbee offers a complementary but distinct theoretical framework in *Making Popular Music* (1999), particularly in his chapter on musicians 'Making Up and Showing Off: What Musicians Do.' Toynbee examines the creativity of musicianship through a sociological lens, drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field', to understand musicians' creative agency within structured production cultures. For Toynbee, musical practice is not a spontaneous act of individual inspiration but is instead shaped by a dynamic tension between a musician's embodied dispositions (habitus), their position within a network of social and professional relationships (field), and a third element he introduces: the degree of likelihood that any given musical possibility will be selected. Together, these elements constitute what he calls the radius of creativity – a model that accounts for both constraint and possibility in musical authorship.

Having established this radius, Toynbee's next step is to reconfigure the concept of musical creativity as social authorship. Framing musicians as authors of the possible, rather than as autonomous creators, he articulates this process of selecting from historically and socially embedded musical ideas to construct performances that are themselves intertextual and dialogic. Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia, he suggests that musicians, like novelists, assemble voices – musical references, genres, idioms – that are already saturated with cultural significance. This process, far from undermining originality, is at the core of authorship. It is also central to Toynbee's attempt to resolve Roland Barthes' concept of the 'death of the author,' arguing that while meaning is always partially contingent on audience reception, the musician retains a form of authorial intent grounded in their historical and cultural awareness. Musical meaning, then, is not simply inscribed at the moment of performance or 'reception' but negotiated across time through a shared field of works and listening practices.

Toynbee's theoretical claims come into sharp focus in his reading of a particular musician: Charles Mingus. Here, Mingus is portrayed not as a lone genius but as a social author, orchestrating a polyphony of voices that are themselves drawn from a historically situated repertoire. Mingus's band exemplifies what Toynbee, following Amiri Baraka, refers to as the 'changing same' of black music. For Toynbee, musical agency is always historically mediated; understanding what is being 'changed' requires a deep engagement with what has come before. Toynbee's emphasis on historicity is particularly important to my research, particularly in his understanding of the musical past's sounding in the musical present of musicians.

Together, Feld, Grazian and Toynbee offer models that emphasise the importance of studying musicians and the kinds of historical knowledge such research can unearth. Feld listens for how musicians make sense of the world through sound and story; Toynbee attends to how musicians navigate cultural structures to author meaningful musical texts; Grazian locates these practices within a richly conceived culture of production. In each study, emphasising the agency of instrumental musicians has offered rich insights into how music is made, how it signifies, and how it circulates socially.

Outroduction

Reggae musicians, then, have been written about in different ways. For Howard and Hitchins, they are the creative labourers whose practices and whose music, individually and collectively, have helped to define Jamaica's cultures of production. For other writers, the emphasis is less on modelling historic cultures of production; preserving these musicians' legacies in their own words is sufficient.

This research follows in the tradition of those writers who explicitly move musicians from the periphery of reggae history to its centre. At the same time, I follow in the efforts of researchers who treat musicians' oral histories not just as a subject for documentation and preservation but as data from which a historical culture can be extrapolated and recreated.

To do so I synthesise the ethnomusicological insights I have covered here with the concepts from media studies and history I discuss next. My synthetic approach to the study of musicians is echoed in the work of Feld, Grazian and Toynbee, all of whom similarly work adjacent to, but distinct in some way from, ethnomusicology. In the next chapter I articulate my method more explicitly, and explore questions about how producing music histories both are an act of, and can be informed by, the mediation of music.

Chapter Three: Entering and mediating the musical past: method and history

In Chapter One, I demonstrated that mainstream histories of reggae often fail to engage with disciplinary debates within the field of history itself. Moreover, much reggae scholarship has prioritised narratives of consumption and frequently relies on, rather than interrogating, journalistic mythologising surrounding the genre's production. However, recent scholarly interventions – particularly those emerging from the University of the West Indies – have begun to challenge these trends. In Chapter Two, I made the case for an approach that centres on studying cultures of music production through their musicians, building on extant reggae studies and borrowing from productive models in popular music studies, jazz studies, and ethnomusicology. Here I outline the method I have developed to address the gaps identified in the two previous chapters. I offer an alternative framework for understanding reggae history, one that – like that of the 'Mona School' – is grounded in empirical research and critically engages with existing histories.

As I indicated in the introduction, the findings chapters of this research each focus on a specific commercial reggae recording, using the record as a jumping-off point from which to draw broader conclusions about how reggae sounded (and still sounds) as a transnational music culture. These case studies apply the synthesis of media and cultural studies and ethnomusicological perspectives, as discussed in Chapters One and Two, to explore the history of each record's culture of production and mediation, and to offer alternative, intertextual readings of reggae as a mediated music culture. Each chapter emphasises a different principal research methodology and, when taken together, these chapters demonstrate the plurality of insights that can be gained through the application of diverse and synthesised methodologies. Despite their distinctive qualities, each history shares the qualities I outlined in the thesis introduction, binding them as a coherent body of work.

This chapter, then, acts in part as a review of method. It opens with a detailed account of the specific research activities I have employed, before a discussion of some more general characteristics that underpin my own approach to engaging with the past in this research. I then discuss how my distinct approach to writing history – an act of mediating the past – has been informed by the notion that writing up is as important as the sources I gathered, how I accessed them, and what frameworks I used to make sense of them.

This chapter sustains the focus I have maintained thus far on recognising the role of the researcher within the research. As such, I reflect below on my positionality, and how it has informed the design of my methodology, and mediated my experiences during the journey of this research, and my reflections on them. This should be a relevant question for all researchers, but is particularly pertinent in my case as a white, British, reggae bass player examining reggae's cultural past (and my own engagement with its present) in both Jamaica and Britain.

The second half of this chapter is a discussion of other historical works on which my own approach has been modelled. These works span a variety of disciplines, but all focus on some aspect of popular music history (along with one on cricket). As I demonstrate, there is a wide range of methodological, conceptual, and stylistic models from which reggae historians can draw, in order to source rich insight into the cultural past, and write more sophisticated counternarratives to the current dominant discursive narratives of reggae history.

Finding things out about reggae's past

In this section I outline the specific methods I have used to research reggae's past. I detail how each activity has generated different kinds of evidence, contributing to a holistic picture of reggae's past that addresses the absences I have identified in extant reggae writing. I then explain how these methods emerged and evolved iteratively in my own work through multiple opportunities for cultural immersion, and how my conclusions have been informed by my positionality, and my aspiration to respectful, non-extractive research practices.

Sourcing the past

Conversations with musicians

A significant portion of the primary research I have conducted has centred on two different types of conversations with musicians, including during three research visits to Jamaica in May – June 2022, March 2023, and December 2024. This project differentiates between and synthesises pre-planned interviews with musicians who were active participants in the 1970s musical culture this research addresses (entered as oral histories), and the more informal conversations with contemporary reggae musicians and producers that I conducted before, during, and after shared musical activity in which I explore their sense of 'the past in the present' (entered as ethnographies). By 'the past in the present', I refer to the way in which ideas and stories about reggae's past inform its contemporary meaningfulness to its cultural

producers and consumers, as I discussed in the introduction. While interview data from the former feature more explicitly in the formal writing of my findings, both have been integral to my approach, as I outline below.

The informal conversations I held with contemporary musicians tended to differ from the more structured interviews in their spontaneity and openness. They took place backstage at performances, in air-conditioned cars in Kingston traffic jams, during or after rehearsals, and in recording studios. I was also invited to 'reasonings' with other musicians – deep and meaningful communal conversations through which deeper understanding is reached that have their roots in Rastafari culture. These conversations would often serve as the catalyst for other research activities, prompting invitations to studio sessions, introductions to collaborators, and opportunities to record oral histories. But what made these conversations so valuable was not their adherence to dominant research practices, but the depth of honesty and context-dependent insight they produced, and their relation to what I define as my insider-outsider positionality; an idea which I explore below. Speaking with musicians as a fellow musician granted me privileged access to candid, emic knowledge that is rarely articulated in institutional archives or journalistic interviews. Conversations with today's generations of Jamaican musicians often brought to the fore granular detail from beyond my own experience, prompting routes of historical inquiry, as I have outlined in the introduction to this thesis. As a white, British researcher often researching in a Jamaican context, I may have remained ignorant of or misunderstood these details had I not immersed myself in Jamaican musical culture in this manner.

The more formal conversations I conducted with participants in reggae's 'golden age' were closer to classic oral history interviews. This key research method has provided insight into the memories and narratives of those involved in reggae's 'golden age' production cultures. This approach has resulted in some of reggae's best extant histories, the usefulness and limitations of which I have already articulated in Chapter One. I move beyond this approach by drawing on reflective research about oral history as method, influenced by oral historian Penny Summerfield (2004); and on which I expand further below. Following Summerfield's insight, I understood these interviews not as transparent windows onto the past, but as narrative constructions shaped by the cultural frameworks and composure strategies of the interviewees. Unlike much extant reggae history writing, I treat these oral histories not as records of objective truth, but as complicated accounts that reveal how memory, identity, and historical consciousness are actively produced in their telling.

Observation and participation in reggae music cultures

I have observed and participated in various events that comprise contemporary reggae culture in Jamaica and the UK. These included live shows, studio sessions, jam sessions, and music lessons. During these observations, I took notes on the practices of my participants and their environment, and asked questions for clarification. These observations were conducted during multiple extended stays in Jamaica, and at various times in the UK. The UK-based research activities were often conducted at gigs and festivals where I was performing professionally, providing an opportunity for unique insight. The purpose of these observations has been to provide me with an understanding of how contemporary musicians, including myself, go about the business of *being* musicians: what their day-to-day diaries look like, how they make a living, the politics of getting gigs and studio work, and so forth. As with the less-formal conversations with musicians I have outlined above, this method for researching contemporaneous cultures of production in Jamaica and the UK has unearthed new avenues of historical research that arise from the granularity of musical life. These routes complicate the oft-romanticised narratives of working musicians through the introduction of the granular and, following Campt, the quotidian (Campt, 2017).

I do not consider my approach to this research to be conventionally ethnomusicological, certainly when compared to the classic works from that discipline I outline in Chapter Two. However, as a professional musician with over a decade's experience in the UK reggae scene, I do meet the ethnomusicological criteria of being able to perform the music of the culture in which I researched. This made it possible for me to employ the dominant ethnomusicological method of musical participation at jam sessions and gigs, resulting in an understanding of the realities of musical life in Jamaica, to the politics of a jam session, and to opportunities for self-reflection on my musical experiences and growth. As a socio-cultural 'outsider' when researching in a Jamaican context, my status as an experienced reggae musician served to affirm my position as a musical 'insider' to participants with whom I performed on stage. This, in turn, established a different sort of relationship during any interview activities, enabling the kind of musician-to-musician dialogue I explore above, rather than musician-to-researcher or musician-to-journalist.

My approach to ethnographic observation and ethnomusicological participation is particularly indebted to two ethnomusicologists. Following Gregory Barz's influential chapter in *Shadows in the Field,* I have approached the practice of taking, interpreting and revisiting fieldnotes reflectively and iteratively, releasing them from objectification. And I am methodologically

indebted to Ray Hitchin's research, particularly his article on performing and observing in contemporary Jamaican studio culture, which pays careful attention to the particularities of that culture, and the specific challenges of researching it for professional musicians active in the culture (2013; 2014).

Media research in the archive

In introducing this thesis, I made the case that considerations of reggae's mediation have been largely absent from its extant histories. As such, I have conducted archival research at several institutions, including the National Library of Jamaica (NLJ) and the BCU Arts, Design and Media Archive in the UK – hosting a satellite collection for the National Jazz Archive. These archives hold collections of artefacts that have mediated reggae, such as full runs of *Swing* magazine in the NLJ, and *Black Music* and *Melody Maker* in the ADM archive at BCU. I have also visited institutions like the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, not to access archives per se, but to examine the curated narratives they present. I explore that museum and its mediation of reggae's past at length in Chapter Six.

That these collections have been preserved within archives necessitates an understanding of media and mediation in writing reggae (and other popular music) history, if for no other reason than it is often these media artefacts that have been archived as a matter of course. These artefacts offer insights into reggae's historical trajectory, but must be understood as mediated/mediating objects rather than objective records of reggae's past. To analyse these materials, I employ traditional media studies approaches, synthesising detailed textual analysis with the political-economic context of the institutions that produced these texts. I examine how reggae was framed for audiences in a transnational context. This study focuses particularly on the music press, exploring how publications constructed reggae's identity, its racial politics, authenticity, and perceived cultural value.

I analysed the media texts I encountered in the archive by asking the following four questions: what is the object being constructed in this piece? Who is doing the act of constructing? Using what repertoire? And, for what purpose? This approach is based upon Norman Fairclough's influential model for the analysis of media discourse, who argues that discursive practices both draw upon and reproduce broader 'orders of discourse', thereby situating language within relations of institutional and ideological power (Fairclough, 1995). I contextualise these texts within a broader conceptual framework inspired by Paul Long and Tim Wall's (2021) approach to media studies, which emphasises the interdependence of

textual form, production practices, and audience contexts in the construction of meaning. Together, these perspectives have provided a reading of archival sources as mediated artefacts through which cultural value, authenticity, and identity were – and continue to be – actively produced, rather than as transparent accounts of reggae's past.

Engaging with the past

Having identified and justified the specific research methods this research employs, I now turn to the broader and more general qualities of this research. I explore what I mean by an 'ethnographically-informed media and cultural history', before reflecting on how my understanding of my positionality and of the iterative nature of research have informed my research design.

Undertaking ethnographically-informed media and cultural history

In this section, I reflect on the interdisciplinary aspect of such a research methodology at an abstract level, before discussing each aspect of this concept – media and cultural studies, ethnography/ethnomusicology, and history – specifically.

From a disciplinary perspective, I situate this research as a form of popular music studies at the intersection of media and cultural studies with ethnomusicology, and history. Responding to Stuart Hall's advocacy for research that moves beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries (Hall, 2020), my aim has been to synthesise the methods and theories that each discipline offers to researching reggae. In doing so, I have been able to address the limitations that each disciplinary approach faces when applied in isolation.

Media and cultural studies do provide sophisticated conceptualisations of mediation and the processes of meaning-making that are often absent from both history and ethnomusicology. History, which has typically constituted the reconstruction of a story of the past from the written record, looks to archived sources like newspaper clippings as evidence for what happened, rather than as constructed objects that mediated their topic in a deliberate way for a specific audience. Ethnomusicologists, who typically conceive of themselves as going 'to the source' of musical meaning (that is, 'the field') have tended to overlook the role that mediation plays within the music cultures they study. Moreover, ethnomusicologists – who primarily study the creators of music – stand to gain from cultural studies' insight into cultures of consumption and their link (through mediation) to production; cultural studies of music, in turn, with their tendency towards studying consumption, can equally benefit from the focus on *production* that ethnomusicology has developed. And history and

ethnomusicology interact in an equally interesting and complementary manner: ethnomusicologists offer historians, typically writing from within the archive, several ways of accessing the past from the field (Bohlman, 2008), while historians prompt ethnomusicologists to root their studies, which are typically of a musical present (or near-past), within a history.

Cultural studies, with its focus on text, semiotics and ideology, has been critiqued by both historians and ethnomusicologists. I have in mind, for instance, E P Thompson's historical-materialist perspective critique of the over-abstraction of cultural theory through his analysis of Althusser and, by inference, his role as one of the leading figures of intellectual inspiration for the CCCS in the 1970s (Thompson, 1978). Of course, this characterisation of these disciplines occurs at a very high level of generality. There are works, some of which I discuss below (Brennan, 2020; Mueller, 2024; Wright, 2024; Torrens, 2025) and some of which I have already mentioned (Toynbee, 2007; Hitchins, 2014; Jones, 2016;), that complicate the broad strokes I have deliberately used to describe each. These works indicate the benefits of a truly synthetic and interdisciplinary approach to accessing, conceptualising, and reconstructing the cultural past, and it is towards such an approach that I align this research.

By 'ethnographically-informed', then, my method indicates a debt to ethnomusicology and the importance it places on gathering empirical data and emic understanding in the field. I have done this work, but I have so armed with a particular set of questions about how the past manifests itself in the present, and with the assumption that time in the field would open up new opportunities for historical work. By 'media and cultural' I acknowledge my debt to both disciplines, and locate the data I discover within the broader model of production, mediation and consumption upon which these disciplines depend. And by history, I stake my claim as a historian, albeit an unusual one, in that I go into the field as often as I do the archive, and I do so equipped with a bass guitar. These elements are united in an attempt to write histories of reggae first and foremost, but histories that address my primary concerns of mediation (through concepts from media and cultural studies), transnationalism (inspired by cultural studies like Gilroy (2022) and an ethnomusicological sense of going into the field with an 'insider/outsider' positionality, which I explore next) and musicians in the cultures of production (using models from ethnomusicology and cultural studies).

Positionality and the mediation of history

The design of this research has been informed by my dual positionality as a white, male, British researcher and musician working in contemporary British reggae culture. Throughout the conducting and writing up of this research, I have tried to hold multiple perspectives that emerge from this positionality in productive tension with one another. My long-standing involvement in the UK reggae scene affords me a degree of 'insider' status in British reggae production culture from which I draw insights about the development of reggae in Britain. Simultaneously, I am an 'outsider' to the parts of the research into the Jamaican cultural context in which reggae emerged, and into which I immersed myself during several research visits[1]. This dual nature of my positionality, which indexes the lens through which I view reggae as a transnational cultural formation, problematises the 'insider/outsider' binary that has dominated anthropological and ethnomusicological research, and opens up an opportunity to interrogate their typical methodological approach.

I have used Mellonee Burnim's insights as a resource for making sense of this dual positionality – particularly the 'insider' aspect (1985). Burnim challenges ethnomusicologists – whose research had typically been predicated on the assumption of outsider status on their part – to reflect on what it means to research within musical cultures in which they are already embedded. Her work has been formative in helping me understand my own 'insider-ness' as a practitioner in the British reggae scene, and in recognising the kinds of knowledge and access that status enables. Burnim's reflections on 'culture bearers' prompt me to reflect critically on my own 'insider' status, asking questions regarding what we reggae musicians understand as a matter of course, and how that understanding complements, contradicts, or has become dependent upon, the dominant narrative of reggae history which this thesis aims to complicate. This critical reflection becomes most explicit as a finding of the research in Chapter Eight, but has remained a constant throughout the duration of the project.

At the same time, the Jamaican dimension of my research meant that I also began from a position of 'outsider-ness', which demanded a different set of strategies. My outsider status in Jamaica often meant that musicians felt compelled to explain elements of practice that might otherwise have gone unspoken. This dynamic frequently resulted in rich dialogues that benefitted both my own understanding and the degree of detail in the findings of this

[1] Each time I was graciously hosted by colleagues at the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of the West Indies, Mona.

research. Yet it also created potential barriers, requiring trust to be built over repeated encounters and sustained relationships. My response to this outsider-ness was to ground myself as firmly as possible in the cultures I was studying: spending months at a time in Kingston, participating in rehearsals and performances, and building ongoing, dialogic relationships with musicians. These were sustained not only through fieldwork but also through the use of digital technologies to maintain contact between visits.

A recurrent theme across these encounters was the way my participants' own positionalities shaped the accounts they gave. The research therefore remains critically attentive to how musicians narrated their histories, and how those narratives were framed by cultural and personal strategies of self-presentation. The influential Summerfield (2004) article on oral history that I reference above has been especially useful here. Summerfield's work on gender in oral histories has informed my understanding of how individuals position themselves within or against dominant narratives, particularly in relation to the (often masculinist) mythologies that construct reggae that I have identified in Chapter One. She argues that interviews are not transparent records of the past but narrative constructions shaped by strategies of composure. Oral histories can therefore be understood, using the parlance of media and cultural studies, as doubly mediated both by the cultural frameworks that shape participants' accounts, and by the dynamics of the interview itself. Her essay models a method of oral history that synthesises two of the most important qualities this historical research aspires to: to reconstruct a music culture from the past using oral history in a more informed and critical perspective than has been typical in reggae; and to treat the participants in oral histories, and their testimony, in a respectful manner that avoids cynical deconstruction.

Taken together, these reflections complicate the standard insider/outsider model. Ethnomusicological research, given its nature, has been a key source of guidance in my ethical and methodological approach, as I have discussed here. But that research has traditionally been imagined as a process through which outsiders gradually acquire insider knowledge, as detailed, for example, by Timothy Rice (2008, pp. 79-81).

Respect and iterative research practice

These aspects of my positionality, my consistent self-reflection about where I am in the research, and the opportunities and responsibilities it poses, all of which I have just outlined, have had a direct bearing on my research design as it has evolved during its undertaking.

Because of my positionality and the long history of extractive research practices of global North academics working in Caribbean contexts (mirroring power dynamics in reggae culture at the global scale) I have sought to place paramount importance on studying reggae culture and its past and participants as respectfully as possible, and in an iterative way that mitigates the possibility for intellectual and cultural misapprehension.

In one sense, my emphasis on respect means remaining cognisant of the unequal power relationship between researcher and participant. Despite my attempts to reach a 'musician-to-musician' mode of dialoguing with other musicians like myself, these dialogues occurred within a researcher-participant framework of unequal knowledge exchange. In order to proactively respond to this imbalance, I have sought to provide opportunities for international collaboration and networking for my interlocutors in the (admittedly limited) instances where my existing network has been of some use[2]. I have, again, taken Steven Feld as a model for my approach to ethical, mutually-equitable (if unequal) research.

In another sense, one not so much of activist research but rather of respectful understanding of a culture of which I am not a part, the design of this research has responded to this challenge by making iteration an explicit characteristic of its method. This approach was initially inspired by conversations and seminars held during the PGCert I underwent at the commencement of the project about the inherently iterative nature of (especially doctoral) research: trying things out in the field, returning to reflect, revisiting and revising method in accordance with what one finds out about *how* to find things out. In the specific case of this research project, which occurs in a transcultural context, and which has benefitted from generous AHRC and Erasmus research funding, moments of reflection and subsequent iteration have been programmed in.

On paper, then, the design of this research resembles the 'creative echo chamber' culture of production that I study. In practice, this approach has required multiple research visits to Jamaica. The first of these was deliberately designed to be more exploratory than oriented around data gathering. I instead emphasised aspects of cultural immersion in a musical sense (identifying and embedding myself within Kingston's contemporary music culture) and an academic sense (participating in the research culture at the Institute of Caribbean Studies, identifying archives, museums). Two subsequent research trips built on the success of this foundational visit, as I was able to return equipped with a more empirically-formed

[2] I also hope that my research makes a small contribution to a much bigger and more substantive change, as I outline in the conclusion to this thesis.

knowledge of what kind of ethnographic and historical research it was possible for me to conduct in Jamaica, and how to go about doing so. This approach also inflected the kinds of understanding I was able to gain through dialoguing with musicians (following Summerfield's insight). In the case of several of my participants, our dialogues unfolded over multiple conversations, digitally and in person. Pursuing opportunities to talk to people repeatedly both offers them the chance to clarify aspects of their previous testimony and intervene in instances I may have misunderstood them; also to develop trust and relationship over time.

Writing the past

Each of the findings chapters in this thesis respond to the gaps in reggae's existing histories. I have already demonstrated the overreliance on biographical 'great man' narratives, a canonical approach to history told through important recordings, and the reproduction of journalistic mythologies, in extant accounts of reggae history. But my approach to writing reggae history equally aims to pluralise the *ways in which* such histories can been written, as well as the *kinds* of narratives they reproduce. This has necessitated experimentation with writing styles, which I consider in this section.

Writing history as reflexive research practice

This research differs from dominant modes of reggae history writing due to my incorporation of autoethnographic writing. I have regularly reflected on and written my own experiences, both as a seasoned 'insider' musician in British reggae culture and as an 'outsider' in respect to Jamaican music culture and society. This mode of writing offers a productive way of explicitly acknowledging and exploring my presence in the research, which as I state above is a key ethical and intellectual consideration. In the case of this research and its historiographical goal, autoethnographic writing complements the more established methods of archival and oral-historical, revealing how (following Carr (1961), on which I expand below) historical narratives are shaped not just by whatever data a historian is able to access and their subjective interpretation of it, but their culture, their positionality, their experiences.

This manifests in my writing in the form of short autoethnographic vignettes, which begin each of my findings chapters. Unlike the similar device which opens the introduction to this thesis, each vignette narrates an experience that actually occurred during my research in Jamaica or Britain, apart from the first, which recalls an earlier (and formative) moment in

my bass playing career. As well as locating my place in the research at the front and centre of each chapter, indexing the ways in which my subjective experiences have informed the research, each also speaks to a set of larger themes that the subsequent chapter explores – the mythologies of Lee "Scratch" Perry in Chapter Four, for instance, or how a lovers rock classic record sounds through time, in Chapter Seven.

Steven Feld's writing, which I have already discussed at length as a methodological, conceptual and ethical model, is equally influential on my writing, especially his emphasis on storytelling both as a feature of West African (musical) culture as I describe above, *and* as inspiration for his own writing method (2012). In this manner, Feld's writing emulates the culture he researches, demonstrating the affect of this mode of storytelling by example. My autoethnographic vignettes aim to do for reggae what Feld's stories do for jazz in Accra, not in the sense that I attempt to formally replicate a 'reasoning' on the page[3], for example, but in that they are influenced by the culture I study in terms of their content.

Writing history as a critique of history

My approach to writing reggae history has been equally shaped by historians who critically engage with other extant histories in a manner moving beyond conventional reviews of literature. A particular version of this debate has played out in academic reggae writing, which has usually been ordered around the insider/outsider status of the author[4]. I want to expand the issue further, taking influence from other disciplines, by writing history that incorporates, interrogates and critiques existing histories.

An immediate example of this from historiography is E. H. Carr's (1961) influential book (and question), *What is History?* In brief, Carr distinguishes between 'facts of the past' (things that we know happened in the past) and the 'historical facts' selected by historians in order to construct their particular narrative of what happened. This work has been so influential that its basic premise is now considered elementary, if not obvious. But despite the ubiquity of such a concept in other fields, this kind of historiographical reflexivity remains largely absent from reggae histories. Carr's insistence that histories are always deliberately constructed in a certain way – which I argue constitutes an act of mediating the past – offers a

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[3] There have been efforts to advocate such an approach, such as Nakhid et. Al (2019), who advocate for the recognition of 'liming' and 'ole talk' as valid potential research methods in the shaping of Caribbean epistemologies.

[4] See, for example, Klive Walker's chapter entitled 'The writing about reggae must skank to an authentic, rub-a-rub bass line: the insider perspective' (2005, pp. 257-268), or the introduction to Cooper (2004, pp. 1-34).

simple but meaningful challenge to reggae historians to reflect both on the dominant narratives of reggae's histories, how they came to dominate, who has perpetuated them, and why.

Another key influence, this time from popular music historiography, has been Elijah Wald, whose histories of popular music cultures exemplify the kind of historiographical intervention stance this research attempts. In *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (2004) Wald offers a productive model of writing a popular music history and demythologising its extant histories at the same time. Wald dismantles the dominant myth of Robert Johnson's Faustian bargain with the devil, situating Johnson as one of many musicians working in a commercial popular music culture, instead of its founding father genius figure. More broadly, he exposes how blues history has been shaped by primarily white folklorists, critics, and collectors whose desire for 'authentic' expressions of black experience led them to valorise obscurity and melancholy while overlooking humour, irony, and the blues' status as dance music. His approach provides a vital analogue for reggae history, the mediation of which has come to depend on journalistic myth-making and the obsession of outsider fandom.

Wald continues his deconstruction of authenticity in an article that has been equally influential to my research (2007). In the article, he takes aim at the entrenched opposition between authentic artistry and commercial compromise in jazz history. By taking seriously Louis Armstrong's enjoyment of Guy Lombardo's dance band, typically derided in academic jazz discourse as lightweight or inauthentic, Wald foregrounds Armstrong's preferences over those of the jazz commentariat. In stressing Armstrong's agency, he destabilises one of the central binaries of popular music history and demonstrates how dominant narratives can be deconstructed by paying attention to the kinds of 'crossover' and commercial aspects of popular music culture that have typically been dismissed or derided by fan-historians. My own selection of case-study records follows a similar principle. By focusing on several crossover pop hits and records often dismissed as lightweight, I aim to critique the consensus of reggae historiography and, like Wald, foreground the agency of the musicians who made them.

Shifting writing modes

As I have demonstrated in the thesis introduction, academic writing about music has the capacity to reflect the subjective, expressive, and creative qualities of its subject, without

sacrificing rigour or specificity. Sarah Raine's work is exemplary in this regard, and has been influential on the way I have presented my findings (2018). Rather than writing up her research in a singular, 'conventionally academic', voice, Raine shifts through different styles of writing within and across her chapters. Her chapters begin, as do my findings, with autoethnographic vignettes that foreground her presence in the research, before changing to a more ethnographic mode of writing depicting and discussing aspects beyond her own subjective experience, and finally extrapolating outwards from these moments into wider discussions. This model demonstrates how academic writing on a popular music culture can consider the position of the researcher in order to produce insight at a higher level of abstraction than the (equally important) granular detail that make up most reggae histories.

Where I depart from Raine's research of a (historically-located) contemporary music culture is that I explicitly explore, though writing, the musical past and the musical present (informed, in part, by immersion in a contemporary music culture). Mine is an inversion of her approach; I similarly combine autoethnographic, historical, and theoretical modes of writing, but I do so in ways that seek both to generate new ways of thinking about reggae's past and to make explicit how I arrived at them. Here I follow Raine's insight that "removing the researcher from the study, the reflexive experience that has contributed to the research is also removed, hiding the role of the researcher herself as the catalyst for the things that are said and done in answer to her questions and interest" (p. 13). What is true for Raine's study of a contemporary music culture remains true, then, for my own study of a music culture's past.

Finally, I want to highlight Paul Morley's popular music history (2004), whose approach demonstrates a postmodern tactic. Morley's writing constantly shifts mode across multiple narratives and employs a plethora of literary devices which, not unlike Feld, replicate the polyphony of his object of study. The history of popular music that exists in Morley's book is not simplistically synchronic or diachronic; everything happens all at once and is then drawn upon at the historian's whim. Chronologies are more performative than authoritative. A standout example of his distinct approach, which is also of particular relevance to this thesis, is his depiction of Lee "Scratch" Perry[5]. The passage reads as though it were transcribed a

[5] The full passage is as follows: "The architect of dub, taking Jamaican music into the outer limits, the missing link between meek and wild, between Brown and Marley, between Marley and pole, between sound and space, between sea and land, between toast and trance, between tree and house, between arrival and delay, between steady and unsteady, between distance and vision, between comparison and uniqueness, between centigrade and Fahrenheit, between drum and bass, between the devil and the deep blue sea. The greatest showman on whatever his planet is called demonstrates that sound isn't real, except when it's as real as you make it, mixes

from Perry interview – it probably was spliced together from several – replicating the producer's unique oratory style. Morley certainly relies on the 'mad genius' trope, and situates Perry within a world of abstractions rather than a culture of production; but by attempting to capture something about Perry's distinctive characteristics in a history of pop, Morley offers a novel perspective on the producer that differs from the 'great man' mediations I critiqued in Chapter One.

Model histories

So far in this chapter, I have outlined my research method, including methods of writing-up, and discussed extant works that have influenced these aspects of this research. I finish by highlighting works of history that model how my approach to producing reggae histories. Rather than being sources of methodological or writerly inspiration, the histories I discuss in this section share certain qualities with those I have produced in the findings of this research. Some foreground aspects or perspectives that have been traditionally sidelined in favour of more dominant narratives, much as I do when investigating and emphasising the role of instrumental musicians and the processes of mediation in reggae history. Some are grounded in political economy, while emphasising mediation and the material conditions of production. I begin, though, with histories organised through place, whether that be a singular 'music city', or a transnational cultural exchange.

Place in musical and cultural histories

Hobsbawm's essay on jazz in Europe exemplifies how to write a history of a transatlantic music cultural formation and its inception (1999). Hobsbawm, well-known for his work on the 'long nineteenth century', turned his attention to jazz regularly throughout his career (1975; 1999). This essay demonstrates his Marxist approach to writing history, beginning with the role of the popular music industry and the development of the phonograph, and consistently referring back to the social function of jazz as a dancing music. He constructs the idea of a 'jazz public', and his interpretation of this public's jazz consumption is typically antithetical: rather than repeating the assumption that jazz was popular because of its

noise, space, dust, art, science, magic, black, gravity, speed . . . and names . . . He's switched names as much as he has changed sounds and minds: the Upsetter, Lord God Muzick, Super Chin from the Castle Grey Bed, King Perry, President Abraham Perry, the Last Dustbinmen, the Gong, Westminster Bank Perry, Inspector Gadge, Daniel Dandelion the Lion, the Super Ape, Paul Getty, Kojak, Kimble the Nimble, Duppy Air Ace Marchsall, William Shakespeare, King of the Jews, the King of Mess, the Hebrew King, Gabriel the Archangel, Pipecock Jackxon, Santa, the Red Ninja, Lord Thunder Black, Dr On The Go, Doctor Dick, the Firmament Computer, Mr P. the Weather B, the Ghost of King Arthur, Jesus H. Christ, the Chesire Cat."

‘primitive’ connotations, he insists that to European ears jazz *sounded* modern, its Americanness inseparable from the context of industrial modernity. Put simply, “jazz bands came from the same country as Henry Ford.” As he observes, “the reception of jazz is to be judged… [by] the extraordinary interest of the very process of transatlantic transfer for the cultural and social historian.” (1999, p. 356) His account provides a model for writing the history of a music production culture as it sounds across the Atlantic to a distinct consumption culture, much in the way I attempt throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapter Four.

Similarly to Hobsbawm’s essay on jazz, I take from C. L. R. James’s *Beyond a Boundary* a model of transnational cultural history that traces the movement of cultural forms across the Atlantic (1994). Unlike Hobsbawm, however, James’s focus is specifically on the Caribbean and England – the same axis along which I frame this research. James demonstrates how cricket as a cultural practice served as a medium through which the power relationships of race, class, and nationality played out on the pitch, and could be subverted. This notion of how and what cricket signified to its teams and their fans resonates strongly with my idea that reggae records sounded beyond their function as sounding objects.

James also offers a model for studying individuals important to a culture of the past without reproducing the ‘great man’ theory. This is evidenced in his writing on Learie Constantine, analogous to, say, my historical treatment of Bob Marley, whose importance to reggae culture is unquestionable. James explains how Constantine’s distinctive cricketing style and political leanings were significant to both to a sporting culture and to wider society, without reducing his discussion to a kind historical-biographical determinism.

From Brian Ward’s (1998) and Suzanne Smith’s (1999) exemplar studies of African-American popular music I draw guidance on the dangers of ‘golden age’ narratives, as well as the value of mixing archival material with oral histories to explore the cultures of record production in their geographical locale. Both Smith and Ward identify the role of nostalgia, not only as an act of fandom, but also perpetuated by the stories produced by the institutions involved in the original production of the music. They warn us, as popular music culture historians, that we need to avoid the nostalgic totalised histories of the ‘golden age’ that have formed the published stories of black American music like that of Motown and the greater geographical and historical sweep of R&B.

Ward uses policy documents alongside oral history transcriptions and music press articles to tell us a history of R&B's institutionalisation, mediation and meaningfulness in the USA over the twentieth century. Smith uses the more-familiar practice of telling the Motown story as a city-based perspective. She does so by contextualising individual moments in the story of Motown within the history and politics of Detroit, and by constantly positioning the political, cultural and economic implications of Berry Gordy Jr.'s practices within broader genealogies of black political and cultural discourse, an approach extended further by Stuart Cosgrove in his study of a single year in Motown's Detroit (2015). They both interrogate the narratives around their object of study from a Marxist angle in order to interpret the economic forces at play, alongside insightful contextualisation of the cultural and socio-political climes in which these musical cultures operated. Smith and Ward each provide significant contributions to my understanding of the R&B end of that transatlantic connection, and, crucially, the complicated ways in which the production of this music interacted with both black political thinking and with white mainstream audiences.

Bringing the marginalised to the fore

Another set of histories from which I take influence recentres people and perspectives typically sidelined in popular music history. Tyina Steptoe's black queer re-reading of rock'n'roll's early and pre-history exemplifies this approach (2017). Steptoe's history prompts us to revisit an important moment in black American popular music making by emphasising the explicitness of a queer aesthetic in black music of the 1940s. During the 1950s, in which anti-communist sentiment intensified in the US, and a notion of 'respectability' was cultivated from within parts of the civil rights movement, queerness in rock'n'roll's lyrics and presentation changed from being iconified to being indexed. Steptoe traces this evolution through the case studies of Big Mama Thornton and Little Richard, restoring a marginalised aspect of that music's cultural past to its written history.

Following one of the central tenets of this research I similarly interpret the historical centralising of instruments (and, by extension, the musicians who play them) as a way to bring aspects of the past that have been marginalised in extant histories to the fore. Wright's (2024) and Brennan's (2020) histories of the electric bass guitar and the drum kit, respectively, demonstrate this approach. Both histories consider the technological development of their respective instruments, the innovations that each instrument made possible for the musicians who played them, and what they signified to music culture. (The

books tell us, then, how these instruments *sounded,* in both senses of the word.) While these are aspects of reggae's past with which my research does not interact, these histories have been influential in that both are simultaneously histories of the people who played the instruments as much as they are of the instruments themselves.

This distinctive approach reframes familiar timelines of popular music. Wright, for example, organises his history according to perceptions of the bass, first as 'novelty', then as 'practical', 'studio', 'default', and 'lead' instrument, charting the electric bass's journey from ridicule to ubiquity. By writing history, not so much from the 'bottom-up' as from the 'bottom end-up', he highlights overlooked collaborations, reveals connections across genres through shared personnel and technologies, and invites us to 'hear again' canonical stories via feel, function, and groove. Both demonstrate how attending to instruments and their players bring the material aspects of musical life and social dimensions of music-making to the fore.

Ironically, given the oft-acknowledged primacy of the drummer and bass guitarist in reggae discourse, rhythm-section musicians remain underrepresented in most histories. While Brennan devotes welcome attention to Jamaican drumming (2020, pp. 300-3), Wright himself identifies reggae as a field needing further study in relation to the role of the bass player (2024, p. 328). My research takes up this challenge, particularly in Chapter Five, using specific recordings to foreground rhythm players not as peripheral contributors but as central agents in shaping reggae's history.

Political economy of production cultures in (jazz) music histories

This final set of historical models incorporate insight from political economy into popular music histories. Tim Wall's work is particularly instructive here. In his foundational book he provides one of the most useful working definitions of the incorporation of political economy in the study of popular music culture: "to seek to understand how music production is ordered institutionally, and how finance, resourcing, economics and the politics of organisational structure and regulation operate as determinants in forming the industries as they are and can become" (Wall, 2013, p. 96). This definition, which has been foundational for my own understanding of how to approach reggae as a production culture, plays out across his wider scholarship. In two articles on Duke Ellington, Wall discusses how the pianist and band leader intersected with larger institutions, such as radio stations in 1920s New York (2012; 2017), or the BBC in 1930s Britain (2023). In his recent (2025a; 2025b) chapters on Miles Davis's career, he explores, synchronically and diachronically, how industry structures

mediated Davis's practice and how record labels signify within a broader map of meaning. These works exemplify how political economy can result in rich, informed popular music histories, without sacrificing the notion of musicians' agency.

The same can be said of Darren Mueller's history of the LP format in jazz culture (2024). Mueller narrates the transition in recorded jazz from the seven-inch single as a medium to record dance-oriented black popular music, to the twelve-inch LP as a format aimed at white avant-garde listeners. Crucially, Mueller complicates the dominant narrative that this shift was imposed upon jazz musicians by record companies in pursuit of profit. He simultaneously demonstrates the ways in which musicians and label figures actively embraced the expanded format, exploiting the increased duration it afforded to express their musicality and artistry. It is no bad thing for a musician, Mueller reminds us, to be thought of as a great artist. This is a sophisticated reframing of the inner workings of music labels and the wider recorded industry that restores agency to musicians, while not disregarding the structural and commercial forces that shaped the cultures in which they operated.

Mueller's approach to structuring his history has been equally influential on this research. He centres his book around a series of commercial records, through which broader themes about their production and significance to the longer development of jazz culture, are explored. Both in his incorporation of insight from political economy, and how these manifest in commercial recordings through which we can know something broader about the past, Mueller's work provides a particularly productive model to this research.

Taking Wall's and Mueller's work as an example and applying it to reggae allows me, for example, to locate Bob Marley's *Catch a Fire* within a longer history of Islands Records, evolving media formats, and changing notions of artistry from within reggae's culture of production, as I explore in Chapter Six. Manifested more broadly throughout the thesis, an emphasis on political economy in this research helps me move beyond the dangers of the 'golden age' narratives that Ward and Smith warn against, and to avoid the 'seductive menace of records', which Rasula identifies (2012).

Outroduction

In this chapter I have outlined my approach to producing an ethnographically-informed media and cultural history of reggae. I combine oral history, observation and participation, archival research and media analysis with a reflexive and polyphonic approach to writing up my findings. This has been informed by aspects of my positionality in relation to, and a

committed respect for, the culture I study. I have also identified the historiographical and methodological models from which thesis takes inspiration, detailing how each informs my focus on cultures of production and musicians' agency, transnationalism, and mediation.

The first three chapters of this thesis have established what we already know about reggae's past, some aspects that have yet to be discovered or covered at length, and discussed some productive models and methods I have used to retrieve and reconstruct those aspects. I now present and consider what I have found out about how reggae records sounded and continue to sound in/from Jamaica and the UK. I begin in the next chapter, which explores the mediation of an early reggae crossover hit, unpicks the mythology of its 'genius' auteur-producer, and theorises how the record would have sounded to different audiences in Britain.

Chapter Four: ‘Return of Django’ – the mediations and meanings of an early reggae record

October 31st, 2015, the Coventry Empire

I could hear everything. The back doors leading from side stage to the loading bay outside were wide open. My bandmates and I had not long finished our set supporting the Upsetters, the latest iteration of Perry’s band, who had just taken to the stage to begin their headline slot. There was no sign of the man himself, and yet his band, unphased, began their performance regardless. From outside the venue, I could hear their rendition of Ernest Ranglin’s ‘Surfin’’. This was the number, I would come to realise during our UK-wide tour, with which they would open their set every night. There was apparently nothing amiss with the fact that the Upsetters’ set was underway without their ringleader; the band played on as if this were nothing new.

Just in the nick of time a minivan pulled up, and out came Perry, dressed in full regalia: his outfit, head to toe, was adorned with mirrors and jewellery. God knows how he ever got through airport security. The last vestiges of a spliff, smoked down to the nub and held together on a wing and a prayer, hung from the corner of his mouth. This was the first time I had seen him in the flesh, this mythical figure in reggae circles who had produced so much cherished music. He had no words to say by way of greeting, even though we were the only two people in the vicinity. Instead, he just silently beamed up at me, eyes glimmering, and fixed me with the most genuine grin. He gave me the dog end of his spliff – you can imagine how that must have felt to an impressionable reggae fan; Lee Perry gave me his spliff! I have been chosen! – and walked straight on stage to begin his nightly ritual to rapturous cheers. The self-proclaimed ‘skeleton from outer-space’ was here on Earth for Halloween night.

‘Return of Django’ was performed by an early iteration of the Upsetters – precisely which musicians is unclear, as I explore below. It was produced by Lee “Scratch” Perry, who released the record as a single in Jamaica in 1968 on his own Upsetter label. The record was released in the UK the following year, eventually becoming one of a handful of early reggae singles to achieve crossover commercial success. It has since become canonised as a classic of what is commonly known as ‘skinhead reggae’ – early reggae singles popular with the ‘skinhead’ subculture in the UK, and which have been frequently compiled since their original releases in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Much of what is written about Lee "Scratch" Perry operates in a discursive plane that foregrounds a mythic over-rigorous historicism. The brief exchange I had with Perry – articulated above – did nothing to dispel those myths for me. All of 24 years-old at the time, and well along my own journey of learning more about Jamaican music, I was already well-versed and increasingly literate in the langue of reggae myth. However, while I cannot claim to have known Perry well at all, I would come to find out during our two-week UK-wide support tour with the Upsetters that the Perry that I met outside the Coventry Empire, the Perry that enacted his mystique for his devoted fans, was a very different Perry from the weary veteran who switched off whenever his fans left the room. The Perry I observed over those two weeks was someone who had mastered the role of such a mythic character over the course of his life in music. Perry anticipated, and had mastered the performance of, the kind of eccentricities that (typically white, male) music obsessives revered in their figures of (typically black, male) musical genius. His public-facing persona had become a routine of riddles and doublespeak, sounding a living embodiment of subversive Rastafari wordplay, causing music hipsters to salivate at his performance of authentic eccentricity and eccentric authenticity .

In Chapter One I establish the historiographic implications of the mythologising of Perry, using 'Return of Django[1]' as a case study. I show how the record's historical treatment depends upon and reinforces the common tropes of reggae histories: the 'great man' model of history and the genius myth; the binary of novelty/crossover hits and the 'authentic'; reggae as British subculture; reggae history as told through its important recordings. But the record also contributes to the establishment of many of the formal qualities that would differentiate reggae from ska and rocksteady, as well as from other popular musics in the black Atlantic, while laying the groundwork for the roots reggae proliferation that was about to occur.

This chapter illustrates the importance of understanding reggae as a transnational and mediated music culture. I explore the mediated mechanisms – the 'roots' in – through which reggae records entered British consciousness and the implications of mediating Jamaican reggae for British audiences. I locate Django within a synchronic map of meaning of British music and media culture at that time. I offer some ways of conceptualising Lee Perry and the production and significance of 'Django' beyond Perry's mythologised persona, and I begin by analysing two texts that mediate the man and his music. The first is a British television

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[1] Hereafter referred to as 'Django'

documentary that first aired in 1977, and which has an enduring appeal amongst reggae fans; the second is a journalistic feature published in *Melody Maker* in 1969 that attempts to make sense of reggae for a rock audience. I look at the role that commercial recordings and their 'great man' producers play in these constructions of reggae's production culture, and argue that such contemporaneous mediations of reggae's 'golden age' contain both the ideological seeds of the limiting and limited retroactive constructions of reggae, as well as the means for subversion of those constructions.

Having identified and explored the roots of the discursive repertoire which buttresses reggae histories, I then write a history of 'Django' that complements and contradicts the familiar refrains of reggae history, rather than reifying them. My history emphasises marginalised aspects of the record: its culture of production (in Jamaica) and consumption (in Britain), and its mediation. In counterpoint to the dominant ways of making historical sense of 'Django', I treat the record as both a sounding object and as a commercial object, rather than as one in a line of Perry-produced gems or as part of a distinct British 'skinhead' subculture. I instead write a history of what the record might have meant to different audiences in Britain in 1969, and how it acquired its meaning within a broader map of meaning. My intention is not to emphasise the importance of a British consumption culture over a Jamaican analogue, but to make productive use of the kinds of tangible historical materials that have been archived in Britain as a matter of course[2].

***Roots, Rock, Reggae*: Mediating Perry at the Black Ark**

Jeremy Marre's 1977 documentary, *Roots, Rock, Reggae*, represents a significant attempt to mediate Jamaican reggae production culture[3] at the zenith of its 'golden age', for an audience of British television viewers. Tellingly, while a significant portion of the film focuses on Perry and his productions, 'Django' does not feature at all in the story of reggae or of Perry, as told by the documentary. Nevertheless, the documentary and its narrative are typical of a reggae discourse preoccupied with authenticity and the notion of place, through which the film's totalising narration makes sense of and explains reggae's culture, whether that place be a recording studio, a neighbourhood, a city, or a country. In Chapters Five and Eight I address

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[2] The discrepancy between the wealth and comparative lack of archival materials in Britain and Jamaica, respectively, of course indexes issues of debate much broader in scope than can be addressed in this thesis. Beginning in the next chapter, however, I demonstrate the aspects of my methodology that complement and circumvent the dominance of the archive in writing histories.

[3] Consumption cultures of reggae, including those based around the sound system or the blues, are peripheral at best in Marre's documentary.

the relationship between place and production cultures further, looking at Jamaican and British cultures of reggae production respectively through empirical research. Here, though, I parse the ways in which the notions of place and authenticity contribute, to the dominant narrative of reggae during the portion *Roots, Rock, Reggae* that focuses specifically on Perry.

Roots, Rock, Reggae was initially produced by Marre's own Harcourt Films production company. The film was then compiled as the earliest episode of the 'Beats of the Heart' series of feature-length films documenting music cultures around the world and released by Channel 4. It was first aired in the UK, however, during a primetime slot on BBC 2 in 1979. That the BBC saw fit to programme the documentary during such a slot, with its accompanying broad viewing audience and elevated kudos, is interesting; clearly the reggae scene was a subject worthy enough to merit airplay in the eyes of the BBC 2 programmers, yet they evidently doubted their ability to produce a worthwhile documentary in-house[4].

Early in the documentary, Marre's film takes viewers behind the scenes to the Black Ark, Lee Perry's (in)famous studio in the Washington Gardens neighbourhood of Kingston, Jamaica. Centred around some remarkable footage of Perry and his Upsetters at work, along with Junior Murvin and the Heptones, Marre uses this scene as an example of a 'typical' Jamaican reggae recording session. The table cross-references the documentary's narration with what we can see and hear during this segment.

Table: Roots, Rock, Reggae narration

Time Stamp	Images and audio	Narration
00:08:51	Footage of 'downtown' Kingston streets. A painting of Lion of Judah is juxtaposed against Wray and Nephew signage. Cut to an exterior shot of the Black Ark studio. The camera zooms in from the wide exterior to a shot of a mural on the wall, as if we are being invited in.	Reggae music only really sounds right when it's recorded in Jamaica. Kingston's full of little studios in almost every side street. This is where the music happens. Like "Scratch's" home, which is also his studio.
00:09:21	Interior shots of musicians singing the hook to the song that will be recorded – 'Mr. Music' by the Upsetter Revue[5] – with a piano and bass	Junior Murvin, Upsetters and the Heptones all rehearse

[4] The BBC would again call on Marre, over thirty years later, to produce the reggae-centred entrant into their *Music Britannia* series, *Reggae Britannia* (2011).
[5] Marre made the claim that this song was written in honour of his and his crew's visit to the Ark, as evidenced by the lyric 'The chalice is burning/the cameras are rolling/getting ready for the show' (Marre & Charlton, 1985, p. 165).

	accompaniment. A close-up of chalice being packed with marijuana. An extreme close-up of a reel-to-reel tape machine zooms out to reveal Perry operating the equipment, dressed in a yellow vest, red sports shorts, and a red, gold and green tam.	here. Scratch's real name is Lee Perry. He records all the greats, including Bob Marley. Even Paul McCartney's come here from England, because "Scratch" has a sound and a riddim of his own. He calls it rockers.
00:09:45	Mid shot of hangers-on sat down in the control room, including the only woman in the scene. Cut to shots of the drummer – cigarette hanging out of his mouth – and bass player, interspersed with close-ups of the VU meter and of Perry's hands at the controls. A zoom out from the close-up of the pianist's head reveals a room full of musicians – guitars, bass, piano, organ, and singers, as well as people sitting in on the session. Cut to Perry behind the controls, gesturing through the window to the band. Close up shot of the bass player, Boris Gardiner, who counts in the band. "Let's go: one, two, a-one, two, three, four…" Cut to Perry behind the board again as the band makes a mistake. He yells "blood claat!" in annoyance, but everyone's all smiles.	When Scratch begins a session, first he balances drum and bass, for the basic riddim. Ghetto music: always drum and bass. Then "Scratch" will balance all the other instruments, 'til he's ready to start recording. When the balance is right, the Upsetters lay down the riddim track. That's how reggae's recorded!
00:10:59	The camera stays on Scratch while the band starts again. Then cut to bass player and drummer, organist, back to Perry. Close ups on the musicians' faces and hands. Shots of Perry using his phaser.	Though there seems to be no kind of order or discipline, Scratch knows exactly what he wants, and the musicians respect that. By other peoples' standards, the instruments may sound distorted, the balance way off, but it's just these rough edges that give reggae the kind of raw sound that can never copy abroad.
00:11:56	Cut to the vocalists in the vocal booth and a zoom in on Perry through the window. Cut, back to the vocalists. The riddim comes in and out of the audio track, as if we're going in and out of the vocal booth with the camera. Shots of he walls and windows of the Ark, which are adorned with images of Marley and other figures. Close up of VU meters and the same	When Scratch is happy with the riddim, he'll get Junior Murvin and the Heptones to put the vocals on! Riddim and then lyrics. That's how Scratch describes reggae: riddim from the

	Black Ark mural we saw at the start of the scene.	ghetto, lyrics from the streets.
00:13:55	A pan shot displays different political posters – all seemingly pro-PNP posters, plastered on a wall in a Jamaican (presumably Kingston) street. Slogans include 'Forward Together!' and 'For all the people', 'Equal rights and opportunities – women's status', 'Knowledge to free the nation from poverty – education'. 'Mr. Music' fades out and another track begins – 'The Message' by Neville Martin.	Reggae music is much more than just entertainment in Jamaica today. It's a powerful social force that mirrors the pressures of everyday life, putting them into words and riddim, describing, revealing, persuading.

Throughout the film, the narration offers a totalised definition of the significance of the culture represented on screen, a common practice in music documentaries (Wall & Long, 2009; Wall & Pillai, 2010). The transcription in Table 1 depicts how central the notion place has as one of the working assumptions of the narration's discourse. The dialogue informs us, for example, that "reggae music only *really* sounds right when it's recorded in Jamaica[6]," and the quality of specifically Jamaican reggae is further evidenced in the narration by the fact that even the great Paul McCartney has to trek all the way there to benefit from Lee Perry's signature sound, as if that would be some great hardship for McCartney. The sense of place, and of Jamaican-ness, is reinforced by the narrator's Jamaican accent[7]. The claim that that the music 'really happens' in the studios that populate Kingston's side streets mediates at a more granular level. Reggae is at once constructed by narration and selection of image as 'ghetto music' and as a *uniquely* Jamaican phenomenon, equating one with the other in a discursive construction that obfuscates the way class works in Jamaica and its music scene[8], while emphasising this idea that reggae comes from some*where*, rather than from some*one*. The assumption that place is responsible for the music is ubiquitous, invoked but ever undefined[9].

In Chapter Five I offer an alternate reading of what Marre's cameras and microphones capture that moves beyond the oversimplified explanation imposed by the narration of reggae as the 'raw' product of a singular genius operating in a Kingston ghetto. But what I want to

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[6] Emphasis in the original.
[7] Docuwiki (Roots, Rock, Reggae: Inside the Jamaican Music Scene, 2022) lists the narrator as the musician Ras Michael, but I have not been able to verify this. Given Michael's well-respected standing in reggae culture, especially during the late 1970s, he would likely have been considered a viable candidate for such a role.
[8] I explore class in reggae studios at greater length in the next chapter.
[9] Of course, implicit in Marre's discourse is that reggae produced outside of its original Jamaican locality is inferior. This narrative endures in the minds of many music fans as I explore in Chapter One, and as discussed in Walker (2005, pp. 187-200)

emphasise here is not that it is Perry, the Upsetters, and the Black Ark, that Marre selects to personify his construction of reggae as Jamaican ghetto music. In reality, there is every chance that this choice may well have been made for Marre – perhaps Perry features the most prominently because Perry was the only prominent producer who agreed to let Marre into his inner sanctum. Certainly, the Perry I constructed in the vignette with which I began this chapter was someone who knew the value of an outsider's camera lens. Regardless of the seat-of-the-pants reality of documentary production, the construction that comes together in the editing room constructs a profound narrative in the viewer's mind that, in order to be authentic, reggae *must* be Jamaican, that Jamaica is ubiquitously ghettoised, and that from deep within the ghetto the Black Ark, Lee Perry and the Upsetters exemplify this phenomenon.

I posit two factors that contribute to the documentary's preoccupation with place, the first of which concerns audience. Aired on the BBC for its primetime viewership, *Roots, Rock, Reggae* was clearly an attempt to mediate Jamaican reggae culture for a British audience, to unearth and explain the Jamaican roots of a culture that is contemporaneously changing British society. Of course, there would have been important stratifications within that British TV audience: what the documentary meant to people who were born in Jamaica and migrated to Britain is likely to have been different from what it meant to second generation black Brits, or to white subcultures organised around the consumption of reggae records. However, the documentary is built around a spatial othering inherent in the relationship between audience and viewing object: the rhetoric is that this is a programme for *over here* about some music from *over there*.

The second factor, also to do with mediation, is revealed by way of comparison with the written histories of reggae I examine in Chapter One. These books are chronological histories; they make reggae make sense to the reader by constructing a temporal narrative: records beget other records, exemplifying the kind of deterministic discourse of genealogical influence against which Rasula warns (2012). By contrast *Roots, Rock, Reggae,* operates in a different way, visually representing another *place*, rather than another *time*, for its audience. The change in medium from written (hi)story to televisual film allows the latter to foreground the places of reggae culture through the combination of written and spoken narration, sound, and crucially, image.

Continuing the comparison of *Roots, Rock, Reggae* with reggae's written histories, in Chapter One, I posited three common traits of the latter: that they are written by 'outsider' fan-

historians using a fan's discursive repertoire, that they capture a wealth of discographic and biographic information, and that they construct a singular, narrowed narrative of reggae history. In this context, 'Django' is understood in the written histories as either an early British reggae hit for Perry, paving the way financially for his soon-to-arrive creative apex, *or* as one of a slew of early frivolous pop reggae records that constituted the 'skinhead reggae' era. In either construction, the record's place in reggae history is peripheral at best. *Roots, Rock, Reggae* shares many of these qualities. Marre's attempt to get at the essence of reggae culture results in a treasure trove of footage from Jamaica's studios, but one which is ultimately presented in a totalising and essentialising manner that echoes the histories. The tropes that construct reggae in Marre's documentary – the 'ghetto' imagery; the idea that reggae is the result of the genius of great male producers; the emphasis on the relationship between reggae and Jamaican political turmoil – are all the same narrative resources from which retroactive reggae histories have been written. I do not posit a causal link between *Roots, Rock, Reggae* and any later attempts to write reggae's history, but the fact that the mediations of reggae that occur in each depend upon the same discursive repertoire is significant. I expand on the dialogue between Marre's documentary and other mediations of Perry, and of reggae more widely, below. Next, though, I look at an earlier mediation of the Upsetters in the British music press from the year of 'Django's' release. In fact, its success in the British charts justifies the Upsetters' inclusion alongside their popular reggae peers.

'Spotlight on reggae': mediating early reggae for a readership of rock fans

The Upsetters and 'Django' were featured prominently in the British music press when, on November 8th, 1969, *Melody Maker* published 'Spotlight on reggae' (Welch, 1969, see Appendix 1), a one-page feature on the music that had recently been "invading" the British charts. The feature took the form the sweeping overview of the reggae scene alongside a revue of several recording artists. In the wake of several crossover hits detailed in Barrow and Dalton (1997, 83), reggae coverage in the British music press began in earnest. That *Melody Maker*'s editors deemed it their responsibility to shine such a 'spotlight', the article positions the publication as the authority on this emergent cultural phenomenon in British society, as well as contributing to a narrative of reggae as a novel music. This is in keeping with *Melody Maker*'s construction of itself as a 'thinking fan's' publication in comparison to its competitors during this period, as I explore elsewhere (Torrens, 2025).

The publication's treatment of 'Django' occurs within a wider mediation of reggae culture more broadly across three distinct elements, all occupying similar column inches, that take up an entire page. From left to right, we see succinct profiles of three reggae groups – the Harry J All Stars, The Upsetters, and the Pioneers – with accompanying photographs, an article suggestively titled 'Reggae – is it a new art form?' by celebrated rock journalist Chris Welch, and an equally suggestive cartoon of *Melody Maker*'s idea of a reggae fan. A look at how each component contributes to a mediation of reggae reveals the different discursive repertoires from *Melody Maker*'s editorial staff drew in their early attempts at making sense of reggae on their readers' behalf.

The Upsetters and 'Django' are listed alongside the Harry J All Stars and their hit single 'The Liquidator', and 'Long Shot (Kick De Bucket)', released by the Pioneers. Each of these records feature in Barrow and Dalton's list of the most important singles released in reggae's early period which – according to the authors – are responsible for the commercial success and popularity of reggae in Britain (1997, p. 93), as well as Lloyd Bradley's account of the same period (2001, pp. 241-2). Each group is mediated through a short write-up of its biography and recent hits[10], and an accompanying image: the Upsetters are represented by a professional close-up photograph of Perry, the Harry J All Stars by what appears to be a candid photograph of the band performing live, and the Pioneers by a shot of the three vocalists that made up the group.

A closer look reveals the awkwardness with which *Melody Maker*'s journalists attempt to mediate these groups, and the culture of production from which they emerged, to its rock fan readers. Both the Upsetters and the Harry J All Stars present a particular problem for the publication: how to construct and mediate a production culture of reggae at a point in which its early crossover singles were often instrumentals, and did not feature prominent star vocalists or solo instrumentalists. A look through the other pages of this issue of *Melody Maker* reveals just how dependant the publication was on the star system in its mediation of other genres. Rock is constructed as existing in a conversation between Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart for example, and jazz and blues through features are narrated around

[10] The full text of the write up of the Upsetters is as follows: 'The Upsetters are the current leaders of the reggae invasion of the chart with their instrumental hit "Return of Django". They are led by songwriter and producer Lee Perry who also acts as vocalist with the group. Their first British tour starts at the end of November. Perry started as a songwriter before producing his own hits "People Funny Boy" and "Jackpot". He brought Johnny Moore, Val Bennett, Winston Wright, J. Jackson, Hux Brown, Easy Beckford, and Bob Aitkens together to form the Upsetters and to give him his first British chart hit.'

significant individuals like Cecil Taylor (Williams, 1969) and Albert King (Jones, 1969), respectively. Faced with the challenge of how to mediate a starless music to a readership preoccupied with stars, in the case of constructing these two groups, *Melody Maker*'s solution is to make stars of the music's producers, in lieu of star singers and virtuosic individual musicians.

Melody Maker's journalists list 'Johnny Moore, Val Bennett, Winston Wright, J. Jackson, Hux Brown, Easy Beckford' as the particular set of musicians who comprise the band at this juncture (although the moniker 'Upsetters' would go on to be bestowed upon whichever group of musicians Perry would happen to be working with at a particular time)[11]. This is in sharp distinction to retrospective reggae histories, in which instrumental musicians are rarely given credit, as I argue throughout this thesis. However, it is on producer Perry that this construction of the Upsetters depends. Perry is signalled as the group's star producer and songwriter, fulfilling the criteria of rock journalists to point to a great man in their mediation. Similarly, Perry is the only figure on show in the accompanying image. While the image of the – anonymous – Harry J All Stars is a live shot of a band in action, the image that represents the Upsetters is a press shot of Perry, indicating an intent behind Perry and his label to push him as the star persona in a manner familiar to the readers of *Melody Maker*. Perry is also ambiguously described as someone who "*acts as* vocalist with the group"[12], despite their highlighting that 'Django' is an instrumental record. Pre-empting a discourse in which reggae producers would become the lead singer/auteur analogue within their respective music culture, this construction of Perry as a star singer who does not sing is a confused one.

The accompanying illustration portrays *Melody Maker*'s construction of a member of the skinhead reggae subculture Barrow and Dalton identify. The image depicts a solitary young, white, man, complete with buzzcut, braces and disgruntled expression. He carries a 12" vinyl record: 'Club Ska '67'[13]. This depiction of a late '60s skinhead reggae fan is in stark contrast with the images throughout this issue, all of which depict musicians and not fans, and most of which show white rockers whose sartorial choices – long hair, beards, baggy clothing – fly in

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[11] The musicians comprising the Harry J All Stars remain anonymous in the piece.
[12] My emphasis.
[13] An LP of the same name did exist, released in the UK in April of 1967 by Island Records and manufactured by WIRL – West Indies Records Limited. WIRL had famously been founded by Jamaican Prime Minister Edward Seaga, although he had sold WIRL to Byron Lee of Dragonnaires fame by the time this compilation was released. The LP compiled well-known hits from previous years like 'Guns of Navarone' by The Skatalites (1965), and more recent releases like '007 (Shanty Town)' by Desmond Dekker and the Aces (1967) and 'Dancing Mood' by Delroy Wilson (1967). The sleeve of the real LP differs greatly from that depicted in the cartoon, however.

the face of the style signified by the cartoon. Reggae's (white) fanbase, then, was likely being satirised and othered in the rock-dominated pages of *Melody Maker*, whose own readership would have deified the long-haired guitar gods of its pages. The parodic depiction of such a fan in this article serves to further construct reggae as something atypical of inclusion in the magazine. It is a paradoxical discursive move: *Melody Maker* champions the music in its words and satirises its fans with its images, contributing to an 'arm's length' sense of its mediation.

For *Melody Maker*'s rock journalists and rock fan readers, the Upsetters present something of a new challenge in the late 1960s. *Melody Maker* make sense of reggae and mediate the music and musicians to its fans using discographic information, and construct it as a music defined by producers and singers, made in Jamaica and consumed by white British skinheads. Reggae is constructed using familiar discursive tropes of black popular music as both a novelty music and an "authentic" and "pure" black music. In so doing, *Melody Maker* also constructs itself as much as the music. The didactic nature of the feature constructs the publication as the elevated, 'thinking fan's' tome – one that will cover and even champion reggae, but that will only do so from a distance. That *Melody Maker* struggled to definitively clarify *who* was important – musicians or producer – for an audience unfamiliar with reggae's production culture is significant. A common journalistic method was to construct the personnel of any given band as significant by listing their names, but this was not always possible in reggae culture; such discographic information was frequently unavailable, often purposefully, in an attempt by producers to escape paying royalties to their session musicians. In 1969, *Melody Maker* fashioned a conception of reggae for its rock fan readership using the materials available to its journalists (discographic information and press shots), using the same discursive moves it used in the mediation of rock and jazz ("great man" narratives). Compared with *Roots, Rock, Reggae*, there are continuities and disruptions between this and later mediations as I explore below.

As I argue elsewhere (Torrens, 2025), *Melody Maker* from its inception mediated popular music to a readership of both professional musicians and aspirant pop fans. It understood pop through the twin narrative tropes of novelty songs and as musics of black origin, and was preoccupied with place as a defining discursive notion, particularly with how the relationship between Britain and the US fit into its discourse of authenticity. My historical inquiry differs from where most accounts of *Melody Maker* pick up the story, as in Lindberg et al (2005, pp. 76-106), who pick up the story of the publication in the mid 1960s, and who understand the

British music press in this period through the prism of Chris Welch's journalism and creative agency. Such a treatment of *Melody Maker* both foregrounds and is explained by the prominence of rock in its pages from the mid-1960s onwards, at the expense of understanding how reggae sat, often uneasily, side-by-side with mediations of other music cultures. With a history of *Melody Maker* that incorporates media and cultural studies and political economy, the didactic nature of its mediation of reggae begins to make more sense: not only is this a mediation of reggae for rock fans, but it is a mediation that occurs within a publication that has been about didactic communications *to* its readers since the publication of its first issue.

'Return of Django': a history beyond the greatness of Perry

The Upsetters' single 'Return of Django' began as an attempt by Perry and his studio musicians to cover an R&B hit, 'Sick and Tired'. Originally written by Chris Kenner and Dave Bartholomew and released for US record label Imperial in 1957, it is likely that Perry et al became aware of the record through Fats Domino's 1958 cover of the song due to the latter's well-documented popularity in Jamaica[14]. While both the original recording, attributed to Kenner, and Domino's cover both feature prominent lead vocal performances, Perry's production is an instrumental. Katz (2021, p. 88) attributes this to a failed attempt on Perry's part to perform a vocal he was happy with, prompting a question to which I return about the producer's limited capacity as a vocalist.

Comparing the formal qualities of all three versions at a rudimentary level reveals some basic insights into the production of 'Django'. While the chord progression – a variation on a 12-bar blues – remains the largely same across all versions, the key signature is transposed from Bb in the original – which transposes for brass players to a concert C with no flats or sharps – to C# – a much more unwieldy key for brass players – in the Upsetters' version. One may speculate as to why this choice was made: perhaps Perry, an aspirant but limited vocalist throughout his career, made the decision to transpose the song into a key signature that would better accommodate his range, before, as Katz notes, the attempt to 'voice' the song was abandoned. By this time in the recording process, it is likely the riddim would have been committed to tape, fixing the key signature, and leaving Val Bennet on saxophone to solo[15] in a more awkward key signature.

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[14] On Fats Domino's popularity in Jamaica, see, for instance Roy Brown's article in the Jamaica Gleaner (2017).
[15] A common feature across all three versions of 'Sick and Tired'/'Django' is a prominent saxophone solo.

Structurally, the form alters slightly in that the ‘stops’ around which the original’s verses are organised are replaced in the Upsetters’ version by a groove that plays straight through the recording, save for one drum break. Rather than the R&B backbeat, the Upsetters construct a classic early reggae riddim around the 12-bar blues variation composed – presumably – by Bartholomew. While tempi are similar across all three recordings, the groove that emerges from the Upsetters’ experimenting with this R&B classic in a Kingston studio results in the half-time feel that would give reggae its defining characteristic for dancers on the lawns of Jamaica and the dancefloors of Britain.

The 7” single release of ‘Django’ was backed with another Perry-produced instrumental credited to the Upsetters entitled ‘Dollar in the teeth,’ and released as a white label through Perry’s own Upsetter Records in Jamaica in 1968. The matrix information on the B-side of this Jamaican pressing reads ‘WIRL 4405 UPSETTER’, intimating that the record was pressed at Dynamic Sounds. This recording studio and pressing plant was originally opened as West Indies Records Ltd (hence ‘WIRL’) by Edward Seaga, Jamaican Prime Minister during the 1980s and music industry entrepreneur, before being bought by Byron Lee of the ska band Byron Lee and Dragonaires, who changed the name in the process (Bradley, 2001, p. 43). The commercial success of ‘Django/Dollar’ in Jamaica is difficult to track (Katz claims it did not do well in the local market, (2021, pp. 88-9)), but given some established facts about Perry’s business practices in Kingston at that time we can speculate with some certainty that the record would have been sold at the label’s Upsetter Record Shop. The churn of Kingston’s working musicians that constituted Perry’s house band makes it equally difficult to credit who played what on many Upsetters recordings. The ‘mainstays’ of the Upsetters lineup, as Katz describes them (2021, p. 84), were Jackie Jackson on bass, Gladstone ‘Gladdy’ Anderson on piano, Winston Wright on keyboard, Lynford ‘Hux’ Brown on guitar, Hugh Malcom or Winston Grennan on drums. Additionally, Bobby Aitken (guitar), Theophilius ‘Easy Snappin’ Beckford (piano), Val Bennett (saxophone) and Johnny Moore (trumpet) are also known to have been called for Perry sessions at this time. It is most likely that what we hear on the recording is some combination of these musicians; it was certainly Val Bennett who played the signature saxophone line (Barrow & Dalton, 1997, p. 92).

An alternate narrative, one of the record’s success and meaningfulness in British culture, can be mapped out from British chart history which – much like other media artefacts – have been documented and are accessible to a much greater degree than its Jamaican analogue. The record was again released by Upsetter records as ‘Return of Django/Dollar in the teeth’,

although now with a distribution deal with Trojan records. Trojan specialised in importing and re-releasing Jamaican reggae records, aimed at the black British community and white youth subcultures that began to adopt Jamaican music as part of their cultural identity. It remains the dominant label in the discourse of British reggae history. The record's initial UK release date is difficult to establish, although an online database has it listed as 14 March[16]. Tellingly, Chris Welch in the September 13th issue of *Melody Maker* says that the record has been playing in discotheques for months, which points to the likelihood of such a release date. What can be identified with more certainty is that the record does not enter the UK charts until October 4 later that year, broaching the top 50 on the week of 29 October, and climbing to the fifth spot, which it would hold from 2 - 23 November, before beginning to fall. This delayed chart success is commonly attributed to the song's use on a Cadbury's chocolate advert, but would also have been due to the record being featured on the all-important *Top of the Pops* the week prior on 23 October.

In order to arrive at a better understanding of just what the Upsetters' music signified to a wider, non-specialist British audience at this time, it is worth considering the advertisement in question in more detail than has been done in reggae histories. The advert was directed by Terry Gilliam, who as Katz notes (2021, p. 106) was soon to debut *Monty Python*, and had already been honing his surrealist comedic talent in arenas like *The Frost Report.* The television advertisement centres on Cadbury's Fruit and Nut chocolate bar. A narration[17] constructs the product's consumers as '(fruit and) nutcases' [*sic*], British slang for eccentrics, or 'mad' people[18], while we see surreal and amusing images of works of art coming to life to eat Cadbury's chocolate. The advertisement's rhetoric emphasises the joy of being a 'nut case', of eccentricity: Fruit and Nut consumers are not the same old sticks-in-the-mud who eat plain, boring chocolate bars.

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[16] The comment section of the listing for 'Return of Django/Dollar in the teeth' attributes this to a user's copy of *Record Retailer* from that same week. Regrettably this has not been uploaded/linked in the comments, and I have been unable to source a copy in order to verify or dispute that claim.

[17] The entire script is as follows: 'Everyone's a Cadbury's fruit and nut case! It's the nuts and raisins. They're all after those crunchy nuts and juicy raisins wrapped up in lovely dairy milk chocolate. Isn't it strange the way the simple combination of nutty nuts, juicy raisins and Cadbury's chocolate can affect people? Are you a Cadbury's fruit and nut case?'

[18] Given that retroactive constructions of Perry would consistently posit the producer as reggae's 'mad genius', there is a great deal of irony that his early British hit would become the soundtrack to such an advert.

It is telling, then, that ‘Django’ was the record selected to contribute to this rhetoric. Film editor Alan Blake, who makes the claim to have selected the record for use in the advertisement, explains his decision thusly:

> I heard it at one of the clubs I used to go to and bought it at a record shop in North Finchley. We needed something that was jocular in feel, that had beats you could cut to and had sufficient phrase repetition, so I thought this could work, apart from the fact that reggae and ska were pretty hot at the time, and it did go well with the ad. In fact, it became quite talked about, and so they re-released it.
>
> Alan Blake, quoted in Katz (2021, pp. 106-7)

There are three things I want to highlight from this explanation. The first is the emphasis in Blake’s discourse on dancing: ska and reggae are described as ‘pretty hot’ – invoking a language that began with jazz as a dance music – and the advertisers wanted something with ‘beats you could cut to’. Crucially, Blake recalls hearing ‘Django’ *at the club*. Despite the seemingly unusual requirement for a television spot that the advert feature a light-hearted dance number, ‘Django’ clearly sounded youthfulness, frivolity, and like a call to the dancefloor in the minds of some audiences. Some versions of this story mention a television *and* radio advert, and while I have been unable to unearth this advert, its existence may clarify the emphasis on danceability in the advertisement makers’ brief.

The second, less immediately obvious, connotation at play is that of novelty. This was the narrative technique being used to make sense of reggae by white journalists mediating the music and its makers for a white audience, as I explore above. For such listeners (and viewers), reggae at this stage was a completely new phenomenon. While the genealogy of ‘Django’ reveals its roots in American R&B, and although reggae and rock have a shared antecedent in the likes of Fats Domino, the new reggae beat would have been upside down to British audiences who were not already fluent in the language and sound of Jamaican music; the sonic accompaniment to, and equivalent of, the surreal image of a statue tempted into animation at the prospect of a chocolate bar as is depicted in the Cadbury’s advert. A final important factor is implied through what Blake codifies as ‘sufficient phrase repetition’: that ‘Django’ is an instrumental. As I outline in Chapter One, instrumental reggae would later become canonised in reggae discourse its early form, and is an explanatory trope for the formation of a British ‘skinhead’ subculture. The advertisers, however, clearly hear something else: a signature horn part that hooks in audiences (and perhaps contributes to the sense of novelty), and a vacuum where a voice should be, leaving sonic space for the

narration to do its own sounding. In Blake's discourse, the presence of a brass hook (explicitly) and the absence of a vocal (implicitly) are equally important to its sound.

As well as getting at the meaningfulness of 'Django' as a sounding object in the context of late 1960s Britain, my analysis also paints a picture of the different social and cultural contexts in which its meaning was made, and how these change through the course of 1969. At the time of its release – most likely in March of that year – 'Django' is a record that is heard and danced to in clubs frequented by specialist reggae fans. What it becomes by year's end, though, is a ubiquitous pop reggae record, re-released by Trojan who had clearly identified the record's crossover potential and re-pressed the record to quantities to meet the prospective demand for such a hit.

The record was featured on music chart show *Top of the Pops* on October 10th of 1969. Perry and the Upsetters were unable to appear on the show and mime along to 'Django' in the manner typical of most artists whose records were played, which Katz (2021, p. 107) ascribes to Perry's complicated love life intersecting with his professional and creative obligations. The program instead features images of the Pan's People dance troupe while the record plays out. The absent presence of the Upsetters in the *Top of the Pops* studio would likely have only increased the group's mystique. It also indexes a key question about Perry's role at this time: just what would Perry, who was a producer and not an instrumentalist, and whose attempts to voice 'Django' were consigned to the cutting room floor, have been doing on screen, had the Upsetters been able to perform on television? It is likely that Perry would have put his champion dance moves to use, as I explore in Chapter Five.

Three cover versions of 'Django' were released in the UK following the record's success, and can tell us something about the way in which both jobbing musicians and the pop industry responded to reggae in the UK. One such cover, attributed to the Top of the Poppers, was later compiled *Top of the Pops Volume 8*, a compilation LP released by Hallmark Records, a subsidiary of budget record label Pickwick International, who specialised in such releases. The Top of the Poppers were a rotating cast of session musicians pressed into service for the re-recording of hit songs for such a release, who would likely have been known for their versatility given the diversity of pop styles on these compilations, which aimed to replicate the diversity of music on the program. Listening to their rendition of 'Django' suggests a lack of familiarity with reggae performance; quite clearly the band does not replicate the 'groove' of the original riddim. Whether that is down to a lack of proficiency on the part of musicians coming to terms with a new musical idiom or due to other factors is difficult to nail down, but

recording prompts interesting lines of inquiry: does the groove 'fail' because the band cannot convincingly replicate the reggae feel, or because the record's producer wanted a version of 'Django' with a more familiar feel? Why are there so many musical mistakes on the record - is it because the performers, operating in a novel and unfamiliar musical form and rhythmic feel, were unable to achieve a flawless take? Because the producer saw such mistakes as a means to recreate a sense of reggae's 'rawness'? Because their ears did not hear any mistakes or, according to their attention of organisation, they had other preoccupations?

The compilation also featured covers of two other reggae crossover hits, 'Wonderful World, Beautiful People' by Jimmy Cliff, and 'The Liquidator' by the Harry J All Stars. The former featured the formal qualities discursively associated with a more familiar pop hit – lavish orchestration[19] and a powerful vocal performance from a singer in Cliff who could be recognised and marketed as a star singer. The latter resembles 'Django' more closely in its instrumental form and house-band personnel. That it was possible to compile this selection of Jamaican recordings alongside the remaining nine songs on the LP, including hits by Stevie Wonder, Fleetwood Mac and Elvis Presley, indicate the ubiquity of reggae, *and* how it could be considered both a popular mainstream music and a specialist club-goers music by different record companies with different economic models geared towards different groups of consumers.

Two more cover versions of 'Django' were released on *This is reggae*, Roberto Delgardo and his Orchestra[20], and on *Reggae, Stedae, Go* by the Aggressors. Both were 12" budget albums comprised of instrumental covers of early reggae hits. The latter ostensibly attempts to recreate the Upsetters' original feel and tempo, but without the requisite 'feel' of a reggae rhythm section. The drum track is more reminiscent of the Beatles' 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer' than it is of a reggae performance – perhaps a decision taken to enhance the novelty aspect of the record. The recording mix is also inconsistent with early reggae recordings; the signature off-beat guitar 'chop' or 'skank' that helped to define much of post 1950s Jamaican popular music is not so much percussive as abrasive. The version for which Delgardo was band leader, however, opts for a straight, double-time feel as opposed to a swung, early

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[19] The phenomenon of overdubbing string tracks onto reggae hits intended for the international pop market was common in reggae production culture. Such records were known as being 'stringsed-up'. See for example Bradley (2001).

[20] Roberto Delgardo was the alias of Horst Wende, a German musician and band leader whose prolific output consisted of cover albums of "world music" aimed at the easy-listening market.

reggae groove. The resulting record references 1950s rock and roll and pre-empts the 2-Tone sound of bands like the Selector.

That so many covers of 'Django' were recorded by British bands, and some of the discrepancies between these versions and Upsetters' recording with regarding to musicianship, reveals two things. First, that British – or in the case of the Delgardo version, European – session musicians at this time seemed either incapable of or uninterested in reconstructing what sounds today like a passable reggae riddim. The cultures of production in Jamaica and Britain were distinct, resulting versions of the same record that sound equally distinct. The second is that reggae could both be popular with a 'mass' audience, and 'belong to' a subculture. This is brought into sharper focus by comparing the sound(ing) of the Upsetters' recording of 'Django' and the Top of the Poppers' cover. What was signified by a Trojan 7" release of a Jamaican reggae record, and to whom it was doing the signifying, were completely distinct from the signification of that same recording's inclusion on a 12" budget LP for a non-specialist audience produced by Hallmark – the same company that would go on to manufacture gift cards. As is common across popular music cultures that are understood as having emerged from a subculture, discursive claims of authenticity are typically made through constructions of margins and mainstreams. As Raymond Williams reminds us, though, 'there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses' (2014). The binary between 'diluted' records for the masses and authentic reggae has been perennial in reggae's history. But, as this section has demonstrated, reggae's past was in actuality a more multiply discursive field of contestation, and one in which Perry and his productions would prove to be a constant inspiration.

Outroduction: Perry as a case study for reggae's mediated discourse

The history of 'Django' in brief, then, began with a failed attempt at a vocal cover of 'Sick and Tired' – likely inspired by Fats Domino's earlier cover. The resulting instrumental track was released in 1968 in Jamaica to little commercial success, but following a UK release in March of the following year on Trojan, the record became danced to in clubs, including the kinds of trendy venues frequented by young creative professionals working in advertising and filmmaking. The record was featured on a Cadbury's advert because it sounded to such individuals as novel and eccentric. It was treated by the British rock press – not upon its initial release in March, but much later in the year – as something to be aware of, rather than

to run out and purchase. The record was featured on *Top of the Pops* in October, after it had already begun to feature in the charts, before peaking at the fifth position for multiple weeks.

The extant retellings of the record's history constrict a simplistic narrative that posits 'Django' in one of two ways. The record is either as an early example of Perry's production expertise, a narrative that depends on the mythologising of the great male musical genius figure, or it is a hit following its use on an advertisement and appearance on *Top of the Pops*. The latter narrative depends on an overly-determinist Marxist view of (reggae) history. Compared to these versions of the story, my account has attempted to conceptualise the past of reggae as a multi-discursive field by exploring how the record would have sounded to different British audiences, and by reconstructing, partially, the map of meaning in which this sounding occurred.

By way of concluding thoughts to this chapter, I turn to the relationship between these two phenomena: the discursive tropes that dominate reggae histories on the one hand, and, on the other, the particular set of contestations for meaning that were going on in Britain at the time, and the political economy of the industry in which such a discourse was institutionalised – the music press.

I have argued elsewhere that the mediation of reggae in the British music press during its 'golden age' occurred in accordance with the distinct business practices of IPC (International Publishing Corporation) (Torrens, 2025). IPC constituted an attempt to recreate the 'press baron' model of newspaper ownership for magazines[21], and in so doing, created a distinct set of markets for reggae in amongst the readerships of its various, ostensibly 'competing' magazines like *Melody Maker, New Musical Express* and, later, *Black Music Magazine.* We have seen how reggae in its early period represented a challenge for journalists in a rock-facing music press. Faced with the task of making sense of a new popular music form without the access to its Jamaican cultural context, these journalists resorted to panel-beating a rock discourse onto a distinct music culture that resulted in a confused and confusing mediation, a reluctance to either wholly embrace or dismiss reggae that resulted in an arm's-length

[21] In a recent documentary retelling the history of IPC's "men's magazine", *Loaded,* a former employee references the company's nickname: 'the Ministry of Magazines' (Sakula-Barry, 2024). While the anecdote refers to a period at least three decades after the initial instantiations of reggae's mediation in publications like *Melody Maker*, it nonetheless indicates the scale of IPC's approach, and perhaps the growing awareness of such on the part of industry personnel.

distancing from the music, its makers, *and* its fans. The latter, as we have seen, are constructed not as black Brits but white soul fans.

As I discuss in the article cited above, this construction of reggae changed dramatically in a relatively short space of time, into a multi-faceted music culture defined by its contestation. In the pages of *Black Music,* journalist Carl Gayle emphasised reggae's transnational element, focusing on the movement of musicians and other people across the Atlantic, and simultaneously emphasising and exploring Jamaica's singular cultural influence *and* making sense of the British reggae scene. Gayle's treatment of reggae culture stood out amongst a slew of journalistic voices that instead constructed a subaltern and fixed culture, defined almost exclusively by its Rastafari aesthetic and Garveyite political potential, at the expense of other societal factors. It is the latter position which dominated the pages of *Melody Maker*, constructing a reggae culture that is 'other' to a readership constructed as white, British rock fans.

It is into this latter context that *Roots, Rock, Reggae* was released. As such, its construction of reggae can be understood as one that follows the conventional wisdom of music criticism at the time, despite the potential for subverting the printed journalistic form provided by the impressive footage captured. As one of reggae's most significant contemporaneous televised mediations in Britain, the documentary did two things simultaneously: it explained its capture using the dominant journalistic tropes of the time, and in doing so provided image and sound, beyond what could be accessed by records, to buttress the narratives that constructed reggae in the music press. In looking at Perry's mediation in the documentary, I demonstrated how, using a rhetoric of a kind of "ghetto authenticity", *Roots, Rock, Reggae* was structured around the kind of assumptions emerging in the rock press and that would recur in almost all subsequent works of reggae history. Put simply, it is a documentary that knows the answers to the questions it asks *before* anybody involved in its production sets foot in Jamaica.

The implications that instances of reggae's mediation such as these have had on reggae discourse are difficult to understate. As I illustrate in Chapter One, the narratives that emerge from the mediation of Jamaican reggae to a British rock audience during its "golden age" have become the axioms of its histories: the corrupt political landscape of 1970s Jamaica, Rastafari culture, and the actions of 'great men' operating within the 'Babylon system'. In this chapter, I have identified the roots of these discursive tropes, and in so doing I have simultaneously offered a history of 'Django' that complements and contradicts the familiar refrains of reggae history, rather than reifying them. In this spirit, the next chapter offers a

way to reinterpret what Marre's camera captures in *Roots, Rock, Reggae*. Rather than focusing in on the genius of Perry at work, I shift emphasis onto the practices and contributions of Perry's session musicians.

Chapter 5: ‘Hurt So Good’ – a British hit single from the ‘Creative Echo Chamber’ of Kingston

March 2023 University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica

I sit in the old bookkeeper’s lodge, now the music suite at UWI. I am midway through an interview with Boris Gardiner, singer, bassist, and former band leader of the Upsetters during Lee “Scratch” Perry’s fabled residency in the famed Black Ark studio. At this point in our conversation, Gardiner has sussed that unlike most interviewers he’d dealt with in the past, I’m less inclined to quiz him about his time as a singer, an ‘artist in his own right’. My aim instead is to talk to Gardiner one bass player to another, moving beyond the kind of stories musicians recount to journalists in order to narrate their careers and justify why one artistic or professional choice was made over another. I want to get to the kind of conversation musicians have with one another while we’re waiting around between sets at gigs, beginning the drudgery of packing up long after the punters have since moved on, or filling the silence on a late-night drive home.

I gently steer the conversation onto the topic of Boris’s approach to bassline composition. My Fender Jazz 5-string was, ‘conveniently’ (read: deliberately) close at hand. We swapped the instrument back and forth, going through old classics he’d recorded. Gardiner’s long fingers seem to recognise something tangible as they find their way around the fingerboard – it’s clearly been a while since he has played, but the bassist of old is still in there.

Eventually, I ask him about recording the riddim for Susan Cadogan’s ‘Hurt So Good’ with Perry in the Black Ark – the reason I had been so excited to talk to Gardiner in the first place. He remembers Susan, but not the song. “How it go, again? I can’t remember the tune.” I (hesitantly, painfully) sung him a few bars of the hook, and it starts to come back to him. “Oh, yeah. Nice tune. I did, um… ‘Police and Thieves!’”.

Susan Cadogan's 1974 rendition of 'Hurt So Good', was arranged by Boris Gardiner and produced by Lee "Scratch" Perry during his fabled period in the Black Ark studio. Just as with 'Return of Django' and many other reggae classics, it is difficult to determine which individual musicians made up the particular iteration of the Upsetters that recorded this song. Gardiner – who led the band at the time – is certainly unable to recall.

The song was originally titled 'It Hurts So Good' and was written by soul songwriter and singer, Phillip Mitchell, and was first recorded in 1971 by Katie Love and the Four Shades of Black at the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. A cover was then recorded by Millie Jackson for on Spring Records in 1973, which appeared on the soundtrack of the Blaxploitation film *Cleopatra Jones*. Cadogan's single failed to make a notable impact in Jamaica upon release, despite the popularity of Jackson's version of the song there. It emerged as a surprising success in the UK, however, where it climbed to number four on the charts on the Magnet label. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) its chart success in Britain, Cadogan's 'Hurt So Good' occupies a marginal place in reggae histories.

In Chapter One of this thesis, I explored the ways in which Lee "Scratch" Perry's records have been discursively constructed in journalist-fan-histories. In interrogating these narratives, I have made a series of wider points about who writes reggae histories, their structuring ideological assumptions, and the implications on our understanding of reggae's past and its development as a music and a culture. I continue this avenue of inquiry in Chapter Four, in which I explore the sound of one of Perry's signature early productions on the dancefloor, and in British mediations. I have yet, though, to say any more about who Perry was and what he did, beyond the fact that these questions that have preoccupied music journalists.

In this chapter, then, I draw some conclusions about Perry, and what distinguished him within the dancehall-focused music culture in which he operated. To do so I consider at length the testimony of two musicians who worked with Perry at a later point in his career, Susan Cadogan, and Boris Gardiner, and another, Peter Ashbourne, who operated in Kingston's studios at the same time.

I was thrilled at the prospect of being able to interview Gardiner specifically, as an instrumentalist and arranger who had been directly involved the recording and composition of one of my five case study recordings. As well as playing bass on 'Hurt So Good'[1], Gardiner was band-leader for the Upsetters at that time. All of which meant I was initially rather deflated that his recollections of the 'Hurt' studio session proved to be patchy at best. But Gardiner's inability to recall neither the record nor the studio session in which it was recorded echoes the marginal position afforded to 'Hurt' by most reggae historians[2], despite being among the most commercially successful crossover singles from Lee Perry's Black Ark period, and from reggae's 'golden age' more broadly. It is revealing, then, that Gardiner's first instinct when I bring up 'Hurt' at interview is to move our conversation on to more familiar territory.

Upon failing to recall 'Hurt', the record to which Gardiner immediately pivots is Junior Murvin's, 'Police and Thieves[3]', which was also another Perry production and released a year later in 1976. According to the official UK chart data (Official Charts, n.d.), it took four years from its initial release for 'Police' to enter the top 100, when a re-release on Island Records eventually peaked at number 23 on 3 May 1980. Despite a poorer chart performance in Britain, Gardiner's invocation of 'Police' in our conversation reflects its dominant position in reggae discourse in relation to Cadogan's 'Hurt'. 'Police' has long been associated with the Notting Hill Carnival 'riots' of 1976, often unofficially labelled the 'anthem' of that year's iteration of the Carnival[4]. It recently featured on Rolling Stone's list of the '100 Best Protest Songs of All Time' (Rolling Stone, 2025), and was covered by the Clash on their debut album. This synthesis of critical acclaim, an endorsement by a band as well-regarded as the Clash[5], and a discursive symbiosis with a key societal moment in the history of British race relations, are the ingredients necessary for a position as one of reggae's 'essential' songs –

[1] Hereafter referred to as 'Hurt'.

[2] For example, Bradley (2001, p. 442), makes a passing reference to Cadogan and 'Hurt' So Good' in reference to the success of DIP Records and de Koningh and Griffiths (2003) make several mentions of the record in a chapter detailing attempts made by competing labels to challenge Trojan's hegemonic control of the reggae record market in early 1970s Britain. Katz (2021, pp. 219-258) gives the record a lengthy and in-depth treatment in the second edition of his biography of Perry. But both Cadogan and her biggest hit single are absent in the histories written by Doumerc (2018), Hebdige (1987), Barrow and Dalton (1997), Walker (2005), and Borthwick (2022).

[3] Hereafter referred to as 'Police'.

[4] See, for instance, White (2020).

[5] That the Clash were frequently referred to using the monicker 'the only band that matters' is indicative of the reverential position in which the band are held in popular music discourse, a sentiment likely shared by many British writers of reggae histories. That the band covered 'Police' will have certainly had some impact on the record's standing, then.

essential both because it is commonly understood to represent the 'essence' of reggae at the form's aesthetic peak, and because it is *essential* that one is familiar with it if one is a reggae fan.

One could speculate that Gardiner's better recollection of 'Police' arises, due to its discursive prominence, from his having been asked about the record more frequently at interview. Gardiner likely remembered one record better than the other in part because he had had more practice at telling its history. That Gardiner rerouted our conversation away from 'Hurt' and towards 'Police', then, not only indexes the place of both records in reggae discourse, but also raises the question of how to write histories of recordings that been marginalised in extant work and that are rooted in the experiences and understandings of the people who made them. This question is particularly timely with regard to reggae's 1970s period, given the age of many of its participants, as I explore further in the conclusion to this thesis.

This chapter attempts an answer at such a question, beginning with a more conventional history of 'Hurt So Good', constructed from extant secondary literature, chart data, and an interview I conducted with Susan Cadogan. From this historical moment I expand diachronically and synchronically. I look first at Gardiner's career as a bass player, and extrapolate from some basic biographical detail some broader conclusions as to how musicians *became* musical in Jamaica, and the importance of jazz. I then reconstruct a typical studio session in what Howard calls the 'creative echo chamber' (2016), synthesising testimony of such a session by one of Gardiner's peers, Peter Ashbourne, with existing research into the distinct reggae production culture of 1970s Jamaica.

'Hurt So Good': a Jamaican cover of a US record hits in Britain

As I note above, a 'Hurt' first appeared in 1971 as 'It Hurts So Good', a US soul single, originally written by Phillip Mitchell and performed by Katie Love and the Four Shades of Black for Muscle Shoals Sounds. It is likely, however, that the recording that inspired Perry to produce a reggae cover was Millie Jackson's 1973 re-recording, produced by Brad Shapiro for Spring Records. Jackson's version was a more substantial hit, and featured on the blaxploitation film *Cleopatra Jones* (Starrett, 1973).

Both Jackson's version of 'It Hurts So Good' and *Cleopatra Jones* made an impact in the Jamaican market. The former made the top 10 in Jamaica (Katz, 2021, p. 219), and the latter found an audience in Jamaica, which included both Perry and Cadogan, as the latter testifies:

> [‘Hurt’] was in the movie *Cleopatra Jones*. I saw the movie, but I really heard it on the *radio*. ‘Cos I used to listen to the radio a *lot* back then. And I loved it. I loved the *song*, so I could sing it like Millie Jackson, not with her growly voice, but I knew the song. I knew the lyrics… [On cinema culture in Jamaica] We used to have a saying: “Saturday evening come, matinee at State [Theatre]: *Princess of the Nile* and *Tarzan and his Mate*!” We used to go to pictures all the time! Double-header down at Carib State, Tropical… I even went to pictures with [Lee] “Scratch” [Perry] and [Perry’s girlfriend] Pauline [Morrison]… We went to Odeon open air theatre… that’s how I got to see *Cleopatra Jones*.
>
> Author’s interview, 2025

That Perry was one of ‘70s Kingston’s cinema-going public comes as little surprise, given the ubiquitous overt references to US cinema culture in Perry’s and other reggae productions from this period. Cadogan remembers the US Western film as a particular source of inspiration:

> Remember he [Perry] was always making, like, the ‘Return of Django’ and ‘Clint Eastwood[6]’. They [reggae musicians] were all fascinated by cowboy. [Keyboard player] Glen Adams used to tell me he was a cowboy, and a lot of the album covers, you see them have on hats and guns and whatever[7].
>
> Author’s interview, 2025

Cadogan’s recollections highlight Jamaican cultural phenomena that are underappreciated in the story of reggae’s development. Cinema, including the Westerns and blaxploitation films like *Cleopatra Jones* to which Cadogan alludes, as well as martial arts films, represented a venue of transcultural influence on Jamaican reggae producers and consumers. So, too, did the radio: a crucial medium whose influence on the spread of musical influence is underrepresented in a body of literature that mainly addresses Jamaica’s distinct sound system culture[8].

When Cadogan initially met Perry, she was no professional vocalist, but a librarian at the University of the West Indies (Katz, 2021, p. 219). Her passion for singing had initially been cultivated by musical upbringing – Cadogan’s mother, grandmother, maternal aunt, and two brothers sang – and in church – she began singing at Coke Methodist Church in downtown Kingston where her father was the minister (author’s interview, 2025). Cadogan attributes her

[6] The ‘Clint Eastwood’ to which Cadogan refers is an album released as a follow up to ‘Return of Django’ by the Upsetters in 1970. The title track opens with Perry’s spoken tribute to the actor and director: ‘Clint Eastwood is boss for Lee Van Cleef. Clint Eastwood is tougher than Lee Van Cleef.’

[7] Another obvious example of the influence of the Western on Jamaican culture is in the visual language of *The Harder They Come*. Jamaica’s cinema consumption culture, and its wider influence on music and other areas, is an under-researched area.

[8] Howard makes an analogous point about the importance of jukeboxes in Jamaica (2016, pp. 149-160).

initial passion for singing to influence from her mother ("She used to sing Paul [Cadogan's younger brother by 11 years] to sleep and sing old negro spirituals") and from US pop and soul. Crucially, she had little interest in reggae – although she was familiar with artists like Ken Boothe and Derrick Harriott who achieved mainstream radio play in Jamaica – and held no prior aspirations to stardom or a career as a singer: 'I didn't think of recording or being a singer. I wasn't into reggae music as such, I was into pop Motown and the Supremes, you know?' (author's interview, 2025).

Her first experience in a recording studio or in the world of reggae production, Cadogan was first taken to Perry's Black Ark studio not by Perry himself but by Jerry Lewis, a DJ at the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation, who was dating Cadogan's friend Theresa. Lewis's intention had been to have Theresa sing a song he had written called 'Love My Life', but Theresa had insisted on Cadogan's accompaniment. Cadogan continues the story:

> So, we went down [to the studio]. I don't know where I am; I don't know who is who. All I know is I'm going to sing this song, and Theresa said she was shy to sing it by herself, so it was to be a duet. Both of us were to sing it… 'Love my Life', which was my very first recording – it was my first time in the studio! Just going to *sing*, not dreaming of being a singer, or wanting to be a singer. So, we went down, both of us were there in the voicing place… The music started, and Theresa didn't sing anything! Him say, "OK, start again 'cos she's nervous." So, they start again, and she didn't sing anything, and I just started singing and I kept singing. So, I ended up recording the whole thing by myself. That is 'Love my Life'. And after I sang 'Love my Life', that's when, you know, I met this little man… I didn't even know who he was 'til way after… who said that he liked how I sing and asked if I know this song ['It Hurts So Good'] and would I sing it for him. Of course, I knew the song 'cos I was into soul music. He played me a version of the song with another voice on it… because he liked how I sang ['Hurt…'] he asked me to sing some more for him, and to myself I just said, "well, why not?" I never had an idea in my head about records, contracts, who was who or what was what. I was just in a studio singing to my heart's content.
>
> Author's interview, 2025

According to Katz the riddim to 'Hurt' was arranged by Boris Gardiner and featured Gardiner on bass, Paul Douglass on drums, Dougie Bryan on guitar, David Madden on trumpet and Glen DaCosta on saxophone (2021, p. 219; 221). It had initially been voiced by a singer named Joy White, who had apparently not satisfied whatever Perry had in mind, so the producer capitalised on Cadogan's voice, which plainly had the right sound, when he heard it.

After recording 'Hurt', Cadogan and Perry continued their singer-producer partnership for a period of time, recording on weekends when the former wasn't working. In between sessions, Perry would give her cassettes of music to learn during the week, and when those weekend

sessions arrived, they were an intensely private affair, with Perry demonstrating a nurturing affection for his new vocal prodigy:

> Perry showed me so much *respect*, and put me… on a pedestal… While I was working with Perry in Jamaica… he'd tell the other musicians around, 'cos all the band people – [Aston] Family Man [Barrett], Jimmy Riley, Glen Adams, others, I don't know the names – always hanging about the studio, 'cos that's what those musicians did to get likkle work or get recorded and t'ing. He'd tell them, "Listen! Leave my singer alone!" He would tell them and when I was recording *nobody* can come in that studio, right? Only Perry in the control room and me in the voicing room. And I used to tell him, "I'm shy"… he used to out the lights so when I go in and put on my headphones he'd say, "lights", and turn out the lights. All the other men [were] outside on the wall because he don't let them come in… I'll never forget how I enjoyed [singing]… I used to hurry through the week just to get down to Perry on Saturday to sing. I couldn't believe it… I didn't even know I wanted to be a singer… being a singer came to me and just gave me a life! Perry was respectful, [and] kind… *Nobody* through these 50 years that I've been singing has ever produced me and caught the vibe and sound that [Perry did]. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be Susan Cadogan.
>
> Author's interview, 2025

While Cadogan's weekend recording sessions with Perry continued, Perry had begun to release the fruits of their labour, including 'Hurt'. According to Cadogan, Perry was signed to Trojan Records in the UK, and yet had licensed 'Hurt' to Dip records, a London-based independent label run by Dennis Harris. Following a warm reception at Notting Hill Carnival in 1974, Dip pressed and released the record in the UK. Pete Waterman of Magnet then heard the record in Brixton Market (Katz, 2021, pp. 224-7) and bought the rights to the song from Dip. Litigious chaos ensued, as Perry, Trojan, Dip, Magnet, and even Warner Brothers – who owned the publishing to Phillip Mitchell's original song – quarrelled over who would receive the royalties for 'Hurt' as it climbed the British chart. It was at this point that Cadogan saw another side of Perry:

> The *only* time he was ever hostile or in any way negative towards me was after 'Hurt So Good' was a hit and he came to London… He never ever said to me, "you know, Susan, I've sent the record here," or, "I've done this." I didn't even know the record was in London being played at Notting Hill Carnival until I got the call to come over there… And when they called me, I said, "What about Mr. Perry?" He came to London and discovered I had signed a contract with Magnet. I didn't even know who Trojan was. Perry was signed to Trojan and sold out 'Hurt So Good' to Magnet. Magnet flew me over, looked after me and I signed Magnet's contract, and when he came and heard he held my wrist and he squeezed it and he said, "if you ever sign that contract I'm going to make sure you don't get a cent from the record!", slammed down my wrist and marched out of the hotel room.
>
> Author's interview, 2025

According to Cadogan, Perry's fear was that her first album on Magnet was to be comprised of Perry's productions, but the potential for legal action on Trojan's part kept this from materialising. Instead, Pete Waterman at Magnet had Cadogan voice 'Hurt' over a re-recorded facsimile of the riddim recorded in the Black Ark that the artist described as 'syrupy' (author's interview, 2025). Perry, whose nurturing nature Cadogan repeatedly emphasised at interview despite his violent and threatening behaviour towards her in London, had been replaced by Waterman and Magnet. Their approach, according to Cadogan, was not so nurturing:

> [Singing in a British studio] was *completely different*. Whereas with Scratch [he'd say], "Learn these. See two cassette here? Learn these song". I go home, sit down and decipher the lyrics, write them out, go to the studio: boom. Sing them. So, just, *raw* and *natural*, right? No 'sophisticated method'. With Pete Waterman, now, we went to a musical arranger. We had to meet with Tony King and go through the songs… He would pick out the songs, some I didn't like. We argued *a lot*… [He picked] 'Swinging on a star'. I said, "What kind of foolish song is this?" And then he comes and sings in it in a chipmunk voice! The songs I was to sing, the music, the bass was light… I remember going to the studio and there was a whole heap of violin and… they would say it is 'sophisticated reggae'… Because I'm from Jamaica, they put palm trees on the album, you know? They used to pass some remarks in that record company that really annoyed me, like, how I'm going to hang my silver disc because the homes in Jamaica have mud walls? And how, when I'm doing interviews, I mustn't talk too much 'cos people won't understand my accent. I remember saying to Peter Waterman, "Understand me? What about you? I can't hear what you are saying! I speak English!"
>
> Author's interview, 2025

In one sense, then, the history of 'Hurt', is a history of Cadogan's accidental audition for Perry: the record not only opened a door into the music industry for her, so much as it brought that door into existence. It also served as the means by which a British music industry, constructed as predatory and racist in Cadogan's telling of her career, exerted their influence to what Cadogan perceived as a deleterious extent:

> I came out with a follow up, with this more syrupy sound, 'Love Me Baby', written by Peter Waterman and recorded for Magnet, and it just… they tried to record me… the album I did with Pete Waterman is still quite popular, you know? But because I didn't follow with the *roots* Jamaican music, it dropped me out of the Jamaican highlight as a singer, you know?[9]
>
> Author's interview, 2025

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[9] Below I expand on the Jamaican studio culture Cadogan invokes here, and on the British analogues and their comparison with Jamaica in chapters seven and eight.

The producer-vocalist relationship is a key dynamic in the history of reggae production culture, particularly in 1970s Kingston, in which reggae producers were amongst the key agents. In the case of 'Hurt', an exploration of that dynamic reveals not just Cadogan's story. It also unearths elements of Perry's practice that, in concert with historical retellings of his more mythologised output, paint a more-rounded image of a producer who was as concerned with climbing the charts and nurturing new talent as with producing more "authentic" records.

However, as I argue in Chapter One, the producer-vocalist dynamic has dominated reggae discourse at the expense of other stakeholders and contributors, including session musicians. As my account of my interview with Gardiner at the start of this chapter outlines, my attempts to access the recollections of the recording of 'Hurt' by the song's arranger fell short. What Gardiner *was* able to recall, though, was a rich and varied – if patchy – autobiographical telling of a specific part of reggae history. It is to this recollection that I now turn, beginning with Boris Gardiner's broader career and a question of how reggae musicians become musical in the first place.

The makings of a reggae bass player

During reggae's 'golden age', Boris Gardiner was a session bassist for some of reggae's most significant studios. Despite his bass playing credentials, Gardiner is usually codified in reggae histories as a singer. His 1986 single, 'I Want to Wake Up With You'[10], is occasionally invoked in reggae discourse as a post-'golden age' Jamaican pop-reggae crossover hit. The single was number one in the British charts for three weeks, and the biggest selling song of the year in that market. Given the prominence of records deemed important by reggae historians, it is no coincidence that Gardiner's contributions to reggae as a session musician are outshone by his releases as a 'recording artist'; the records with his name on are the records listed next to his name in the books, despite his playing bass on and arranging some of reggae's most well-known and beloved riddims.

It is as a singer that Gardiner's musical career began, over two decades before his later chart success in Britain. As a young man he was approached by singers Richard Ace and Dennis Moss, who remembered Gardiner as a singer in school. The three young aspiring singers

[10] This was a cover version of 'I Wanna Wake Up With You', initially conceived of as a Nashville country song written by Ben Peters and released by several country recording artists.

formed the Rhythm Aces, a trio which was soon to evolve into a quartet, as Gardiner remembers:

> We started rehearsing, the three of us, and we said we really need another singer because the harmonies in the background, [had] three parts, you know? So, they found this likkle yute named… Delano Stewart. He was 15, I was 17. Richard Ace could have been 20. He was older than us. So, we did our ting, we did some nice rehearsals and listened to hit parade songs and started to, you know, sing them, the harmony and thing. And we find that we have a nice likkle t'ing going, everybody singing in tune and everything, you know.
>
> Author's interview, 2023

The Rhythm Aces played shows at the Regal, a cinema which featured live music before screenings in the form of local singers and vocal groups performing chart hits with a house band, and at local nightclubs like the Penguin, where they were backed by a band led by saxophonist Trenton Spence. The group then began recording their own compositions, like the Gardiner-penned 'Angela', inspired by a crush on a girl Gardiner had known from school. Gardiner recounts their first studio experience:

> This was 1960… it could be RJR[11], to tell you the truth, because RJR was ahead of JBC at that time. I think it was RJR. And we went in with Roddy Abrams who had his little production thing. And we recorded it for him and thing. We get thirty pounds and thing. And thirty pounds in them days is good money. You divide that up four ways [an equal share for each vocalist] … Of course you could have bought a pair of shoes and a nice shirt and everything in those days…
>
> Author's interview, 2023

The theme of puppy love would prove to be a productive creative vein for a young Gardiner to mine; a precocious heartbreak after a summer romance with a Trinidadian girl who moved back home after a scant few months resulted in the Aces' hit, 'A Thousand Teardrops'. Gardiner picks up the story:

> [When the girl in question left for Trinidad] I did one piece of crying, you know. And I started to think of a... how do you say it? [Singing] 'A thousand teardrops/Each day I shed over you'… And then I wiped my eyes and said, wait, that didn't sound bad! [laughs]... I start singing it a couple times to remember it and went into the piano and… [sings]… We then decided to record it… somebody introduced us to Chris Blackwell, and he took us to RJR and they had some guys from Australia. They had a group at Sheraton Jonkanoo Lounge. Dennis Sindrey and Peter Stoddart [of the Caribs] were two Australians, and the rest of the guys were Jamaicans. But [the Australians] were very good musicians, especially the keyboard player [Stoddart].

[11] RJR and JBC stand for Radio Jamaica Rediffusion and Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation, respectively. The two were the two dominant radio broadcasters in Jamaica during the period addressed in this thesis (Hitchins, 2014).

> And so, they started playing. We started singing and they just worked it out, you know [sings the rhythm track]… It reached number 2 on the charts, and spent like ten weeks in the top ten. It did pretty good for us.
>
> Author's interview, 2023

Due to a mix of what Gardiner described as tedium and the financial difficulties of supporting four individuals in a fickle live scene for jobbing musicians, the singers decided to fold the band. Richard Ace started formed a house band as a jazz pianist and backing singer for a hotel. Delano Stewart joined the Gaylads, another vocal group. Dennis Moss returned with his brother to Africa[12]. Gardiner was now a vocalist, without a group but with, according to his recollections, a growing reputation, that resulted in his next gig:

> Everybody kind of knew that I could sing… and a drummer named Freddie Campbell, who was in a band called Kes Chin and the Souvenirs, come and talk to me one day: 'Boris, you don't want to come sing with Kes Chin?' 'Bwoy, if I can get a job with him, I'd really go, you know?' Him say, 'alright, I go talk to Kes'… Kes Chin was… a half Chinese guy. Him sing a little calypso and [played] maracas, but he's no musician. But he had the band. He had the instruments, and he'd get musicians and so. So, Freddie… talked to him: 'look, man. You need guys like Boris Gardiner, these front-line guys who can really sing and them things'. So, him agree and said, 'alright, me a go try him.' [Campbell said] 'come to rehearsal at such a time, you know, because Kes Chin want to really hear what you sound like.' So, [I] went and started singing two tunes and everything and them said, 'yeah, well, that sounds good'. So, him said, 'alright, you're in the band for the time'.
>
> Author's interview, 2023

It was during Gardiner's time with Chin that the singer began to round out his skillset as a musician, learning to play percussion for his live duties on the 'front line' of the band, and beginning to read and write notated music. Having already grown accustomed to working out the chords to songs using his piano as a younger man, he began to do the same thing with the bass guitar:

> I'd pick up the bass and start [singing]…1-4-5 [chord progressions], all that sort of thing. Till I started to see 1-6-2-5 and, you know, this music because there's a lot of 1-6-2-5 music in the Doo-Wop music, right? So, I started understanding a little about it, but I didn't really take it serious, you know. There was a bass player in the band, and with my piano at home, I could work out songs that you'll hear and learn a song on the hit parade, 'Blueberry Hill', that kinda tune you know?
>
> Author's interview, 2023

[12] Gardiner did not specify, and I have been unable to clarify, which country from Africa Dennis Moss and his brothers originated, or to where they returned.

Gardiner's experimentations beyond his role as a backing vocalist for Chin would soon bear fruit. Chin's band, along with Byron Lee and the Dragonnaires, Carlos Malcolm's Afro Jamaican Rhythms, and the Caribs, were featured on an album entitled *Let's Have A Red Stripe Party*, produced by Premiere Records and recorded at Federal.

> Each person did like, about two tunes each. I don't know who made up the ten, but it was ten songs. And I wrote two songs for Kes! I sang one, and the other one was an instrumental. We had a hurricane that come mash up Cuba, named Flora. And I wrote an instrumental, 'Memories of Flora'… And we recorded it, and… 'Don't speak to me of love'. That sort of Latin American feel… we used to play a lot of mambo and them things in those days. Cuban music and South American, Bossa Nova, and that sort of music. And of course, you had the rhythm and blues from the States. Ben E. King was getting popular…
>
> Author's interview, 2023

Gardiner then moved from Chin's band to Carlos Malcolm's Afro Jamaican Rhythms. He attributed this move, again, to the influence of drummer Freddie Campbell, who had already made the switch from one band to another and convinced Gardiner to do the same. Malcolm's backing singers already consisted of a formidable lineup: Derrick Harriot, Hopeton Lewis and Lascelles Perkins, all of whom would go on to have careers as artists in their own right. Regardless, Gardiner was not to remain a vocalist in Malcolm's band for long:

> Musicians [in professional Jamaican bands such as Malcolm's] keep changing. So, the bass player was called [to a gig in Canada], whose name was Audley Williams. Fantastic musician… played vibraphone, electric guitar, played piano and bass. And so, Carlos started looking for a bass player all around Jamaica, down in Montego Bay… can't find nobody. One day he called me and said, 'bwoy Boris, I can't find a bass player, you know… So, guess what? You're going to have to go play bass, you know.' Just like that. I never play bass on a tune yet in a band.
>
> Author's interview, 2023

Malcolm coached Gardiner through his new role, giving him one song to learn at a time until he could hold his own, or at least survive the set. Gardiner was later provided a unique opportunity to hone his craft when Malcolm's band took up residencies in the Bahamas for six months, in both Nassau's Cat and Fiddle and the Caterham Field Club in Freeport. According to Gardiner, "those days that was a time that I really put my musical thing together. I could practice without any interference. Daytime, we don't have anything to do, so I just have the music and run through the parts and everything and learn" (author's interview, 2023).

After their stint in the Bahamas, Malcolm was offered a gig in New York. Gardiner went with Malcolm, but could not find regular work as a musician. Faced with the prospect of working

a ‘regular job’ during the week and gigging on the weekends, Gardiner instead chose to go still further north to Toronto. This would be Gardiner’s last stop on his tour of (one part of) the black Atlantic before returning to Jamaica, as he explains:

> I made a contact in Canada. There were some musicians there, you know? And him said, “come up man. I want to really have a bass player…” We did about six months [at a venue called Club Jamaica] and then winter came on. One morning I look out the window and I see something. I go, “wait, what is that?” And snow started to fall. Leslie [Butler] said, “boy, I get a job at Round Hill Hotel.” A rich hotel in Negril side… And I said, “well, I'm not staying up here without Leslie because them guys [the other musicians]… nobody's showing any progress… I'm going to take a chance going back.” So, I pack up and I left and came to Kingston… I started calling round. I called Byron Lee and said “Byron, I need a job you know. You don’t have any space for a bass player?” … He couldn't help me. Anyway, the phone ring, Eddie Knight. “I hear that you're back, Boris.” I say, “yeah man, everything alright”. Him say, “we have a little club now called the Bronco you know… It’s really a steakhouse but we need to have it as a little nightclub at night, you know… you can put a group together?” So, I don't see why not: ‘I'll just check around and see who I can get and let you know what’s happening…’
>
> Author’s interview, 2023

Gardiner eventually formed his band – the Boris Gardiner Trio – which, as was evidently a defining feature of many such bands, featured a rotating cast of instrumentalists. The band’s repertoire during their residency at the Bronco consisted of top ten records, calypso and rhythm and blues (author’s interview, 2023). Gardiner then took his band to the Courtley Manor hotel, following a lucrative offer from the hotel manager: “Him say, ‘just name your offer’… I talked to [the band] and told them what had happened. They said, ‘bwoy, we can't turn down this, you know.’” (author’s interview, 2023). The band then on to the Hotel Kingston, following financial troubles at the Courtley Manor.

While Gardiner and his band entertained the uptown crowds of Kingston’s hotel and nightclubs, a second income stream presented itself, oriented around the provision of entertainment for an audience ‘across the tracks’:

> When I was in [the] Bronco… Coxsone – ‘Downbeat’, them call him, right, from Studio One – called me and said, ‘I need a bass player, you know, in a group down here. I don't know if you're interested in playing in… doing some recordings’. And that would be in the day, so it wouldn't affect the job. So I said, ‘yeah, I'll come down and see how it works out’. So, [I] went down, and there was people like Jackie Mittoo, a drummer named [Filberto] Fil Callender, a guy named [Eric] Frater, and Patrick McDonald on guitar, me on bass. A nice set of musicians... Reggae was created in that set of musicians, because Jackie was playing that bubble and them sort of thing from that time, right?
>
> Author’s interview, 2023

Gardiner's bold claim to be part of the "set of musicians" that created reggae is not without foundation. Coxsone and Studio One are probably the most frequently cited producer and venue, respectively, in the irresolvable debate about reggae's initial moment of inception, and Gardiner was one of Coxsone's first call bass players at that time. Larry Marshall's 'Nanny Goat', produced by Coxsone at Studio One, is one of the early reggae recordings which is often dragooned into this argument, and features Gardiner's bass playing. Interestingly, however, the riddim was originally composed to suit a tune composed by another singer, as Gardiner explains:

> 'Nanny Goat'… that rhythm, when it was laid, it was laid for Jacob Miller. Jacob sang, we made the rhythm, everything, for Jacob… And when the evening came and Coxsone always come out and start listen, and make the guy sing to hear the tune, him called Jacob and said, 'make I hear the tune, then Jacob'. And Jacob get a microphone and start sing 'im tune… Coxsone says, 'hold on. Jacob, me nah like how your tune sounds 'pon the riddim here, you know... I don't like how this tune sounds on this rhythm, [to] tell the truth. Larry, Make I hear your tune on this. Sing your tune 'pon this rhythm'… It [Marshall's vocal] fit the t'ing *perfect*! [laughs] I never see a t'ing like that… It was as if the tune was made for Larry!
>
> Author's interview, 2023

Just as his band moved from gig to gig in Kingston's nighttime circuit of clubs and hotels, Gardiner moved from studio to studio and producer to producer. After a stint working with Duke Reid at Treasure Isle, performing on recordings like Phyllis Dillon's cover of 'Perfidia' and several releases by the Melodians, Gardiner also produced his own sessions and released singles under his own Bronco label, while gigging at the bar of the same name. He did some arranging work, most notably composing and arranging 'Elizabethan Reggae' for Bruce White and Byron Lee. Eventually, Gardiner received a call from Lee Perry for some session work at the Black Ark. He would go on to become the band leader for the Upsetters and Perry's arranger for a time, contributing to some of Perry's most lauded productions, including Junior Murvin's 'Police and Thieves', the Congos' album *Heart of the Congos* and, although he couldn't recall the record when I asked him about it at interview, Susan Cadogan's 'Hurt So Good'.

* * *

While Gardiner's story, of course, continues after 'Hurt' and his time in the Ark – his own UK number one single was released over a decade later, and he also began a career as a studio engineer – here is where I press pause on his biography for a moment of reflection.

In explaining his musical processes and justifying his career choices to me, Gardiner's discourse exposes five important aspects of reggae's past, which are either brushed over or ignored in reggae's histories, but which are significant. First, Gardiner's story articulates one of the many ways in which the musicians who worked in Jamaican studios and performed reggae music actually became musical in the first place. In Gardiner's case, a passion and talent for singing and song writing led to an accidental and influential career as a bass guitarist in Kingston's studios, for its most renowned producers. Second: the influence of jazz, pop, and Latin American music on Jamaican musical culture. While reggae is commonly understood to have resulted from either a 'slowing down' or a 'speeding up' of rocksteady, depending on how one counts the beat, Gardiner's own narration of his story centred almost entirely on musical forms with their origin outside Jamaica. Certainly, many Jamaican session musicians were autodidacts, specialising in local musical styles, but Gardiner's biography evidences a far more plural conception Jamaican musical consumption and production than is commonly acknowledged in discourse. Third is the workaday nature of musicians' lives as they negotiate Jamaica's hotel and club scene and its distinct but interconnected studio culture. Consider again Gardiner's justification for working with Dodd at Studio One: he agreed to the offer of studio work because it could fit in around his regular live work. Reggae is usually understood as a predominantly studio-based culture, its history narrated through its recordings, but for its musicians, perhaps a steady and well-paying live gig at a hotel was more valuable than the inconsistent opportunities and inconsistent pay of studio work. Fourth is the movement of musicians and music throughout the black Atlantic, and fifth, evolving out of this notion, is the dependence of the Jamaican music scene on this transnationalism. While developing the musical ability that would later allow him to cut it in Jamaica's studio scene as a bassist, Gardiner depended upon the following: the position of bass player in Carlos Malcolm's band opening up after Audley Williams took a regular gig in Canada; a six-month stint in the Bahamas during which he could practice his instrument daily; gigs in New York and Canada; and – implicit in his discourse but just as significant – a market in Britain and elsewhere for music recorded and produced in Jamaica.

Not only do these factors nuance and problematise the dominant narratives of reggae history I outline in chapter one, but they also constitute a historical recreation of the production culture of Jamaican reggae. Such an insight provides means of accessing the musical past, which helps to fill in the gaps when researching a culture at the limits of living memory. In the case of Gardiner's recollection, clearly some pieces of music and recording sessions are more

sharply defined than others; when I asked him about recording the 'Real Rock' riddim – one of the most famous riddims in all of reggae – he responded that he couldn't remember every line he played on; this despite his definitely being on the session[13]. In this scenario, what the likes of Gardiner and his contemporaries *can* remember, synthesised with analysis of extant primary and secondary sources and some theoretical insight, allows us to extrapolate a production model of Jamaican reggae studios in the late 1960s and 1970s from a musician's perspective. It is, after all, the musicians that are 'responsible' for incepting reggae in Gardiner's discourse; this despite all three of the producers for whom he worked (Perry, Dodd, and Reid) each being hailed as reggae's originator. Such a model reveals the way in which musicians actually fit into the culture of production: from job to job.

In the next section I move away from a biographical approach and make some broader points about the production culture from which 'Hurt' emerged. I do this by examining the specifics Gardiner and one of his contemporaries *were* able to recall at interview regarding their experiences in the studios of Kingston, and framing these recollections two of Hitchins' approaches to modelling Jamaican popular music production.

Musicians in the 'creative echo chamber'

Peter Ashbourne is a Jamaican musician who has occupied a formidable number of roles including composer, conductor, pianist, band leader, educator, and scholar. While Ashbourne is more commonly associated with the classical and jazz scenes in Jamaica than with reggae, he has nonetheless worked as a session pianist and arranger for several key reggae producers and artists, including Duke Reid of Treasure Isle and Burning Spear. When I asked him about a 'typical' reggae recording session, he used his recollection of a session at Treasure Isle as an exemplar:

> I did a session at Duke Reid studio. It was the first time I'd ever been to Duke Reid's studio… and, it's *exactly* what [laughs] like, a *crowd* of people, right? And some of them, most of them are *singers*, right? And you just, a guy comes in, he sings his song, and you figure it out, and then you work until, you know… You fiddle around, and everybody fiddles around until you get something that's good. You get a nice bassline, a bassline that will work, and then you cut it.…the chords come first. You have to work out the *song*. And, you see, the getting a bassline… I guess mostly the responsibility was on the bass player. But it didn't always come. Sometimes… [the] guitar player would say something, or… maybe the piano player… has an idea, and

[13] This is according to the testimony drummer Fil Callender, who also played on 'Real Rock', among many Studio One records from the time, given at interview (Taylor, 2014). Callender, who was Panamanian by birth and had migrated to Jamaica as a teenager, is testament to the transnational nature of reggae's culture of production at an intra-Caribbean level, much like Gardiner's development as a musician in the Bahamas.

> then it goes from there. *Or*, *occasionally*, on rare occasions, the producer come in, say, "no, no, no, no. Listen this. Listen this:"… And him *sing* something... Because one or two of the [producers], Clancy Eccles, Coxsone, the people who love music and were musical without being musically literate… but they *were* musical. So, there were always suggestions… and you play around, and play it and play it until it starts to sound good and then you say, "Alright, alright!... Record!... Red light! Red light!" And you record it. And then… you go in the control room for the playback and listen to it.
>
> Author's interview, 2023

Compare Ashbourne's testimony with the model offered by Hitchins, below. Hitchins' (2014) model is constructed around the recollections of Dennis Sindrey, the Australian guitarist who formed the Caribs and who Gardiner mentioned in his interview above:

> [During] a typical recording session for [Coxsone] Dodd at the Federal studio, during the early 1960s [Sindrey] claimed: 'Sessions were organised on a conveyer-belt system', using singers that Dodd had previously auditioned. Dodd decided on the choice of musicians for the session and negotiated fees directly with them. Once the band was set up in the recording studio and balanced by the audio engineer, the first singer would be brought in and the piano player would establish an appropriate key and chord progression for the proposed song. The rhythm section would then create an appropriate song arrangement and rhythmic groove while the horn section composed a series of lines that complemented the vocal arrangement… Musicians were required to create and then memorise the harmonic progression and form of the song. This was performed spontaneously, with musicians varying and embellishing their instrument part, as the arrangement evolved and as required… Although some musicians were self-taught, many musicians had received formal music training, could read music, were typically competent jazz players and included exceptional musicians such as Ernest Ranglin, Monty Alexander and Don Drummond.
>
> (p. 91)

Note the striking similarities between these two musicians' explanations of what occurred in different studios, working with different producers and different sets of musicians, at different times in Jamaica's popular music development. In both cases, the singer sings a 'song' – lyrics and a melody – from which a band can determine the guitar and keyboard parts, from which a bassline and some horn parts can be determined. Despite the distinct discursive constructions of what we typically understand as early Jamaican ska and the reggae of Treasure Isle, both musics evolve from a studio practice that depended to a significant degree upon the on-the-spot compositional proficiency of a group of musicians.

As I explore in Chapter One, Hitchins' larger project foregrounds the role of the audio engineer as both an important intermediary between producer and musicians, but also as agents making their own executive and creative choices. In this construction, Hitchins

contextualises the compositional duties of session musicians in a continuum of Jamaican popular music production, identifying four eras defined by distinct sound recording practices. Hitchins (2014) categorises the era that encompasses the object of study of this thesis as the 'multi-microphone/multi-track' recording model, which he defines thusly:

> The multi-microphone/multi-track recording model (1963–1982), where instrument and multiple microphone positioning, in addition to electrical balances are employed, but also where additional recording tracks allow voices or instruments to be added (over-dubbed). The resulting collection of tracks can then be sonically treated and balanced through an independent process of mixing. (p. 9)

While Sindrey's and Ashbourne's accounts of an archetypical Jamaican recording session occur in different strata of Hitchin's timeline[14], a shift of emphasis away from engineers and onto musicians suggests a reliance on musicians-as-composers in the production culture of Jamaican reggae was an axiomatic legacy from the extant recording industry.

This model of riddim production makes possible an alternate narrative to explain what we see in the *Roots, Rock, Reggae* documentary that I examine in the previous chapter. While the narration explained what we saw through the prism of Perry's genius and distinct sound, a parallel explanation is available. That the chronology of the images we see on screen mirrors perfectly the model followed by Jamaican musicians and producers is no coincidence, as the table below illustrates.

[14] Sindrey's account is of a Coxsone Dodd session at Federal, in what Hitchins calls the 'multi-microphone/single-track recording model' (1958–1963). The other two eras in Hitchins's model are defined as the 'serial multi-track recording model' (1982–1992) and the 'computer-based recording model' (1992–present).

Table: Revisiting Roots, Rock, Reggae

Time stamp	Narration	What the musicians do
00:09:21	Junior Murvin, Upsetters and the Heptones all rehearse here. “Scratch’s” real name is Lee Perry. He records all the greats, incuding Bob Marley. Even Paul McCartney’s come here from England, because “Scratch” has a sound and a riddim of his own. He calls it, ‘rockers’.	Junior Murvin, the Heptones, and the Congos sing the lyric to what would become ‘Play on Mr. Music’. In the same room, Keith Sterling works out a chord progression on upright piano, providing musical structure and a harmonic anchor for the vocals. Murvin plays along on an unplugged electric bass, perhaps an attempt at composing a bassline.
00:09:45	When “Scratch” begins a session, first he balances drum and bass, for the basic riddim. Ghetto music: always drum and bass. Then “Scratch” will balance all the other instruments, ‘til he’s ready to start recording. When the balance is right, the Upsetters lay down the riddim track. That’s how reggae’s recorded! Though there seems to be no kind of order or discipline, “Scratch” knows exactly what he wants, and the musicians respect that. By other peoples’ standards, the instruments may sound distorted, the balance way off, but it’s just these rough edges that give reggae the kind of raw sound that can never copy abroad[15].	Gardiner is now playing bass – a Fender Jazz. He and Sterling play the riddim in one room, while Mikey Boo Richards plays drums in the drum booth. Guitarist Billy Johnson improvises a solo over the bass, drums and piano. Robbie Lyn plays the ‘bubble’ on the organ. Richards experiments with drum fills, and Gardiner plays different rhythmic and melodic variations. Some of the vocalists are on their feet and dancing along while the riddim crystallises. The band plays the groove repeatedly, composing and internalising on the spot, while an excitable sound engineer gets his levels. Ready for a take, Gardiner counts the band in, and the engineer dances along as he records the riddim in one take. He gestures, giving encouragement to the musicians.
00:11:56	When “Scratch” is happy with the riddim, he’ll get Junior Murvin and the Heptones to put the vocals on! Riddim and then lyrics. That’s how “Scratch” describes reggae: riddim from the ghetto, lyrics from the streets.	Now that the riddim has been recorded, the vocalists enter the voicing booth. They record lead and harmony in one room in one take, using multiple microphones.

[15] Ashbourne provided an alternate explanation for the ‘raw’ sound of Jamaican reggae: “And… sometimes there was… a confidence trick in there, you know? Because the musicians are being paid by the tune. So, you go in there, and there are mistakes in there, right? But you say, “Nah man, this wicked! Irie man” [laughs] because the producer is too ignorant. The producer doesn’t know the difference, he doesn’t know whether it’s good, bad or indifferent” (author’s interview).

Reflecting on a different session in a different studio, although still one during which Perry was at the helm, Gardiner expanded on his understanding of the bass player's role in the studio. Here he recounts re-recording a riddim for Bob Marley's 'Punky Reggae Party', and, like all good bass players, Gardiner makes sense of his practice in relation to the drummer:

> But the bass player has to find something. I played one of Bob Marley's hits, you know, 'Punky Reggae Party'… Bob [Marley] go to Lee Perry and say, 'bwoy, me no like the bass and drum 'pon this, so, can you do something? See wha' you can do.' And him [Perry] take the tape and went down to Joe Gibbs studio… and he took Mikey Boo… and myself and we went down to Joe Gibbs and put on the tape and start to play, and Mikey start feel up him pattern, and I [sings bassline]… and gwaan until we start get it right, you know? 'Yes man that sound great! Red Light!'
>
> Author's interview, 2023

According to Katz, the riddim for 'Punky Reggae Party' was indeed re-recorded. Produced by Perry in Chris Blackwell's Basing Street Studios in London, the first attempt at a riddim was performed by drummer Angus Gaye of British reggae band Aswad, guitarist Stephen "Cat" Core and bassist Richard Daley of Jamaican reggae band Third World, session keyboardist Phil Ramacon, and backing vocalists Candy McKenzie, her brother Bunny, Michael "Ibo" Cooper, also of Third world, and Aurelia Msimang (Katz, 2021, p. 308)]. At this point, Katz's narrative departs from Gardiner's. Perry himself takes up the story:

> Me write the song in England and think it could record at Chris Blackwell's studio but there was no life in Blackwell's studio to do it, neither Third World didn't have any energy to do it… So me take it back to Jamaica and remake it in Joe Gibbs' studio with my musicians.
>
> Lee Perry, quoted in Katz (2021, p. 315)

According to Katz, then, it was Perry's own sense of dissatisfaction with the record that led to its re-recording, rather than Marley's request, as Gardiner remembers. Further, according to Katz, it was not Gardiner and Mikey Boo Richards at all, but Sly Dunbar and Val Douglas, that recorded the new riddim.

The question of which of these competing narratives is true to history provides productive food for thought. Katz's reggae histories typically represent the last word in rigor and fact-checking, and Gardiner's memory, as has this chapter demonstrates, is regrettably patchy regarding many of his important contributions to reggae recording. It is certainly possible, maybe probable, that Katz has the correct version, and Gardiner is misremembering; to create a false memory that one had played on a recording when in fact it had been a different set of

musicians altogether is not unheard of. There is, however, another explanation: as Howard identifies (2016, pp. 92-3), studio musicians had very little to do with the recordings on which they played once their session was over. It is equally possible, therefore, that there were not two but *three* recording sessions, three sets of musicians, and three riddims recorded for 'Punky Reggae Party'. Perhaps it is true that Perry was unsatisfied with the initial attempt, and so recruited Dunbar and Douglas to record a second riddim. Perhaps it was this second riddim that did not meet Marley's expectations, resulting in a third studio session. Perhaps, as far as Douglas and Gardiner know, they *both* played bass on the version that was released.

This is all speculative, of course, but Gardiner's story nonetheless illuminates the aspects of production in which session musicians were able or unable to exert their agency. When constructing riddims, they were not only allowed to compose; the whole 'conveyor belt system' – as Sindrey put it – *depended on their improvised compositions*. However, once this work had been done, they had no say in or knowledge of what was to become of their recordings.

Outroduction: no Lee Perry without "Scratch"

At the start of this chapter, I set out to consider what distinguishes Perry as a producer. My own contention is that the discourse that constructs Perry has neglected a key aspect of his persona: his love of dancing. A noted but neglected fact of Perry's life is that before relocating to Kingston and beginning his career in the music industry, Perry had been a champion *dancer* (Katz, 2021, pp. 19-20). The clue is in the name: there are many origin stories of Perry's sobriquet, "Scratch" – most of which are retrofits by Perry himself in an effort to build his mystique[16] – but the likely truthful explanation is that the moniker resulted from the 'chicken scratch' dance move, and the song of the same name Perry recorded for Coxsone Dodd (Katz, 2021, pp. 38-9).

Understanding Perry as a dancer first – not in the sense that he was a dancer first 'and foremost', but that his first musical experiences were at dances, and that his first musical 'success' was as a dancer – casts new light on Perry's practice as a producer. Consider, for example, the shot of Perry dancing behind the mixing board while he records the band playing the riddim for 'Play On, Mr. Music' in *Roots, Rock, Reggae*. He gestures through the

[16] For example, Susan Cadogan recalled Perry's own explanation of his nickname to her during their collaboration. Perry's explanation for the moniker emerged from his claim of being the originator of reggae music: "Where everything start from? From *Scratch*!" (author's interview).

window at the musicians, spurring them on, while he dances in place. This moment was clearly part of Perry's practice of producing musicians in the studio. Susan Cadogan recalls a similar moment when he was asked by the band Chalice to help them in the studio: "him dance and him tell them what to play! Him stand up and dance and mix to how the music make him feel!" (author's interview). This embodied understanding of the relationship between music and movement is an example of what Ashbourne meant when he referred to producers as being "musical without being musically literate".

In keeping with reggae's origins as a music culture of the dancehalls, then, Susan Cadogan's 'Hurt So Good' in the context of Perry as dancer-producer can be conceptualised as less a love song than a dance record. Comparisons to Millie Jackson's 'It Hurt So Good' are illustrative here: consider the rhythm tracks of each recording – or, rather, compare the 'rhythm' with the 'riddim'. Jackson's is orchestral and filmic – it is much better suited to the soundtrack of *Cleopatra Jones* than it would have been to a 1970s dancefloor. The Upsetters' riddim is double-time in comparison, and features tambourine and percussive rhythm guitar patterns throughout that maintain a consistent and danceable beat. This is not to say that the vocals are unimportant, but the vocals were – as this chapter has demonstrated – an attempt by a singer and her producer to *replicate*, rather than reject, a US soul singing style. It is in the rhythmic accompaniment that Jamaican musicianship, Perry, and reggae music, can be found. Operating in a production culture in which to compose a riddim and to record a riddim were one and the same thing, Perry's approach as a producer was to recruit musicians who, like Boris Gardiner, were as familiar and comfortable operating in the modality of black American popular music as they were in localised forms.

In the next chapter, I move from a focus on Perry, probably the most written-about producer in reggae, to Bob Marley, undoubtedly its most written-about singer. I continue my investigation into what constitutes reggae history and how it has been preserved through an exploration of Marley, his *Catch a Fire* album, and an ethnography of his former home-turned-museum.

I leave the last words in this chapter to Peter Ashbourne and Susan Cadogan, who, separately and unprompted, expressed to me their definitions of reggae music. For Ashbourne, a musician through and through, it is in defence of his colleagues that he makes his case. Cadogan, appropriately enough given the nature of the next chapter, constructs a straw man of Marley to stake her claim in reggae culture. Both, independently of one another, use the

same word to define reggae, a word of which Lee “Scratch” Perry, the champion dancer, would surely approve: *beat*.

> I’ve been trying to… articulate an opinion on whether the… the ska and reggae thing… is a product of the *musicians*, or to what extent is it the musicians, as opposed to the songwriters, as opposed to the singers… They [musicians] made the *beat*!… The singers have come with the songs. And *then*… depending on whether it appeals to the musicians and how they translate… they, with *their* musicality, *their* talent, they devise an accompaniment.... And sometimes it looks like magic, but it isn’t really magic.’
>
> Author’s interview

> There is one thing Bob Marley said in his life that I disagree with… I saw this little video of Bob Marley saying that reggae is the music of struggle, of the people and thing, and if you’re not from down[town] and you don’t know the struggle you can’t sing the music. And once I did an interview and the interview lady… here in Jamaica, was saying, ‘Susan, you have such great music. I don’t understand why you’re not better known’… and this man call in to say, ‘you don’t know what the problem is? Susan is from the other side of the fence.’ In other words, I am more uptown; what am I doing singing reggae? So, I can’t sing because I was born in a life of the middle class? I’m not from Trench Town or the ghetto area, right, so I’m not supposed to be able to sing? And that’s the one thing I disagree with… reggae might have been born, as Bob Marley said, out of suffering and wailing about their situation… but it’s a *beat*!
>
> Author’s interview

Chapter 6: *Catch a Fire* – the Wailers' Island debut and the contested legacy of reggae's superstar

6th December 2024, Bob Marley Museum

My journey to the museum begins in an air-conditioned Uber, enjoying my driver Velverine's choice of music – a mix of Dennis Brown songs. We sit in the dreaded traffic that gridlocks Kingston every Friday afternoon, as Velverine expresses surprise at my familiarity with Jamaican music. This is a common occurrence; my interactions with Jamaican taxi drivers are, without exception, mediated through music.

We crawl along Hope Road, one of Kingston's arterial East-West routes, and eventually arrive at the fabled number 56: Bob Marley's residence and Jamaican base of operations – formerly Island Records' Chris Blackwell's home[1] – and now the Bob Marley Museum. The security guard allows us inside the walled-off compound, and Velverine drops me off in front of a statue of the man himself. I show an email attachment of my pre-paid ticket voucher to a lady behind the ticket booth, who gives me a physical ticket and advises me that, "there are strictly no photos or videos to be taken inside the house," and that, "your tour guide will meet you at 4 p.m. in the seating area behind you."

I sit down with a Red Stripe – I have arrived 45 minutes early thanks to my fear of the Friday afternoon traffic – and take in the vibe of the compound. The seating area is mercifully shaded and partitioned by bars selling food and drink. A P.A. system plays reggae music – mostly by Marley/the Wailers but with some exceptions – at a volume far more 'civilised' than typical of most Jamaican outdoor musicking. The compound features murals painted on the internal face of the walls: images of Marley, his family members, of Haile Selassie I, and the conquering lion of Judah, peppered with more signs warning against the taking of photos or videos inside the museum. From over the high walls the sounds of workaday Kingston clashes with the controlled and curated environment in which I now sit.

Waiting for 4 p.m. I look again at the ticket I'd accepted without properly examining. The reverse is a comprehensive chronology of some biographical facts about Marley's life and career[2]. I read them as 'I Know'[3] and 'Bend Down Low'[4] play out over the P.A.;

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[1] See Salewicz (2009, p. 250).
[2] Appendix 1 reproduces this extensive chronology in full.
[3] Taken from the Bob Marley and the Wailers album *Confrontation* (1983).
[4] Featured on 1974's *Natty Dread* album.

that the playlist features records not just from the *Legend* compilation strikes me as significant. They clearly expect audiences to be familiar with Bob's discography beyond the clichéd dope smoking American college student who listens to the 'best of' and nothing else. I hear nothing from the pre-Island era Wailers, though.

Despite what, looking back, seems to have been a ridiculous overcompensation for traffic delays, I'm not the first punter awaiting the 4 p.m. tour. There are eight others, all couples, with more arriving: cars enter, drop off their payload of paying tourists, and exit, as if in one well-rehearsed motion. At 3:30 p.m. a minibus pulls up into the compound and out march half a dozen more to bolster our ranks, replete with maps, fans, and a tour guide. One guy sits alone, like me, nursing his Red Stripe; we exchange nods. A young woman poses for a series of photos next to the statue of Marley taken by an obliging boyfriend. I pick out accents in the group – all seemingly North American, Caribbean, or fellow Brits.

I take my beer with me for a meander around the compound to go and get a better look at some of the artwork. Two North American women stand in front of me reading a plaque commemorating the building. Noticing me awkwardly lurking, waiting my turn, one of them invites me up to read alongside them. "We're all friends here," she tells me, before offering – I'm travelling solo – to take my photo next to the murals. I leave my new friends to it and go back to the seating area and the music.

'I shot the sheriff' starts to play – a record I've cherished since a friend's father, also a bass player, told me as a young musician that the best 30 seconds of reggae bass and drums could be heard just before the track's fadeout. The Fan in me knows I should know better, that a more 'obscure' record should hold the title of my favourite Marley track, but I can never quite get past the bass and drums.

What had begun as a general sense amongst the tour group of anticipation and disbelief ('here we are! At the Mecca of reggae, Bob Marley's house! And, even better, we're about to go in!') has since slowly devolved into an atmosphere of impatience and irritability. Our tour guide, Nicholas, arrives just in the nick of time, and cajoles the group, now collectively muttering under its breath about the heat and humidity and the waiting around. Assembled at the front door, Nicholas gives us the run down:

> There are three rules to follow in order to get inside of the Legend's house. One: you must not use your cellular phone inside the house. *At all.* Two: you must show me that you have a ticket for the Bob Marley House tour. Three: no cigarettes can be smoked inside the house. However, if you have some good marijuana, unnu a go inna di house right now and bun it!

***Catch A Fire*[5], by The Wailers, was produced by Bob Marley and Chris Blackwell and released in the UK on 13 April 1973 on Island Records. It was the first of nine studio albums Marley would release on Island (including the posthumous *Confrontation*), although, famously, only the first two of these, *Catch* and *Burnin'* would feature the other two Wailers singers, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer. Session musicians on the album include Aston and Carlton Barret on bass and drums respectively, Rita Marley and Marcia Griffiths on backing vocals, and many other session musicians. The songs were recorded in three Kingston studios – Harry J's, Joe Gibbs, and Dynamic Sound, before being 'sweetened[6]' – that is, overdubbed – in London's Island studio. Because of this, it occupies a contested place in reggae discourse. Subsequent reissues of the album have been credited to 'Bob Marley and the Wailers'.**

For many, Marley's Island output represents the best of reggae, as evidenced by the exponential commercial success Marley achieved in relation to his peers. For others, *Catch* indicates the beginnings of reggae's corruption by outside capitalist interests.

This chapter takes the Wailers' *Catch*, and the band's star singer Bob Marley, as its objects of study, through an autoethnography of a visit to the Bob Marley Museum, in Kingston, Jamaica. In Chapter Four I explore the discursive construction of reggae recordings and their producers (broadly defined) in their mediation, and attempt a history of an important early reggae record beyond such tropes as those employed by contemporaneous mediators. In Chapter Five, I write a history of a crossover record that had previously been marginalised in dominant narratives, incorporating a focus on the production culture from which it emerged. This chapter builds on these strands of discourse and production culture in an Anglo-Jamaican context. However, rather than examining a 'forgotten gem' or 'peripheral crossover' record, my object of study in this chapter is undoubtedly one of reggae's *most* discussed albums.

[5] Hereafter referred to as *Catch*.

[6] This pejoratively-loaded terminology is often used to describe the production practice and resulting aural affect of the overdubbing of guitar and keyboard tracks in Island studios.

The significance, aesthetic success, and legacy of *Catch* have been confirmed in the annals of Anglo-American popular music history: the latest iteration of *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of the 500 greatest albums of all time listed the album at number 140 (Rolling Stone, 2023), with 1977's *Exodus* the only reggae album placing higher; and *Catch* has been the subject of a documentary (Marre, 1999) as part of Rhino Home Video's *Classic Albums* series. Simultaneously, the album has been a bone of contention amongst academics and 'serious' reggae fans. Such commentators typically express an antithetical view of Blackwell's 'interference' of rock guitars in the UK as a sign of Western forces appropriating and corrupting reggae.

A brief comparison of *Catch* with 'Hurt So Good' is illustrative here. The latter is a Jamaican cover of a US soul single. Its production follows the dominant pattern of agency within the creative echo chamber: a reggae producer works with an artist, drawing on his seasoned session musicians to compose and craft riddims. The former is an album, recorded on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and composed of songs written by its singers, and funded by a London-based independent label in Island. Both, eventually, found large markets in the UK, but while this resulted in the dismissal in reggae discourse of 'Hurt' as a pop crossover, the opposite has been true of *Catch*. Its place in the canon is unquestioned, even if its 'authenticity' remains discursively contested.

Meanwhile, the Bob Marley Museum occupies a sacred place in the heart of reggae fans. Many of the people I met and spoke to had come to Kingston specifically with the express view of visiting the museum. Its credentials benefit from the official stamp of its being run by the Marley estate – Marley's daughter Cedella handles day-to-day operations according to our tour guide. As such, both the discursive and financial stakes are high: there is so much money still to be made from Marley's name, image, and music, it is no wonder the museum carefully controls the narrative of Marley it constructs for its visitors so fastidiously.

Nicholas's three rules for gaining access to Marley's former home – while successfully intended to play for laughs – therefore actually signify the discursive work being done at/by the museum: the institution's exclusivity (the building's 'aura' in Benjaminian terms (Benjamin, 2008)) must be protected by prohibition of photographs and videos; this is a tour for paying tourists.

This chapter addresses three important issues: the story of Bob Marley's life and musical career, as told by the official museum dedicated to his legacy, and the way that *Catch* is

implicitly and explicitly important to that story; the significance of the sound of *Catch*, and the culture of its production, in comparison to the dominant model of making records in the creative echo chamber; the part played by institutions like the museum in the preservation of Jamaican musical heritage.

The passage above sets the scene, establishing the audience for the museum, and locating it in its contemporary Jamaican context. What follows in this chapter is narrated around the remainder of my visit to the museum. We see the original site of the Tuff Gong studio and consider the unique production culture of Marley's Island output, we go upstairs and consider narratives of Marley's love life and sexuality, and finally explore questions of legacy, heritage and commerce as we exit through the gift shop. First, I pick up the thread of the tour where I left off. Having met two of Nicholas's three criteria, my first stop was a room full of discursive objects, enticingly called the 'Album room'.

The 'Album room' – gold records, crossover hits, and the academic treatment of *Catch a Fire*

We file into the entrance hall, following Nicholas's instructions: 'Do the opposite of Beyonce – she said 'to the left, to the left,' you all go to the room on the right." A voice from somewhere behind me in the bottleneck at the door says, "I hope there's AC". Nicholas responds, "Oh, don't worry about that." True enough, I feel the blast of the air-conditioning a few feet back from the front door.

We're in, about 20 of us all-told. A door stands ajar on the left of the hall, opening tantalisingly on the original site of the Tuff Gong studio, and a staircase leads to the upstairs of the house but, as obliging visitors, we do as we're told and pile through the door on the right and into the 'album room'. Its four walls are adorned with framed records and awards, far more than I can count in the short time we're allowed in there. Apparently, what's on display is just a selection of Marley's silver, gold and platinum records. In a glass cabinet atop a plinth in the centre of the room sits Marley's Grammy award for lifetime achievement (Nicholas, astutely remarks: "them wait 'til the man dead twenty years before they give him him Grammy").

Also displayed on the walls and in cabinets are photos of Marley live on stage and in the house, as well as memorabilia like backstage passes from tours. Each item in this room has the capacity to inform its own story, material clues of reggae's musical and cultural past, but these are stories that remain, largely, untold, thanks to the prohibition of photo taking and the tight rein Nicholas keeps on his group of charges.

Two artefacts catch my eye at almost the exact same time: an award presented to Marley from the United Nations, and something I've never heard of before, tantalisingly called a 'British Reggae Recording Award' won in 1976. Just as I spot these gems, Nicholas begins narrating the room for us all, commanding our attention away from the materials in the room and towards his own charismatic performance.

> Ladies and gentlemen, if you direct your attention to the album to my left, that is the *Catch a Fire* album. That is Bob Marley's *first* album with Island Records. *Catch a Fire* included the number one single, 'Stir It Up' [sic].

Nicholas continues, pointing out *Burnin'*, *Natty Dread*, and so on, highlighting the hit singles to come from each album. He finishes with *Legend*:

> What they did was to collect all of Bob's number one songs and put them together on one compilation. And that was their best move, because that album has sold over 15 million copies in the United States *alone*, and over 28 million worldwide. And that number is still growing. Why is that number still growing? Because when I say, "Bob", you say, [we respond] "Marley!" When I say, "One," you say, "Love!". You're in Jamaica now so when somebody aks you, "yu irie man?", you say, "*ye man*".

Nicholas's encouraging us to speak patwa with him stimulates an enthusiastic response from the group. The exchange highlights for whom the tour has been primarily designed: people who don't normally speak patwa; international tourists.

I want to break ranks with the group as we are directed onwards to our next stop on the tour of the house. I want to spend hours committing as much information as I can to memory, respecting the twin urges to uphold the 'no photos' rule and to document everything. But I can't; the social pressure to follow is too great. I'm the last person to file out of the door.

On our way from one room to another, foreshadowing the upstairs portion of the tour, Nicholas reminded us:

> Don't forget: *Exodus* voted number one album of the century, "One Love" voted number one song of the century, Bob Marley voted world's *second* sexiest man. Behind who? That's right, behind Denzel. Ladies, we men will never know what it is about Denzel!

In the history of Bob Marley's life and musical career according to the Bob Marley Museum, literally narrated to visitors, *Catch A Fire* is where the story begins. In this section I want to compare the discursive construction of Marley and of *Catch* that occurs within the 'Album room' in the museum with two scholarly treatments of the album, all three of which can be categorised by the album's relationship to rock music. In the museum, rock is an absent presence in the tour guide's narration, borrowing the iconography of rock culture to construct Marley as reggae's rock superstar. For Mike Alleyne, across several articles about Marley and *Catch* (Alleyne, 1994; 1998; 2000), the album is understood as a synthesis of the two genres, whereas in Toynbee's book-length study of Marley (2007), the record represents a moment where reggae has *become* rock.

The 'Album room'

Above, I argue that we can infer the museum's target audience from Nicholas's patwa and how it plays out in the social group. Speaking Jamaica's language with our guide was obviously meaningful for the people on the tour, either due to a sense of novelty, or of solidarity, or perhaps both. Plainly the museum's guides have developed such practices because the majority of the museum's visitors are, like my cohort, from 'foreign'. And yet we (visitors) demonstrably know enough *a priori* about Marley, reggae and Jamaican culture already that we can respond in the manner expected of us; indeed we know and care enough to have come to Kingston to see where he lived and made music.

For such an audience, the discursive work done by such a thing as an 'Album room' is impactful. It is difficult to translate without photographic evidence, but the maximalist selection and arrangement of its artefacts is designed to overwhelm. The room is a sensory overload. Each artefact is testimony to Marley's singular achievement and importance, providing material evidence of what the fan's discourse tells us: that Marley truly was (and remains) the 'great man' of reggae.

Further, the juxtaposition between waiting around in the outer compound, juggling the intense heat and onsetting boredom, with being a mere pane of glass away from Bob Marley's lifetime achievement Grammy in a cool, air-conditioned environment, is staggering and surreal. The room's discursive repertoire, then, is more sophisticated than a simplistic equation of commercial success as indicated by platinum record sales with cultural value. The effect is not so much a case of 'look at what Marley accomplished' as it is 'look at what Marley accomplished considering where he began'.

Recall that Nicholas's narration of the room begins, not with Marley's upbringing in Nine Mile or his move to Trenchtown, nor his founding the Wailers with Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer, nor working with Coxsone Dodd or Lee Perry[7], but with *Catch*. What we are told to care about, then, is Marley's output on Island Records, and *Catch* is important because it is the record that kicks off that way of telling Marley's story. The narration places the same emphasis on Marley's success: *Catch* specifically is important because it has sparked off his Island career, but also because it begat a hit single.

What is absent from this telling of Marley's history is as revealing as what is included. Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, and many others without whom Marley's career would certainly not have played out in the same way, are absent from this narrative. As such, there is no recourse to the kind of social authorship that distinguishes the creative echo chamber from its contemporaneous production cultures in the US and the UK: Marley is the singular genius in this story. And while explicit mentions of rock music are absent, here is where the rock discourse starts to structure the museum's construction of Marley. To paraphrase Toynbee (2007), auteur theory provided rock with its discursive sense of authenticity, but prior to *Catch* had largely been absent from reggae discourse, at least with regard to its singers. In the case of Marley, it is as reggae's "great man", an individual of singular genius and achievement, that we are to understand him; more akin to Bob Dylan than to any of his Jamaican contemporaries.

[7] Of course, much of this information is included on the reverse of the ticket. See Salewicz (2009, pp. 21-201) for an example of a biography of Marley's early life and pre-Island career. Toynbee (2007, pp. 37-71) takes this standardised story and convincingly places it in a series of academic frameworks.

Catch A Fire in reggae scholarship

Both Mike Alleyne and Jason Toynbee use *Catch* to make broader points about Marley's career and agency, and through that, some more general observations about reggae and its position in relation to the Anglo-American record industry and rock culture. But they do so in different ways and from different ideological positions which I want to explore here.

Mike Alleyne's evolving position on reggae more broadly, and on *Catch* more specifically, which evolves across a series of articles and books, exemplifies a productive Marxist reading of popular music as a commercial and cultural entity. His thesis is summed up by his provocation that, "paradoxically, while reggae acts as a force for counter-hegemonic change, it simultaneously economically consolidates the power base of the status quo". (Alleyne, 1994, p. 236) The insight from such an argument, however, is a limited, overly-structuralist position that obfuscates the agency of individuals. In sophisticated studies of popular music, such as those I discuss in Chapter One, it is not paradoxical, but rather paradigmatic, that transgressive representations become commercialised by capitalist systems. I do, though, want to pause on Alleyne's discourse of *Catch* as a point of comparison for that of the Bob Marley Museum's.

In his 1994 article, Alleyne begins by asserting that, "Island Records' presentation of Marley and his work since 1972 features highly significant instances of textual reconfiguration, dictated by Western capitalist imperatives, which have intervened in the articulation and representation of the original cultural texts," (1994, p. 227). He then quotes Cushman, who states that, "in its diffusion, reggae music was transformed from a form of cultural criticism into a cultural commodity," (Cushman, 1991). There is plainly a lot to unpack here. I will pick up what Alleyne means by "significant… textual reconfiguration" in the following section of this chapter, but here I note that both Alleyne and Cushman construct an idea of reggae as having being drastically altered for the worse thanks to its adoption by and marketing to new audiences. Such a position misunderstands the history of Jamaican music's transnational dynamic pre-1972, as well as its mediation and consumption in 'the West'.

In the case of Alleyne's argument, *Catch* is constructed as *the* watershed moment in reggae history, after which the damage has been done, the 'authentic' has been impurified. This corresponds to a dominant narrative of *Catch*, wherein, with Chris Blackwell pulling all the strings, the album's music, marketing and packaging are refashioned in order to maximise

appeal to an audience of white rock fans. In this discourse, it is rock with which reggae is synthesised, and thereby corrupted.

In an important distinction, Toynbee understands *Catch* not as an attempt to market reggae as rock music, or to synthesise rock with reggae; rather, it *is* rock music. Toynbee's argument is made on what he determines as 'musical' and 'discursive' grounds (although by these terms I would argue he means 'production' and 'mediation' respectively). I pick up Alleyne's and Toynbee's articulation of the record's production again in the next section of this chapter.

However, while Toynbee notes the importance of mediation in the signifying work that *Catch* does, he underestimates the degree to which British music press covered reggae. Journalists did not 'largely ignore' reggae, as Toynbee states (2007); rather, they were obsessed with trying to make sense of reggae for themselves and their readership, as I have covered in Chapter Four and, in greater detail, elsewhere (Torrens, 2025). Similarly, Toynbee homologises the approach of mediating Marley and *Catch*, whereas I have demonstrated how different publications constructed their audiences via distinct ways of mediating reggae. What is significant about *Catch* from this perspective, is not that it indexes a significant effort of translation on the part of rock critics, as Toynbee claims (2007, p. 150), but that Marley's sense of himself as a star singer, and Island Records' marketing of him as such, mean these critics can finally bring their rock critic toolbox to bear on a reggae artist.

Against such discourses as these, in which *Catch* is defined against rock rather than on its own terms, the Bob Marley Museum has the potential to offer a powerful counter narrative. The sense of the overwhelming scale of what Marley achieved, punching upward from his Jamaican context and culture, does not need the rock straw man to do its signification in the 'Album' room. The capacity for such a narrative to take hold, however, is severely limited by the short amount of time in the room, the totalising narration of the tour guide, and the prohibition of photography.

Ultimately, both Alleyne and Toynbee's treatment of *Catch* do well to incorporate critical perspectives on the Anglo-American music industry and its impact on the sound of Jamaican recordings. But both neglect to explore the culture of the record's production in sufficient detail, and as such lack a theory on why and how it sounds the way it does. That 'outside forces' were involved is not a sufficient explanation; I have already shown how reggae from its inception was a transnational endeavour. Neither is it enough to attribute a change in sound(ing) to Island Records's impetus to make a profit – a goal it has in common with all

other record labels. Neither do overdubs a rock record make, as the dominant narrative perpertuates. The way to resolve these discursive constructions – rock; reggae; the Babylonian record industry – without recourse to their predetermined existence is by examining the culture of *Catch A Fire'*s production. It is to this that I, and our tour group, now turn our attention.

Tuff Gong: a new type of transnational production culture

We cross the hallway moving from the east side of the house to the west. The next stop on the tour, Nicholas informs us, is the original site of Tuff Gong, Marley's Kingston-based record label and recording studio. We file into the first of two conjoining rooms, sharing a windowed partition. In dead centre of this first room, facing the window, is a 32-channel mixing desk, protected by a Perspex screen. As with most decades-old analogue mixing desks, multiple faders are missing. The room is bare, apart from the desk, the acoustic baffling adorning the walls, and our selves.

We surround the desk in an effort to cram two-dozen or so tourists into one studio room. It turns out that Nicholas's call and response and light-hearted narration serves dual purposes: we enjoy the tour, but we also cultivate a sense of collegiality. Potential awkwardness arising from such close proximity has been dispelled. The Air-Conditioning helps.

The acoustic treatment in the room is made from an untreated wood, light in colour – maybe pine? The panelling looks as though a woodworm infestation has taken hold; in reality, the markings are deliberate carvings, Nicholas tells us. We are informed that Bob liked to keep things natural.

We are crammed in to the extent that I can't get near enough the mixing desk to make out its make or model. As we stand, shoulder to shoulder, I am caught between the poignance of being stood in such a place as this, and the desire to break out of the studio into a less constrictive space. Judging by some fidgeting and shuffling towards the door, I imagine I am not alone. The irony of this, given Marley's international journey, is not lost on me.

We go from this room to the larger control room by way of the house's large hallway. This room contains another mixing desk – Stephen Marley's 48-channel SSL – as well as several rack-mounted effects units and amplifiers. There is more acoustic treatment on the walls, as well as some photos, including one of Marley himself sat in the very studio in which we now stand. We can see through to the percussion room next door, lit by a sunlight, and where, apparently, 'all the drums for the Bob Marley

songs were recorded'. Nicholas makes sure we take note of the sunlight. We are told, again, that Bob liked to keep things natural.

I spy a Fender Jazz bass on a stand in the percussion room. A four-string, with a sunburst finish. On our way out I ask Nicholas if it had belonged to Family Man. "Hmm? Nah, man. Dem Stephen's."

The group shuffles up two flights of stairs [I revisit the upstairs portion of the tour below].

We file back down to the ground floor, this time using a rear staircase which I assume must've been added on to the house sometime after its initial construction. We are now outside the building's rear. Ahead of us lies an outbuilding, now a gallery-cum-gift shop, but our attention is instead directed back towards the house, to the room now known as the "Shot Room".

Once a back kitchen, Marley repurposed the room as a rehearsal space for the Wailers. It was while rehearsing in this room that the infamous attempt on Marley's life was made in 1976. The 'Shot room', then, is so-called because of the two bullet holes in the building's walls, indicators of this seismic event in the history of Marley and of Jamaica.

Like the mixing desk in the first studio room, each bullet hole is protected by a thick layer of Perspex.

There are two TV screens placed at either end of the L-shaped 'Shot Room', playing on loop an edit of several JBC news bulletins, including footage of Marley at interview after his recovery from the assassination attempt. He's not for JLP, or PNP, so he says, but for *Rasta*. "If you sit on the fence, you can get shot down."

Marley's musicians: Bob Marley and the Wailers' distinct culture of production

If the Bob Marley Museum constructs a narrative of the singer's identity in terms of his legacy and achievement in the 'Album room', then the tour of the studio and rehearsal rooms do similar work with regard to the production culture that begat Marley's musical output on Island. In keeping with the discourse of the 'Album room' of Marley as singular visionary, the narrative of the production of his records is that of a solitary genius. The spaces in which museum visitors stand are understood to be special because they are the spaces in which the

great man himself stood. The wooden acoustic baffling and the sunlight are literally narrated as indicators of Marley's predilection for the 'natural', repurposing the built environment of the Tuff Gong recording studio to reify the myth of the 'Natural Mystic[8]'.

Absent from the tour and its narration is any recognition of the musicians and engineers who co-populated the studio, or of the wider Kingstonian culture in which these figures would have initially learned and plied their trade. Stephen Marley's unremarked-upon Fender Jazz, tucked away in a corner, functions to indicate the absent presence of such individuals. Just as significant are the absence of any pre-Island recordings, and the subliminal constructions of the period of Marley's music to which we ascribe value. Claims like "all the drums for the Bob Marley songs" being recorded in the percussion room of Bob Marley's literal in-house studio are as absurd as they are revealing of the story the museum wants us to hear.

Despite this totalising narration and curation, there are indicators as to the production in which Marley and his collaborators operated. To begin with, it is unlikely any other singer on the island would have had the luxury of a live-in recording and rehearsal infrastructure, let alone the time capital to make use of either. Of course, this would have had implications for the creativity and expressiveness of creative practitioners[9]. But at a more abstract level, there is the question of why either was necessary.

The mode of production defined in the previous chapter and dominant in Jamaican music culture was defined by the interrelated economic and time constraints under which its musicians operated. Music rehearsal spaces were not necessary, because reggae songs were not rehearsed; they were recorded, and the act of composing a reggae riddim and its recording were basically the same thing. Singers and instrumentalists were connected professionally either through live work in uptown venues or, in the case of reggae, through working relationships with the same producer in their studio. In Marley's case, once he had taken up residence at 56 Hope Road, he had clearly begun to exercise his agency in new ways.

The presence of a rehearsal space indicates that the Wailers had changed as much in conception as in personnel, from a vocal trio to a band. This is significant for two reasons. The Wailers once was the name for Bob Marley and his fellow singers. Bob Marley *and* the Wailers became the name for the singer *and* his backing band, now two separate entities

[8] 'Natural Mystic' is the name of a well-known recording on the Bob Marley and the Wailers album *Exodus* (1977)
[9] I discuss the significance of the rehearsal room in another historical context in Chapter Eight.

where before there had been one collective. This etymological detail poses the an interesting question of who *counts as* a Wailer. The Wailers as later constructed, per album credits, would include the I-Threes – the trio of Rita Marley, Marcia Griffiths and Judy Mowatt – as backing vocalists, but also Aston Barrett, Carlton Barrett, Earl Lindo, Tyrone Downie, Al Anderson and Seeco Patterson. These 'new' Wailers, then, included instrumentalists who patently *didn't* 'wail'. Just as importantly, the rehearsal space makes possible a new approach to reggae songwriting, freeing Marley and his musicians from the time pressures of the Kingston's recording studios.

By the time Marley and his collaborators took up operations at the house, then, the singer clearly operated in a distinct production culture than that of his Jamaican contemporaries. It is this distinction, I contend, that made possible a different *sounding* reggae both in the sense of its aural qualities but also of what it signified. How, then, might we make sense of *Catch*, a record which had been produced and released *before* Marley took up residence at Hope Road, and yet is so often located as this Rubicon moment in reggae history? What was the production culture that begat the record, and can a better understanding of that culture help to disassemble the narratives that construct the record in the minds of many reggae fans and scholars?

Which 'Concrete Jungle'?

There is an often-told origin story of *Catch* from which an understanding of the production culture that begat the record can be extrapolated. Here I recount the dominant narrative in brief:

In 1971, Bob Marley had moved to Sweden to work with American artist and musical entrepreneur, Johnny Nash. Their collaborations included composition for a film soundtrack, and a Marley single, 'Reggae on Broadway', released on CBS, and intended to break Marley as a solo artist but which did not perform successfully. Marley returned to Jamaica to reunite with fellow Wailers Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer, who then toured the UK and began studio sessions with Nash and CBS. These sessions fell apart due to reported disagreements between Nash and the Wailers, leaving the trio stranded in London without enough money to return to Jamaica, and without the requisite work permits to gain employment. Hat in hand, or so the story goes, the Wailers approached Chris Blackwell, who had long since moved to London to establish Island Records in the UK.

Blackwell offered the band a £4,000 advance to return to Jamaica and produce the record, with the promise of the same amount again on completion of the project. Perhaps pre-empting a mistrust of contractual agreements, Blackwell infamously offered the Wailers the sum without committing pen to paper. Now financially liquid, the trio returned to Jamaica, functioning as producers during the recording of the tracks for the album. These sessions took place in three different studios within Kingston's creative echo chamber: Dynamic Sound, Harry J's, and Randy's. Jamaican sound engineer Sylvan Morris, who had apprenticed under Graeme Goodall[10] (Hitchins, 2014), engineered each session. While some of the material had already been recorded with different session musicians at various studios, the versions that made it on to *Catch* featured the new, expanded lineup of the Wailers, with Barrett brothers on bass and drums[11].

Famously, Marley then flew to the UK with the tapes, which were mastered in Island Studios in London. In what has become one of the major bones of contention in reggae history, these mixing sessions included the overdubbing of 'rock' guitars, performed by American session guitarist Wayne Perkins, on three tracks: 'Concrete Jungle', 'Stir It Up', and 'Baby We've Got a Date'. John 'Rabbit' Bundrick, who also performed on Johnny Nash's 1972 hit 'I Can See Clearly Now' and played with several prog rock artists, played keyboards and clavinet on the album. Despite the common narrative that these overdubs, much like the zippo lighter-inspired album sleeve, are typically understood as indicators of Blackwell's 'master plan' to market reggae to a rock audience, Marley is said to have been present during the recording of the overdubs and complicit in their inclusion on the album. Thus, the narrative tells us, began reggae's rise to the top of the album charts and the centre of popular cultural relevance.

There are some immediate wider points that can be made about the transnational nature of reggae production culture that the story indicates. First, whether conceived of by Marley alone, by the Wailers, by Blackwell, or perhaps even at an earlier time by Johnny Nash, the idea for the project that became *Catch* began life in an Anglo-American popular music culture. As is often noted[12], that the project was initially conceived of as an album, a holistic project, rather than a single or a collection of singles, signals a deliberate intention to produce reggae recordings in a mode distinct from that established in Kingston with its focus on 7"

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[10] Goodall, an Australian audio engineer who worked in Jamaica, is an important and interesting figure in the development of Jamaican popular music. He features prominently in Hitchins (2014).
[11] Marley, Tosh, Wailer, and the Barrett brothers are the only musicians credited on *Catch*, despite other sources noting the involvement of the musicians I have mentioned above in its recording.
[12] See, for example, Alleyne (1994, p. 227).

singles. However, Marley, functioning as producer in Blackwell's absence, relied on Kingstonian production culture, its studios, its musicians and its practices, to produce a long-playing album.

What is important to consider at this point is what Island Records represented as a record label, their practices of producing records, the kinds of artists with whom they worked, and, ultimately, how their records would have sounded to Marley. The label had initially made its name – and a windfall of money – with a hit record by another Jamaican artist – Millie Small's 'My Boy Lollipop', which reached number 2 in the British charts in 1964. However, Blackwell and music entrepreneur Lee Gopthal would found Trojan Records in 1968 with the express intent of catering to a British market for Jamaican music. Island increasingly became a home for British artists. In the late 1960s the label signed folk and folk-rock acts like John Martyn and Fairport Convention, and progressive rock acts like King Crimson. In 1972, the year of *Catch*'s production, Island signed glam rock act Roxy Music. At this moment, then, Island was a mid-sized label, proudly and performatively independent of the majors and yet big enough to compete. Crucially, the label had been actively cultivating a reputation as an environment that allowed artists to thrive independently and creatively.

Catch, then, can be understood as a synthesis of Jamaican reggae production culture with British production rock culture, iterating back and forth across the black Atlantic. But we can also pick out enough detail from the dominant narrative to provide a diachronic conception of the record's significance, borrowing from Hitchins's (2014) chronology of recording model. Hitchins identifies the multi-track/multi-microphone model as the dominant practice of production in Jamaican reggae studios during the 'golden age'. However, the overdubbing of other instrumentation following the logic of Island Records' 'progressive' approach to production suggests the beginnings of the linear model Hitchins identifies. *Catch*, then, is also an indicator of changing approaches to reggae production more generally.

Whether *Catch* is understood as a bridge between Jamaican reggae and British rock production cultures, or as a precursor to the linear model of reggae production, or both, there is certainly a case to be made to conceive of the record as a transitional moment. Marley's output on Island certainly changed reggae, not just the culture of its production but its audiences and its meanings, on a global scale. And a critical understanding of *Catch*, as the first of these collaborations, is crucial to explaining the Marley phenomenon.

However, despite these high stakes, the record's distinct culture of production is hotly contested in reggae discourse. I identify Alleyne's work, above, as exemplary of a Marxist critique of Marley's Island output: despite their "counter hegemonic potential" the records were unable, ultimately, to transcend the capitalist and colonialist base of their production. What is of particular significance about such a position as regards the culture of the record's production is that it is the "instrumental framework" – Alleyne's codification of the riddim – that signifies these forces at work. Alleyne's discursive repertoire is militaristic: Blackwell 'sanctioned' the remixing and overdubbing. These processes subsequently become constructed as an abandonment of a Jamaican sound which, for Alleyne, indicates an inauthenticity to the 'original' Jamaican product that had resulted from the sessions in Dynamic Sounds, Randy's, Harry J's studios.

Antithetical to this narrative is the discourse of progression, a commonly employed trope in histories of popular music. Chris Blackwell, in his autobiography co-written with British music journalist Paul Morley, exemplifies such a discourse in his retelling of the tale of *Catch*. Indications as to his particular perspective as a label boss who knew Jamaican reggae music and British rock music come to the surface in moments like the following:

> Later on, the Wailers collected me there [at Blackwell's hotel] and took me to their studio, Harry J's. What they played me was what became *Catch a Fire*, their first Island album. It sounded great and they sounded like a group – it was a tremendous progression from other Jamaican music.
>
> Blackwell & Morley, 2022, p. 209

Note that Blackwell recognises the importance of the musicians to the finished product. It is no coincidence that what he recognises as "progression" is intersected with the people who produce the riddim – Alleyne's concept of the "instrumental framework".

Later, Blackwell is more explicit in addressing accusations of selling reggae out[13]:

> [Producing *Catch a Fire*] didn't seem a weakening or a pasteurisation to market the Wailers as you would a rock act. There was no sell-out. It seemed more compromising and condescending to continue to market reggae as a niche music or some kind of exotica. So I took what I had learned working in rock and applied it to reggae, just as I had taken what I'd learned from producing and selling Jamaican music and applied it to running a rock label. It was coming full circle, really.
>
> Blackwell & Morley, 2022, p. 214

[13] I return to the discursive trope of 'selling out' in Chapter Eight.

The difficulty in ascribing positive or negative value to both Blackwell's and Marley's actions is that these discourses too easily get stuck in the muck of cynicisms and essentialisms. On the one hand, Alleyne rightly recognises the knife-edge on which he walks: "the term [authenticity] is not used here to impose monolithic, static or one-dimensional parameters upon Caribbean cultural expression," (1994, p. 226). But his approach does just this by assuming that Caribbean cultural expression happens, and has only ever happened, exclusively in the Caribbean. Alleyne continues, that "while the innate eclectic fusion which gave birth to reggae is acknowledged, external cultural and economic forces are identified as reducing the congruence of the internationally commodified form with its root components." What Alleyne misapprehends then, is that the "innate eclectic fusion" was as dependent on external cultural and economic forces. Reggae, put simply, was birthed in a specific production culture – distinct and distinctive, yes, but also transnational. It never existed in the kind of non-corrupted pre-Blackwell vacuum Alleyne imagines.

On the other hand, we would of course be remiss to take Blackwell entirely at his word. Having faced consistent attacks from his contemporaries[14] for his perceived predatory appropriation of black Jamaican musical culture, Blackwell's own narrative throughout his biography is as the white Jamaican who truly understood, loved, and was embraced by, black Jamaica. His autobiography begins with a tale of his being saved from near death by a Rastaman as a young man; from then on, we are told, Blackwell learned not to fear what white Jamaican society understood to be a mysterious and dangerous religious cult (Blackwell & Morley, 2022, pp. 4-5). In this context, Blackwell presents himself as the figure who gave reggae artists like Marley the time, space, and money they needed for the records to transcend the constraints of the Kingston studio scene. And yet, while it may be easy to dismiss as self-serving, Blackwell's narrative is essentially a positive explanation of the same change in production culture that *Catch* represents, and to which Alleyne responds in his powerful critique.

Of course, Alleyne is not wrong to understand *Catch* in terms of its position as a commercial text as well as a cultural one. However, that records' meaningfulness exists in their tension between these two poles is not specific to reggae nor to Marley, despite his lyrics and star persona which popularised an anti-Babylonian critique. But what Blackwell's justification tells us, whether we agree, is that there are multiple ways to interpret his, and Marley's,

[14] Notably and famously, Peter Tosh christened Blackwell 'Whiteworst', and Lee Perry accused him of vampirism (Farber, 2022).

musical agency. We will never get at the 'truth' of Blackwell's intentions; this is the wrong question to ask, and anyway, such an approach fixes the record's meaning at the point of its production. Rather than ascribing positive or negative motives to the record's production, then, my investigation of *Catch* has tried to contextualise the record in an overlap between the culture of reggae's production in Jamaica, and one of progressive rock production in Britain. The album's meanings were, and are, plural, because its audiences were and are multiple. What is certain is that the record's meaningfulness to fans is the same thing that results in its contested status in scholarship: the record is either the moment where reggae begins to realise its ideological aesthetic potential, or the moment at which these aspects are forever tainted.

This concludes my discussion of *Catch*, but I want to return to the upstairs portion of the tour, and to the questions of gender and sexuality that have thus far remained largely implicit in this thesis. When invited upstairs, these issues were brought to the fore of the tour's narrative. I now do the same in my own argument, in order to set up some issues I address in Chapter Seven.

Turn your lights down low: Bob Marley, sexuality, and gender

Our group makes its way back to the front of the house and shuffles up the two flights that lead to the first floor. We arrange ourselves around the impressive landing, the walls of which are suffuse with photos of Bob and other accoutrements. The photos are of Bob with the good and the great, including one taken outside the front of the house; Bob poses with his top off, lined up alongside dozens of music journalists.

Nicholas points out several items of clothing housed in a glass case on one wall: a dashiki, two pairs of cut-off jeans Bob wore when playing football, and *that* denim shirt. 'If you know Bob Marley you know that shirt! He was in that shirt 24 hours a day.' A hushed murmur of recognition reverberates around the group.

There are several rooms immediately off the upstairs landing. One is off-limits for refurbishment, but another, Rita's former office, is similarly bedecked with photos. We are permitted to mill around between the landing and the former office (and nowhere else!) for a few scant minutes, until we are directed into the 'Uprising Room'.

This room is small, probably an antechamber in the days of the building's colonial past. It's now a shrine to *Uprising*, the last studio album Marley would record before his death. Its walls are covered with memorabilia and press cuttings relating to Bob's

last ever, and biggest, tour, in support of the album. A map of Africa dominates the room. An explanation is not necessary.

We move through the room into what we're told is the 'back veranda', although (if I haven't been too discombobulated by the back-and-forth between rooms) by my reckoning it's on the eastern side of the house. The veranda is exposed to the elements and thus renders AC useless: instead, we get two large ceiling fans keeping us cool. Against the exterior walls of the house are propped two artworks that Bob used as backdrops for live performances. They were painted, we're told, by Neville Garrick, Bob's artistic director. One depicts Haile Selassie, and the other Marcus Garvey.

Nicholas has herded us all into the veranda by now, and tells us that it once housed a gigantic hammock, from one end to the other. Things get a bit blue, during his explanation:

> The hammock ran from that pin in the ceiling there all the way over here to where I'm standing. It filled up the whole room. In fact, it was so big, it could fit Bob with all of his children. You know how many kids Bob had? 12. 5 with his wife, Rita, and 7 other children with 7 other different women. And all 7 of them were conceived [points to the door to the bedroom] right there. Ladies, you have been warned. Keep your hands to yourself, don't touch anything because it is the most fertile room in the world.

There are some laughs, some awkward faces, too. But the general mood seems more to be one of excitement as we go into Bob's bedroom. Like his mixing desk downstairs, and the bullet holes in the wall from the attempt on his life, Bob's bed is kept behind a wall of Perspex. His gold Les Paul lies on the made bed. Next to the bed are Bob's three copies of the Bible. Nicholas explains: before the barrier was in place, the first thing visitors did when entering Bob's bedroom was what? 'Jump on the man bed!' People laugh, and he makes his joke about the potential for an immaculate conception again. Fewer laughs, this time.

Through the open curtains, we can see a building to the rear of the main house. According to Nicholas, this building was once where Cindy Brakespeare, Bob's former mistress and Damian Marley's mother, used to live. 'Turn your lights down low' was written about Cindy apparently; Bob wrote the lyrics while looking out the window at Cindy in her bedroom. "Don't worry. Unnu a go see it. It ah de gift shop now".

We are ushered out of Bob's bedroom, back across the landing, to the other side of the house. Two adjoining rooms leading off the hall are now the 'Rita Marley room', dedicated to Rita's life and achievements. Like most of the house, its walls are adorned with photos: photos of Rita on stage, photos of a young Rita and Bob on their

wedding day, photos of Rita and family with Barack Obama and family in the White House, and so on. There's way too much to take in in the short time we're afforded there. But Rita's Order of Jamaica stands out, as does an honorary doctorate, awarded to her from the University of Fort Hare, South Africa.

Our final stop on the first floor is the upstairs kitchen, a kind of open kitchenette at the back of the landing. A solitary food blender sits atop a worktop. Nicholas points out the blender and begins to tell us about Bob's penchant for Irish moss smoothies. Rita's room demanded a respectful pause on the innuendo. Not so in the upstairs kitchen

> The human body needs 102 minerals and vitamins. Irish Moss contains 92 of those 102. Drunk to excess, it can replicate the effects of two pills of Viagra. You can see it's a short distance from the kitchen to the bedroom, so, ladies... 12 children... We call this kitchen the 'Get Up, Stand Up room'. Except, if you drink one of these smoothies, it's less 'stand up for your rights' and more like 'stand up for the night!'

OK, I'll admit it: that one was pretty good.

In the next chapter, I explore the themes of gender and sexuality in reggae discourse at greater length. As such, I here make no great claims about Marley or about reggae in this light; rather, I want to point out some obvious constructions of gender and sexuality that occur within the Bob Marley Museum's discourse.

The museum was founded by Rita Marley in 1986, and its day-to-day operations are handled by her daughter Cedella Marley. Despite this, women are absent from the museum's narrative of Bob Marley's life until the tour goes upstairs, to the bedrooms. That Rita Marley has two rooms dedicated to her own achievements is laudable. But just as she was in real life, Brakespeare in the narration is relegated to the outbuilding. Bob's other romantic interests are completely absent from the story. So, too, are Marcia Griffiths and Judy Mowatt, who along with Rita formed the I-Threes. Women, then, occupy a position in the story of reggae's superstar that is at best marginal and sexualised, and more frequently absent altogether. Meanwhile, Marley himself is subject to an absurd construction as hyper-sexualised, fertile from beyond the grave.

While I do not cover this topic in Chapter One, there is a wealth of productive scholarship around the perennial topics of homophobia in dancehall culture and misogyny in Rastafari culture which was and remains an ideological influence on reggae. Some of the most high-

profile public discourses about Jamaican popular music centre on these questions of gender and sexuality. In the next chapter, I want to foreground the issue of gender through an exploration of a classic of the lovers rock genre – a music predominantly understood as the 'romantic' or 'softer' side of reggae, it might seem an obvious area through which to examine reggae and gender. However, as I will elucidate, an understanding of how gender structures lovers rock discourse makes possible an extrapolation that encompasses wider reggae culture.

First, though, as is customary in institutions like the Bob Marley Museum, we must exit through the gift shop.

Outroduction: Exit through the gift shop

We're packed into the back kitchen, perhaps a little too close for comfort, so it comes as a relief when Nicholas gives us his blessing to erupt out of the tiny room and back into the yard. A short walk from the main house takes us to a – pretty sizeable – outbuilding. There are two rooms. The room on the left, the room into which we are directed, is a gallery full of photos of Bob, arranged chronologically around the length of the entire room. The first photo we see is of a sixteen-year-old Bob, posing with Peter and Bunny. The last is of his funeral and his final resting place at Nine Mile, in St. Ann. In the centre of the room, with pride of place, is Bob's beautifully restored Land Rover. It's not quite the bus from the *Babylon By Bus* album cover, but it's not far off.

Nicholas informs the group that, in this room and in the yard outside, we are now free *to take photos*. The collective relief at the lifting of smartphone prohibition is palpable. I note how my initial annoyance at being unable to document my visit (that Western urge to document the culture of the other?) has been replaced by a feeling of gratitude. It's refreshing to not have had this experience mediated through an iPhone. It's corny, but it feels like Bob would approve. He liked things natural, after all.

The group is no longer a homogenous whole. Once people have snapped away, in pairs and threes they drift into the next room: the gift shop. Here, they can commemorate their visit with a memento: Marley-branded clothing, footwear, mugs, and so forth. I break a $5000 note – about £25 back home – to get some change for a tip for Nicholas. I'm now the proud owner of a Jamaica-branded fridge magnet.

I sign the visitors' log, and book my Uber back to my hotel.

Chapter Seven: ‘Silly Games’ – conceptualising the sound of lovers rock beyond gender and nation

March 24th, 2023, Leamington Spa Assembly

I have taken a train from Birmingham to nearby Leamington Spa to watch singers Janet Kay and Carrol Thompson on their *Queens of Lovers Rock* tour. The rain and cold weather take the edge off my usual pre-gig sense of excitement, which isn’t exactly buoyed by the half-empty main room in the Leamington Assembly venue.

My mood lifts at the bar. A group of women – about half a dozen or so – strike up conversation while we wait to be served. They’re all huge lovers rock fans despite their youth, they tell me, having been raised on the music. Throughout the night they’d prove their credentials, singing along with practically every song, and cheering the loudest of any group in between numbers.

As far as I can tell, the rest of the audience are couples, out to enjoy a night of dancing to romantically-themed live music. I am surprised at the range of ages in the room. Seemingly the Queens’ appeal clearly extends beyond the nostalgia of those who remember their music from the first time around.

An all-male backing band take to the stage first, running through an instrumental medley of reggae riddims. After they finish the song, one of the musicians grabs the mic and warms up the crowd with the obligatory call and response: “When I say lovers, you say rock!...” He asks us the rhetorical question, “are you ready to sing along with the queens?” and the crowd yells its affirmation.

Crowd now suitably warm, he steps back into place and joins in with his fellow musicians as they play an epic walkout song for Kay and Thompson, before going into... not one of either singer’s catalogue of hits, nor a Marley song or one of the other reggae classics, but a cover version of Bill Withers’s ‘Lovely Day’. It *is* a lovers rock gig, I suppose, so one can’t be too surprised at reggae covers of US soul hits. The band faithfully replicates the intro to the original recording, but as soon as the vocal comes in, the rhythm section drops into a lovers groove: a quaver heavy, root-fifth bassline and a variation on a one-drop drumbeat transform Withers’ classic and instantly root it in a blues dance. A perfect fit.

The set unfolds as a mixture of Kay and Thompson classics (the second song is Thompson’s hit ‘Yesterday’) and familiar reggae hits (song three: John Holt’s ‘Help Me Make It Through The Night’). The singers alternate the lead role every three songs or so, at which point the other takes up backing vocalist duties. By the time

they reach the big hits – Thompson's 'I'm So Sorry', 'Hopelessly in Love', and, of course, finally, Kay's 'Silly Games' – the room is in full voice. As the band reaches the pre-chorus, ("you're as much to blame…"), the anticipation in the room becomes tangible. Can Kay, who hasn't missed a beat all evening, still hit *that* high note? The note that has come, somehow, to signify all lovers rock?

Of course she can. The audience, overjoyed, erupts. We've all given up singing along, though. Who could keep up with Kay, anyway?

'Silly Games', released by Janet Kay in 1979, was produced by Dennis Bovell of the band Matumbi for the London-based label Arawak. The record is often thought of as a classic of lovers rock, a subgenre and subculture comprised of romantically themed records to which British reggae fans danced. Many lovers records were covers of popular US soul hits, but 'Silly Games' was written by Bovell, lovers rock's 'great man', who also played bass, guitar, and keyboards on the recording. The only other credited musicians on the record are Drummie Zeb, aka Angus Gaye, of the band Aswad on drums, and Kay on vocals. The record was a crossover hit, peaking at number two in the British pop charts in the summer of that year.

The vignette above depicts an instance the past of lovers rock sounding in the present moment. Janet Kay, Carrol Thompson, and a set of instrumental musicians whose names the audience is not expected to know, are sounding a powerful musical nostalgia to an audience of dancers and singers. Some members of the audience would have been old enough to remember 'Silly Games' at a blues[1] when it was released; others share in the nostalgia for a musical time they did not experience, but one whose records, especially including 'Silly Games', have been meaningful in their own musical past. What Kay, Thompson, and the band sound to us in the audience, is a performance of the discourse of lovers rock.

Attending the gig solo, I probably stood out amongst an audience made up primarily of couples. (The group of women with whom I briefly made friends at the bar certainly made

[1] With regard to the kinds of gatherings at which lovers rock records were performed, the term 'blues' was typically used interchangeably with 'blues party' or 'blues dance' – as in 'going to a blues'.

light of the fact that I could not find anyone to come with me). A couple of years into this research project, I had a sense of myself as being 'in the field' that evening, anyway, much more the ethnographer than the lovers rock fan (which I am). But I also slipped into a bad musician's habit while in the crowd that evening of silently evaluating and comparing myself (and my band) to 'the competition'. Kay and Thompson's backing band were excellent players; I could hear the gospel influence in their reinterpretations of classic lovers rock riddims. Much like in Jamaica, the church has played an influential (and under-researched) role in the cultures of black popular music in Britain, reggae included.

The musicians' performance was stellar that evening, and 'Silly Games' was certainly a high point of the proceedings. As a fan, my only bugbear came when, a few songs into their set, Kay and Thompson surveyed the audience, determining by the volume of the audience's cheers who was in attendance from the surrounding areas. A handful of people cheered for Leamington, and few more from Coventry. When we were asked, "who's here from Birmingham?" near-enough the whole room cheered. "Why not book the gig in Birmingham, then?" I remember asking myself. Despite a rich musical past, Birmingham has a strange, and strained, relationship with its musical legacy, as I explore in Chapter Eight.

This chapter grapples with the sound of Janet Kay's 'Silly Games', and the lovers rock culture from which it emerged. Given its initial chart success and enduring legacy, the record is often positioned as *a*, if not *the*, 'classic' of the lovers rock genre[2]. But while 'Silly Games' is often identified as one of the genre's canonical records, lovers rock writ-large is less easily defined. There is an assumed narrative of lovers rock (implicit at the Kay and Thompson concert; explicit in academic discussions) that it is a sub-genre of reggae that crosses over to US-soul, that in its romantically-themed lyrics and presentation are aimed specifically at women consumers, and that it is somehow distinctively British. As I will show, these aspects are more the product of lovers rock's discourse than its musical form. Regardless, writing about reggae has tended to reify rather than interrogate such narratives, with some notable exceptions that I explore below.

Given that the definitions of lovers rock and its meaningfulness are contested on multiple battlegrounds, this chapter investigates the sounding of 'Silly Games' in multiple contexts. The first of these is an important contemporary British mediation of the record in *Small Axe: Lovers Rock* (McQueen, 2020). The film first aired on the BBC at 9pm on November 22nd

[2] Following Palmer (2014, p. 115) I do not capitalise lovers rock when referring to the genre, in order to distinguish between that and the label Lover's Rock, and *Lovers Rock* the film.

2022, and prominently features ‘Silly Games’ in a way commensurate with director Steve McQueen’s approach as an auteur director. The film, as I demonstrate below, sounds ‘Silly Games’ in an effective and meaningful way, and invites us to hear popular music’s past through a particular frequency. Despite universal critical acclaim from the established commentariat, however, the film also prompted several critiques from black British perspectives, at least one of which centres on McQueen’s deployment of ‘Silly Games’ as a particular bone of contention. In this chapter I think through the importance of such critiques and what they tell us about the importance of the musical past to our present moment, and discuss McQueen’s micro-historical (fictitious) representation of a culture of record consumption with regard to the “seductive menace” of records against which Rasula (2012) warns.

Beginning long before *Small Axe* hit British screens, though, a discourse of lovers rock has perpetuated the dominant narrative I identify above. It is ideas of nation and gender which structure the sound of lovers rock to many reggae fans (and reggae historians), that position lovers rock as a discursive fault line: the point at which notions of gender and nation which structure reggae discourse more broadly, become the most exposed and explicit. In this chapter, then, I engage with this discourse of lovers rock, exploring its (most often absent) place in reggae history as well as its treatment in academic analyses. I invoke Grazian’s (2003) notion of authenticity, which he utilises in his analysis of the contemporary Chicago blues scene, as a model for illustrating how lovers rock sounds (in)authenticity to various commentators.

Finally in the chapter, I return to ‘Silly Games’ and its history, and ask how we can understand its production and its significance beyond the essentialising and totalising tropes in lovers rock discourse. I attempt to conceptualise how ‘Silly Games’ sounded within lovers rock culture upon its release. In addressing and recontextualising both the culture of lovers rock production and the story of one of its classic records, I demonstrate a conceptualisation of the music’s past determined by its production, consumption, and mediation, rather than by impositions of gender and nation.

I conclude by offering some ways of conceptualising lovers rock and its past. As this chapter demonstrates, definitions of lovers rock are contested and fluid. By way of an intervention, the suggestions I make are intended to demonstrate plurality and invite interrogation and iteration, rather than to provide an authoritative definition.

Small Axe: Steve McQueen's mediation of a lovers rock classic 40 years on

Lovers Rock is a 2020 'filmic' television drama directed by the internationally respected artist and film-maker Steve McQueen, co-written by McQueen and novelist Courttia Newland. The second in an anthology of five films by McQueen entitled *Small Axe*, the film premiered at the 58th New York Film Festival in September 2020, having been selected to open the festival[3]. It was then screened in a primetime slot on BBC One later the same month, as each *Small Axe* film aired over successive weeks. Recreating a West London blues party in 1980, *Lovers Rock* was received with universal acclaim from film critics[4]. The film is unusual among mediations of reggae culture, most of which focus in on the culture of its production, in that it represents the site at which the cultures of reggae's production and consumption intersect: the blues dance.

The film's 'A-plot' follows two main characters during the daytime before a blues dance, then getting ready for the party, then during the blues itself, with a brief coda set in the early hours of the morning after. While the film is ostensibly structured around the story of these two characters meeting, dancing, and leaving together, McQueen pushes the tropes of the romance genre, depicting multiple romances, some queer, some unreciprocated. Such an approach indicates the pluralism which underpins the ideology of *Lovers Rock*.

The film recalls *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham, 1977), in that we see our protagonists experiencing the mundanity of the day-to-day grind of working-class urban life and familial pressure in the form of oppressive parents. Beyond intertextual reference, though, both directors are trying to accomplish the same thing, which is to reproduce a musical space in order to explore peoples' lives, and the importance of music to their lives. Much like what the discotheque represents for John Travolta's Italian American Tony Manero, *Lovers Rock* depicts the blues as a source of solace and significance for a racialised minority group in a hostile society.

Another aspect *Lovers Rock* shares with *Saturday Night Fever*, which took as its source material an ethnographic article in *New York* by music writer Nik Cohn (1976), is an ethnographic sensibility. McQueen populates the blues party with a host of supporting

[3] See Film at Lincoln Center (2020).
[4] The film received five star reviews in the Guardian (Bradshaw, 2020), Rolling Stone magazine (Collins, 2020), four (out of four) stars on RogerEbert.com (Henderson, 2020), and a positive review on the British Film Institute website (Oloukoï, 2020).

archetypes: women preparing food in the kitchen; a group of young men who have formed their own sound system crew; the birthday girl and her best friend singing into hairbrushes while they get ready upstairs (not unlike the enthusiastic singers in the crowd at the *Queens of Lovers Rock* gig); a suave 'ladies' man' who turns nasty; the muscle-bound and locksed-up Rastafari bouncer who turfs him out. The party goers are black women and men of all ages. This is not a film that attends to white audiences' relationship with reggae; the only white faces we see during the evening are those of a racist gang lurking outside and up the street, unwelcome at the party and yet suggestively positioned within the gravitational pull of its cultural allure. McQueen is similarly uninterested in the artists, musicians, engineers and producers who record the records that play out. The cultural 'producers' here are the sound-system deejays, who determine the music selection and reimagine the dubs with their own lyrics.

Alongside the 'A-plot', the records that feature in *Lovers Rock* tell their own story. Juxtaposed against 'Silly Games', the Revolutionaries' 'Kunta Kinte Dub[5]' represents a provocative B-side to the lovers rock classic. These are the two records that feature most prominently in the film, and I explore their significance below. But just as significant is the rest of the film's soundtrack. Of course, we hear many reggae records, including Dennis Brown's 'Money in my Pocket' and 'Your Love is Amazing', Lee Perry's 'Dreadlocks in Moonlight', and the In Crowd and Jah Stitch's 'Baby My Love'. Many of these are diegetic, playing out over the sound system (or in one case a car stereo), while others are used as sonic interstitials. Just as important to McQueen's story as these Jamaican classics, though, are records like Sister Sledge's 'The Greatest Dancer' and Carl Douglas's 'Kung Fu Fighting', both of which prompt eager responses from the dancing crowd – and the latter affording each dancer the opportunity to express their particular interpretation of Kung Fu-as-dance move. McQueen makes a point of having his selectors play hits from the US performed by black artists alongside Jamaican recordings. Not 'selected' by the deejays, but still represented in the film, is Blondie's 'Sunday Girl', which is sung acapella while the birthday girl and her

[5] The record is is a dub of the 7" single 'Beware Of Your Enemies' by the Creoles (1978), originally released on Channel One records. Several bootlegs of 'Kunta Kinte Dub' were released, and the recording may never have had an 'official' commercial release. The rhythm is perhaps one of the most versioned tracks of British reggae culture in the 1980s; various dubs were played extensively by one of Britain's leading deejays, Jah Shaka. The record was reimagined again in the 1990s as a foundational record of British jungle as 'Kunta Kinte Jungle' 1995 by Congo Natty (aka Rebel MC).

best friend get ready upstairs. This crossover hit[6] is, significantly, not found in the selectors' record boxes, and yet is still a part of the young ladies' pop culture worlds.

McQueen, then, playing the role of selector through his characters' selections, programmes a diverse range music throughout the duration of his fictitious blues. And, while the crowd on screen represents a singular culture, there remains a diversity of tastes among the partygoers, as indicated by the following exchange between the two romantic leads of the piece:

> Franklyn: You a rude girl or a soulhead?
> Martha: I listen Louisa Mark, Junior English, Gregory, Janet Kay.
> Franklyn: Seen, seen, *lovers*!

McQueen's is a mediation of an identifiably distinct culture of musical consumption, but it is one that contains multitudes. It is therefore significant that 'Silly Games' is the only record in the film which calls *all* the characters to the dancefloor.

'Silly Games' (and 'Kunta Kinte Dub') beyond the 'seductive menace'

Lovers Rock's thesis on the importance of records to black British culture is captured in the two major scenes built around 'Silly Games' and The Revolutionaries' 'Kunta Kinte Dub' (1976). Reggae records, then, in McQueen's historical retelling of a blues constituted a material reason for people to gather socially and make meaning (and a little money), with the door shut on the hostile external environment. The filmic representations tell us something about the way the production and consumption cultures built around popular music are centrally important. I reflect next on how these two records each sound in the film as a solution to the "seductive menace" of records discussed by Jed Rasula (2012), which I highlight in the Introduction to this thesis.

The powerful 11-minute central scene of *Lovers* Rock is built around dancing to Janet Kay's lovers classic 'Silly Games'. The record is indexed early in the film, long before the party begins, as women prepping food to sell at the party sing an acapella version. Later, it appears again and forms the structure for one of the best articulations on film of the meaning and importance of popular music in people's lives. This articulation is rooted in the lives of these fictitious black Britons in 1980, but it sounds well beyond that time, place and culture.

McQueen utilises 'Silly Games' to raise the ante on our understanding of the cultural significance of recorded music and people's engagement with it. The scene begins with the

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[6] 'Sunday Girl', Blondie's follow-up to their smash hit 'Heart of Glass' topped the UK charts for three weeks in 1979, a year before the movie is set.

opening bars of Kay's record being received with elation by the dancers; then deejay and selector play with the crowd by pulling up the record to encourage cheers for the 'birthday girl', before dropping the needle and reloading the record. The camera moves closer and closer into slow dancing couples and solo dancers in their own worlds; the sexuality of the dancing is emphasised, and the singing is punctuated by the deejay's exhortations. The bodies become increasingly abstracted in the frame as the camera takes us closer still into the intimate space of the dancing crowd. The crowd's performance also becomes increasingly abstracted from the original record, looping the first verse and chorus, extending the length well beyond its usual 3'32" runtime to nearly 6 and a half minutes. At the point at which the record 'should' end the dancers can first be seen, and then heard with increasing volume, singing the song acapella. The sound of the record itself then falls away and all we hear is the singing dancers, their footsteps on the floor, punctuated by the deejay interpolations.

By way of sharp comparison, the scene built around 'Silly Games' is contrasted with a similar scene based on the selection – and multiple reloads – of 'Kunta Kinte Dub'. The record, its riddim and its many versions also have a key resonance in British reggae sound-system culture that the film indexes, but does not explore any further. The title of the record and its musical style offer up an exemplar revolutionary dub plate of the time, and it is in this way that depictions of dancing to the record privileges the men at the party. I explore the implications of gendered constructions of dub such as this below.

In the scenes structured around 'Silly Games' and 'Kunta Kinte Dub', the selector and deejay are given a prominent role but, in the latter, it is the engagement of the (almost exclusively) male dancers with an obviously political record from 1976 that leaves the viewer immersed in the culture of a blues dance. It most explicitly depicts the acts of cultural production *within* a culture of consumption (and, also, succinctly portrays the kind of complications that dub reggae production practices present to ethnomusicological conceptualisations of popular music like Turino's, as I discuss in Chapter Two).

The discourse of records McQueen employs in *Lovers Rock* is not one of influence or individual genius but instead one of plurality and community. What we see and hear more closely resembles an audiovisual representation of the three 'wavebands' Henriques theorises throughout *Sonic Bodies* (2011): the material, corporeal, and the social. The notions contained within each of Henriques's 'wavebands' correspond, respectively, to the sound system crew's selection and performance of the record, the physical and emotional responses from individuals and couples to these records' amplification, and the depiction that this

cultural practice informs a sense of community. Further, by treating 'Silly Games' and 'Kunta Kinte Dub' as if they were of the same importance, McQueen subverts the dominant, gendered discourse of lovers rock (which I explore below), and locates *both* reggae and dub as emergent from a transatlantic sound system culture.

I now move from the film, with its pluralistic representation of a lovers rock blues, to an exploration of the discourse of lovers rock, which, comparatively, typically constructs a more totalised and singular narrative.

Sounding out the discourse of lovers rock (and roots reggae)

In *Lovers Rock*, 'Silly Games' sounds a blues party in ways that seek to emphasise physical response, emotional affect and community. To some of the people who were there, though, the record sounds a call for criticality and accuracy in representations of the musical past. Here I want to move away from *Lovers Rock* and pause my discussion of 'Silly Games', in order to explore how, and what, lovers rock sounds in the discourses of fans and scholars, and in histories of reggae they write.

As I highlight in the introduction to this chapter, lovers rock has typically been framed via two axioms: it has been both gendered as 'women's reggae' and constructed as a distinctly British phenomenon (Palmer, 2011, p. 183; 2014, p. 119). Concurrently, the journalists and fan-historians who have written reggae histories typically marginalise and trivialise lovers rock in their narratives, or exclude it altogether, as I demonstrate in Chapter One. In the instances in which they do grapple with the genre, these writers invoke comparisons with the perceived militancy of roots reggae and the (similarly masculine-coded) technical experimentation of dub. As Palmer identifies, the categorisation of lovers rock forms part of a wider binary in reggae discourse that contrasts 'soft' lovers rock with 'serious' roots reggae, in which the former is feminised and the latter masculinised. Lovers rock discourse, then, with its repertoire of Britishness and femininity, is the fault-line at which the topics of (trans)nationality and gender, which underpin many narratives in reggae discourse more broadly, come most clearly to the surface.

Paradoxically the lower discursive importance afforded to lovers rock by the die-hard (roots) reggae fan historians *because* of its perceived Britishness, means it is also marginalised in this fans' histories of reggae in Britain. And the writers that attend to lovers as a way to reintroduce women into their reggae histories do so in ways that tend to reinforce, rather than unpick, the gendering narratives within their discursive plane.

To conceptualise this discursive phenomenon, David Grazian's (2003) account of the construction of authenticity in the Chicago blues scene is particularly instructive. I have already indicated the significance to this research of Grazian's argument: that participants' understandings of music cultures are structured by assumptions about what does and does not constitute an 'authentic' manifestation of a cultural form. The same phenomenon is observable in reggae culture. In mediations and histories of reggae, gender and place are repeatedly codified using the concept of 'authenticity'. In reggae discourse, roots reggae – which refers to a type of reggae recording and artist that foreground societal inequities and/or Rastafari philosophy in their lyrics and presentation – is typically constructed as the 'most authentic' flavour of reggae. Concurrently, roots reggae is frequently referred to as being 'heavier' and having a 'harder' sound and riddims than the romantically-themed lovers rock. The way that roots has been gendered as masculine in reggae discourse, then, is quite blatant, but seldom acknowledged. It is only when comparing roots and lovers and the stark dissimilarities in the discursive repertoire that construct each that the gendering of roots comes into sharper focus.

In a parallel issue of debate within reggae discourse that centres on place, Jamaican reggae is typically understood to be the original, and therefore 'authentic', place from which the music emerged, while reggae from elsewhere is dismissed as derivative appropriation, or euphemistically constructed as being 'progressive' in some way. Even the latter, more celebratory discourse depends upon the concept of authenticity: for a music to be described as 'progressive', the speaker must have some sense of it progressing away from an original. Again, roots reggae is notable for its close connotations with Jamaica, in particularly the Jamaican 'ghettoes' from which roots records are understood to emerge in the minds of many fans.

As Lisa Amanda Palmer, who has interrogated the dominant narratives that construct lovers rock at length, argues (2011; 2014) such notions are historically inaccurate. She begins by making the foundational point that many women who consumed lovers rock records also identified as "conscious sisters." (Palmer L. A., 2011, p. 177) She draws on bell hooks to make the parallel point that love is often relegated to an apolitical, feminised domain. When lovers rock is treated as a sanctuary for 'female concerns', Palmer argues, the complex relationships black women forged with oppositional black movements – alongside their negotiations of sexual politics and gender politics – are undervalued (Palmer 2011, 186).

Palmer also contradicts the assumption that lovers rock was a distinctly British phenomenon, insisting that this narrative obscures lovers rock's transnational genealogy. She correctly notes that the influence of black popular music from the US on lovers rock culture, while undoubtedly important, somehow evidences the British distinctiveness of lovers rock in its discourses. She also highlights continuities in the practices of the production cultures of Jamaican reggae and British lovers rock, like record producers' auditioning of young, aspirant singers. While lovers rock has been narrated as Britain's answer to reggae, the opposite appears true of the culture of its production, which much closely resembles that of Jamaica's 'creative echo chamber' than do Britain's reggae bands, as I explore in the next chapter.

As this thesis demonstrates, reggae was a transnational and dialogic cultural form, which from its inception was consumed and mediated in Britain, even if those mediations often depended on and contributed to a discourse of novelty. Chapters Four and Five demonstrate the importance of US culture – both music and film – to Jamaican musical life, and Chapter Five also explores in detail a record analogous to 'Silly Games' in that it is performed a woman singer in a male-dominated studio space.

Of all the modalities that emerge from reggae's 'golden age', it is roots reggae, with the powerful political message of its aesthetic, lyrics and performance, and dub, to which this research is less attentive, but which is similarly championed in reggae's histories, that sound the authenticity of reggae for many fans and writers. These subgenres both correspond in their own ways to a notion with which several theorists have wrestled (Mercer, 1990; Gilroy, 1991) and which remains most succinctly encapsulated by Stuart Hall: "'Good' black popular culture can pass the test of authenticity – the reference to black experience and black expressivity. These serve as the guarantees in the determination of which black popular culture is right on, which is ours and which is not" (2019, p. 90).

Compared to roots and dub, lovers rock sounds inauthentic in reggae's histories. These histories instead fixated on figures like Lee "Scratch" Perry, whose perceived eccentricity and genius maps neatly onto existing tropes of the male auteur in rock and popular music studies. Following Bob Marley's rise to international superstardom – a moment I covered in the preceding chapter – the criteria by which reggae was judged increasingly mirrored those of rock discourse: notions of individual authorship and of a commitment to revolution. For many writers, affirming these values became a way of establishing their own credibility as reggae historians, demonstrating their expertise to their readers by reiterating what they already knew: that roots is the real reggae.

In constructions such as Palmer's, lovers rock records sound in a more multifaceted way: they sound simultaneously like the black Atlantic; like the men who occupied positions of power in its culture of production intended; like the women who sang it; and they sound *to* both the men and women in the cultures of their consumption. This is in sharp contrast to the way lovers rock sounds in most reggae histories, which is either peripherally, inauthentically, or not at all.

Below I offer an exploration of 'Silly Games' that attends to its culture of production and that of lovers rock more broadly. First, though, I want to return to the film *Lovers Rock* by examining some critical responses to it which indicate the significance of that culture to a more recent moment.

Unpacking the response to *Lovers Rock*

I argue above that McQueen's film, and especially his dreamlike auteurist mediation of 'Silly Games', effectively evoke ideas of meaning, community and plurality, rather than attempting to recreate a historically accurate blues party. As I note above, reviews to *Lovers Rock* were overwhelmingly positive. However, some critical responses to *Lovers Rock* from cultural commentators within black British society, which emerge from a distinct set of preoccupations to my own, take issue with McQueen's approach. I want to explore two examples of such criticism here.

The first was written in November 2020 by Marlon Palmer, a British filmmaker and founder of Kush Cinema, the UK's first black-owned video streaming platform. Palmer's response to *Lovers Rock* took the form of a blog post on his LinkedIn profile (Palmer M. , 2020). In the blog post, while Palmer takes care to laud McQueen's leveraging of his industry status to tell such stories as those in *Small Axe* anthology, he critiques of the filmmaker's use of creative license on the grounds that he had the cultural responsibility of being "more accurate" to "how it was". On the topic of McQueen's artistic license regarding the manipulation of 'Silly Games', Palmer is more forgiving, interpreting the director's choice as an emphasis on the record's status as a "cultural landmark", and acknowledging that "the scene wasn't meant to mimic what actually happened in a dance when that track was played". Palmer's specific qualms are to do with historical inaccuracies in the representation of the sexual politics of a blues, as well as with an overrepresentation of ganja smoking and the speaking of patwa. For Palmer, "'many white folks/the mainstream watching the show most likely will not determine fact from fiction and will believe it really was like that in 'Blues Dances'".

Palmer's apprehensions centre on representations of black British cultural and the potential for negative stereotypes to be drawn, especially during a prime slot on national television. While Palmer does not take into account the kinds of theoretical discussions I note earlier, particularly Mercer's notion of the 'burden of representation' (1990), his discourse nonetheless signifies what remains at stake for some black Britons who were there at the blues dances in 1980 that McQueen re-presents. It also indexes a way in which that generation engage with their history through cultural products like *Lovers Rock*, and also 'Silly Games'.

Lisa Amanda Palmer, whose work I explore in detail above, also published a response to *Lovers Rock* (2020). Unlike the previous piece, Palmer takes care to praise the film's attentiveness to historical details, in particular:

> some of the various elements needed to hold a blues party in your "yard". The huge pots of rice and peas and curry goat. The removal of the carpet and furniture from your living room, as if you were moving house. The wiring up of the epic speaker boxes to balance the treble and the heavy baselines of the sound system. The eagerness to show off the latest style and fashion as you step into the party in shiny sateen dresses or your Gabicci shirt.

Palmer also bases the negative aspects of her critique on what she recognises as the scarcity of such opportunities for representation, constructing *Lovers Rock* as something of an opportunity missed. In particular, she highlights the 'Kunte Kinte Dub' scene as a weakness. Rather than frenzied dancing, Palmer argues, dub was as much about educational communication[7]. Shifting bias away from the dancers and back towards the sound system crew, she also posits the unlikelihood of any tune being repeated for 11 minutes, citing the reputational importance of a "selector's ability to 'rinse tune', meaning a sound system's credibility rests on demonstrating the unique depth and range of their music back catalogue."

Both Marlon Palmer's and Lisa Amanda Palmer's response to *Lovers Rock* indicate an important discourse from within black British culture that indicate the importance of the musical past to the present moment. For Marlon Palmer, McQueen's manipulation of 'Silly Games' and his choice to present an acapella rendition of the record are permissible compared to the misrepresentation of the social norms of the shebeen; meanwhile Lisa Amanda Palmer's bar for historically accurate details has been met, but the use of 'Silly Games' sounds a bum note. That these two contestations each take issue with separate aspects

[7] Here, Palmer echoes William 'Lez' Henry's construction of the sound system "deejay's role and purpose as spokesperson for the community." (2012, p. 366)

of the film highlights the subjective nature of how records from the past sound to us, while still demonstrating the importance of historical accuracy[8] to the community represented in the film.

Historicising the sound of 'Silly Games' in lovers rock culture

In this section, I offer a reflection on lovers rock, and on 'Silly Games', that draws on the contemporaneous and retrospective mediation of each in order to recreate the culture of its production. The similarities between the stories that emerge in this chapter and in Chapter Five are striking; the cultures of production in particular are much more similar than the narrative of lovers rock's distinct 'Britishness' would suggest. This notion is brought into even sharper focus by looking at the culture of production of British reggae bands, which I address in Chapter Eight.

According to some sources, lovers rock began in one of two London night clubs: Dalston's Four Aces (Bradley, 2001, p. 440) or Soho's Roaring Twenties (Hebdige, 1987, p. 129). Such an origin indexes a construction of lovers rock as a culture primarily oriented around night clubs and people dancing to historically important records. For Hebdige (1987), in particular, lovers rock's inception came in the mid-1970s when Lloyd Coxsone plays soul records to a roots reggae crowd to provide dancers with a moment of intimacy, and resulting in a musical "fusion" of reggae and soul. The key record in this story is Robert Parker's 'I Caught You In A Lie', which became known as Coxsone's 'signature tune' (Hebdige 129). According to Dennis Bovell, this recording held particular sway as the first song Coxsone would play at any dance; the record with which to test any sound system (Bovell, 2020). Indeed, it was Bovell that Coxsone called upon when the latter, according to legend, had the idea to produce a reggae cover of 'Caught You in a Lie' in 1975, which would retroactively become widely acknowledged as the first lovers rock single.

But there are other moments and other narratives. De Konigh and Griffiths (2003, p. 186) locate many 'precursor' records recorded and released in Jamaica in the years before 'Caught You in a Lie'. Similarly, Palmer (2011, p. 179) locates lovers rock in a transatlantic genealogy, citing the classics of Jamaica's rocksteady period and constructing a powerful

[8] This may be as true in music culture as it is in film culture. I remember once being dressed down at a rehearsal for not transcribing a bass fill *exactly* right when depping for a colleague on a lovers rock gig. Regardless of the fact that I had been given a scant couple of days to learn the three hour long set, the band's leader stressed to me how their audience would be expecting a note-for-note perfect replication of their beloved music from 'back in the day'.

counter-discourse of continuation, and not of rupture. Steve McQueen and Courttia Newland's history of lovers rock is evidently the story of a culture that evolved from within the blues, or shebeen, rather than the nightclub, emphasising the importance of such spaces for black recreation in a hostile society. And Linton Kwesi Johnson (quoted in Katz, 2011) attributes the inception of lovers rock[9] to the founding and naming of the Lover's Rock label by Dennis Harris.

The extant histories of lovers rock already overrepresent Bovell to the extent of replicating the 'great man' model I have criticised throughout this thesis, and while I do not seek to reinforce such a conception, it is nonetheless difficult to overstate his importance to the development of the genre as a cultural and commercial form. What remain typically unremarked-upon in the dominant narrative, though, are the transnational currents that underpin his journey to the centre of British bass culture. It is significant that, as Bovell himself recounts at interview (Bovell, 2020), he was born in Barbados, and his uncles, who travelled to Jamaica for work, brought records back home with them. Such anecdotal detail indexes both the importance of Jamaica to other Caribbean nations, and of the wider Caribbean to Jamaica, productively disrupting the JA-UK dominance in reggae discourse by locating the inter-Caribbean movement of people (non-musicians) seeking work as having a direct bearing on the musical upbringing of the person typically credited with the invention of the 'British contribution to reggae'.

By the time Lloyd Coxsone called Bovell to produce a version of 'Caught You In A Lie', the latter was already the band-leader of one of Britain's leading reggae bands (alongside the Cimarons), Matumbi, and had his own sound system called Jah Sufferer. Coxsone introduced Bovell to the young aspirant Louisa Mark, who had been singing on sound systems and had entered a competition at the Four Aces club, where Coxsone's was the resident sound. Having survived a notoriously tough crowd at the Four Aces was enough proof of Mark's ability in the eyes of Coxsone, who put singer together with band leader with the brief to make a reggae cover of a soul hit, his signature tune. (Bovell, 2020)

According to Bovell, the next steps were to head into the studio with drummer and vocalist from Matumbi:

> The drummer played drums. I played the bass. Then I played the guitars and the keyboards. Then… I was charged with making an intro for this song that was not the intro

[9] The name 'Lover's Rock' is usually thought to have been borrowed from the B-side to an Augustus Pablo record called 'Lover's Mood'.

> to the R&B version… that sounded like a very popular reggae tune at the time produced by Lee Scratch Perry, a song called 'Curly Locks', right?... So, I took the bassline [to 'Curly Locks'] and one day when Robbie Shakespeare was in the studio… I found myself playing [the intro line to 'Caught You in a Lie' on the Moog synthesiser]… and Lloyd Coxsone said "Did you record that?... That's the intro!" And that became the intro of the song, and a really kind of well-known intro. 'Cos, reggae in those days had to have an intro that people go "Ah, this song's coming on now. I wanna dance."
>
> Bovell, 2020

According to Bovell, Lloyd Coxsone, famously refused to play reggae recorded in the UK on his sound system; strictly Jamaican reggae, and strictly pre-release. But now Coxsone had a production of his own to promote on his sound system, and so he *did* play it. This was a sea change in the acceptance of reggae produced in Britain, for Bovell: "A sound system was making a *big thing* of a song that was recorded in Soho." (Bovell, 2020)

Lovers rock took another step forward in its development with the opening of Eve Studios by Dennis Harris of DIP Records. Eve studios was named for Harris's wife, Yvonne "Eve" Harris. Jamaican-born, London-based Harris had was a mechanical engineer with an entrepreneurial streak, having begun organising coach excursions for the local Caribbean population before turning his hand to the music industry (de Koningh and Griffiths, 121). Having founded DIP in 1973, Harris had financial success licensing Jamaican recordings for British release, in particular the productions of Lee Perry – recall from chapter five that DIP originally licensed 'Hurt So Good' from Perry. Harris took the decision to open Eve Studios above DIP's retail store, which he explained in a 1976 interview with Steve Barrow by way of championing local talent (de Koningh & Griffiths, 2003, p. 123).

Harris began to accrue a team of industry professionals to staff his studio. Steve Wadey, a drummer-turned-engineer (and a "wizard with the soldering iron" (Bovell, 2020)) built the studio's eight-track recording desk himself, taking up residence as the engineer. And who else would Harris call upon but Dennis Bovell, band leader of Matumbi and record producer in his own right, to staff the studio sessions. Bovell brought in guitarist John Kpiaye and drummer Leroy Green as session musicians in the studio, and they recorded a song co-written by Kpiaye and Green called 'I'm In Love With A Dreadlocks'. The song was written as an 'answer[10]' to 'Curly Locks', the same Perry production that had served as inspiration for Louisa Mark's 'Caught You In A Lie' (Bovell, 2020). To voice the song, Bovell and Harris recruited three young singers, Pauline Catlin (who has returned to releasing commercial

[10] Paul Long (2022) has summarized the concept of an 'answer' song in reggae culture in his chapter on Althea and Donna's 'Uptown Top Ranking'.

music in recent years as 'Shezzie'), Carol Simms (later known by her stage name 'Kofi', and with a successful solo career), and Caron Wheeler (of Soul II Soul fame).

The three young women took the stage name 'Brown Sugar', a name etched into the annals of British reggae history as the group with the first release on the newly minted Lover's Rock record label. As Bovell recalls it, Harris conceived of Lover's Rock the label as another of DIP's many subsidiaries[11], albeit one with a powerful image at the heart its core: "It was decided that the label to represent this kind of music should be called 'Lover's Rock'. And Dennis took his pen out, drew a heart, put an arrow through it like Cupid, and went, 'that's the label'" (Bovell, 2020).

Lovers rock the music and Lover's Rock the label were discursively justified along the lines of nation, race, and gender at their inception, and have become increasingly so ever since. Harris certainly constructs an idea of himself as a benevolent nurturer of local talent in the interview cited above, and Bovell similarly justifies the development of lovers as a deliberate attempt to "disprove the myth that reggae could only be played by Jamaican people in Jamaica" (Bovell, 2020). And as I outline in the second section of this chapter, myriad explanatory narratives exist that express an analogous sentiment regarding lovers rock and women's consumption of reggae records. But other origin stories, including another variation of the story told by Bovell himself to Lloyd Bradley, ascribe the development of lovers rock to financial motivations rather than socio-cultural ones. Quoted in Bradley (2001, 442 – 445), Bovell describes 'seeing what was going on in the dancehall' and 'market research… [going] round record shops and talking to the people in the shops about who their customers were, how many men bought records, how many women bought records, what their ages were, etcetera.' Bovell's endeavours resulted in an estimated 60/40 split weighted towards women buying records, which he attributes to women's tendency to purchase records compared to men's preference to consume socially in the sound system context.

Regardless of the rigour – or lack thereof – of Bovell's research, and of the 'actual' motivations for producing lovers rock records (as with all popular music, the tension between lovers rock as commercial *and* cultural form is only a tension in the realms of discourse) a narrative did begin to emerge that constructed this "new" musical form as something of a goldrush in British reggae. Journalist Penny Reel, writing for *New Musical Express*,

[11] According to Bovell, '[Harris] was very fond of making a new label for a new venture' (Bovell, 2020). Clearly; at one point, de Koningh and Griffiths estimate Harris was at the helm of an 'empire' consisting of 13 imprints (121).

exemplifies this discourse, citing reggae industry insiders' resentment at the growing market for this supposedly frivolous music (Reel, 1979). In the *NME* article, the buying power of the "schoolgirl revolution" was due to these records' prominence and universal appeal in the dance: "A lot of people in reggae have little good to say about lover's rock, but when it comes to the very serious business of getting it on *everybody* dances to it."

The narrative that lovers rock was subsuming other modalities of reggae was explicit, then, as early as 1979:

> Whereas most reggae singles sell no more than a few thousand copies at most, lover's rock titles shift in tens of thousands, and continue to sell. Every week new titles and new artists make their appearance on wax in response to a seemingly insatiable demand from its audience.
>
> Reel, 1979

Reel and his interviewees adopt this Adornian critique, not dissimilar to Alleyne and others' critique of Marley's albums on Island Records I explore in the previous chapter, that bemoans the popular commercial success of this compromised, soppy form of reggae at the expense of roots. Such a construction echoes Palmer's critique of the gendering of lovers rock, yet the notion of lovers rock as a distinctly British phenomenon is absent from *NME*'s mediation of the music. For Reel, "lover's rock can claim no real departure from mainstream Jamaican music". Instead, lovers rock is the latest in an ongoing battle for lyrical supremacy between ideas of romance and "folk themes and moral tales" in Jamaican popular music. Lovers, we are to understand, harks back to the romantic rocksteady period, sandwiched between the more "socially charged" ska and roots eras.

***

It was from this particular formation of London studio culture, dancehalls and shebeens, from which, and into which, Janet Kay's 'Silly Games' emerged in 1979. Kay – full name Janet Kay Bogle[12] – was born in London in 1958. In a story not dissimilar from Susan Cadogan's biography outlined in Chapter Five, Kay's passion for singing was cultivated through a passion for US soul hits (Katz, 2014). Kay had been studying at secretarial college in 1977 when she was invited one day to a rehearsal by a friend, Sonia Ferguson. Tony Gad, of Aswad fame, heard Kay singing in a rehearsal room, and convinced of her talent introduced her to

[12] Kay is reportedly a descendant of Paul Bogle, Jamaica's national hero who led the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865, for which he was hanged by the colonial government.

Alton Ellis – best known as Jamaica's premier rocksteady singer, but who was at this point in London trying his hand at record production.

After winning her parents' blessing (Katz, 2014), Ellis invited Kay to record a cover of Minnie Riperton's 'Lovin' You' – a record that sounded Riperton's famous and (nearly) inimitably high vocal range. That Kay could convincingly, and beautifully, replicate Riperton's pitching would mark her out as a singular vocal talent in the lovers rock scene. Ellis's production of 'Lovin' You', attributed to Jannet [sic] Kay and the Kaylets, was released on the Stonehouse label, backed with the 'Loving Dub' B-side by the Ellis Group[13]. Despite failing to cross over to the pop charts, 'Lovin' You' was reportedly a smash hit in the reggae market, remaining at the number one spot for several weeks. Capitalising on her popularity, Kay released several further singles with other producers, namely Delroy Witter (for D-Roy Records) and Clem Bushay (for his Bushays label). On the session for Witter that begat Kay's cover of Deniece Williams's 'That's What Friends Are For', the engineer was one Dennis Bovell, who made a mental note of Kay's formidable vocal range.

While Reel and others may have recognised a familiar pattern of covering US soul songs in a reggae style, 'Silly Games' began life as an original composition by Bovell. Quoted in Katz (2014), Bovell's retelling of the tale of the song's composition emphasised its famously high-pitched vocal hook:

> There was an advert for Memorex where Ella Fitzgerald sang a note and broke a glass, and I wanted a song with a note like that; little girls always try to sing a high note, so when I wrote 'Silly Games' and put that high note in there, it meant that every female in the dance would try and sing that note.
>
> Bovell, 2020

Remembering Kay's performance on 'That's What Friends Are For', he brought the singer in the studio who 'effortlessly' recorded her vocal performance in two or three takes (Bovell, 2020).

The recording of the track's distinctive drum pattern, however, is another matter. The version of 'Silly Games' which Kay originally voiced would have featured the drums of Lloyd 'Jah Bunny' Donaldson, a Jamaican-born drummer who had learned from the master, the Skatalites' Lloyd Knibbs (Bartholomew, 2018). But Bovell had envisaged a drum pattern that

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[13] It is difficult to identify the session personnel on these recordings. Per Discogs, this was the only release to feature either the Kaylets or the Ellis Group. Stonehouse was a short-lived imprint that released five singles, mostly written, produced, arranged by Ellis (45cat, n.d.).

diverged from the familiar patterns that dominated reggae, aiming for a distinct and marketable rhythm of his own. In conflicting accounts Jah Bunny either was unable to sufficiently interpret and articulate Bovell's rhythmic vision, or expressed an unwillingness to give the new pattern a try, and so Bovell called on Angus 'Drummy Zeb' Gaye of Asward to re-record the drums (Bradley, 370-1). For Bradley, Gaye's openness to experimenting with rhythmic form was indicative of black British second-generation musicians' willingness to subvert Jamaican musical tradition. Such a notion is congruent with the discourse of musical progression, which I examine further in relation to constructions of British reggae in the next chapter.

Once Bovell was happy with the recording, the record was initially released on Arawak, another London-based label that had previously licensed Bovell productions like Errol Dunkley's 'Little Way Different'. Arawak, the 'hottest' of the 'newer labels working the genre' (Reel, 1979) was founded by Patrick Cann, who licensed the song to Scope, a new imprint on the Warner Brothers major label which had been launched to capitalise on the lovers rock 'goldrush' (Katz, 2014). Now reissued, and with major label-backing, the song entered the charts on 9 June 1979, and would stay in the top 40 for fourteen weeks. Following an appearance on *Top of the Pops* on 14 June 1979, the single climbed, peaking at the number two spot for two weeks the following month. As is evidenced by my vignette, and in McQueen's film, its popularity endures

Outroduction: defining lovers rock

Throughout this chapter I have demonstrated the ways in which people conceptualise lovers rock – how it sounds to them – which is often articulated using the discursive repertoire of gender and nation. Trying to define 'what makes lovers rock British', or 'for women', though, is the wrong way to try and apprehend a music that, as I have demonstrated, is inherently transnational, and was and is produced and consumed by women and men. In this way my own exploration of 'Silly Games' corresponds with McQueen's mediation of the record, which really succeeds in his emphasis on the multiplicity of meanings that are constructed at a blues. This is predicated on the even more foundational notion that structures this thesis, and which *Lovers Rock* depicts masterfully, that records sound in peoples' lives.

Despite the transnational nature of lovers rock, though, it is clear that there have been attempts to construct the music as a 'British sound'. This notion is ingrained to the extent that it has had impactful ramifications on the careers of some musicians. While Janet Kay and

Carroll Thompson have been able to maintain successful careers as singers as indicated by the *Queens of lovers rock* tour (and during the performance I witnessed, they made repeated references to lovers rock's Jamaican antecedents in both the songs they performed and the talk in between), the same cannot be said of, for example, Susan Cadogan. Much like Janet Kay, Cadogan sang reggae songs with romantic lyrics, many of which were covers of US soul records, in a studio space dominated otherwise by men, to produce records that proved popular on British dancefloors. But the distinction between her Jamaican nationality and the axiom that lovers rock is something that only happens in Britain has left her in an ambiguous position as an artist, both in the creative sense and the professional sense. She went so far as to tell me at interview: "*I don't know if I sing lovers rock.*"

Rather than attempting to close-off this subculture along the familiar lines, the reflection on the past of lovers rock in this chapter implies an alternative way to define lovers rock: as the name various people ascribed to a subgenre of reggae records (and to one of the labels that produced them) that were produced in Britain in a manner that was strikingly similar to the culture of production of reggae records in Jamaica. By way of comparison, the next chapter explores the most commercially successful reggae band from Britain (even if their status as a reggae band remains contested), who emerged from a completely distinct culture of production.

Chapter 8: *Signing Off* - Embodied knowledge, discourse, and UB40

18th October 2023, Birmingham

I have just received a phone call from a member of UB40's management team. Earl is unwell and they need a bass dep for a couple of shows in a few weeks. They've asked me. My head's swimming. I hope Earl's going to be okay. I'm instantly nervous about the gigs. What an opportunity for the PhD and for my career as a musician. I'm fairly certain Tim will encourage me to do the gig, so no worries there. But that's a very short space of time to learn a very long set. I'll have to down tools on the thesis for a while and get cracking on the material.

1st November 2023, Birmingham

To learn the set, I'm playing along with Jahred to a recording of their last live performance – the homecoming show in Moseley Park. I remember the gig well; it was the first time I'd seen Matt, formerly the singer in my own band, singing lead for UB40. It's quite a moment to see someone who you grew up playing music in a school in Birmingham with step into those shoes. That'll be me soon enough. It'll be nice to be on stage together again, even if it's only for a couple of shows. That thought takes the edge off the nerves a bit.

2nd November 2023, Birmingham

Day one of full-band rehearsals today, at the studio over towards Coventry. Matt's picked me up – just like old times. I've been in this room plenty of times before, which helps me settle in.

The band are deciding on the setlist for the gig. They're throwing in numbers I've not been asked to learn, and so I have to transcribe the basslines on the spot. I've got one earphone in, listening to the track on Spotify, and working it out as I go. It doesn't take too long to get the patterns down, but the structures take a while to internalise. I make a mistake the first time we try one of these numbers I'm learning for the first time. I don't quite receive 'the look' from Robin Campbell, but it's not far off. After we finish the number, he tells me where I went wrong. I ask to run it again, and we nail it. "You don't need telling twice, do ya lad?"

7th November 2023, Birmingham

I get picked up in a flash new people-carrier. I load my case into the back and pile in. I'm the second-to-last person to get picked up in our van – we still need to stop off and

grab Jimmy on the drive to the airport. It's early and everyone's half asleep still. On the drive out to Jimmy's, Gilly points out the entrance to a manor house. The driveway must go on for miles – no sign of the house itself. Gilly tells me Haile Sellasie had stayed there at some point during his exile. I'd had no idea. "That's why we call this road the 'Sellasi-highway'."

We get to the airport and check in to the business departure lounge, which is a first for me. I make the most of the breakfast buffet. Someone in a Villa top recognises the band and has a chat with us and asks for a photo. I offer to take it instinctively, but they tell me to get in the photo and call me a muppet. I can't get used to this.

8th November 2023, Birmingham

I've been picked up from my door, driven to and dropped off at the airport, checked into the business lounge, picked up at the other end and driven to the (very nice) hotel, driven to the venue for soundcheck with my bass waiting tuned-up and plugged-in on stage for me, driven back to the hotel, and then back to the venue again. I literally don't have to worry about a thing other than performing. And I'm doing plenty of worrying about that. Here goes nothing.

***Signing Off* was released in the UK on the 29th of August 1980, on Graduate Records, a small independent label based in the West Midlands town of Dudley. Per the album's sleeve, the musicians that performed on the record were: Astro – talk over vocal; Jim Brown – drums; Ali Campebll – lead vocal, rhythm guitar; Robin Campbell – vocal, lead guitar; Earl Falconer – bass; Norman Lamount Hassan – Percussion Congas; Brian Travers – tenor saxophone, melodica; Michael Virtue – Keyboard, strings, organ. *Signing Off* represented a huge success for the label, achieving gold status (having sold 100,000 units) in October 1980 and platinum (breaching 300,000 units sold) in June 1981. The album's lead single, a double A-side 'King/Food for thought', would peak at number four in the British charts, and makes a claim of being the first independent single to breach British top 10 without assistance from a major label.**

UB40's next two albums were similarly politically charged: *Present Arms* in 1981, and *UB44* in 1982. These three albums, and especially *Signing Off*, are often understood as the band's early apex, preceeding the massive

commercial success of 1983's *Labour of Love*. That album was comprised entirely of covers of largely romance-themed songs, most notably 'Red, Red Wine'. It went on to achieve platinum status in multiple territories around the world, and often marks the point at which many fans narrate the band's descent into sell-out territory.

There are several obvious things about *Signing Off* that set it apart from the other records around which this thesis is structured. One such aspect is the album's mixed-media format, comprising a 33rpm 12-inch record and a 45rpm record that resembles an extended-play rather than the second disc of a double album. While reissues of the album have compiled all thirteen tracks together, an early interview with the band refers to the 45 as a "free 12 inch-single" (Sutcliffe, 1980). Another point of departure is the album's track list. A cover of a black American popular song of huge cultural significance in 'Strange Fruit', originally performed by Billie Holiday and popularised further by Nina Simone, corresponds to conventional practices in reggae culture at that time. But a cover of Randy Newman's 'I Think It's Going to Rain Today' is a comparatively incongruous selection. So, too, is the selection several tracks which are not dubs of recordings but are instrumentals. While 'Return of Django' is also an instrumental (even if it had been initially conceived as a vocal cover of another song,) by 1980 the convention in reggae culture of making stars of its singers had been long-established, and instrumental recordings were far less common than in the late 1960s. Then there is the label that released the album, Graduate Records – not Island Records or Greensleeves, labels which are more frequently in the dominant narrative of reggae in Britain. *Signing Off* was the first full-length album released by any band or artist on Graduate, which, before signing UB40, had released a handful of guitar bands' singles.

These distinctions index a distinct culture of production than those of the other records I examine in this thesis. In this chapter, I want to interrogate that culture of production, in order to develop some ideas in my exploration of 'Silly Games' and lovers rock around reggae produced in Britain. I do this by a novel method, capitalising an opportunity I had to perform with UB40 in 2023, and synthesising autoethnographic reflection with more familiar methods. It is my contention that the unique production culture of *Signing Off* is at odds with the dominant narratives that construct UB40 in reggae discourse. These narratives are the narratives of the 'two UB40s', that the band 'sold out', and that they are a white (and therefore inferior or inauthentic) reggae band, despite their multi-ethnic lineup.

These are the murky waters into which I self-consciously waded when I received a call to dep on bass for two of the band's forthcoming European shows. The first, in Basel, Switzerland, was to be broadcast live as part of the Baloise Session series of concerts. The second would mark the occasion of the 30th time the band had performed to a sold-out audience at the Rotterdam Ahoy. All in a day's work for a band celebrating their 45th anniversary, but these were the highest profile and the most pressured gigs of my career by some margin. Alongside the excitement there was trepidation, but not just pre-gig nerves. As a Birmingham-based reggae musician, I had been aware for years of the complicated discourses around UB40. Apocryphal anecdotes and cautionary tales about the band circulate the city's music scenes. For most of my peers, UB40 are a source of immense local pride. Having a pint of Guinness bought for you by the late Brian Travers while he propped up the bar at the Hare and Hounds was once a rite of passage for many aspiring Brummie musicians. But that sense of local goodwill does not preclude fierce debates about the band's history, legacy, and aesthetic merit.

In this chapter, then, I begin by critically reflecting on the task of learning a two-hour set of UB40 songs ahead of my stint with the band. The process of accruing this material as an experienced bass player gave nuance to the collective wisdom that explains UB40. I examine the band's setlist as a discursive artefact, a deliberate attempt to construct a version of themselves in the minds of fans attending their concerts. I then explore the dominant narratives that have come to define the band, using several important mediations and historical treatments of the band and their debut album to explore this discourse. I attempt to recreate the historical production culture from which *Signing Off* emerged, and look at examples of its contemporaneous mediation, in order to make some basic but significant points about the record and the band. I end with a reflection on the question that has come to define the band since their inception: just 'how reggae' are UB40?

What's in a setlist? Learning the song and the setlist as a discursive artefact

Despite the primacy of the live music sector to the current popular music industry, academic literature on the subject of setlists remains scant [1]. As this section of the thesis argues, writing a setlist is a communicative discursive act, by which a band or an artist intentionally constructs an idea of their musical identity, and by which fans make meaning. In the case of

[1] One notable exception is Chianca (2018), who uses the setlist to construct the virtuosity of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band.

an act that have had the longevity of UB40, euphemistically termed ‘legacy acts’ by industry, a setlist becomes a way to narrate a decades-long musical career, an act of selection and omission of literally hundreds of possible songs, and a way of confirming the ‘essential’ UB40 songs. In what follows, I analyse the setlist I was required to learn at one of the performances in which I took part as such. I then reflect on what I term my ‘embodied response’ to the set as a bass player; my contention is that, contrary to popular opinion, UB40 ‘got better’ at playing reggae the further their career progressed. I then consider what the relationship between the setlist and the original recordings it indexes, and the importance of those recordings to musicians. Rehearsing with UB40’s keyboard player, Jahred Gordon, brought to the fore the prominence of recordings in how reggae musicians learn repertoire and the value/significance of recordings to a historical understanding of a music culture. For Jahred, commercial recordings are a window into a musical past in which UB40 are at the peak of their powers, and a musician’s North Star in the seas of live performance.

The setlist of a ‘legacy act’

Appendix 2 lists the songs comprising the setlist for UB40’s gig at the Rotterdam Ahoy in December 2023, as well as the year and album of each song’s release. By adding the corresponding dates, a setlist goes from being a set of instructions and prompts for musicians into a way to understand an artist or band’s conception of their musical output and audience’s preconceptions.

The immediate takeaways from the data in Appendix 2 are probably quite predictable. Most of the songs performed were released as singles, and over half are selected from the band’s 1980s period, during which they experienced the most economic success. *Signing Off* is prominent, with three songs from the album featuring in the setlist – ‘Food For Thought’, with which the band begins their encore, and ‘Tyler’ and ‘King’, which transition from one song into the next when performed live. This miniature medley is a nod to the band’s debut single, which featured both tracks as a double A-side in 1979.

But there are also more recent records, such as ‘Gimme Some Kinda Sign’ – a cover of Brenton Wood’s 1967 hit which at the time of the gig was unreleased but would form the first single from the band’s next studio album – and ‘You Don’t Call Anymore’ and ‘Me Nah Leave Yet’ from 2021’s *Bigga Baggariddim* album. From 2019’s *For The Many* album the band selected ‘The Keeper’ and ‘Broken Man’, the latter of which features a guest verse from leading Jamaican artist associated with the ‘reggae revival’, Kabaka Pyramid. During their performance, Kabaka Pyramid’s pre-recorded vocal track plays out as part of the song.

There are several things that can be inferred from the setlist as a discursive artefact. Clearly the band recognises the need to 'play the hits' to a certain degree, anticipating the demands of an audience who may have been expecting something of a 'career retrospective'. But it is also important to UB40 that they demonstrate that as a band they are still writing and releasing new material. Kabaka Pyramid's disembodied voice is intended to index the band's ongoing link to Jamaica musicians and the cutting-edge of contemporary reggae culture. In a similar vein, when 'The Keeper' is performed live the band introduces the song as being from the recent *For The Many* album. The album's title (and artwork – which depicts Grenfell Tower) signify the band's identity as a collective of left-leaning, working class Brits. That the band make explicit mention of the album title during their performance is a nod to their Dutch fans familiar with the British Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, and indicates their desire to remain symbolically associated with this movement[2]. The band also includes 'Champion', a single released in 2022 which was selected as the official anthem of the Commonwealth Games held that year in the band's home city of Birmingham. Like 'Broken Man', the live performance of 'Champion' plays out the vocal track from the single's featured artist, Birmingham-based Grime MC, Dapz on the Map. Another symbol, then, this time of the band's strong – and current – association with Birmingham in popular discourse.

The narrative the band constructs of itself through the choice of songs, then, is one of smash hits, established longevity, and also of contemporary relevance. While other 'legacy acts' may be more inclined to stick to the "set list from hell" (Grazian, 2003), this iteration of UB40 at this point in their career feel the need to distance themselves from such an approach and the negative connotations that may come with it.

This need makes sense given the discourses that construct the band. As I argue at greater length below, the band has had to compete with accusations of 'selling out' and cultural appropriation by some fans and commentators. Specific to UB40 (although there are many other examples of two or more competing sets of musicians associated with the same name), is this discourse of the 'two UB40s'. Original lead singer Ali Campbell, who left the band and later formed 'UB40 ft. Ali Campbell', provides an ongoing point of comparison against which the remaining members that constitute UB40 are constantly measured, and against whom they compete commercially and litigiously. It is in this discursive context that the band

[2] The name of the album also riffs on the national motto of Jamaica, 'Out of Many, One People', which appears on the Jamaican coat of arms.

makes concessions to their career, with their early popular period during which Ali Campbell was still the band's lead singer certainly dominating, but compared to their rivals the band also construct themselves as the UB40 that can still get Jamaica's most successful recording artists to feature on their recordings, that are still championed by their home town, and that are still writing and releasing new music. UB40 ft. Ali Campbell have to date released one album, comprising entirely covers. While a covers album is nothing unusual in the UB40 catalogue, the band emphasises their continued commitment to writing their own material, using notions of authorship to construct their artistry, authenticity, and relevance.

A bass player's embodied response to UB40's set

From the perspective of a bass player, one of the most striking things about learning a setlist's worth of UB40's music is how their basslines felt progressively more familiar – more recognisably reggae – as their career developed. Preparing to perform with the band offered me a unique opportunity to test this impression against the embodied experience of learning their repertoire.

To prepare for the gigs, I was given a live recording of the Royal Albert Hall concert and a copy of the setlist. With roughly six weeks until the first performance, I set about transcribing each part, learning, and internalising the entire set. Learning the set from a live recording, however, presented a distinct set of challenges than if I had been working from commercial studio recordings. In the latter, reggae bass parts are easy to isolate: the instrument is mixed prominently and can be discerned with greater clarity than in many other genres. On the live recording, however, the bass was much more difficult to discern. This is probably due to a combination of the poor acoustic fit of such a venue for a reggae concert and the band's and their engineers' decision not to place the bass as high in the mix as other reggae acts. I resolved this difficulty by returning to the studio recordings of the songs to hear the bass clearly, although this would later create problems when discrepancies emerged between the recorded and live arrangements – an issue I explore further in the following section on rehearsals with Jahred Gordon.

It is significant that, unlike many reggae 'standards', these lines were not already at my fingertips. Borrowing Grazian's concept of the "set-list of doom" – which describes the repertoire of songs every working musician in the Chicago blues scene is expected to know – it is apparent that UB40's music does not occupy an equivalent place in Britain's reggae

scene. That I had to learn these songs from scratch indexes their contested status in the minds of working reggae musicians and their audiences[3].

As I worked through the material, I began to notice two distinct approaches to bassline construction in UB40's catalogue. The first was structured and rigid: ostinato patterns built around root-fifth melodies that remained unaltered throughout the song. Tracks like 'Please Don't Make Me Cry' or 'Sing Our Own Song' fall squarely into this camp. The second approach was more fluid. Songs such as 'Tyler', 'King', 'Food for Thought', and 'One in Ten' featured constant variation, with bass figures shifting from bar to bar in both the studio and live versions. These variations suggested an evolving approach on Earl Falconer's part, one that reflected the band's developing relationship to reggae's conventions and perhaps the broader production culture in which they were working.

I *felt* this perceived stylistic evolution in my fingers as much as hearing it in the music . Later tracks – such as 'Gimme Some Kinda Sign', or even 'Kingston Town' – felt instantly familiar to play. The basslines to these records are built around a root-fifth or triad pattern and a quaver-heavy rhythm (not unlike, for example, the riddim that Janet Kay and Carrol Thompson's band composed for their cover of 'Lovely Day'). This aligned them with the particular kinaesthetic habits of reggae bass playing I had developed, contrasting with the incongruity I felt learning their earlier songs and the awkwardness with which the sat 'at my fingertips'.

A closer analysis of 'Food for Thought', taken from *Signing Off*, illustrates this point about the kinaesthetic incongruity of their earlier material. The chord progression to that song cycles through Am, E, G, and D (i, V, VII, IV in A minor), played in the familiar off-beat 'chop' pattern by guitar and keys. The bassline, however, does not follow the typical convention of centring on the root note. Instead, it descends chromatically: beginning on A, then moving to G# under the E chord, joining the guitar for the G, and dropping to F# under the D. This unusual harmonic relationship, which differs sharply from the kind of reggae basslines I had learned during my career, felt even stranger as I tried to emulate Falconer's use of hammer-ons and pull-offs – techniques common to rock bassists but unusual in reggae, where a rounded, sustained tone is typically desired. Similar patterns recur across UB40's

[3] For comparison, before beginning this research I had already learned 'Hurt So Good', which is a standard in reggae cover gigs, and had transcribed much of *Catch a Fire* when learning reggae and trying to replicate the style of Aston 'Family Man' Barrett. Lovers rock records are also regular fare, even if 'Silly Games' itself is less commonly performed, perhaps owing to the difficulty of replicating its high-pitched vocal.

early output: tracks like ‘Tyler’, ‘King’, and ‘One in Ten’ (all of which I played with the band) all employ harmonic ideas and improvised fills that *feel* closer to the vocabulary of rock or pop than to reggae as I had come to know it.

In this embodied sense, I felt a sense of UB40’s trajectory in learning their basslines. From this perspective, their early work reflects a band still learning the conventions of reggae. I took much more naturally to records from the later part of their catalogue, which felt much more ‘like reggae’. Such a construction of the band depends on the logic that they got better at playing reggae the more they played it, but is in complete contrast with the dominant narratives of decline and ‘selling out’, of moving *away from*, rather than towards, an idealised form of reggae as their career progressed. I explore such narratives below.

Rehearsals

Having familiarised myself with the bass parts for all the songs in the setlist, my next task was to rehearse the material with the other musicians. Before full-band production rehearsals could begin, though, I had the chance to play through the set with Jahred Gordon. A highly talented multi-instrumentalist and producer, and with a strong reputation among his fellow Jamaican musicians, Jahred had become UB40’s permanent keyboardist in 2022. During my brief stint with the band, Jahred resided primarily in Jamaica, but during the Birmingham rehearsals was staying with another band member in a flat on Hagley Road, a convenient ten-minute walk from my own house.

I rehearsed with Jahred several times, each session following a familiar pattern. I would turn up, tune up, and plug my bass directly into an interface linked to his laptop and Digital Audio Workstation software. Jahred would do the same with his keyboard, and the two of us would play along with the stems from a different live performance, this one taken from a recent performance in Moseley Park. By muting the bass and keyboards in the mix, he created space for us to play along with the rest of the band’s recorded performance. For songs with little variation or live arrangement to worry about, Jahred was content to run partially through them, in order to save time. For others, he offered prompts about structure and transitions, giving me a better chance to succeed during the full-band rehearsals and the actual gigs.

After these run-throughs, Jahred often asked me to play on some of his own productions. He would mute the existing bass track and invite me to improvise alternatives. I took this positively as a sign of endorsement from a musician deeply respected in contemporary Jamaican reggae culture. His feedback, including flattering comparisons to Robbie

Shakespeare, went a long way to boosting my confidence ahead of the intimidating gigs ahead.

The rehearsals were smooth and encouraging, apart from was one bone of contention. I had been explicitly instructed by UB40's management to learn the *live* basslines and arrangements of UB40's songs, and in some cases these differed significantly from the studio recordings. 'I Can't Help Falling in Love with You,' for example, departed markedly from its original version. Jahred, however, saw my presence as a dep as an opportunity to restore the originals to the set. He encouraged me to play what he regarded as the 'correct' versions, which created a tension between different authorities: the band's management and long-serving members, who expected the live arrangements, and Jahred, who placed the studio recordings at the centre of reggae's authenticity. As a dep musician it was easy for me to fall back on the excuse of 'just doing what I was told', but the conflict itself revealed the pre-eminence of recordings within about reggae culture and a musician's discourse of authenticity.

When I asked Jahred why he insisted on the originals, he explained that, to him, they were 'correct', and what UB40's fans were expecting to hear. Such a notion signifies the prominence of recordings in reggae's history (especially as bands like UB40 operate in the 'legacy act' stage of their career), and to the centrality of recordings for younger generations of musicians learning the music.

So far, I have made the case that writing a setlist is a discursive practice of selection, which, in the case of the setlist I performed with UB40, constructs a narrative of their career and makes the case for their continued relevance. I have reflected on the embodied response to my learning that setlist, arguing that their music feels progressively *more* like reggae as their career develops, and discussed the centrality of commercial recordings from reggae's past to my own, and Jahred Gordon's, development as musicians, and our musical interactions. My response as a musician runs contrary to the discourses that construct the band, to which I now turn my attention.

'How reggae' *are* UB40? The discourses that construct a band

In this section I explore three interrelated discourses that have shaped UB40's identity: accusations of 'selling out', cultural appropriation and their mediation as a 'white reggae band' despite their multi-ethnic line-up, and the notion of the 'two UB40s'. Each of these discourses is encompassed by the recurring question of 'how reggae' UB40 are. By

examining each in turn, we can see the different ways in which fans, journalists, and musicians have constituted what does and does not count as reggae. I then reflect on how these discourses have played out in reggae historiography, shaping UB40's contested place within it.

Signing off vs selling out

The concept of 'selling out' is a familiar notion in popular music discourse. In his article on British indie labels, Hesmondhalgh provides us with a productive definition of the notion: "pressures towards professionalization and partnership [with major record labels]", assumed to be "an abandonment of previously held idealistic positions" (1999, p. 34). While Hesmondhalgh addresses indie labels, his insight is just as pertinent to the study of bands and artists.

This notion is frequently invoked when pop fans make sense of a band or an artist's career over time, usually identifying their signing with a major label as the crossing of the Rubicon. Familiar notions of the margins and the mainstream are diachronically employed when fans understand an artist's beginnings to be an organic occurrence from an emergent and marginalised music culture, before their inevitable co-optation by the major music labels results in a 'watered-down' aesthetic. As Hesmondhalgh reminds us, though, "perspectives which ascribe negative aesthetic consequences directly to such problematic institutional arrangements may well be flawed" (p. 36).

We can see this discourse at work in Lloyd Bradley's review (2010) of UB40's 30th anniversary re-release of their debut album, *Signing Off*. Bradley, perhaps Britain's most preeminent reggae journalist and writer of one of its best histories, writes for the BBC Music website in 2010.

Bradley sets out his store in the first paragraph: "Remastered and reissued to celebrate UB40's 30th anniversary, *Signing Off* is still believed by many to be the group's greatest album, and it remains the clearest window into what the band were all about." There are two ideas at play: that *Signing Off* represents an aesthetic apex to which the band has never returned; and, paradoxically, that this lighting-in-a-bottle recording is also somehow the "most UB40" of all the UB40 albums. Such notions are taken as read in reggae discourse, and their obvious conflict is never problematised. The remainder of the band's catalogue is evoked but unnamed in the article, although it would be assumed that most fans of reggae or

pop music would be familiar enough with UB40's catalogue already to fill in the blanks: it is *Labour of Love* onwards that typically signals the downturn in reggae discourse.

Bradley's review continues, hinting at an aesthetic of Signing Off that tells us why this album was so good:

> It's far from their most musically proficient release, but Signing Off has energy and intelligence that made it stand out from so much post punk pop. This set sums up a bunch of young Brummies schooled in the West Indian blues dances of Balsall Heath, angry about the world around them and articulate enough to express that without simply ranting. Not entirely unexpected, as being clever with words and using abstract lyrical imagery is very Jamaican and was a factor in the 1970s reggae that influenced the band.

Note what seems like a reluctance to regard UB40 as a reggae band at all. The piece makes reference to the band's reggae influence, but explicitly categorises them as "post punk pop". Similarly, the song 'Madam Medusa' is praised as "the epitome of how roots reggae works", but the review falls short of actually categorising it as roots reggae[4]. Bradley's references to the album's aesthetic are key to understanding his discourse: the band's socio-political lyrics – understood as analogous to roots reggae's Rastafari-inspired lyricism, and their musical influence being rooted in their environment during a working-class, multi-ethnic upbringing in Balsall Heath. The band's early music is constructed as authentic here because it is early in their career, because it reflects an authentic portrayal of working-class anger at the early-Thatcher British political state, and because its lyrical content positions it closer to the 'authentic' ideal of Jamaican popular music. As I illustrated in the previous chapter, post-Marley, Rastafari-inspired roots reggae became the ideal form to which other modalities of reggae are compared.

Such discourses are rooted in a high-low dichotomy that has existed in some form or other for centuries: the idea that there is a credible, authentic form of popular music that becomes discredited when co-opted by a music industry whose preoccupation is with maximizing profits rather than aesthetic achievement or, in the case of UB40's early output, expressing some kind of authentic working-class Britishness. In this discourse, *Signing Off* is folkloric; their later *Labour of Love* album is a cash-grab.

The other discursive assumption at play here is the idea that authentic reggae is determined by its 'Jamaican-ness' (Bradley praises an aspect of the record that he describes as "very Jamaican"). This idea hinges on a presupposition that the closer a reggae record or artist

[4] That Bradley all but excludes them from his aforementioned reggae history is equally revealing (2001).

resembles an essentialised notion of Jamaican people or Jamaican music, the 'more reggae', or 'more roots', it is. Such questions of race and nationality and the role of each in structuring popular music discourse are, of course, fundamental to unpick. In the next section I do so, with regard to UB40, in greater detail.

'White reggae': race and nation in reggae discourse

An ambiguous mediation of the band with regard to race can be seen in the 2011 BBC TV documentary, *Reggae Britannia* (2012). I have discussed this documentary previously at the Global Reggae Conference (Torrens and Wall, 2022), where, similarly to director Marre's other efforts at documenting British music cultures (Wall and Long, 2010, Long and Wall, 2010) its narrative was critiqued for totalising the history of reggae in the UK. Marre's treatment of UB40, however, bucks this trend, to the extent that the significance of the band's ethnicities, in particular the whiteness of the band's singers, is left open to interpretation.

After a familiar introduction to the band as working-class Brummies, Marre's treatment of UB40 cuts to Mykaell Riley, founding member of the other of Birmingham's two most well-known reggae bands, Steel Pulse, in a talking head segment:

> Bands like UB40 we saw as cashing in on all that hard work that we'd done to bring British reggae to a point where we could exploit it, only to be superseded by what we thought at the time was a... weaker version, a more commercial version of what we were doing.

In a well-worn documentarian's sleight of hand, a hard cut to Robin Campbell of UB40 positions his statement as being in response to Riley's: "I think that there are some bands who thought that white guys shouldn't be playing reggae and that we've stolen their music, but they're as English as we are."

Where the earlier expository treatment of UB40 featured the totalised narrative over images of familiar tropes of the British working class under Thatcher, the section that explicitly tackles race features the voiceovers from the talking head interviews over glossy shots of the band performing 'Red, Red Wine' on Top of the Pops, a signifier for mainstream success. In a move that combines both the discourses of 'selling out' and race in popular music culture, Marre aligns the whiteness of the band's singers with the mainstream and with inauthenticity. The omniscient narrator closes out the section by totalising the band's move to the mainstream but falls short of casting judgement on the whiteness of some of its members: "As the 80s unfolded, reggae moved away from militancy… UB40 did an about turn and paid tribute to softer hits of the early 70s that inspired them to play reggae in the first place."

The ambiguity of Marre's mediation UB40's multiethnic makeup alludes to the problem reggae historians have tried to solve when making sense of UB40. They are categorically *not* a white band, and yet they received much the same foregrounding that many white artists who take from black music cultures do from a music industry that has repeated this practice time and again. In the most histories of the band[5], their multi-ethnic makeup is highlighted during the representation of the band's early 'authentic' period, but, as demonstrated in *Reggae Britannia*, when the band later 'sells out', it is the whiteness of the singers that is emphasised. This discrepancy highlights the way in which blackness and whiteness are used to signify authentic and inauthentic reggae in popular music discourses.

The other apparent thing to mention at this juncture is another axiom of pop music discourse: the primacy of the lead singer. In the case of UB40, Ali Campbell's whiteness has resulted in a multi-ethnic band becoming understood discursively as a white reggae band, and it is to this hierarchical phenomenon that I now turn my attention.

The 'two UB40s'

In 2008, lead singer Ali Campbell left UB40 to pursue a solo career. That is about as much as can be said from concrete evidence available to us. Anything else is part of a discourse so heavily mediated and contested by two bands, their lawyers and PR teams, and their respective fanbases, that to dragoon such partisan statements into a scholarly argument as anything other than primary data would be extremely difficult. Campbell began to perform using the name UB40, or variations thereof, causing litigious chaos and a sundering of their fanbase. Both bands have returned to touring in recent years, which Borthwick attributes to financial need resulting from mishandled business practices (Borthwick 2022). Whether or not this is the case, the 'two UB40s' phenomena offers insight into constructions of authenticity in novel ways. By looking at two statements made by each band towards the end of 2023, we can discern how this discourse manifests itself in the minds of fans and structures the practices of each band.

On 24th October 2023, UB40 ft Ali Campbell – who stake a claim on the battlefield of Instagram with their handle '@UB40' – posted a lengthy statement to the social media platform regarding discord between the two bands as to which band is the 'real' UB40 (UB40.org, 2023). Campbell's camp says the following:

[5] Borthwick (2022) is indicative.

> For the record, UB40 was a band that Ali started after receiving compensation from an injury he sustained, making him the founding member of the band… Since leaving the original set up of UB40 not only has Ali continued to tour using the name UB40, he has also continued to release successful Top Ten Albums – something which the former members of his band haven't… Ali's shows are clearly advertised as UB40 Feat. Ali Campbell and this is in place, so that fans clearly know they are getting the original singer who sang on all of the hits, bar our dearly beloved Astros' "Rat in Mi Kitchen"… We believe it is up to the fans of reggae music and UB40, to make their own decisions on who is UB40, is it the voice – Ali Campbell? is it the 4 other surviving members? Or is it all of them? This is for you to decide, not Ali and certainly not his former band mates or their management.

Campbell's narrative is multifaceted. His claim to front the authentic UB40 is based upon the historical fact that his initial financial investment in the band allowed them to come into being, upon the superior sales figures of his band, and upon the assumption that "the voice of UB40" is the band's defining musical feature. This last claim in particular indexes one of the ways in which lead singers and bands are understood within popular music culture. The logic at play here is that the voice is the most personal – and unique – of instruments; Earl Falconer's bass guitar, Brian Travers' saxophone, Jimmy Brown's drums – these can be replaced without any significant change in the band's identity; they're still UB40. But Campbell's voice is the one irreplaceable instrument if UB40's essence is to be preserved.

The 'original' UB40's statement (UB40.global, 2023) in response to this is equally as revealing a document with regard to understanding how a band conceives of itself. Posted on the band's website two days later, the statement begins by listing the myriad names under which Ali Campbell has performed live, including 'Ali Campbell the legendary voice of UB40', 'Ali Campbell the Golden Voice of UB40', 'Ali Campbell the True Voice of UB40'. Note again the emphasis Campbell places on the authority his voice holds in the minds of UB40's fanbase(s). The statement continues, highlighting that four of the five surviving founding members are still a part of their band, and that they – along with the late Brian Travers – wrote all the material apart from one Ali Campbell-penned song. They attribute Campbell's adoption of the UB40 moniker to poor ticket sales for his tours as a solo act. Their discourse again depends upon a narration of their history, on song-writing credits, and a discrediting of Campbell by implying financial desperation on his part. Throughout the statement is an undertone of common-sensical logic to their discourse that tells the reader they are real UB40 simply by virtue of the fact that they never *stopped* being UB40.

UB40's contested place in (or outside) reggae history

The recurring question of UB40's 'reggae-ness' manifests in histories of reggae in one of two ways. The first is by near or total exclusion from reggae history at all. *Tighten Up* (de Koningh and Griffiths, 2003), *Dub* (Veal, 2007), and *Solid Foundation* (Katz, 2003), all give the band the most cursory of reluctant mentions; in *Tighten Up* UB40 are mentioned twice in reference to their cover of Winston Groovy's 'Please Don't Make Me Cry', in *Dub* they are included in a list of bands that have turned to Neil 'Mad Professor' Fraser for remixing duties, and in *Solid Foundation* they appear in the transcript of a Lloyd Parks oral history. Neither Bradley (2001) nor Barrow and Dalton (1997) give the band a single mention in either of their comprehensive histories of reggae. This is a conspicuous absence in reggae historiography; in the discourse around the question of 'how reggae' UB40 are, such historical constructions position the band as footnotes to reggae history, or not reggae at all.

Such historiographic practice tells us more about the people who write such histories as it does about reggae history and UB40's place within it. As I demonstrated in Chapter One, histories of reggae have typically been written by fans. In this case, the present absence of UB40 in reggae history likely results from the historians cited above demonstrating their cynicism of UB40's reggae credentials by omission. In doing so they position themselves as the arbiters of the 'real' reggae, and UB40 as outside of such a canon.

Histories that *do* include UB40 adopt a standard narrative informed by the discourses defined above. For example, Borthwick's *Positive Vibrations*, includes a four-page treatment on the band. Borthwick does well to consider UB40 at greater length than most, but adopts the familiar narrative: the band begin their career with a "trilogy of politically charged reggae albums worthy of any self-respecting Jamaican reggae band," – note the equation of 'Jamaicanness' with authenticity which, as this thesis has shown, is recurrent in reggae discourse. Borthwick attempts to draw out how the band was meaningful politically to their audience: "As a solidly working-class band, the depth of UB40's debut gave the lie to the notion of unemployment being a result of laziness or educational underachievement." He also equates UB40's music with lovers rock, in that both the band and the genre/label both appealed widely to audiences of women. I have shown in the previous chapter (following Palmer) the historical inaccuracy of such a claim about lovers rock, and it is equally as problematic here .

UB40 receive similar treatments to this in Doumerc's *Jamaican Music in England* and Walker's *Dubwise*, but there is an interesting and significant point of departure across these

mediations of the band in the way in which they construct UB40's 'middle ['of the road'] period. Borthwick categorises this period of the band's career by ascribing to it a catch-all aesthetic "mellifluousness". While Borthwick may be attempting to adopt a diplomatic position as regards UB40's perceived sell-out here, allusions towards 'sweetness' as a musical categorisation are usually pejorative in reggae discourse as I have argued in the previous chapter. Doumerc, in his construction of the band as "reggae ambassadors", choses instead to highlight the band's practice of covering well-known Jamaican hits, especially in albums like *Labour of Love*. Their chart success is constructed in this narrative as a mission accomplished: reggae is at the top of the charts, and its originators are benefitting financially.

Walker, though, codifies this in a different manner. What Doumerc categorises as reggae ambassadorship, Walker constructs more cynically: "the cover version pop-reggae route chosen by the band was financially lucrative and gave them immense popularity as an admittedly talented band, but they cannot be assessed as producing U.K. reggae at its most creative and cutting edge." Adopting a discourse of progression (there is, for Walker, such a thing as "reggae at its… cutting edge") Walker's construction is of a band whose talent has to be "admittedly" recognised, and whose success was part of a plot to top the charts.

The production and mediation of *Signing Off*

So far in this chapter, I have approached UB40 through my own embodied practice as a bass player, and through the discourses that have constructed the band and determined their mediation in reggae historiography. These perspectives do not correspond, the former suggesting that the band became progressively 'more reggae' in their playing, the latter constructing the band as 'guilty' of 'selling out' and cultural appropriation as they moved further away from authentic reggae. I now return to the original moment of their debut album, examining the culture of production and mediation of *Signing Off*.

A band-led model of record production

The commonly told story of UB40's inception is one that echoes the formation of many British bands from the post-punk late 1970s, explained through the working-class solidarity of its multiracial members, the proliferation of 'DIY' youth culture, and a welfare state that could support – just about – aspiring creatives. The name eventually settled on by the band indexes such a beginning, famously named after the 'Unemployment Benefit 40' form which benefit claimants were required to fill out when 'signing on' for the dole.

The band was formed in 1978 by a group of young men from the neighbouring Birmingham suburbs of Kings Heath, Moseley, and Balsall Heath. Most of the members had attended Moseley School of Art, and had their minds set on a life in music. The lack of any kind of 'formal' musical training was not a problem:

> The DIY punk attitude ruled: anyone could be in a band, you didn't actually have to be able to play an instrument proficiently. In some ways, although none of [the members of UB40] ever really liked punk music – apart from Brian [Travers] – the formation of UB40 was fuelled by that punk ethic.
>
> Campbell, et al., 2005, p. 46

Brothers Ali and Robin Campbell had grown up in a musical and a leftwing home – their father was Ian Campbell, folk singer, trade unionist and leading figure in the British folk revival of the 1960s. After leaving school, the brothers held several jobs. Robin had been a toolmaker and foreman at the Leyland plant and tried his hand running a second-hand car dealership with another brother, Duncan. Ali worked as a labourer and industrial cleaner. Brian Travers, a schoolfriend of Ali's who owned but couldn't play a saxophone, had trained as an electrician. But after forming the band all members would ultimately end up 'signing on' – claiming unemployment benefits – in order to focus solely on music. It was during this period that a friend of the band members, Andy Nash, who suggested the name UB40 (Campbell, et al., 2005, p. 55).

The band "commandeered a cellar and started rehearsing every day, nine till five" (Chaytor, 2010), learning how to play their instruments and their chosen genre – reggae – by listening and playing along to reggae records (Campbell, et al., 2005, p. 52). Per Brian Travers, they practiced an entire a year before their first gig at Kings Heath's Hare and Hounds pub, their setlist comprising all the material from *Signing Off* as that was all the material they knew. Other accounts, though, have the band learning and rehearsing covers of original songs performed by Gregory Isaacs, Bim Sherman, and Randy Newman (Campbell, et al., 2005, p. 51); given that they learned how to play reggae by learning existing records, it's likely that Travers's telling of the tale is apocryphal. Regardless, after the first gig, the band continued to play local pubs like the New Inn and the Fighting Cocks, both in Moseley (Campbell, et al., 2005, p. 60).

Having developed performance and songwriting abilities through rehearsals and live gigs, the next step was to make a recording. Their formative period was defined by a sense of amateurism, welfare support, and the pub circuit, all of which enabled a distinctive culture of production than the one that begat the Jamaican reggae recordings from which they took

inspiration, and these same conditions shaped the recording of their debut album. Unlike the producer-driven environments of Jamaica or lovers rock, in which riddims were often composed basically in real time, UB40 entered the studio with a repertoire of pub gig-tested songs, approaching the recording of their debut with the ethos of a band rather than that of a singer-producer partnership.

It was at this point that Bob Lamb, became central to their story. Lamb, a well-known drummer with the Steve Gibbons Band and an aspiring producer, was instrumental in bringing UB40's debut to fruition. According to the record's sleeve notes, the album was recorded over five sessions across a seven-month period, between December 21st 1979 and 1 July 1980, at Lamb's self-styled 'Home of the Hits' studio. The ironic title belied the reality: the studio was the ground floor of Lamb's terraced house on Cambridge Road, only a short walk from the Hare and Hounds where the band had played their first gig. Lamb engineered and produced the sessions himself, creating an informal environment that mirrored the amateurism and camaraderie of the band. The additional 'bonus EP[6]' was recorded in July 1980 at The Music Center, engineered by Rage McKenna and Neil Black, and produced by bassist Earl Falconer's brother, Ray "Pablo" Falconer. These sessions often had the atmosphere of a garden party; friends and acquaintances gathered in the large back garden while recording took place indoors, with upwards of twenty people socialising around the band (Coley, 2015).

UB40 were impressed by Lamb's professional credentials (Campbell, et al., 2005, p. 66), while Lamb himself was struck by the band's songwriting, recalling that they won him over when they played him 'King' (Coley, 2015). He later described the group as "all geniuses, every last one of them," not because of flawless technical ability but because of the distinctiveness and charm of their collective sound. Brian Travers's saxophone, often slightly sharp or flat, would not have worked in a conventional music school context, but, in Lamb's view, it gave the music its idiosyncratic edge. Similarly, Mickey Virtue was celebrated not only for his timing but for his imaginative use of keyboard sounds, while Ali Campbell's voice was regarded as utterly unique. Lamb characterised the sessions as almost effortless:

[6] The album in its original vinyl format comprises two 12-inch discs, one containing ten songs and played at 33rpm, and one containing three songs and played at 45rpm. Its track list includes two covers, one of 'Strange Fruit', originally performed by Billie Holiday and popularised further by Nina Simone, and Randy Newman's 'I Think It's Going to Rain Today', as well as multiple instrumental tracks.

the band were in a good place, full of enthusiasm, and the album came together with little strain.

The band's first single, a double A-side of 'King' and 'Food for Thought', demonstrates both their naivety and their knack for connecting with audiences. 'King' was initially conceived as the hit, while 'Food for Thought', then known as 'the Christmas song', was relegated to the B-side. One of the road crew suggested its eventual title. It was, however, the latter track that resonated with DJs, its quicker tempo and danceable quality propelling it into radio rotation. Released on Graduate Records, the single entered the British charts in March 1980 and reached number four in April, remaining there for two weeks.

Graduate, a small independent label based in Dudley and run by David and Susan Virr, became indelibly linked with UB40 and *Signing Off*. Initially a vehicle for local rock acts, Graduate's profile was transformed by the success of UB40's debut. After the band went on to found their own DEP label in 1980, Graduate struggled to repeat this success, aside from a modest hit with the Maisonettes in 1983. Nevertheless, for a label barely two years old, the achievement of launching a chart-topping, platinum-selling reggae band was remarkable.

The story of UB40's debut is thus one of independence and amateurism. The band learned their craft through constant rehearsal, trial and error, and the supportive environment of a welfare state that enabled them to survive while developing musically. Brian Travers would later characterise *Signing Off* as "naïve," recalling that the band thought they could "change everything with a pop song" before discovering otherwise. That political naivety was mirrored in their musicianship: they had not yet mastered reggae, but were in the process of learning both their instruments and the genre itself.

Compared with other cultures of reggae production, UB40's approach was distinctive. In Jamaica, aspirant singers and seasoned musicians negotiated the strictures of producer-dominated studios, crafting singles aimed squarely at the dancefloor. Songs were typically pre-determined, whether original compositions or covers of US soul, while riddims were composed on the spot by studio musicians. Lovers rock in London operated in a similar way: producers such as Dennis Bovell functioned much like their Jamaican counterparts, directing musicians and singers in the studio. In Britain more broadly, however, would-be reggae musicians followed an established band model. They formed groups, played the pub circuit, and only after building up material and confidence did they seek to record a full-length album. Songs were written and refined in rehearsal rooms, tested before audiences in pubs

and clubs, and only then committed to vinyl. UB40's *Signing Off* is emblematic of this latter model: a record born of band-based amateurism and collective experimentation, situated within Britain's distinctive reggae production culture.

Mediations of UB40's early career and the amateurism of *Signing Off*

The idea that *Signing Off* represents a more experimental attempt at producing a reggae record, rather than a fully accomplished work of mastery, is not only audible in how the music sounded to me as a bass player, and evidenced by a history of the record that emphasises its culture of production, but can also be traced in early attempts to mediate the band. While such artefacts are attempts by both the band and the music press to present UB40 in a particular light, and cannot therefore be taken as objective truth of their musical abilities, they do constitute a discourse that contrasts starkly with the dominant retroactively applied narrative that celebrates *Signing Off* as the band's 'best' album.

The members themselves repeatedly framed their debut in terms of learning, exploration and naivety, such as in this feature published in *Sounds* in September 1980, for example:

> Ali: "We're still looking for the sound we haven't got yet, though."'
>
> Earl: "We want to do heavier reggae, but we're still learning."'
>
> Brian: "Those instrumentals [on *Signing Off*] were some of the first things we ever did together. They are really innocent."
>
> Ali: "Because we've got so many people involved in writing we get some stuff that's very plain and some that nobody understands at all…"'
>
> Ali: "Our first rehearsals were at Earl's place. He had a room the size of this table, but the cellar underneath it was as big as this caff."

The musicians' own discourse construct a narrative that was reinforced by other members of the band in subsequent interviews. Drummer Jimmy Brown characterised their music as a process of incremental growth: "It's just a natural progression. As we learn it we do it, we're still trying to master new techniques. It's just about doing what we do in a heavier style." Travers, too, tried to downplay the political or aesthetic weight that was being projected onto the band: "People take the band a lot deeper than it really is, we're just a normal bunch of blokes but we get forced into a situation of answering really heavy political questions." Later reflections reinforced the same spirit. Travers explained that the dole provided both sustenance and the space to experiment:

> Thank God for the dole. We got fed, it paid the rent and it enabled us to concentrate on developing our careers. We commandeered a cellar and started rehearsing every day, nine till five. Our first experiences of playing an instrument started together, and we'd humiliate each other over mistakes. But we were very serious about our music.

> It was a year before we played our first gig. It was in an upper room at the Hare and Hounds in Kings Heath, Birmingham. We played the whole of *Signing Off* because they were the only songs we knew.
>
> White, 1982

These extracts have been taken from sympathetic mediations of the band as working-class, relatable heroes, but we can still see a version of this narrative in a negatively-slanted piece from the same period. Reviewing the *UB44* album for *NME* in 1982, Charles Shaar Murray contrasted UB40's rhythm section with the taut precision of Jamaican players, writing that their beat "feels loose and floppy where it should be tight as a… er… drum." For Murray, the band's commitment to social realism risked becoming one-dimensional: "There is something grimly literal-minded about their obsessive view of reggae as a music which deals exclusively in sufferation and weary recounting of Babylonion excesses… On UB40 records, it's always bloody raining," (1982). What Murray is constructing in his piece is, ultimately, a sense that UB40 are not good enough to replicate Jamaican reggae, be that in their songwriting or musical ability; UB40's reggae doesn't *sound* right to Murray.

Outroduction: so, how reggae are UB40?

In reflecting on performing the music of UB40 as a temporary part of the band, writing the history of their formation and debut album, and unpicking the discourses that have constructed them, a number of themes have emerged. Chief among these is the question of the band's reggae credentials, which reveals the different ways that fans, journalists, and historians construct ideas of what does and does not qualify as reggae. Across much of the commentary, reggae has been constructed as a black Jamaican cultural form rather than a transnational one, and politically charged rather than commercially oriented. UB40, despite their multi-ethnic membership and their evident debt to reggae as a form, have therefore been repeatedly judged against criteria that measure them against an idealised version of the genre.

In the previous chapter, I used Palmer's critiques of lovers rock discourse and Grazian's conceptualisation of authenticity to demonstrate how narratives in reggae discourse often misapprehend the music's past. These debates are equally applicable to the question about what constitutes a 'British reggae sound'. As I have shown, British reggae was not confined to bands but also flourished in producer- and singer-led studio cultures that closely resembled those of Jamaica. Yet when commentators evoke the 'sound' of British reggae, they often mean the sound of British reggae bands. Steel Pulse and Aswad, for instance, signed their debut albums to Island Records and entered professionalised studio cultures from the outset, while UB40's path was marked by amateurism, welfare-state survival, and DIY rehearsal

culture. Not all British reggae bands followed UB40's model, but their reliance on the pub circuit, their collective authorship, and the refinement of material in live performance before it was taken into the studio contributed significantly to what became recognised as a distinctively British reggae sound.

What distinguished Britain from Jamaica was less a matter of sonic quality – as Hitchins has shown, differences in recording fidelity were not the determining factor – than of the culture of production. Whereas Jamaican recordings were typically the product of producer-led studios and songs composed or adapted on the fly, British bands like UB40 road-tested songs in pubs and rehearsal spaces before committing them to record. This band-centred culture of production, rather than any essentialised sonic difference, did as much as anything else to shape how reggae in Britain came to sound.

Conclusion

To conclude this research, I outline, and reflect on, how its three central themes (the role of musicians within cultures of production, transnationalism, and mediation) manifest across the duration of the thesis. In so doing I accomplish two things: I summarise what I have found out about reggae's past and its significance in the present (or, more accurately, the near-past); and I make the case that this research contributes to an alternative framework of the historiography of popular music, specifically in this case of reggae, but which can be applied to other music genres and cultures in popular music and jazz studies. I end by identifying the future avenues of investigation opened up by the research.

The findings of this research, which I have presented through five micro-histories of commercial recordings, unearth rich detail on the temporal cultural location of each record, before expanding outwards to make some broader points about the following:

- the dominant but contested stories of reggae's past,
- the mediation of reggae culture to different audiences,
- the agency of musicians in creating this culture,
- their part in the creation of reggae in its transnational locales, and
- the differences in political economy and production cultures in different transnational locales.

In the context of wider reggae research and history writing, I have argued that these themes are underrepresented or misunderstood. They identified themselves to me over time, coming into sharper focus throughout the duration of this project, as I continued to read, enter the field, write up, reflect, and so on. Rather than advocating for an emphasis on, for example the role of musicians, as a better way to conceive of and write a popular music history, I instead want to stress how the particularities of a certain genre culture and its written histories should determine what approach needs to be taken in order to pluralise and complicate whichever narratives have become prominent. (It would be difficult, for example, to argue that instrumental musicians have been underrepresented in jazz histories.) However, in the case of the microhistories that make up the findings of this research, such an emphasis unearths new perspectives on a music from the past and the way it sounds today.

This notion, that the musical past is very much alive in the musical present, similarly emerged steadily as my primary research progressed. As all five findings chapters demonstrate, in their own way, reggae's past continues to inform our broader cultural

conjuncture, whether that be as inspiration for filmmakers or as a structuring influence on contemporary touring practices and setlist curation. The idea that the musical past manifests in the present has been central to some ethnomusicological work, and this research demonstrates its potential applicability for other disciplines too. Media and cultural studies, for instance, have the potential read contemporary mediations of music not just as texts about the past, but as instances in which the past is actively re-sounded and re-imagined.

This indexes the entangled approach I have employed in conducting research that is profoundly interdisciplinary. Not only have I drawn on ethnomusicology and history for this piece of media and cultural studies research, but I have also used the case of reggae to demonstrate how these distinct traditions of research can be brought into dialogue and reshaped in the process. Accessing the past, and writing popular music history in this way, makes it possible to attend simultaneously to cultures of production of the past, to practices of mediation over time, and to the sound of recordings across transnational contexts and across decades. It is precisely at the intersections between disciplines that richer, more plural histories of popular music begin to emerge.

Musicians in/and the culture of production

This research has sought to emphasise the relationship between the culture of production of a recording and the way it sounds (as both an aural recording and signifying object), and has paid particular attention, where possible, to the role that musicians have played within those cultures. This is because in the particular case of reggae discourse, with its focus on producers and star singers, the significant role of instrumentalists is often obfuscated. Where I do attend to singers, I treat them not as stars or figures of great genius but as musicians.

In Chapter Two I identify some productive scholarship within reggae studies that has begun to address this imbalance, though I note that it remains under-theorised. Turning to other disciplines for inspiration, I discuss works from ethnomusicology, which have either been particularly influential or which have engaged with popular music cultures specifically, and I identify a model from jazz studies, ethnography, and popular musicology that exemplify the approach I adopt in this thesis. Exploiting the particularly productive aspects of my own positionality as a musician to this end has resulted in what I have called the 'musician-to-musician dialogue'.

The emphasis on cultures of production and the part played musicians within them runs throughout all the findings chapters. In Chapter Six, for example, I conceptualise the culture

of recording of *Catch A Fire* as a singularly distinct moment in which the British rock and Jamaican reggae production cultures interacted. While most treatments of that record fixate on its overdubs and marketing, I make the basic but important point that the success of that album depended just as much on the Wailers, acting as producers in Blackwell's stead, making good use of the musicians in Kingston's studios.

The usefulness of my focus on musicians, though, and especially of my concept of a musician-to-musician dialogue, is particularly in Chapters Five and Eight.

After interrogating some of the discourses that construct reggae's most infamous producer in Chapter Four, in Chapter Five, I move the focus away from Lee "Scratch" Perry and on to what the musicians in the Upsetters did. In doing so, and building on extant scholarship from Ray Hitchins and incorporating the understanding of Peter Ashbourne, I theorise how studio musicians played a significant, and underacknowledged, role in the 'creative echo chamber' that constitutes Kingston's distinct culture of production. The chapter represents the emphasis the research pays on musicians' insight through the space I create for the verbatim quotes from my interlocutors as much as the musical culture of their past that I attempt to recreate.

I also use this insight, as well as oral histories of Susan Cadogan and Boris Gardiner, to re-conceptualise Perry as a music maker, his role in this culture, and what made him and his productions significant. In this way, I indicate my approach to engaging with and incorporating extant reggae histories into my own; while those histories may be too preoccupied with individuals like Perry, and too reliant on under-theorised notions of their 'greatness', by no means do I mean to suggest that Perry was not an important or talented record producer; only that the narrative that constructs him in many peoples' minds has become too narrow, and underplay the larger cultural cohort in which Perry operated.

In Chapter Eight, I theorise a 'band-led model of production that proliferated in the British reggae scene, with successful Aswad, Steel Pulse, Misty etc. Despite these bands' closer discursive association with a 'more Jamaican' style of roots reggae, the cultures of production in which they operated were far more distinct from those in Jamaica than those of lovers rock, despite the frequent constructions of the latter as being an explicitly British phenomenon. Particular aspects of the socio-cultural conjuncture in which these bands proliferated, like DIY punk culture and the focus on live music enabled by an infrastructure of pub gigs, when contrasted with the creative echo chamber, helps to explain the commonly

acknowledged difference in British and Jamaican reggae sound without recourse to the essentialising discourse.

A transnational history of reggae

This research focuses primarily on Jamaica and Britain, which I conceive of as two important locales in reggae's transnational cultural formation. However, I have also taken care to emphasise the cultural influence of the US, and of the importance of the wider Caribbean to Jamaica and its musicians. Put succinctly, I have tried to explore how reggae sounds across the black Atlantic. This does not just apply to the histories I write, but begins in Chapter One, in which I explore different scholarly and discursive perspectives on reggae emerging from different nodes within the black Atlantic.

My commitment to transnationalism results from several emergent themes within my research. It obviously depends upon the theoretical and historical work of Paul Gilroy, but also from this recurrent notion that British reggae has its own distinct sound, that I articulate in the Introduction to this thesis. I have wanted to investigate reggae on a transnational scale, and explore how the idiosyncrasies of local cultures of production across a much wider transnational culture impact on the sound of its recordings, both from a sonic and discursive perspective.

My emphasis on transnationalism intersects with the other central pillars of this research, such as in Chapter Four, which explores the mechanisms by which British audiences were exposed to records from Jamaica's culture of production, the different ways in which they sounded to different audiences, and the importance of mediation to that process.

Chapter Five expands the theme of transnationalism beyond the dynamic between Jamaica and Britain as it explores the influence of US soul records and Blaxploitation and Western cinema on Jamaican society, including culture of reggae production. It also explores how Boris Gardiner, a key player in that culture, moved around the Caribbean, the US, and Canada before returning to Jamaica and settling in the studios of Kingston, and how this influenced his musicianship.

I have already indicated the importance of transnationalism to my treatment of *Catch A Fire* above, but it is worth noting here that I have shown how, beyond the intersection of two distinct cultures of production, the production of album and its subsequent discursive construction also mark the introduction of a very Anglo-American rock notion of authenticity, relating to authorial intention, into reggae's production cultures in a substantive way.

In Chapter Seven I most explicitly address the concept of nation as a structuring device in reggae discourse, as I discuss what is typically constructed as a 'distinctly British' phenomenon in lovers rock, in its transnational context. I explore the link between nation and authenticity in reggae discourse, which has wider implications for the academic study and discourse analysis of popular music genres beyond reggae. This chapter perhaps most directly indicates the need to emphasise transnationalism and move beyond simplistic nationalist discourses when studying popular music cultures, and writing and researching their histories.

Chapter Eight depends upon yet another way in which to conceptualise transnationalism, by exploring how the musical past of a British reggae band, performing their music which was inspired by (and includes multiple cover versions of) Jamaican reggae, informs their present-day (or, more accurately, their near-past) stadium shows in continental Europe.

Reggae's mediated past; mediating reggae's past

Bringing a media studies toolkit to bear to in a work of popular music history such as this certainly offers an alternative perspective on the past, but also goes much furtherr. In the case of popular music cultures like reggae, the literal records of the past are so often artefacts of its mediation: commercially-produced recordings and data on their success in the music charts, print articles, and broadcast documentaries. Media studies, then, offers historians of popular music the theoretical models with which to better conceptualise the materials that popular music cultures tend to archive as a matter of course. These frameworks make possible a more sophisticated reading and re-telling of the past, locating its material culture in the political economies of the institutions that produced them, and articulating the work of signification that occurred (and still occurs).

In Chapter One, which identifies trends and common tropes in reggae historiography, I make the case that this work has largely been undertaken by journalists and fan-historians, rather than by academics in history departments. As I demonstrate, their histories also most often neglect a recognition of the basic tenet in media and cultural studies: that music (and all culture) is produced, mediated and consumed. While reggae histories incorporate its mediation, in that they foreground recordings (which are media artefacts) and occasionally refer to the music press, they lack a notion that the process of reggae's mediation was an active and important part of the story.

Chapter Three outlines my methodical approach, which applies concepts from media and cultural studies to the analysis of media artefacts. I include both the analysis of both primary

historical sources and representations of that past in more recent documentary and drama television. However, I go further, making the case that writing reggae history is in itself an act of mediating reggae's past. This is the best way we can approach both the re-evaluation of existing reggae histories and the reimagining of new ones. I make the case that this has implications for popular music historiography below.

I focus in closely on contemporaneous British mediations on screen and in print of reggae at the point of its inception in Chapter Four, in order to demonstrate how early coverage of reggae in the British music press – mediating a Jamaican music for a British consumption culture – relied upon recurrent tropes within white mediations of black music culture, and how much retrospective history writing from the UK has reinforced these tropes. My analysis of the *Melody Maker* piece demonstrates the uneasiness with which reggae sat in the pages of an important publication which was preoccupied with rockist notions of authenticity, and which could not make sense of reggae in these terms, even while recognising it as something important unfolding.

Informed by these insights from engaging with existing histories and primary source mediations, I construct a history of one of the central recordings to such mediations – 'Return of Django' – that tells an alternative story to the dominant construction of Perry as a musical genius and, instead, locates the record as a sounding object in a broader map of meaning for different audiences in the UK, complicating the one-dimensional mediations of Perry and his music. I then revisit one of these mediations in Chapter Five, using what I have found out about role of musicians within the culture of production to rethink Jeremy Marre's camera captured in the Black Ark studio. I show how the work of documentarians such as Marre – just as much as journalist fan historians like Barrow and Dalton, and Katz – can provide valuable historical insight with a more theoretically-informed reading of what these journalists and historians document.

Chapter Six recognises that reggae is not just mediated in 'the media', but also by our museums. This chapter uses the narrative device of a visit to the Bob Marley Museum to consider reggae's most celebrated figure, exploring the construction of Marley's legacy and its implications. I interpret the story told by the museum to be an act of mediation. I recount my experiences and reflect on my personal response to this act of mediation and explore the relationship between Marley's past and my present as both a musician and a researcher.

In Chapter Seven, I explore a more recent, fictional mediation of an aspect of reggae history in Steve McQueen's *Lovers Rock*. Unlike all the other mediations of reggae this research analyses, which fixate on aspects of reggae's production, McQueen's stands out in that it mediates a blues, a context in which boundaries between production and consumption become fluid. I argue that the film, which was both lauded for its perceived historical accuracies and critiqued for its inaccuracies, does as much for our understanding of the lovers rock consumption culture it depicts because of McQueen's emphasis on multiple perspectives and narratives.

Finally, Chapter Eight explores contemporaneous and retroactive mediations of UB40, and explores how the way in which they sound to different people has evolved through time. I also consider the band's touring practice in 2023, and make the case that their setlist construction is an act of mediating themselves and their past to their fans.

Opportunities for future research

This research exemplifies an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the past of a particular popular music genre (in this case, of reggae) and the importance of that past to, and its manifestation in, the present moment. In synthesising various approaches, it seeks to subvert, interrogate, complicate, and ultimately pluralise, the dominant narratives that construct that past in the minds of fans and musicians. I hope scholars of other popular musics, and other cultures of the past, find something methodologically useful in the way in which I have identified and understood the areas of neglect in reggae histories and attempted to address them.

There remains, though, much work to be done on the past, present and preservation of reggae cultures at a global level. For this work to be done, funding must be identified and stakeholders engaged. We must go beyond what can be achieved through the passion projects of academics being funded by small research grants. I equally, then, hope that this project contributes in a small but meaningful way to the notion that institutions in the global North who have benefitted from reggae, in terms of financial, cultural and social capital, such as record labels, universities and their funders, and media corporations, can begin to redress the imbalance of the unequitable transnational formation of reggae culture.

This work must happen quickly. Since I began this project in 2021, a number of significant reggae musicians have passed away. These include its most (in)famous producer, Lee "Scratch" Perry, and several instrumental musicians central to Jamaican musical culture, such

as Robbie Shakespeare, Mikey Chung, Earl 'Bagga' Walker, and Michael 'Ibo' Cooper of Third World and Inner Circle. Also among them are musicians and artists who were instrumental to British reggae culture, including Drummie Zeb of Aswad, and the poet and musician Benjamin Zephaniah. So are influential singers like as Pluto Shervington, Owen Gray, and Cocoa Tea. This is a truncated list, that will inevitably omit the names of many other musicians and people whose discursive status has not warranted their names in obituary columns, but who played a role in the entangled progression of reggae culture.

Their passing underscores the urgency of further oral-historical work, as musicians from reggae's golden age continue to age, and their memories inevitably shift. This is particularly important in vernacular, living music cultures like reggae, where oral testimony plays such a crucial role in shaping collective understandings of the past. This research demonstrates the need not just for undertaking that work, but for doing so with a set of theoretically-driven questions, rather than assuming that 'the past in their own words', 'reggae history', and 'the past of reggae' are synonymous.

Oral histories of reggae's past are crucial, but their retrieval also indexes a larger set of questions about the archiving of reggae's cultural memory: what aspects of the past is it possible to archive, by whom, and for which audiences? Who stands to benefit from these archival practices, and might there be opportunities for archival activism, or even for forms of economic and cultural reparations? Such questions present fertile terrain for further inquiry by academics, but also necessitate the need to incorporate the communities from which reggae music emerged into the dialogue. This is particularly the case in the study of reggae, a music from which US- and UK-based stakeholders have frequently benefitted financially. Given the wide acknowledgement of this trend, scholars of Jamaican popular music, particularly those with access to levels of funding not often available to scholars in the Caribbean, should aim to invert this unbalanced relationship.

Beyond the preservation of reggae's living cultural knowledge, there are myriad other pathways to impactful research. Jamaican publications such as *Swing* magazine remain an underexplored resource, for example. This research has indexed the importance of the church, and of the culture of gospel music, to the development of reggae's musicians, which I have argued are central to its sound; much work remains to be done on this important, cosmopolitan intersection. Similarly, much more work remains to be done in moving beyond the Jamaica–UK framing that this research explores. The discursive dominance of these two

locales in reggae's global formation must be challenged if we are to better ascertain the global influence of this music culture.

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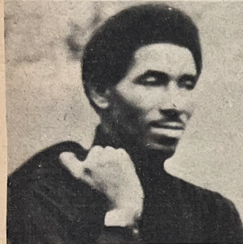
Appendix 1: Chris Welsh. 'Spotlight on reggae'. *Melody Maker*, November 8th 1969.

SPOTLIGHT ON REGGAE

HARRY J. ALL STARS

THE HARRY J. ALL STARS have been together for the past two years as a backing group. They entered the MM chart last week with their first solo record " Liquidator." The four unknown musicians who comprise the All Stars were brought together by Harry Johnson who wrote and produced " Liquidator," on his own Harry J record label. The All Stars previous chart entry was the Jamaican hit " No More Heartaches " by the Beltones which went to number one. Harry Johnson has also produced recent singles by Marcie Griffiths and the Jay Boys.



UPSETTERS

THE UPSETTERS are the current leaders of the reggae invasion of the chart with their instrumental hit " Return Of Django." They are led by songwriter and producer Lee Perry who also acts as vocalist with the group. Their first British tour starts at the end of November. Perry started as a songwriter before producing his own hits " People Funny Boy " and " Jackpot." He brought Johnny Moore, Val Bennett, Winston Wright, J. Jackson, Hux Brown, Easy Beckford and Bob Aitkens together to form the Upsetters and to give him his first British chart hit.

PIONEERS

THE PIONEERS are three young Jamaicans-Sidney Crooks, Jackie Robinson and George Agard — who started out as part of a five piece orchestra known as the Mighty Pioneers. In September of last year the other two members of the group left and the trio carried on as the Pioneers and it is this line-up that will be coming to England later this month for a club and ballroom tour. The trio's first record was " Never Come Running Back " on the Caltone label. They had a big hit in Jamaica with " Gimme Little Lovin' " but it is their latest single " Long Shot [Kick The Bucket]" that has established them on the British scene.

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Reggae—is it a new art form?

A critical appraisal by Christopher J Welch

ONE OF the more intriguing aspects of the current popular music scene is the amount of Reggae, Ska and Bluebeat that has gotten into the Pop 30.

To many observers of contemporary music this development of interest in what appears to be an extremely primitive form, seems like a serious case of lowering standards in public taste and a dangerous assault on the cause of progression.

Boom

Yet it could well be that the bluebeat boom or escalating ska phase, is a pointer to a new sophistication among the nation's young record buyers.

The common belief is that only the " skinhead " faction buy their records out of perverse delight in affronting the intelligence of those who have been busy raising the standard of pop for the last ten years.

Not so. Many hip fans are now turning towards an art form that only the deaf cannot see and to which only the blind will not listen.

Honest

For Reggae, in the opinion of many reliable musicologists, is a manifestation of a far more valid, honest and authentic, derivation from African music than either jazz, blues or calypso.

The sound of " Long Shot (Kick The Bucket) " by the Pioneers or " Wet Blanket " by Max Waxie and the Hill And Gully Riders on the Bover label, is closer to the polyrhythmic and atonal tribal dance melodies of West Africa than anything Cream or Led Zeppelin could hope to achieve.

Slaves

When the slaves of West Africa were transported to the West Indies they took their rhythms with them, much to the relief of the remaining inhabitants (who didn't have rhythm).

In today's West Indian pop we can still hear that distinctive weak shuffle beat and authentic anaemic vocals, not to mention the highly valid out of tune guitar, saxophone and trumpet playing (always a unique quality of the tribal bepop of the M'bongo tribe).

Struck

When Dr Isambard " Ska Face " Capone first recorded them in Africa as late as 1936 he told learned societies in a lecture tour: " I was immediately struck by the unique quality of their out of tune guitar, saxophone and trumpet playing."

There are absolutely no European influences in Reggae at all. Those who come gleefully hoping to detect Schoenberg, Prokoviev, Copland, Stockhausen, Cookhausen, and Russell Unwin, will be disappointed.

Pure

For this is pure African music that we hear, the swoop and slash of the bloodstained spear in every drum beat, the howl of a nation demanding freedom in every cry of " It Mek " and " Ignatz."

Those with an analytical mind will readily detect a kind of mathematical inevitability in the special structure of the quaint chord formations, a tendency to seeping inertia in the basalt-like layers of rhythmic perplexity.

Direct

Boghausen, the German chemist, once wrote at Worms in 1612: " Luther? — No tighter," which many interpreted as a direct prophecy of the holacaust to come.

Many of the sounds of Reggae are " musique concrete " or " cement waltz," some of the everyday sounds that occur in the Reggaeist's life; a dripping tap, a lavatory being flushed, the sound of a stomach, the beauty of a birdcall — thus: " Ark, ark, Belay there! "

Yes, Reggae can be a frightening, but often moving experience.

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Appendix 2: UB40 2023 Set List

Song	**Year of commercial release**
Here I Am	1990 as a single; 1989 on *Labour of Love II*
Sing Our Own Song	1986 as a single and on *Rat in the Kitchen*
1 in 10	1981 as a single and on *Present Arms*
Homely Girl	1989 on *Labour of Love II*
Tyler/King	1980 on *Signing Off*; 'King' released as single in 1980
Please Don't Make Me Cry	1983 as a single and on *Labour of Love*
Champion	2022 Commonwealth Games official anthem; 2024 on *UB45*
You Don't Call Anymore/ Me Nah Leave Yet	2021 on *Bigga Baggariddim*
Don't Break My Heart	1985 as a single and on *Baggariddim*
Groovin	1989 on *Labour of Love II*
Bring Me Your Cup	1993 on *Promises and Lies*
Higher Ground	1993 on *Promises and Lies*
Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain	2013 on *Getting Over the Storm*
The Keeper	2019 on *For the Many*
Gimme Some Kind Of Sign	2024 as a single and on *UB45*
Cherry Oh Baby	1984 as a single; 1983 on *Labour of Love*
Maybe Tomorrow	1987 as a single
I'll Be Your Baby Tonight	1990 as a single and on Robert Palmer's *Don't Explain*
Broken Man	2019 on *For the Many*
Johnny Too Bad	1983 on *Labour of Love*
Red, Red Wine	1983 as a single and on *Labour of Love*
	Encore
Food For Thought	1980 as a single and on *Signing Off*
Kingston Town	1990 as a single; 1989 on *Labour of Love II*
Can't Help Falling In Love	1983 as a single and on *Promises and Lies*

Appendix 3: The mediation of reggae during its 'golden age' in the British music press

Abstract

This article examines the mediation of British reggae culture in the 1970s in *Melody Maker* and *Black Music*. In *Melody Maker*, rock critics come to terms with this new music culture in real time. *Black Music* comes into being in 1973, orienting itself around this new British reggae market. This analysis explores each publication's discursive construction of itself, its audience, and crucially, this new Jamaican form of popular music, in the context of their common ownership by IPC Magazines Ltd.

The analysis of reggae in the British music press reveals the editorial and discursive strategies employed by *Melody Maker* to make sense of reggae. In this context, the reportage of reggae journalist Carl Gayle in *Black Music* provided an important counter to the dominant narratives mediating black British music culture.

The article contributes to debates about black British music culture, and on the larger phenomenon of European writers addressing popular music cultures of the black Atlantic in the twentieth century.

Manuscript

This paper explores the mediation of reggae in the British music press during what many fans and historians acknowledge as the music's 'golden age' period, spanning from the tail-end of the 1960s, through the 1970s. As I demonstrate, such mediations indicate the significant role played by the music press in the discursive constructions of reggae music, its makers, and its audiences. There is broad consensus about the emergence of reggae from 1960s ska and rocksteady forms of Jamaican music, the increasing importance of 'roots' reggae as a form of 'black[i] Atlantic' identity in the mid 1970s, and the end of a golden age of reggae in the early 1980s[ii]. Reggae scholarship constitutes a proliferating body of work and the history of the music's development and meaningfulness in its original Jamaican context has been well documented from a cultural perspective[iii]. Other contributing perspectives from the University of the West Indies include Howard's productive framework for understanding Kingston's idiosyncrasies in the mode of a production culture[iv], and Hitchin's history of technological developments in Jamaica's scene[v].

The story of the adoption of reggae in Britain starts with an emphasis of its use by British subcultures, especially skinheads or 'white rastas'[vi], and as an 'alternative soundtrack to Britishness'[vii]. Julian Henriques' pioneering study of the sound system[viii], and the ongoing work of the Sonic Street Technologies project he leads, constitute a multi-faceted study of the consumption culture most-often associated with reggae records. This project, as well as the work anthologised in *Global Reggae*[ix], index the remarkable degree to which reggae culture and reggae scholarship have proliferated worldwide.

Far less attention has been focused on the way the European music press represented reggae, as a mediation of the culture of another place, and how specialist papers and magazines made sense of a Jamaican music for Europeans. This case study of British journalists, and the publications for which they worked, provides an example of the shifting mediation of reggae for the music fans of one European nation. The study is even more interesting in revealing how fast new discourses of reggae emerged and how British magazine publishers attempted

to deal with the diversity of ways reggae could be, and was, understood by its European audiences.

I show how, in *Melody Maker*, a longstanding British music publication, the emerging sound of reggae was most often constructed as 'other'. Journalists, fluent in a discourse that mediated rock-as-artform, constructed reggae as an alien music which needed explaining to its readership and against which their own music culture was reinforced. In another, then newly-established magazine, *Black Music*, a different set of questions, amounting to a powerful counter-narrative, are posed and answered. Equally interesting is that these magazines' very different ways of explaining reggae to their readers occurred despite their common ownership. IPC Magazines Ltd, who owned both titles, was then a dominant owner in an increasingly oligopolist market for weekly publications.

Melody Maker came under IPC's umbrella as a legacy music publication that, by late 1969, mostly catered to a rock audience. IPC also owned *Melody Maker*'s main competitor for rock readers, *New Musical Express*. First published in 1973, *Black Music* was an attempt by IPC to cater for a new market of black music fans in the UK, in which reggae played a large role. *Black Music* was a response within IPC's senior leaders to construct a readership that challenged the independent *Blues and Soul*[x], by including coverage of West African and Caribbean musics alongside their Western counterparts. All these publications cover reggae in album/single reviews, artist profiles, and advertisements for live concerts as well as less frequent, major features on the music.

It is these major features to which this article is attentive. To do so, I draw on approaches from media studies and critical discourse analysis to begin this work of understanding reggae's construction in the pages of music periodicals. I analyse three features, two from *Melody Maker* and one from *Black Music* magazine. I follow Wall's broadly outlined approach[xi], in asking the following questions of the discourses that operate in each piece: what is the object being constructed here? By whom? Using what discursive repertoire? And who benefits? As the features I analyse often feature mediations of a Jamaican musical culture from a British perspective, this set of questions raises important ideas about ethnicity, identity, and nationality. To understand these ideas, I draw upon two key thinkers, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, specifically the former's concept of the black Atlantic and the latter's 'What is this black in black popular culture?'[xii]. These landmark works represent two attempts, one weighted towards historical analysis and one theoretical, at resolving the paradoxical position of the notion of race in resistance to oppression. Their approaches help us to understand how ideas and expressions of 'race' can simultaneously be an essentialist construction through which Europeans explained and justified their oppressions of other peoples and an act of re-signifying the language of an oppressor as a source of meaningfulness and resistance.

I begin by locating these two publications within a historical and organisational discussion of IPC Magazines. In so doing, I illustrate how multiple approaches to the mediation of reggae occur within a broader business practice of a media institution: the attempt to monopolise the British magazine market and segregate its audiences in line with its practice of acquiring and selling titles.

The main part of the article explores these wider issues of ownership, control and readership through the published articles commissioned by the editors, and written by journalists, employed at each publication. I focus on three major editorial features on reggae in two music periodicals published in 1969 and 1976. Of the articles featured here, the first two are

taken from issues of *Melody Maker* published in 1969 and 1976. The latter, also from 1976, was featured in *Black Music*. All three features take the form of overviews of reggae culture in Britain, functioning as a kind of 'state of the art' for their different readerships.

In analysing these three instances of reggae's mediation, I illustrate the ways in which reggae was constructed as the 'other' against which rock's superiority was defined in the pages of *Melody Maker*. I explore how this evolved in a handful of years, as the publication goes from understanding reggae as a novelty music to an important cultural force, and using Hall's insight to explain how changes in the music's form and presentation explain this new discursive iteration. I end by positing that, in this discursive plane that posits rock as the superior popular musical artform, *Black Music*'s coverage of reggae represents an important counternarrative.

IPC, *Melody Maker* and *Black Music*

International Publishing Corporation

During the time of reggae's 'golden age', a major portion of its mediation would occur under the umbrella of IPC Magazines Ltd. *Melody Maker* and its competitor *New Musical Express* were both acquired by IPC in the early 1960s, and *Black Music* would be founded by the corporation in 1973. Given its significant ownership of the British music magazine market – at one time estimated to be publishing over hundreds of magazines, three London daily newspapers, and several journals[xiii] – it is useful to explore the company's history further, not just to contextualise a significant contribution to British reggae discourse by locating it within the corporate structuring and restructuring of IPC, but by exploring the link between the two.

Given its significance in the British media landscape, scholarship on International Publishing Corporation, as it was originally known, remains relatively sparse. What makes IPC interesting is in its attempt to replicate the 'newspaper baron' monopolistic business model in the magazine market. Despite this, most historical treatments of IPC instead adopt the more recognisable 'great-man' and 'rise-and-fall' narratives, in this case pertaining to the monopolistic business practices of its founder, Cecil King, in particular his ownership of the *Daily Mirror* newspaper. In a well-worn story arc, King is commonly understood to have carved himself out a print media empire before falling victim to a boardroom takeover. The most notable mediation of King occurs in documentarian Adam Curtis' 'Every Day Is Like Sunday[xiv]', which posits him as a pre-Murdochian newspaper mogul by emphasising IPC's ownership of the *Mirror* and King's close relationship to Harold Wilson – Britain's prime minister from 1964-1970 and again from 1974-1976, and his governorship of the Bank of England. Despite casting King in such a central role in British socio-political history, such a totalised approach to media historiography actually underrepresents the scale of IPC's dominance.

To better understand the institutional and commercial landscapes in which *Melody Maker* and *Black Music* operated, the following is an attempt to chronologise IPC's corporate activity before and during the period in question[xv]: The Mirror Newspapers Limited group, under the chairmanship of Cecil King, purchased Amalgamated Press and its associated titles in 1959. Within months, the AP is renamed Fleetway Publications, Ltd. In 1961, the (renamed) Mirror Group then purchased Odhams Press, which itself had previously absorbed Longacre Press, George Newnes, and the Hulton Press. It is at this point that *Melody Maker*, which was published by Odhams, comes into the ownership of IPC. Odhams is amalgamated into

Fleetway, and later, in 1963, King's and the Mirror Group's publishing interests would be housed under a parent company, the International Publishing Company (IPC). The company's purchase of the *New Musical Express* occurs a year after that of *Melody Maker,* in 1962. In 1968, the company indicatively changes its name to IPC Magazines Limited.

Black Music comes into existence at the end of 1973, not as a corporate acquisition by IPC or one of its holding companies, but instead as a brand-new publication, published by IPC Specialist and Professional Press Ltd. The magazine was renamed *Black Music & Jazz Review* from April 1978, before ownership moved to the then owners of *Blues & Soul*, independent publishers Napfield Ltd, in late 1979. The magazine was retitled again in March 1981 as *BM*, relegating the *Black Music & Jazz Review* name to a strapline. In July 1984, it was incorporated into *Blues & Soul*.

IPC's long-running practice of acquiring, offloading and incorporating existing titles, and founding new ones, indicates a corporate strategy that built on segregation of markets. The key is that IPC targeted what it understood as specialist titles, of which *Melody Maker* and *Black Music* magazine were just two. Through this way of understanding IPC and its holdings, *Melody Maker* is better understood as being closer in significance to its corporate ownership to hunting magazine *Horse and Hound*, a similarly long-standing publication with connotations of prestige, than it was to *Black Music.* Such a wide-range of niche publications suggests IPC's board would have had little editorial interest in the coverage in the pages of its publications, leaving its editors and journalists more discursive space to operate as they saw fit, so long as profits were made.

Melody Maker and its audience(s)

We can apprehend the ways in which *Melody Maker* conceived of its audience and its subject matter from the very first instance of its publication. This provides a productive historical context for understanding why its later mediations of reggae would take the form they did. For Gorman[xvi], the important point about the founding of the publication is that its creator Lawrence Wright uses his new platform as a vehicle for promoting his sheet music. This is undoubtedly an important consideration, but there is far more going on discursively in *Melody Maker*'s early years than an innovative medium for advertising sheet music.

On page one of issue one of *The Melody Maker*, as it was originally titled, the publication is subtitled 'a monthly magazine for all who are directly or indirectly interested in the production of popular music'. At stake, then, are conceptions of what popular music is, its methods of production, and two groups of readers who might be 'directly or indirectly interested'. Just what *Melody Maker* constructs as popular music can be read out from its contents: it is 'lighter music' and novelty songs (as Gorman correctly asserts, often composed by Horatio Nicholls, Lawrence Wright's *nom de plume*[xvii]), and it is black music – signified via articles on the banjo, on the ukelele, and on syncopation. An article on the English jazz scene also constructs popular music as nationally defined; place and nation are central to *The Melody Maker*'s narrative from the outset.

Anderton and Atton[xviii] identify *Melody Maker*'s discursive construction amongst rock fans as both a musician's paper *and* a thinking fan's during reggae's 'golden age', and such a construction is similarly evident in this inaugural issue. Those 'directly' interested in the production of popular music are popular musicians. Originally published in London's famous Denmark Street, also known as 'Tin Pan Alley', *The Melody Maker* was an independent

publication aimed squarely at working musicians in the entertainment world, who needed the latest sheet music, industry news, and the classifieds that would remain in the pages of the magazine for decades. Those 'indirectly' involved comprise a musically aspirant, amateur or hobbyist class of readers who want the know-how, and who come to *Melody Maker* as a tome. It is to this prospective readership that articles like 'How to read music at sight' by Hubert Bath[xix], in the same first issue, are evidently directed; working musicians would plainly have had no use for such an article. The contents of this magazine, then, constitute a hierarchical discourse of popular music consumption: musicians are the authorities on music and the goal of non-musical fans should be to aspire to this level of mastery. Anyone else, the non-informed fan, reads should read something else. As Anderton and Atton suggest, it is the publication's historical reputation as a musician's magazine that simultaneously allowed the magazine's editors to present it as the informed fan's bible.

From its inception, then, *Melody Maker* can be said to have been about the mediation of popular music – which it understood as novelty songs and as musics of black origin – to a readership of both professional musicians and aspirant pop fans. It was preoccupied with place as a defining discursive notion, particularly with how the relationship between Britain and the US fit into its discourse of authenticity. This historical inquiry differs from most accounts of *Melody Maker,* as in Lindberg et al[xx], who pick up the story of *Melody Maker* in the mid 1960s, and who understand the British music press in this period through the prism of Chris Welch's journalism and creative agency. Such a treatment of *Melody Maker* both foregrounds and is explained by the prominence of rock[xxi] in its pages from the mid-1960s onwards, at the expense of understanding how reggae sat, uneasily, side-by-side with other music cultures.

Black Music and its 'musical mission'

According to Gorman, *Black Music*'s inception was green lit at the urging of its founding editor, Alan Lewis[xxii]. Lewis, who already held a prominent position in the IPC company as subeditor of *Melody Maker,* would have had an insider's knowledge of the publication's editorial motivations and readership. That he felt motivated to push for the publication of a new title indicates an opportunity for Lewis to exercise his journalistic agency within the established corporate strategy of IPC

As with the above analysis of the first issue of *Melody Maker,* there are a number of insightful historical ideas that can be seen in an analysis of the editorial in the first issue of *Black Music*, published in December 1973, and it is worth quoting here at length:

> Let's get it on! Black music is the very foundation of pop culture. Where it all began. And where it's at today. Black music has given birth to blues, jazz and rock… to musicians of genius like Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Chuck Berry, Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin. And black music is still setting the pace through the work of artists like Sly Stone, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Thom Bell, Bob Marley, B.B. King and many others. From Harlem, New York, to Kingston, Jamaica. From London to Lagos. The music is as diverse as the people who make it. It's getting bigger and better every day and it demands a magazine to do it justice. We believe Black Music is that magazine. We aim to be expert and factual, but never boring. Exciting, but free from uncritical hero-worship. We'll use top writers and photographers on both sides of the Atlantic to bring you news, reviews and interviews on the whole scene: soul, reggae, blues, jazz, gospel and African music. And, just as

> important, we want to include the voice of you – the musicians and fans on the street. It's your magazine, so let's have your comments – good or bad – so that we can make our next issue even better. Together we can make Black Music the magazine the music deserves. Alan Lewis, Editor[xxiii]

Black Music constructs itself, its audience, and the relationship between the two in this manifesto-like editorial. Editor Alan Lewis promises the publication will walk the line between fandom and soulless study. His mediation of black music spans generations and the entire black Atlantic; there is a performance of the depth and breadth of knowledge of the 'true fan'. Its audience, by implication, is constructed as a similarly passionate and knowledgeable fanbase, discerning but not boring, who will share in *Black Music*'s conception of black music as a global scene, and as the foundational form of popular culture. Lewis rounds off his editorial with an explicit and urgent the call for contributions from its readership, sounding the clarion call for a dialogic relationship. This is further reinforced by a picture of a microphone-in-hand at the end of the feature, signifying BM handing the microphone to the reader who finally gets their long-awaited turn to voice their opinion.

Compared to *Melody Maker*, then, with its didactic tone speaking *to* an audience, *Black Music* constructs itself as a magazine that is *of* its audience. The discourse from which the editorial is written could not function without an already established market for reggae music in Britain, a market which IPC evidently understood as distinct from its *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express* readerships. This is the market at which *Black Music* aims itself squarely, constructing a sense of itself and its contributors as being the same as its audience, all in it together in the mission to champion black music to an extent not evident in other established publications. This, ultimately, is what distinguishes *Melody Maker* and *Black Music.* These are not two mediations of two distinct musics; these are mediations – sometimes of the same music, sometimes not – for two distinct audiences and with two distinct approaches: didacticism for rock fans in the former, and dialogues with 'soulies' in the latter.

'Spotlight on reggae': mediating reggae for a readership of rock fans

On November 8th, 1969, British music weekly *Melody Maker* published 'Spotlight on reggae'[xxiv], a one-page feature on the music that had recently been 'invading' the British charts. The feature adopts a top-down, overarching view of the British reggae scene, including a review of several recording artists. Many instances of reggae's mediation from this period adopted a similar approach, with reggae coverage in the British music press beginning in earnest following some early crossover hits in the British music charts in 1968.

That *Melody Maker*'s editors deemed it necessary to shine such a spotlight constructs a reggae scene as something that needs further illumination, and casts itself as the publication with the knowledge to do so, positioning its writers as the authority on this nascent cultural phenomenon in British society, and itself as the font of this knowledge. Indeed, as is explored below in more detail, *Melody Maker* was and is regarded as something of a 'thinking fan's' magazine in comparison to its competitors during this period. This is certainly the case in this early attempt at mediating an emerging black, Jamaican reggae culture for a British rock audience.

In their response to the question of how to make sense of this new music, the editors' solution took three forms: succinct profiles of three reggae groups – the Harry J All Stars, The

Upsetters, and the Pioneers – with accompanying photographs, an article titled 'Reggae – is it a new art form?' by celebrated rock journalist Chris Welch, and a cartoon of a reggae fan. I now examine each component in turn, unpicking the discursive repertoire on which *Melody Maker* drew in its early reggae mediation, beginning with the artist profiles of the three groups.

The groups *Melody Maker* selects to constitute this new musical form are significant. 'The Liquidator', 'Return of Django', and 'Long Shot', released by Harry J All Stars, The Upsetters and the Pioneers respectively, are frequently identified as three of the most important singles released in reggae's early period and responsible for the commercial success and popularity of reggae in Britain[xxv]. Each group is mediated through a short write-up of its biography and recent hits, and an accompanying image. The specific ways in which *Melody Maker*'s journalists attempt to make sense of these new groups, and how they are mediated to its audience, reveals an ambiguity and an awkwardness in early attempts to mediate reggae to rock fans. Also significant are the artists not selected to be here. Desmond Dekker, for example, is conspicuous by the absence of an artist profile, considering his 'Liquidator' had reached the coveted number one position in the UK charts earlier in the year – a feat unmatched by the artists featured. Exactly why Dekker is not featured here is unclear, although the six-month gap between Dekker's success (16 April) and the publication of the article may index a degree to which the editors chose to emphasise a sense of reggae's newness.

Two of these groups – the Harry J All Stars and the Upsetters – present a particular problem for *Melody Maker*'s journalists: how to construct and mediate a production culture of reggae at a point in which its early crossover singles were often instrumentals, and yet did not feature prominent star vocalists or solo instrumentalists. A look through the other pages of this issue of *Melody Maker* reveals just how dependant the publication was on the star system in its mediation of other genres. For example, rock is constructed as existing in a conversation between Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart[xxvi], and we are to understand jazz and blues through features on Cecil Taylor[xxvii] and Albert King[xxviii], respectively. Faced with the challenge of how to mediate a starless music to a readership that would have been accustomed to understanding popular music culture through its stars, *Melody Maker*'s solution is to make stars of the music's producers.

This approach is first evident in *Melody Maker*'s construction of Harry J All Stars, so named for their producer Harry 'J' Johnson, to whom the publication awards the honour of top spot in the featurette. The profile constructs the All Stars as a 'backing band' comprised of 'four unknown musicians'. In *Melody Maker*'s discourse, the All Stars are implied to have been corralled together by Johnson, without whose input they would languish in the obscurity of the jobbing musician. The accompanying image, however, is incongruous with such a notion. Depicted is a shot of the band performing in a live context – perhaps in their role as a backing band – in which several members including Harry J himself are not visible. It is unclear where or when this photo is taken, but its inclusion indicates an absence of professional press shots. This ad-hoc inclusion perhaps indicates a late scramble for any usable image in light of their recent success: the article mentions 'Liquidator' had entered the publication's pop chart a week prior, suggesting a recency bias as the underlying motivation for the group's prominence in the feature. *Melody Maker* both constructs this new form of music called reggae using a discourse of urgency, relevance, and novelty, and in so doing reinforces its own importance in the lives of its readers: this discourse of newness both creates and fulfils a need to be up to date with the latest releases from Jamaica.

Unlike the 'unknown musicians' that comprise the Harry J All Stars, *Melody Maker*'s journalists did know who played for producer Lee Perry's studio band, The Upsetters. However, despite the availability of this information, it is still on Perry that this construction of the Upsetters depends. Perry is signalled as the group's star producer and songwriter, fulfilling the criteria of rock journalists to point to a great man in their mediation. Similarly, Perry is the only figure on show in the accompanying image. This time, instead of a live shot of a band in action, the image that constructs the Upsetters is a press shot of Perry, indicating an intent behind Perry and his label to push him as the star persona, in a manner familiar to the readers of *Melody Maker*. Perry is also ambiguously described as someone who '*acts as* vocalist with the group'[xxix]. This construction of Perry as a singer who does not sing is made more confusing by the fact that the group's breakthrough record, the vanguard of what constituted a 'reggae invasion of the [British] chart', was another instrumental recording. This discourse also calls into question just what vocals Perry would perform live in their upcoming tour – mentioned in the profile – in his capacity as someone who 'acts as' a singer.

In its profile of The Pioneers, *Melody Maker* is on more familiar ground. The Pioneers, for *Melody Maker*, constitute a vocal trio – instrumental musicians and producers are not significant in this approach to mediating music makers. This is reflected in the accompanying image, a slick, professional photograph of the singers that looks likely to have been taken in a studio. Forming vocal groups was commonplace in the Jamaican music scene throughout its earlier ska and rocksteady periods, thanks in no small part to the influence of US groups like the Impressions, and this practice continued into the reggae period. Such groups would have been easier to conceptualise for *Melody Maker*'s journalists and fans alike. A consequence of this familiar way of conceiving of music production means that not only are the instrumental musicians who performed on 'Long Shot' unnamed, they are not part of the story at all.

Like the artist profiles, Chris Welch's article will have been familiar in tone and form to regular readers of *Melody Maker*. Ultimately, the article constructs Welch as a personality in the pages of *Melody Maker* more than it constructs reggae. The rhetorical device employed here winkingly casts Welch in the role of the high-minded musicological analyst. References to an imagined German chemist named Boghausen and to reggae as 'music concrete' or 'cement waltz' attempt to evoke a sense of reggae as emerging from the inner-city, whilst simultaneously invoking the high-minded music form. The decision to subtitle the piece 'a critical appraisal by Christopher J Welch' – his name normally appears as 'Chris Welch' in other articles and single reviews –contributes to a sardonic invocation of a scholarly discourse. Admittedly, the tone of Welch's article – which would likely have obfuscated his thesis on reggae even in 1969 – makes the text difficult to analyse using conventional discourse analysis techniques. This article may well represent an earnest attempt to understand and champion reggae, but there is still a sense of ambiguity and awkwardness. This results from *Melody Maker*'s coming to terms with this new reggae phenomenon in real time – the editors did not yet know what their thesis on reggae was – but had still to conform to their readership's sense of the magazine as the authority on popular music.

Perhaps the most explicit indicator of the way in which *Melody Maker* conceived of and constructed reggae in its incubatory years can be read out from its cartoon of a reggae fan. The image depicts a solitary, young, white man, complete with buzzcut, braces and disgruntled expression. He carries a 12" vinyl record: 'Club Ska '67'[xxx]. This is the stereotypical depiction of the British 'skinhead', and it is in stark contrast with the visual images of rock culture found throughout this issue. In its construction of rock culture, *Melody*

Maker in 1969 predominantly depicts musicians, not fans. Most of them are also white and male, but their sartorial choices – long hair, beards, baggy clothing – fly in the face of the style signified by the cartoon. The image, then, constructs rock fans as much as it constructs reggae fans; reggae's fanbase are white soul boys, not sophisticated rock fans, and are satirised in the rock-dominated pages of *Melody Maker*. The parodic depiction of such a fan in this article serves to further construct reggae as something atypical of inclusion in the magazine. It is a paradoxical discursive move: *Melody Maker* champions the music in its words and satirises its fans with its images, contributing to an 'arm's length' sense of its mediation, and the ambiguity that results from a recognition of reggae culture as important but a reluctance to throw the full weight of its support behind the new music.

We can surmise, then, that for *Melody Maker*'s rock journalists and rock fan readers, reggae presents something of a new challenge in the late 1960s. *Melody Maker* attempted a comprehensive review of reggae culture – who made it and who consumed it - constructing it as a music defined by its producers and singers, made in Jamaica and consumed by white British skinheads. Crucially, that black communities in Britain consumed reggae remains absent from *Melody Maker*'s discourse. Reggae's production is constructed using essentialising and unexplained discursive tropes of black popular music as 'authentic' and 'pure'.

In so doing, *Melody Maker* also constructs itself: the didactic nature of the feature constructs the publication as the reflexive, 'thinking fan's' tome – one that will cover and even champion reggae, but that will only do so from a distance. In 1969, *Melody Maker* fashioned a conception of reggae for its rock fan readership using the materials available to its journalists (discographic information and press shots), using borrowed discursive repertoire from its mediation of rock and jazz. As I explore below, while *Melody Maker* would retain its sense of itself and of its readership, the publication's response to changing reggae culture would see a drastic change in its mediation of reggae in just a few short years.

'Inside Reggae': *Melody Maker* at the height of reggae's popularity

As has been well-documented in the histories cited above, reggae culture constituted a profoundly distinct set of music, musicians, ideas, images and fans in 1976 than it had done seven years prior. The intervening years had seen the meteoric rise of Bob Marley and the Wailers, particularly following *Melody Maker* guitar god Eric Clapton's cover of 'I Shot the Sherriff' reaching the US Billboard's top position in 1974. The proliferation of Rastafari, and social and political discontent in Jamaica, contributed to the development of 'roots reggae', an iteration of reggae that popularised rasta theology and worldview. 1972 saw the release of *The Harder They Come*, a crucial contribution to reggae's legitimisation in Britain. These cultural phenomena – a film depicting reggae as at once 'from the ghetto' and as the music of the outlaw; a self-styled 'revolutionary' reggae superstar; a symbiotic discursive link with a religious movement that put repatriation to Africa at its heart – all make possible a construction of reggae in the press as a cultural form that – in the words of Stuart Hall – can 'pass the test of authenticity'[xxxi]. This in turn explains the increased seriousness with which *Melody Maker* would mediate reggae, as I now demonstrate.

Such changes can immediately be read from the equally stark approach to *Melody Maker*'s mediation of reggae in 1976, in which Britain is now understood to have its own reggae scene, explored in a four-page feature called 'Inside reggae', published 9 October 1976. In 1969, reggae in the pages of *Melody Maker* was constructed as a novelty music, in need of a

one-page ‘spotlight’ feature to be comprehendible by its readership. Seven years later, it had become deemed worthy a ‘four-page MM investigation into the music, politics and religion of ‘today’s underground’’. The editorial decision to devote four pages of *Melody Maker* to its mediation contributes to a construction of the reggae scene as both more populous and popular, and as a more culturally complex phenomenon requiring a broader set of considerations to comprehend sufficiently. These topics are investigated individually over six articles[xxxii] of various lengths and written by different journalists. Tellingly, there is also a glossary of reggae keywords, as *Melody Maker* seemingly understood them, such is ‘toasting’[xxxiii], ‘rockers[xxxiv]’, ‘ganja’[xxxv], and ‘Jah, Jahweh’[xxxvi].

The images that accompany the dense text-based mediations reflect the topics of the articles. An image of Notting Hill Carnival in 1976, captioned ‘VIOLENCE: the scene at this year’s Notting Hill Carnival’ intersects an article by Karl Dallas that ostensibly uses the Carnival and Junior Murvin’s hit ‘Police and Thieves’ as a narrative device to discuss what he describes as the ‘politicisation of reggae’. A side-by-side image of two record shops, one in London and one in Kingston, emphasise the role of small and independent businesses in the distribution of reggae records in Robert Partridge’s article ‘Selling reggae by the pound’ – a title that makes use of a double-meaning: reggae is selling well, and the British market is part of that story. We see images of star singers, producers, and groups, as well as a large portrait of Haile Selassie, captioned: ‘Haile Selassie: Rastafarianism began with him’. Despite *Melody Maker* similarly constructing itself in this article as the font of knowledge, the mediation of reggae in the feature is worlds apart from that of the one analysed above.

Carloyn Coon, like Chris Welch, remains a celebrated figure in British rock journalism. Her piece for the feature, entitled ‘Prejudiced Vibrations’, constructs an alternative British reggae scene than the skinhead consumption culture represented in the 1969 feature. Instead, Coon’s article focuses on a production culture consisting of Jamaican-born, British-based reggae singers like Delroy Washington, and reggae bands formed in Britain like Matumbi, Aswad, and the Cimarons. The significantly increased wordcount of this and other articles in the four-page spread reflects the elevated station of reggae culture in the minds of *Melody Maker*’s editors, and provides Coon with the column inches to mediate reggae culture to more depth than had previously been possible in the publication. Similarly to Welch, the construction in her article is as much as of Coon herself as it is of reggae. Coon is cast in a position of allyship rather than as the superior specialist, however.

The article’s position towards reggae culture is a sympathetic one. The granularity and reality of the hardships of being a reggae musician are frequently evoked and are given space in the feature. Rather than surveying the field from a lofty position, Coon interviews these musicians and quotes them at length on issues as wide-ranging and important as the realities of dealing with pluggers and promotors, or their colonial schooling in Jamaica[xxxvii]. Where Welch was ‘in the know’ thanks to his discerning ear and musical knowledge, Coon and her colleagues achieve their discursive status through an increased sense of proximity to the music they mediate, albeit still to an audience of rock fans who want to know more from within the safety of a music paper. Despite the consistent positionality *Melody Maker* imagines for itself and its audience, we get a sense from the 1976 article and from the wider feature that, for rock journalists mediating reggae culture to an audience of rock fans, reggae has become a subaltern culture that needs defending from the ignorance of the BBC and commercial radio stations[xxxviii], and from promotors who will not give reggae artists their fair shot.

Throughout the feature there is evidently a concerted effort to incorporate a wider sociological perspective into the story of reggae, and to approach the music and musicians with more explicit empathy. But the mediation still depends on an othering of reggae musicians and reggae culture in order to do the discursive job it does, as is made obvious in statements like the following: 'Ironically, if conditions in the last few years had improved for black people in our community, had they become more integrated, reggae music might not be as alive and kicking as it is.' Coon may well have a point here, that the realities of racist British society in the 1970s resulted in fuel for British reggae culture. But it is obvious who 'they' are, and by implication who 'we' are. That *Melody Maker* found the inclusion of a glossary a necessary choice speaks volumes to this aspect: its understanding of its readership was clearly as a group that would need help in understanding just what these reggae musicians were talking about in the first place. The publication's sense of its didactic relationship to its readership that is evident in 1969 is just as visible here, and crucially, that is still a readership that is understood as rock fans first, and reggae fans peripherally at best.

Black Music, Carl Gayle, and IPC Magazines

The pages of *Melody Maker* were dominated by coverage of rock music and rock musicians even in the 1970s 'golden age' of reggae. As I have demonstrated, black musics like reggae are present, but are cast in peripheral roles against which rock's dominance can be measured and made sense of. By contrast, *Black Music* was given over entirely to the mediation of diasporic musics of black origin, including reggae, US soul, disco, jazz and African musics. Coverage of reggae in the early years of the magazine was largely undertaken by Carl Gayle. His copy has been praised for its inclusion of patois/patwa and slang, and due to many trips to Jamaica was likened to reportage by Gorman in his history of the British music press[xxxix]. As I now demonstrate, it is not just his proximity to Jamaican reggae culture, but what he chooses to do with this proximity, that marks Gayle's journalism out as a significant contemporaneous attempt to understand reggae as a transnational culture.

Black Music's analogue to the article by Carolyn Coon in *Melody Maker* employs a by-now familiar form. 'From JA to UK – a British reggae round-up', subtitled 'an in-depth survey by Carl Gayle', positions a reflective introductory article alongside a series of artist profiles and pictures, comprising an overview of the scene. In this feature, though, there is a significantly greater number of profiles, listed in alphabetical order, and each is given more column inches. Given that Gayle's editor would likely have been Alan Lewis, who had previously worked as sub-editor at the *Melody Maker*, the familiarities in form between this article and the 1969 feature are unsurprising, and their differences are significant. Following the practice of its contemporary, *Black Music*'s working assumption is that British reggae artists constitute a 'scene', about which some broader points a musical expert like Gayle or Welch can extrapolate. But the form and content of those broader points in *Black Music* is distinct from those in *Melody Maker*.

What sets Gayle's mediation of reggae in *Black Music* apart is in emphasising an understanding of reggae as a transnational culture, demonstrated in the following quotation:

> British reggae is made by singers and musicians who have lost real contact with the social, economic, political and cultural influences and inspiration that provide their Jamaican based counterparts with the meat of the material with which they made their music… There's an awareness of reggae music now that there has never been before. Interest is growing fact. It is noticeable now that people who, two years ago, would

> not have bat an eyelid have suddenly nurtured quite esoteric tastes. But their taste is for Kingston, Jamaica, not London, England.

In Gayle's construction, it is the constantly evolving music coming out of Jamaica that signifies the target towards which reggae produced in Britain orients itself. In advocating for the British scene, inherently playing catch up to Jamaica, to develop a sound of its own, he restores a sense of agency to the people who make up Britain's reggae production culture. Coon mediates reggae in Britain with reference to its competition for airplay and viability with other popular musics, which is certainly a crucial component. But that same sense of agency is absent from a discourse in which reggae musicians remain subject to racist society and racist institutions. In Gayle's discourse, what is emphasised is a notion of the transnational and of the dialogic. It is not that Gayle's proximity to Jamaica's reggae scene equates to a truer understanding and representation of the music; it is that, in moving back and forth along the black Atlantic, Gayle chooses to emphasise that same movement within a global reggae culture, of records, of musicians, and of ideas.

Similarly, the artist profiles in *Black Music* take a subtle but meaningfully different tack than those in *Melody Maker*. For the acts and artists compiled in the 'round-up', Gayle gives us 'background', 'lineup', lists their latest and biggest hits, and provides us his professional opinion the group or artist's 'outlook' or 'prospects'. That he feels comfortable going so far as to speculate on an artist's future career – a practice that had been common in publications like *Melody Maker* – constructs not only Gayle as the man in the know, but British reggae as something to take seriously enough as to speculate on the future success of its artists. In his treatment of Gayle's journalism and role in the history of the music press, Gorman constructs a sense of the former as being ahead of the curve in spotting trends like the 'genius of Lee Perry' or the 'commercialisation of Bob Marley' before his white counterparts[xl]. This capacity as a prognosticator of reggae culture is on display in the article in question; in his advocating for British reggae musicians to develop a sound of their own, he posits Louisa Marks' hit, 'Caught you in a lie', as a model for others to follow. Those familiar with the story of Lovers Rock will know that this is exactly what happens in the dominant narration of the genre that would become known as 'Britain's contribution to reggae'[xli].

Conclusion

Melody Maker and *Black Music* represent contrasting approaches to the mediation of reggae in British music press. In *Melody Maker*, reggae goes from being a novelty music, consumed by a literal cartoon audience, to an 'authentic' cultural force worthy of serious treatment. These mediations occurred in a publication that, broadly speaking, addressed its rock fan readership in a didactic discourse. In *Black Music*, reggae sits alongside other musics of black origin, as part of a publication that constructed itself as performing an interventionist role in the British music press. Where *Melody Maker* constructed itself as the authority on music, *Black Music*'s editorship catered to an audience constructed as the ones *already* in the know. Language is a particularly illustrative point of departure – not just in the discursive sense I employ throughout this article, but also in more basic terms: the editors of *Melody Maker* in 1976 deem it necessary to include a glossary of terms for its readership; Gayle's celebrated use of patois/patwa in *Black Music* assumes his readership would understand him. The difference in mediations can be explained by the difference in audiences constructed by IPC's segregationist approach to markets in its continuing attempts to acquire and invent new titles.

Of course, this article has explored the mediation of reggae in just two periodicals, across a relatively short time span, in just one European nation. To further illuminate the myriad, complex ways in which Caribbean culture has informed European society, there is significant scope for scholarly endeavour into similar media and cultural practices in different contexts.

By way of conclusion, I posit that the discursive repertoire employed in mediations of reggae have since become ubiquitous in reggae discourse. Our broad understanding of reggae continues to be structured by the preoccupations of rock journalists in the 1970s. Reggae historiography, for example, consists mostly of biographies of its star singers (usually of Bob Marley)[xlii], or attempts to explain reggae through the lenses of politics and religion[xliii]. Such approaches have been fruitful, but as I have argued elsewhere[xliv], reggae scholarship has suffered for a lack of complementary perspectives including those of the musicians who made it. Reggae writing would benefit from a plurality of discourses to supplement the dominant notions of journalists from reggae's 'golden age' that still structure much of our understanding today.

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[i] While I follow the convention of not capitalising 'black' or 'white', as neither is a proper noun, I recognise this important issue of debate and respect that there are many perspectives on this matter.
[ii] See, for instance, Stephen Davis and Peter Simon, *Reggae bloodlines: in search of the music and culture of Jamaica* (Heinemann Educational, 1979), Steve Barrow and Peter Dalton, *Reggae: the rough guide* (Penguin, 1997), Lloyd Bradley, *Bass culture: when reggae was king* (Penguin, 2001), David Katz, *Solid foundation: an oral history of reggae* (Bloomsbury, 2003).
[iii] See, for instance, Caroyln Cooper, *Noises in the blood: orality, gender, and the "vulgar" body of Jamaican popular culture* (Duke University Press, 1995), Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), Sonjah Stanley Niaah, *Dancehall: from slave ship to ghetto* (University of Ottawa Press, 2010), Donna Hope, *Reggae from yaad: traditional and emerging themes in Jamaican popular music* (Ian Randle, 2015).
[iv] Dennis Howard, *The creative echo chamber: contemporary music production in Kingston Jamaica* (Ian Randle, 2016).
[v] Ray Hitchins, *Vibe Merchants: the sound creators of Jamaican popular music* (Routledge, 2014).
[vi] See, for instance, Dick Hebdige, "Reggae, rastas and rudies : style and the subversion of form," *Stencilled occasional papers* (1974): http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/3342/1/Hebdige_1974_SOP24.pdf, Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the meaning of style* (New Accents, 1979), Dick Hebdige, *Cut'n'mix: culture, identity and Caribbean music* (Methuen and Co., 1987), Simon Jones, *Black Culture, White Youth: the reggae tradition from JA to UK* (Macmillan, 1988).
[vii] Mykaell Riley, "Bass Culture, an alternative soundtrack to Britishness" in *Black popular music in Britain since 1945*, ed. Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (Taylor and Francis Group, 2014) 101-114.
[viii] Julian Henriques, *Sonic bodies: reggae sound systems, performance techniques, and ways of knowing* (Bloomsbury, 2011).
[ix] Carolyn Cooper, ed., *Global Reggae* (Canoe Press, 2012).
[x] *Blues and Soul* is an independently published magazine, founded by music fan John Abbey. Studies into 'zine culture, as it has since been named, have often recognised the profound impact of such publications operating outside the oligopolist magazine market thanks to their platforming countercultural discourses.

[xi] Tim Wall, *Studying popular music culture* (Sage, 2013).
[xii] Paul Gilroy, *There ain't no black in the Union Jack: the cultural politics of race and nation* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), Paul Gilroy, *The black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness* (Verso, 1993), Stuart Hall, "What is this "black" in black popular culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1 (1993) 104-114, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766735.
[xiii] "IPC Magazines Limited", Encyclopedia.com, accessed November 22, 2024, https://www.encyclopedia.com/books/politics-and-business-magazines/ipc-magazines-limited.
[xiv] *Every day is like Sunday* directed by Adam Curtis (Adam Curtis, 2011). 44:47. https://thoughtmaybe.com/every-day-is-like-sunday/.
[xv] "IPC Magazines Limited", Encyclopedia, accessed August 12, 2024, https://www.encyclopedia.com/books/politics-and-business-magazines/ipc-magazines-limited.
[xvi] Paul Gorman, *Totally wired: the rise and fall of the music press* (Thames & Hudson, 2022), 9.
[xvii] *Ibid*.
[xviii] Chris Anderton and Christ Atton, "The absent presence of progressive rock in the British music press, 1968-1974," *Rock Music Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 8-22, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19401159.2019.1651521
[xix] Hubert Bath "How to read music at sight by Hubert Bath", *Melody Maker*, January, 1926, 24.
[xx] Ulf Lindberg, Gestur Gudmundsson, Morten Michelsen, and Hans Weisethaunet, *Rock criticism from the beginning* (Peter Lang, 2005), 76-106.
[xxi] Simon Frith argues the rockist discoursed dominate the pages of Melody Maker came into being in fan-made rock magazines of the early 1960s. See, for instance, Simon Frith, *The sociology of rock* (Constable, 1978), 143-146.
[xxii] *Ibid*, 150.
[xxiii] Alan Lewis, editorial, *Black Music*, December, 1973.
[xxiv] Chris Welch, "Spotlight on reggae," *Melody Maker*, November 8, 1969, 20.
[xxv] Bradley, *Bass culture* (Penguin, 2001), 241-2.
[xxvi] Richard Williams, "The Beefheart Zappa Talk-in," *Melody Maker*, November 8, 1969, 24-5.
[xxvii] Richard Williams, "For Cecil Taylor, It's just the beginning," *Melody Maker*, November 8, 1969,12.
[xxviii] Max Jones, "Talk to the King," *Melody Maker*, November 8, 1969, 16.
[xxix] My emphasis.
[xxx] An LP of the same name did exist, released in the UK in April of 1967 by Island Records and manufactured by West Indies Records Limited. WIRL had famously been founded by Jamaican Prime Minister Edward Seaga, although he had sold WIRL to Byron Lee of Dragonnaires fame by the time this compilation was released. The LP compiled well-known hits from previous years like 'Guns of Navarone' by The Skatalites (1965), and more recent releases like '007 (Shanty Town)' by Desmond Dekker and the Aces (1967) and 'Dancing Mood' by Delroy Wilson (1967). The sleeve of the real LP differs greatly from that depicted in the cartoon, however.
[xxxi] Hall, "What is this "black" in black popular culture?"
[xxxii] The articles, in order of appearance, are as follows: 'Burnin' and a-lootin'' by Karl Dallas (subtitled 'Politics'); 'Selling reggae by the pound' by Robert Partridge (subtitled 'Business'); 'Prejudiced vibrations' by Carolyn Coon (subtitled 'British scene'); 'JA blues to rockers' by Chris Lane' (subtitled 'Roots'); 'The bass-ic heartbeat' by Karl Dallas, (subtitled 'The beat'); 'The Rasta connection' by Michael Watts (subtitled 'Religion').
[xxxiii] The following are *Melody Maker*'s definitions: 'DJ technique, in which he talks, or chants, over the record. Even Mick Jagger tried it on "Hot Stuff"'
[xxxiv] 'A slower, heavier rhythm than reggae, in which a singular guitar (often a wah wah) chocks away on the offbeat. The Mighty Diamonds are a good example of its practitioners. Having emerged in the past year, rockers may represent the most seriously terminological threat yet to reggae. Reggae has reflected the enthusiasm of the years following independence; rockers is in tune with the currently desperate mood in Jamaica.'
[xxxv] 'Hindustani word for cannabis, brought to Jamaica by the East Indians who began to settle there about a century ago. It's now being replace by "herb" and another new phrase is "coli and ilie".
[xxxvi] 'In effect stands for Ras Tafari/Haile Selassie, but is actually a form of "Jehovah" used in the English Bible from 1539 to 1758.
[xxxvii] Full quotation: 'Why, I asked Franklyn Dunn, the Cimarons' bassist, was it necessary for black people to develop their sense of identity? "Because you've got to know yourself. You've got to become aware of what you are. Black people have been taught to destroy themselves and become something else. For

instance, when I was in Jamaica going to school, I learned about Christopher Columbus and English history and the spinning wheel, and I don't know anything about black people. I don't know about I self. Jamaican education is essentially English. You are taught English culture utterly. You're taught to worship and think in the English philosophy. Pick up a book and all you're reading is about white. Jesus is white. At school I remember even when I draw a woman she is white with long hair. So where are you personally? The names most Jamaicans have are American names to show ownership from the slave days. You've got your freedom but you still have the chain. It is still there from the name, like a vaccination. I was taught that anything that didn't have the English system in it wasn't worthy. And if you don't fight against it even you yourself sell yourself out.'

[xxxviii] The full quotation from Coon's article is as follows: 'Why can't we just flick on the radio and hear, at least once a day, one of reggae's all-time geniuses like Bob Marley wailing through a superb three minutes of, say, "No Woman No Cry"? The answer is simple. Commercial radio stations at the BBC still cling to the threadbare myth that there is no audience for reggae. It is a minority sound, they say. So they just don't play it.'

[xxxix] Gorman, *Totally wired*,151.

[xl] *Ibid*,153.

[xli] That Lovers Rock constitutes a distinctly British reggae is a common but contested notion. See Lisa Amanda Palmer, "'LADIES A YOUR TIME NOW!' Erotic politics, lovers' rock and resistance in the UK," *African and black diaspora* 4, no. 2 (2011): 177-192, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17528631.2011.583454.

[xlii] Of course, there are exceptions to this, notably Bradley's comprehensive history, cited above.

[xliii] For example, Stuart Borthwick, *Positive vibrations: politics, politricks and the story of reggae* (Reaktion, 2022).

[xliv] *Reference own work*, "Natural progression" (conference paper, IASPM, Newcastle, September 2024).