

Jamaica: Peace Conference In A Western Kingston

Penny Reel, *New Musical Express*, 11 March 1978

ON JANUARY 10 of this year, Samuel Dreckett — JLP (Jamaica Labour Party) Councillor for the Western Kingston district of Tivoli Gardens — entered the adjoining PNP (People's National Party) territory at Beeston Street and Matthews Lane and requested an audience with his rivals.

As a result, hundreds of residents from the surrounding areas assembled later that same day to hear leaders of the two factions pledge a truce bringing a halt to the political gunplay that has plagued the city's downtown ghetto since 1967.

Local spokesmen Claudius "Claudie" Massop of the JLP and Aston "Buckie" Thompson of the PNP urged the crowd to "put away your guns and channel your energies into building your communities."

According to *The Jamaican Weekly Gleaner*, the two leaders declared: "We who have been observed by elements in the society as being the foundation of all badness will now demonstrate that we can live in love and unity. We will demonstrate that we can survive without the shedding of blood."

That night, members of the rival gangs mingled with each other in the Pink Lane/Beeston Street area, where they "greeted one another, shook hands and hugged."

Another reporter observed: "The Beeston/Oxford Street intersection in the ghetto belt of West Kingston was at the best of times an area where one stepped softly. But since Monday night it has had almost a carnival atmosphere.

"Before then there were well-defined areas. If you were JLP, you did not go east of Rose Lane as from Spanish Town Road on the south or North Street on the north. If you were PNP, you did not go from Rose Lane to the west of anywhere as far as Pink Lane.

"The political boundaries had been well-defined. If you live in a certain section you do not go into another without risk.

"After six in the evening, not even dogs ventured out. The only barking was that of guns.

"It was a sight to gladden the hearts and to bring tears to the eyes — that gathering at Oxford Street and Beeston Street on January 10."

The day after the Corporate Area declared its verbal truce the alliance spread to embrace further districts.

A gang spokesman told the *Gleaner*: "In this area youth no have father; father dead from gunshot. We want to park gun, mek gun get rusty and throw away."

Commenting on the truce, Jamaican PM Michael Manley congratulated the parties involved, adding that "other crucial steps must be taken to ensure that the truce becomes a lasting peace, thereby bringing tribal warfare and gang violence to an end.

"In this connection, the illegal guns cannot remain on the streets and therefore all those who have already shown a willingness to be constructive should endeavour to take the other necessary step, which must be the handing in of all guns, offensive weapons and ammunition."

Manley's statement was accorded the derision it merited. Asked if he would be handing in his gun, one youth replied: "You mad? We have baby mother and children to protect. When dem (JA Security Forces) come what we must do? All I will say we not turning we guns against one another again."

The schism dates from 1962, the year Jamaica gained its independence from Britain, under the late Sir Alexander Bustamante.

During this time, West Kingston's Corporate Area housed sprawling communities of overcrowded and squalid shanty towns. There was Ghost Town, Newland Town and Hopeful Village (now rebuilt as Arnett Gardens, or "Concrete Jungle" as it is popularly known); Ackee Walk and Back-O-Wall, where the legendary Rudie gangs of the '60s were "dropped" (Tivoli Gardens); and there was Jones Town, Trench Town, Rose Town, Admiral Town and Victoria Town (now Wilton gardens or "Rema"), Federal Gardens, Riverton City, Smith Village and "Dungle".

The same year, the current leader of the JLP, Edward Seaga, emerged in the political forefront with a scheme to raze Ackee Walk and Back-O-Wall and build the model community of Tivoli Gardens. Successive governments followed his lead with similar redevelopment at Arnett Gardens, Wilton Gardens, Federal Gardens, Tavares Gardens and Lizard Town.

A less altruistic motive was discerned when Seaga proceeded to populate Tivoli Gardens with JLP loyalists. Soon afterwards, the guns had become a feature of campaign policy, leading in turn to a limited State of Emergency declared on the eve of the 1967 elections.

The *'tician* gangs have pretty much ruled the Corporate Area ever since. They were active throughout the years of Hugh Shearer's JLP premiership; and they crusaded alongside the "Word Is Love — Better Must Come" Michael Manley PNP renaissance in the early '70s. Nor did a Gun Court act and Indefinite Detention ruling in 1974 deter them; neither a further State of Emergency two years later.

In December 1976, the gunmen reduced Jones Town to a virtual ghost town, and around the same time took responsibility for the widely-reported attempt on Bob Marley's life.

The catalyst of this recent breakthrough is generally agreed as arising out of the "Green Bay Incident" on January 5, 1978, when Security Force troops ambushed a party of fourteen men conducting target practice at Green Bay, St. Catherine and shot dead five.

Details of Green Bay remain vague, pending a public inquiry, but general feeling shared by both PNP and JLP supporters is that the five men were "set up for the killing because they were more useful dead than alive," and both sides seem quite determined that there shall be no more betrayal by "politicians who talk peace and subsidise war."

REGGAE MUSIC has peddled a form of journalism ever since the infancy of ska, and it did not take the industry too long to make capital out of the peace treaty.

Leading DJ Trinity was first off the mark. Issuing a matter of some half-a-dozen new titles per *month*, he celebrated the events of January 10/11 by issuing 'Peace Conference In A Western Kingston' — also the title of an upcoming Trinity LP, Grove Music inform me — wherein he reiterates the title in a number of variations, claiming *"everyone a shake them hand"* and concluding *"music is strength"* in a style that owes much to the inspiration of Big Youth.

Not content with one espousal of a topic when two will do equally nicely, Trinity has also since praised Massop and Thompson on a further toast entitled 'Strictly Idrin'.

Tapper Zukie is another artist who has seen fit to make comment. A fervent Seaga supporter and personal friend of Claudie Massop, he dedicates 'Peace Heroes' to the Tivoli Gardens peacemaker, calling him a *"living hero"* and recounting *"they send 'im to prison so many times and I know 'im was innocent."*

Virgin Records, who last week signed Zukie to a long-term contract, are similarly keen as to the commercial ramifications of the treaty; and the title of the man from Bosrah's first album for the company will be *Peace In The City*.

Other enlargements on the theme have come from Errol Scorchers 'Peace Man'; Leroy Johnson's 'Peace Truce'; a truly hideous Jacob Miller effort entitled 'Peace Treaty Special' sung to the tune of 'Old Macdonald's Farm'; and Jah Frankie Jones who sings 'The War Is Over' by reworking the 'Ballistic Affair' tune he originally composed for Leroy Smart, and adapting its lyric to fit recent developments.

Finally, Claude Massop, Tony Welch and Earl Eadley have set up a Peace Council, and were recently in London. Speculation suggests that they were here to talk to Bob Marley.

At least, Marley is now back in Jamaica for the first time since his attempted assassination in December '76, and will play a Wailers re-union benefit gig for the Peace Movement alongside ex-Wailers Peter Tosh and Bunny Livingstone.

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