Music of the Common Tongue

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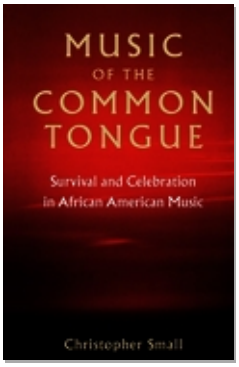

Chapter 15

STYLES OF ENCOUNTER IV: A VERY SATISFACTORY BLACK-MUSIC CIRCLE

In writing this book I have been obliged to keep reminding myself of what I intend it to be, and, just as importantly, what I do not intend it to be, since books, like their readers, define themselves as much by what they are not as by what they are. I do not intend it as a complete survey of Afro-American styles of musicking; such a task would be quite beyond my resources and, in any case, it would almost certainly cause my real aim to be swamped beneath a mass of historical and musical detail. That aim is not only to pay what tribute I can to the musical and social power of untold musicians, both famous and unknown, who have created a way of musicking that can embody the most precious of human values, but also to show the consistency and the essential unity of the various forms which that musicking has taken over the past three centuries. Here, surely, is the central musical culture of the west in our time, which despite the commercialism and the star-making inflicted upon it remains a music of participation rather than of spectacle, in which all are invited to join, and through which even the most downtrodden members of industrial societies can come to define themselves rather than have definition thrust upon them.

To show more clearly how this has taken place I have concentrated my study on the musicking as it has taken place in the United States, not only so as to keep the amount of material under control, but also because it is the United States which has been the place of origin of most of the music as it is today experienced across the world. We need not, however, imagine that the Afro-American tradition in the United States has been entirely autonomous or uninfluenced by what has

been going on elsewhere. It is in fact possible to see the United States as a focus on which have converged a number of musical cultures from all over the world, but most especially from South and Central America and the Caribbean, where they have been assimilated and then disseminated once more, sometimes to be re-assimilated in their place of origin; this process may have been repeated many times, a sign not only of the commercial dominance of what has become known as the music industry in the United States but also of the creativity and adaptability of poor people, both black and white, in the Americas and wherever the sounds of the music have been heard and absorbed into the culture.

In this chapter I shall examine a few of those external interactions, not with any intention of completeness but simply to show some of the ways in which Afro-American ways of musicking have resonated, and continue to resonate, around the world. In particular, we see them crossing and recrossing the Atlantic Ocean, which today may be thought of, in terms of music power, as a lake of the African diaspora.

The present dominance of the United States in the Americas, and its sharp differences, as an effectively Anglo-Saxon Protestant country, from its southern neighbours whose dominant culture is Iberian and Catholic, obscure the fact that in the colonial period there was more affinity and even political unity between the southern North American colonies and the West Indies than there was between them and the northern colonies. It was not just that both societies were based on slavery, or even that colonization in the two areas was planned and financed in much the same way by the metropolitan powers of France, Spain and England, but also, as Dena Epstein points out: 'the two areas shared close commercial ties and a constant interchange of population, both black and white. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries both Britain and France regarded all their colonies in the New World as part of the same colonial structure, regardless of where they were located. Barbados and South Carolina, the French Antilles and Louisiana, were closer in their interests, their plantation system and their exchanges of population, than, say, Massachusetts and South Carolina.'[1] Furthermore, in the colonial period it was the West Indies in

which both the British and French governments were principally interested, 'for the most elementary of financial reasons: enormous fortunes were to be made from sugar.'[2]

Leaving aside the city of New Orleans, which still remains today, as one writer has said, 'in effect a Caribbean island beached on the US mainland,'[3] there were two major differences between the Caribbean islands and the North American slave colonies. In the first place, the mainland was colonized principally by surplus population from the British Isles (among whom the black slaves were initially intended only as ancillary labour and were always in a minority) and that population was there, for better or for worse, to stay; they were committed to America. The Caribbean islands, on the other hand, especially those of Britain and France, were run as enormous sugar factories by a large number of slaves supervised by a small number of whites, few of whom had any commitment to the islands other than as places to make their fortune — and fortunes *were* made, as the eighteenth-century saying 'rich as a West Indian' reveals; West Indian sugar magnates returning to England and France were a byword for ostentatious wealth. In the islands slaves outnumbered masters many times and masters took little interest in the slaves' lives as long as they did what was required of them. Hence the slaves had relatively little contact with European culture, and African ways were able to survive — and continue to survive today — much longer than on the mainland.

The second major difference was that, apart from the British possessions (and in those there still remain today traces of prior Spanish occupation) the culture into which the Africans were thrust was not Anglo-Celtic and Protestant but Iberian and Catholic. The Iberian peninsula, of course, has long had closer links with Africa than has the rest of Europe, not only through the centuries-long occupation by North Africans which finally ended in the very year in which Columbus crossed the Atlantic, but also through an earlier slave trade which had resulted in the presence of a sizeable black population in Portugal by the middle of the fifteenth century, and which according to W.E.B. DuBois affected even the genes of the royal family: 'The royal family became more Negro than white. John IV was Negroid, and the wife of the

French Ambassador described John VI as having Negro hair, nose, lips, colour.'[4] To what extent this facilitated cultural contact in the New World it is hard to say, but it must have facilitated a convergence of musical styles in what is now Brazil.

But there were other features of the encounter in Central and South America, and in the Latin Caribbean, that were to have an effect on the Afro-American culture that developed there. First, there was the balance of population; in Spain and Portugal there was, unlike in England, a chronic population shortage so that there was less reason to export people to America; as a result blacks and mulattos have always formed a larger proportion of the population than in North America, even in the slave colonies. Second, there was the retention, as a matter of deliberate policy by the Spanish and Portuguese colonial governments, of African ethnic groupings, and the encouragement of institutions such as *batuques*, or black dance clubs, which embodied the distinctions between them, in order to ensure the continuance of traditional enmities that had existed in the African homeland, 'to renew,' in the words of a Brazilian official, 'those feelings of mutual aversion that they have taken for granted since birth, but tend gradually to vanish in the general atmosphere of degradation which is their common lot. Now such sentiments of mutual hostility may be regarded as the most powerful guarantee which the major cities of Brazil enjoy today.'[5] To what extent the black 'nations' within Latin American countries today represent a genuine survival of African tribal or ethnic groups is uncertain, since black society there has had its own dynamic, and the more powerful groups — the Yoruba for one — have tended to absorb weaker ones; but they have been powerful forces in the conservation of African cultural traits. Roger Bastide tells us, for example, of the public masked processions in the streets of Havana at Carnival and Epiphany, where 'the masks were faithfully copied from those in use in African societies . . . the musical instruments which accompanied them were just the same as we find employed in Africa; and . . . the names given to characters in the dance were those of gods or spirits.'[6]

A crucial influence on the style of the encounter was Catholicism itself, at least as it manifested itself in the

Americas. We have seen how slaves in the North American colonies, and, later, states, were converted to Christianity mainly through the efforts of Protestant, especially Nonconformist, groups, in particular during the waves of religious revivalism that swept the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The blacks were obliged to undergo instruction, and to be catechized, before being baptized and received into the church; this meant that the concepts of nonconformist Christianity were taught to them with some care. Their worship, too, was watched over carefully by the white clergy to ensure that decorum, as they saw it, was preserved, leading to the rapid elimination of specifically African forms of worship. What remained of African beliefs and worship in North America has been called a 'reinterpretation' of Christian doctrine 'in the light,' says Bastide, 'of his own mentality, sentiments and affective needs; what emerged was a Negro rather than an African brand of Christianity.'[7]

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, first because it regards the sacraments as something to be experienced rather than intellectually understood, and second because it was in the New World what Bastide calls 'a social rather than a mystical phenomenon',[8] was more casual in its attitude to doctrinal instruction. Baptism was often carried out *en masse* at the port of embarkation, or on arrival, on the slave's learning a few prayers and ritual gestures. Besides, there have never been enough priests in Latin America to cater for all the souls in their charge, even in the cities; in the country the blacks have been left largely to themselves. The massive black migration to the cities during this century has not changed things much; in the *favelas*, or *barrios*, that surround the great cities such as Lima, Caracas and Rio, where as we have seen the civil authorities' law hardly ventures, the grip of the Catholic Church is very loose indeed. As a result, the Church has had to wink its eye at both the introduction of African elements into its rituals and at the existence of a number of syncretistic religious cults that were derived extensively from the doctrines, the imagery and the pantheon of Christianity and blended with African deities and their observances.

But there was not, in South America any more than in

North, any clinging to the forms of the past; what occurred was the dynamic response of a highly creative people to the need not only to survive but also to make survival worth fighting for, to preserve identity, community and a sense of human dignity. Even after Emancipation, which occurred at various times in the nineteenth century (the last was Brazil, in 1888), and despite official denials of racism in countries such as Brazil and Colombia, blacks in those countries remain mostly at the bottom of the social system. There is no 'official' dividing line which, as in the United States and Britain, marks anyone with the slightest trace of African ancestry as 'black' and thus inferior, but there is a finely developed sense of hue which ensures that the darker a person's skin colour the more disadvantaged he or she will be. As one Brazilian musician said to Jeremy Marre, 'They say there is no racism — only discrimination.'[9]

In this situation, very different from that in Anglo-Saxon North America (and one to which the surviving Indians have made a significant contribution, both genetic and cultural) we find a much greater survival of African cultural forms. Into the religious space left by the Catholic Church have moved a number of genuinely syncretistic religions which draw equally on Christianity and on memories of Africa (kept alive in the present century by much traffic with West Africa) such as Brazilian *Candomblé*, Haitian *Voudou* (by no means the sinister cult beloved of B-movie makers but a sophisticated and morally elevated religion), Cuban *Lucumbi*, and Puerto Rican *Santaria*. If one finds in these and other religions such (to European eyes) bizarre features as the giving of names of Christian saints to *Voudou* gods, and the uttering of Catholic prayers before *Voudou* ceremonies to bring a blessing on the participants, or the attending of Mass to give thanks for the successful initiation of a new devotee to the *Candomblé*, we can find some explanation in the words of Bastide:

> 'Syncretism by correspondence between the gods and saints . . . can be explained in historical terms by the slaves' need, during the colonial period, to conceal their pagan ceremonies from European eyes. They therefore danced before a Catholic altar, and though their masters found this

> somewhat bizarre, it never occurred to them that these Negro dances, with their prominently displayed lithographs and statuettes of saints, were in fact addressed to African divinities. Even today, the priests and priestesses of Brazil recognize that syncretism is simply a mask put over the black gods for the white man's benefit. At the same time, it can be justified, theologically, in the eyes of the faithful. In essence, the argument runs, there is only one universal religion, which acknowledges the existence of one unique God and Creator. However, this God is too remote from mankind for the latter to enter into direct contact with him; therefore, "intermediaries" are necessary — Catholic saints and the angels of the Old Testament for Europeans, *Orisha* and *Vodun* for the Negroes. Though this universal religion takes on local forms, varying according to race and ethnic group, the variations are not fundamental. In any case, one can always "translate" one religion into another by assimilating some African divinity to a special saint, or to some local variant of the Virgin.'[10].

Without doubting for a moment the necessity for concealment, one may see at the same time something even more positive in this religious double vision: that ability of Africans, not only to tolerate but actively to make use of and to enjoy multiple identities.

We need not be surprised, given the intricate ways in which religion is woven into the texture of Afro-American life, to find that such multiple identities are to be found in musicking also. The ceremonies of *Candomblé* are accompanied, West African style, by a trio of drums with double bell by means of which the gods are summoned to possess the bodies of celebrants as they dance; the *samba da rodé*, rural ancestor of the urban samba of the Rio carnival, is a circle dance accompanied by call-and-response singing, drumming and handclaps, in which each participant in turn dances a solo in the centre of the circle, while the *capoeira*, a form of martial arts disguised as dance, is accompanied by *berimbau*, a single-string bow with gourd resonator struck with a stick. All these represent much more explicit African survivals than anything to be found in North America, and they have filtered into the Portuguese-inflected popular music, even inflecting the music and the dancing of the white bourgeoisie. Dances of Brazil, like the

samba, the carioca and maxixe, can all exist in a number of forms, from those that are acceptable in bourgeois society to those uninhibited and physical dances such as may be found in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro.

If the musicking of the Afro-Hispanic fusion, in those South American countries which were Spanish colonies — Panama, Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela in particular — appears to contain fewer Africanisms, this may be, as John Storm Roberts points out, because both Spanish music and Central and West African music favour complicated driving rhythms with steady pulsating patterns. 'This,' says Roberts, 'is true of the Spanish music best known to non-Spaniards, *flamenco*, and also much other Spanish folk music, especially that of the south. The similarity between Spanish and African approaches extends to the occurrence in much Spanish music of combinations of duple and triple rhythms, though not simultaneous. Many Spanish rhythmic patterns are quite near enough to African patterns for African techniques (cross-rhythms, the overlaying of triple and duple rhythm, and so on) to fit them perfectly. And the rhythmic improvisation which is such a feature of some African drumming — the approach of the lead drummer in many areas — is not alien to the Spanish'.[11]

This affinity of rhythmic style is summed up in the rhythmic pattern known throughout Latin America and the Caribbean as *clavé*, a recurrent two-bar scheme with three accented beats in the first bar and two in the second; counting eight semiquaver beats in each of two two-four bars, a typical clavé would be ONE-two-three-FOUR-five-six-SEVEN-eight, one-two-THREE-four-FIVE-six-seven-eight (lovers of rock'n'roll will recognize that as something very like the 'hambone' or 'Bo Diddley' beat, which is of ancient provenance in black North American music, pointing perhaps to early cultural traffics). Billy Bergman calls clavé a 'truce' which is 'the true genius of the Latin American tradition; polyrhythms fit neatly between bar lines.'[12] The polyrhythms of Africa, he says, are 'caged but not tamed' and so become usable for popular dance music. We have already seen, in our discussion of ragtime, how this unequal division of an eight-beat pattern is the Afro-American accommodation between African and

European concepts of rhythm (Bergman's use of the word 'truce' is thus very apt), and the clavé is another version of the kind of pattern we found in ragtime melodies. In Latin music, however, the basic European two-four beat is not sounded as it is in ragtime; instead it is the clavé itself that is the rhythmic foundation of the whole musical structure, and players do not think of a two-four against it at all, but rather choose to superimpose any number of other patterns, in ever-increasing layers of fascinating and delicious rhythmic complexity, upon it.

It is not only the more or less universal rhythmic basis of Latin American music, but it is also long-established. The American pianist Louis Moreau Gottschalk travelled widely throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1850s and 1860s, spending from 1856 to 1862 in the Caribbean, where, as he tells us in his memoirs, he wandered at random, 'indolently permitting myself to be carried away by chance, giving a concert wherever I found a piano, sleeping wherever night overtook me — on the grass of the savannah, or under the palm-leaf roof of a *veguero* with whom I partook of a tortilla, coffee and bananas . . . When I became tired of the same horizon, I crossed an arm of the sea and landed on a neighbouring isle, or on the Spanish Main. In this manner I have successively visited the Spanish, French, English, Dutch, Swedish and Danish Antilles, the Guianas and the shores of Pará.'[13] Gottschalk was of course no ethnomusicologist — there was no such creature in his day — but a musician of wide social and cultural sympathies and a keen ear, and he composed a large number of pieces for piano and for orchestra in which he incorporated (one might say, celebrated) the rhythms that he heard; the various inflections of the clavé can be heard in these pieces, often flowing seamlessly out of and into rhythms of contradance, schottische, polka and waltz which the Europeans had brought. Gottschalk, who had worked in Paris with Berlioz, organized in February 1860 a giant music festival in Havana with an orchestra which according to his own account numbered 560 players (seventy violins alone!). He is reported to have scoured the countryside around Havana and Santiago for native players of the *bamboula* and other drums to take part in his Symphony No 1, subtitled

Nuit des Tropiques, the second of whose two movements is probably the first samba ever composed for a European symphony orchestra. The picture of all those musicians, plus singers, all 'bellowing and blowing', in the composer's own words, 'to see who could scream the loudest'[14] (where *could* they have all come from?) in an orchestra alongside some fifty drummers from surrounding villages, gives a fascinating and tantalizing vignette from cultural history, and reminds us of the multiplicity of sources from which has come the present-day identity and music of the peoples of the Caribbean.

The influence of South American music on that of the United States has been intermittent and localized, consisting mostly of dance crazes which have captured white American dancers, mostly in watered-down versions, ever since the late years of the last century. The Argentinian tango, the Brazilian maxixe, samba, la conga and bossa nova are among the many which have surfaced briefly and disappeared, surviving today rather weirdly as an element of identity among white ballroom-dancing enthusiasts. It is from the Caribbean and from Mexico that the most enduring influences have come, for reasons which probably have to do partly with their geographical closeness to the United States, partly with the amazing mobility of Caribbean people and partly with the fact that the Caribbean has for centuries been the forum for the encounter between many different kinds of identity. Their history has been extremely complex, with successive waves of European masters following the initial Spanish colonization, the major powers being Britain and France but with the Dutch, Swedish and Danish also represented, and waves of forced migration from different parts of West and Central Africa. In all this history the central part played by the blacks themselves in the development of the islands and of their culture has been consistently left out of account. As Eric Williams says, writing about the economic and political crisis of slavery in the early nineteenth century:

> 'the most dynamic and powerful social force in the colonies was the slave himself. This aspect of the West Indian problem has been studiously ignored, as if the slaves, when they became instruments of production, passed for men

> only in the catalogue. The planter looked upon slavery as eternal, ordained by God, and went to great lengths to justify it by scriptural quotation. There was no reason why the slave should think the same. He took the same scriptures and adapted them to his own purpose. To coercion and punishment, he responded with indolence, sabotage and revolt. Most of the time he merely was as idle as possible. That was his usual form of resistance — passive. The docility of Negro slaves is a myth. The maroons of Jamaica and the Bush Negroes of British Guiana were runaway slaves who had extracted treaties from the British Government and lived independently in their mountain fastnesses or jungle retreats. They were standing examples to the slaves of the British West Indies of one road to freedom. The successful slave revolt in Saint Domingue was a landmark in the history of slavery in the New World, and after 1804, when the independent republic of Haiti was established, every white slave-owner, in Jamaica, Cuba or Texas, lived in dread of another Toussaint L'Ouverture. It is inconceivable *a priori* that the economic dislocation and the vast agitations which shook millions in Britain could have passed without effect on the slaves. Pressure on the sugar planters from the capitalists in Britain was aggravated by pressure from the slaves in the colonies. In communities like the West Indies, as the governor of Barbados wrote, "the public mind is ever tremblingly alive to the danger of insurrection."[15]

With the ending of slavery, at various times over the nineteenth century (a result less of the efforts of humanitarians than of the collapse of the West Indian sugar economy with the import into Europe of cheaper sugar from India and the East Indies), the islands and their populations, which had created for the 'mother countries' such vast wealth, were treated by them with cynical disdain. 'Jamaica to the bottom of the sea!,' said one British Member of Parliament in 1844. 'These "barren colonies" had been the "most fatal appendages" of the British Empire, and if they were to be blotted out from the face of the earth Britain would lose "not one jot of her strength, one penny of her wealth, one instrument of her power."'[16] The islands had even to learn how to feed themselves; in the heyday of sugar, land had been too profitable to be given over

to such mundane commodities as food, livestock and the like, all of which had been imported from the American mainland; hence the seemingly bizarre liking of present-day Jamaicans for dried and salted North Atlantic cod. The general neglect was interrupted from time to time when the mother countries found themselves in need of fighting men or cheap labour; otherwise they were left to rot.

It is this ruthless economic exploitation coupled with neglect that is at the root of the image of picturesque decay, of indolence, superstition and ignorance, summed up in the words 'Creole decadence', which lingers in the European mind today — not an altogether erroneous image so far as the surviving remnants of the planter class are concerned, but completely belied by the cultural vigour of the slaves' descendants as well as of those who were, at various times over the nineteenth century, brought in as indentured labour in ill-conceived attempts to revive the island economies (the problem was not shortage of labour but rather shortage of investment, which the mother countries were never willing to provide): East Indians, Syrians, Indians, Chinese and even Africans, mostly from present-day Zaire. These latter-day immigrations were complicated by the mobility of the islanders themselves; Cubans and Jamaicans have commuted between each other's islands for two hundred years and more, and thousands of Jamaicans emigrated in the 1920s and 1930s to the United States and Canada (they were particularly active in the 'Harlem Renaissance' of the 1930s), while it was mainly people from the British West Indies who built the Panama Canal. It is this mobility and penchant for island-hopping that have brought about some surprising phenomena, such as the spectacle of English-speaking inhabitants of the hispanophone Dominican Republic parading in the streets of San Pedro at Christmas dressed in colourful costumes and reciting garbled versions of medieval English mummers' plays to the accompaniment of a drum-and-fife band which plays a mixture of British military music and African dance music. Perhaps nowhere else in the world — certainly nowhere else in the western world — have there been in historical times such vigorous surges and counter-surges of societies and cultures.

In most of the Caribbean islands people of at least partly

African descent are in a majority — certainly they are in a majority over-all. In most, too, owing to a pernicious combination of neglect by the dominant powers in the area and negative interference from the moment they try to do something for themselves, the economies are in a ramshackle condition, despite the presence in most of a small well-off middle class. Instead of the blanket racism of the United States and Europe which assigns anyone with any visible trace of African descent automatically to an inferior position, the colonial powers fostered, through their control of employment prospects, a more subtle and very divisive system of discrimination based on skin tone, which is slowly dying out as the islands have gained at least the legal forms of independence; this has affected the self-perception of the islanders, who see themselves very differently from a racial and cultural point of view from the way in which Americans and Europeans see them. There is, at least within most of the islands, no white majority who hold the economic power and who are able to co-opt black musicians and their musicking to their own purposes, so that the culture is more autonomous than the black culture of the United States and, today, of Britain. The music remains within the community and in touch with its origins — which, in those mainly rural societies, are generally in the villages and small towns.

There is in the rural areas an unending source of new ways of musicking and of dancing; virtually every community has its own variants which identify whose who practice them as being from this or that village or town. These are ideolects within the dialect of their country or island, which is in turn a part of that common language of music and dance which is recognizable as Afro-Caribbean. Those styles generally remain within the community from which they sprang, but every now and then, perhaps through the activities of an unusually gifted or ambitious musician, one will spread to the towns to become a popular dance style throughout a region or an island, being possibly recorded for local labels and moving socially upwards as part of the music and dance of the middle and upper classes, such social barriers as are erected against the invasion of this lower-class music being almost always eventually swept aside. Such styles may be ephemeral, or may

remain permanent features of the local scene, but they will retain contact with their rural origins; as Kenneth Bilby says: 'the various Caribbean popular musical styles, like their rural predecessors, have maintained their strong family resemblance; they are, after all, extensions of the same creative process of blending that has been shaping Caribbean musical life for centuries.'[17] These styles will invariably be non-literate in origin, becoming literate probably at some point on their ascent up the social scale; the rapid succession of one style by another points not only to the cultural vigour of Caribbean peoples but also to the speed of change and development that we noted earlier, which is a characteristice of non-literate cultures.

Roberto Nodal gives an account of just such development, of the Afro-Cuban *són* in the second decade of the present century. He tells us that in the nineteenth century there was much European music played, for example by touring opera companies, who could rely on picking up their orchestras on the island, as well as in churches and at the 'elegant receptions given by the plantation owners.'[18] These orchestras comprised mostly black musicians (we have here the answer to our earlier question of how Gottschalk could have found 650-odd musicians for his mammoth orchestra in Havana); just as in the United States, black musicians had no difficulty in becoming competent in European styles, and they also played for white dancing — *contradanzas*, derived from a French eighteenth-century courtly dance, and Spanish *zapateados*, which they gradually Africanized as *danzas* and *danzóns*, whose characteristic clavé-based rhythms we today recognize in the habanera. Those Africanizations were much condemned; Nodal quotes a Havana newspaper of around 1840: 'We think that the *danza* and the *danzón*, though born in Cuba, are of African origin . . . The music of these dances contains something of the wanton voluptuousness which characterizes the meek indigenous peoples of hottest Africa.'[19] It would appear that white Cubans found the same half-guilty fascination in black culture that we have seen in the whites of North America. Earlier opinions, says Nodal, were reversed after Cuba obtained independence from Spain in 1902, and musicologists claimed to hear in the *danza* and *danzón*, now

become respectable, an 'example of white Cuban creativity with no black influence, or else traced their origins to fictitious Indian influences.'[20] For the blacks, it would seem, there was no winning either way.

The government of the new Cuban republic, imbued with Europeanizing fervour, embarked on the impossible task of eliminating all trace of African presence from the island, going to greater lengths in their measures against black culture than at any time during the colonial period. 'A "culturally whitened" black minority supported the government's campaigns to de-Africanize customs . . . Black religions were persecuted and the use of African drums forbidden.'[21] But 'despite the legal restraints, the African drums survived and kept their mighty sounds echoing through the republic.'[22]

It was under these conditions that the *són* arose, in the easternmost part of the island, and slowly gained in popularity. It was heavily dependent on complex clavé-based rhythms beaten on hand drums such as bongo and conga, and on maracas, claves, guiros and timbales — the first Cuban popular music to use such a powerful battery of percussion, and a forceful affirmation of identity by the Afro-Cubans in the face of the attempt to destroy, or at least suppress, their culture. Not surprisingly, it aroused considerable opposition among the white upper classes and the authorities, but it became immensely popular in the slums of Havana, and, in the way of such things (not unconnected with both the fascination exerted on the whites by black culture and that exerted on the upper classes by the lower — factors which have been perennially important in the diffusion of Afro-American musical styles) it was soon played and danced to in upper-class salons also. As it moved upwards it changed, becoming smoother, less 'African', so that we find there were several versions of the *són*: a rural version, a lower-class urban version and an upper-class version. Common to them all, however, was the use of the heavy battery of hand-beaten drums and the complex clavé polyrhythms. The *són* was taken to the United States by travelling Cuban musicians possibly as early as 1910, but it was in the form known as the *rumba*, in the early 1930s, that it became really popular there, and with it the

whole range of Afro-Cuban percussion that is nowadays taken for granted as part of the instrumentation of Afro-American music.

To white North Americans, Latin America is a romantic place, where the writ of the Protestant Ethic and Anglo-Saxon puritanism, under which they themselves are obliged to live, does not run. They picture it as inhabited by indolent, picturesque, easy-going people much given to fiestas, revenge and violent politics; among the stereotypes whose power is not diminished today are those of the heavily-moustachio'd Mexican lying under his sombrero in the sun and murmuring 'Mañana' (an image assiduously fostered in the United States ever since the Mexican War of 1846–48 when Mexico was relieved of the present-day states of California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah), the sultry Creole lady whose favours are difficult but gratifying to obtain, and the Caribbean black, flashing white teeth in a beguiling smile but given to taking part in bloodcurdling nocturnal ceremonies. It would seem to have been designed by a benevolent Providence as a playground for romantically-minded North Americans — and for their unromantic business interests. Reinforced by stage musicals and by Hollywood movies with titles like *Flying Down to Rio*, *Saludos Amigos*, and *Caribbean Carnival*, not to mention the *Speedy Gonzalez* animated films, these and similar images have dominated northern perceptions of Latin Americans and Caribbeans for a century or more; northerners, including northern Europeans (as Britain's 1982 adventure in the South Atlantic demonstrated), simply do not take the people or their culture seriously.

Latin and Caribbean musicians, who, naturally enough, have long looked to the wealthy United States as a focus for their ambitions, have found themselves faced with these attitudes and have been obliged to tailor their musicking to them; Latin music is not just 'fun' but even slightly absurd — the image of Carmen Miranda and her banana-topped headgear comes irresistibly to mind — and in order to reach the wider white audience the music has been smoothed out and tidied up to suit its perceptions. Many Latin musicians have made a good living, both in North America and in Europe, by playing what is esentially American popular dance

music with a Latin sauce.

But for two hundred years or more the response of black Americans to Latin music has been of another kind. We have already seen that there was in the colonial period a good deal of traffic between, in particular, southern North America and the Caribbean, and, as is usual, with the traffic went the music. The whites' romantic and frivolous images of Latin America have never taken hold of the black American imagination (romanticism being in any case a luxury most blacks could not afford), and blacks have been able to find in the complex Afro-Latin rhythms a way of escaping from the ubiquitous four-square four-four and two-four time that could be seen as a metaphor for their oppression by a Northern-European-descended majority. Latin clavé-based polyrhythms are after all closer to African complexity than anything in indigenous North American black music, and while strictly African polyrhythms have long since disappeared a liking for polyrhythms remains in all New World black people. Such rhythms would no doubt provide a strong reinforcement for black feelings of common identity with their South American and Caribbean fellows, and there is no doubt that black musicians, unlike the majority of whites, have always taken them very seriously indeed. As John Storm Roberts says: 'Latin rhythms have been absorbed into black American styles far more consistently than in white popular music, despite Latin's popularity among whites.'[23]

Such absorption can be seen, for example, in the rhythmic patterns of ragtime melodies, with their predominantly 3-3-2 accentuation; many of them would seem perfectly natural if placed over a habanera bass instead of the steady one-two (there are in fact a few rags by Joplin where that actually happens). It can be seen, too, in much early jazz, in which Jelly Roll Morton noticed, and himself used, what he called 'the Latin tinge'; indeed, Roberts suggests that the blending of the habanera rhythm into black music may have been 'part of what freed black music from ragtime's European bass.'[24] He quotes an anecdote from W.C. Handy's autobiography which tells how, around 1906, Handy introduced a habanera rhythm into the dance music at a black carnival in Memphis, observing in the dancers a 'sudden proud and graceful

reaction to the rhythm'.[25] The use of both Latin percussion and Latin rhythms has been a persistent feature of jazz throughout its history; the collaboration between Dizzy Gillespie and the Afro-Cuban conga drummer Chano Pozo is only the best-known of many.

Latin and Caribbean rhythms, then, have long been a natural and expected element of black North American music. But their wider diffusion came with the major influx into mainland United States of Puerto Ricans after they had been accorded full US citizenship in 1917 (the island had been taken from Spain after the Spanish-American war of 1898 but for reasons of *realpolitik* had not, like Cuba, been granted independence). They were followed by Cubans, the first wave in the 1930s and 1940s and the second in the 1960s after Castro's revolution. The influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants, not only from the Caribbean but also, mostly illegally, from Mexico, has meant that today nearly one person in five in the United States is hispanophone; in New York estimates put it between one in three and one in two. This large 'Hispanic' presence (itself a genetic mix that ranges from pure Southern European through Oriental to African) has meant that there is in the United States today a large socially disadvantaged minority for whom Caribbean and Latin music is a major element in their sense of identity. That means, in turn, that a Latin musician has a considerable constituency today, if a mainly poor one, for his art. It also means that, as the new generation of Spanish speakers grows up in the United States, the individual identities of Cubans, Puerto Ricans and others tend to become fused in a composite 'Hispanic' identity, just as, three centuries and more earlier, the separate identities of the various African peoples in the North American colonies became fused into a single 'Afro-American' identity.

The musical style that gives expression to that sense of identity more than any other has been christened salsa, a term which means, simply, 'sauce'. Mario Bauza, a pioneer Cuban musician from the 1930s, told John Storm Roberts: 'What they call salsa is really nothing new. When Cuban music was really in demand the kids didn't go for it. Now they call it salsa and they think it belongs to them. It's good as a gimmick.'[26] Whatever the origin of the term, salsa is an exciting and joyous

affirmation, exploration and celebration of the identity of Hispanic Americans which draws not only on Caribbean Latin styles of musicking but also on black American styles, especially rhythm-and-blues and jazz — thus bringing about a meeting, from different directions, of two African descendants — and spreading out once more into r-and-b and rock, where the influence of Latin percussion, in particular, has been pervasive, and into disco music. As with all street musics that move upwards, salsa has been taken up by record companies, with sometimes disastrous results, but also with many fine and committed recorded performances; as with other forms of Afro-American musicking, what gets recorded represents only a tiny fraction of the total. A young Newyorican community leader, Felipe Luciano, told Jeremy Marre: 'Here in New York we are among the most oppressed people. You've seen the dancers and what I call the cultural priests — the musicians. You've seen the joy, the very life, the pulsating rhythms which are our community. But all that belies our political reality. You can see the musicians playing three gigs a night, high on coke, for something like 30 or 40 dollars a night, their lips down to their knees, exhausted, trying to support their families . . . Every one of those musicians playing on the streets of New York is in his own way a keeper of tradition. There's not one musician playing conga or trumpet, whether Puerto Rican, Cuban or 'hispanic', who does not understand what the roots of his culture are. Ours will be the music of the Americas in the 1980s and 1990s. It's the street music that will survive, because there are more street people, poor people. It's the music of the people because it is their conscience. That's what salsa is.'[27]

This statement reveals in Latin American musicking, just as in that of black North Americans, that although the specific musical techniques of Africa may not have survived in the Americas, the fundamental African attitude to the act of musicking continues to flourish. If the ways of musicking of African descendants took different paths in the two Americas and the Caribbean through contact with two European cultures that were about as different from each other as one could imagine — the Anglo-Celtic and the Iberian — the two trajectories have not only met and interacted vitally over the

years but also show the signs of their common origin. Any African musician would recognize the force of what Felipe Luciano says, and would recognize as well, in Afro-American musicking, no matter where it comes from, that endless process of exploration and celebration of self and of community, that loving (and often challenging) interaction between musicians, listeners and dancers, that ceaseless search for human meanings, which is also the stuff of his musicking. Such musicking becomes the more necessary for spiritual survival when the world appears to be ruled by the ruthlessly rational god whose name is Mammon, and whose rationality is always hostile to human life and conviviality. And since that search, that interaction, that celebration, is not the exclusive concern of people of the African diaspora (even though it is on them that the rational god has weighed most heavily), it is not surprising that whites no less than blacks have felt that Afro-American musicking in all its forms addresses them directly as well, in their inmost sense of who they are.

The fact that Afro-American music has spread across the world to affect the sensibilities of virtually all people — Viennese jazz orchestras, Thai pop stars, Japanese reggae bands (complete with permanent-waved dreadlocks), Czech and Russian rock groups, even Indian film musicians, are only a few of its manifestations — has often been cited as evidence of its destructive power, in league with big-business interests, on indigenous cultures. But, in the first place, no-one, not even with the backing of the most sophisticated apparatus of advertising and marketing, can persuade people to enjoy musical performances that have no relevance to their lives, their feelings or their identity. It is not Afro-American music that is destroying the ancient communities and cultures of the world, but Mammon, and his instrument the industrial society. Afro-American music, as we have seen, has been from its beginnings the weapon of a people in the struggle to preserve identity and community, and its presence the world over, in however diluted or skewed a form, testifies to a similar need in peoples the world over as they are torn from their traditional communities by the demands of the rational god. Even the simulacrum of community offered by the most

commercial of pop concerts or top twenty record programmes clearly feeds a real hunger, just as the classical concert or record feeds the sense of identity of those who have benefited most from the god's destructive activities.

And in the second place, what is to be heard on record or seen on TV and in pop concerts is only a small fraction of the musical activity that is going on at any time; it is just not possible to develop a commercial popular-music industry unless there is a great deal of musicking going on unregarded in the lower reaches of the society. One may take it as axiomatic that the real work of Afro-American musicking — of all vernacular musicking, in fact — is done out of sight and hearing of middle-class observers; what is to be heard in public is only that part of it which someone reckons will appeal to a public beyond the community in which it originated, and make him some money. It will quite possibly not be the musicking that is most valued within that community, and may not even be representative of it. What is also axiomatic is that the more widespread the practice of musical performance the more discriminating and demanding its audience will be.

This may explain, at least in part, one of the most remarkable developments in Afro-American music in the present century, namely the return of the music to Africa, to give expression to traditional African social and personal values at a time when those values, and the social structures they support, have been subjected to intense and destructive pressure from outside. Here has occurred another turn of the creative spiral, as Caribbean, and in particular Cuban, rhythms have blended with existing West and Central African idioms to produce a series of dance styles which have swept the dancehalls of Accra, Lagos, Kinshasa, Nairobi and other African cities, each new style accompanied by a chorus of complaints that it was killing older styles. But each, in Roberts's words, would 'give way to another new fad, leaving only a few useful stylistic traits behind. Meanwhile, the local music goes on, at every moment seemingly about to be swept aside, but always surviving.'[28] From highlife to juju, musicians have always remained mindful of traditional ways of musicking and in particular of their traditional task in African com-

munities; as Roberts says of I.K. Nairo, who is credited with the dissemination of juju beyond the Yoruba among whom it originated: 'He has produced music that is new but asserts its newness in a framework of the past, thus supplying both novelty and continuity to a people who value both.'[29] Continuity and novelty are also to be found in the bands who play this music, using as they do both the newest in electronic technology and traditional instruments — not only drums and other percussion but also xylophones, various stringed instruments and the mbira — as well as traditional vocal styles. In the swirling mix of styles can be detected also the sounds of European military bands, missionary hymns, and British, French and American pop music; influences as diverse as those of The Ink Spots, James Brown, the British danceband leader Joe Loss and muted trumpeter Eddie Calvert have all been noted by Roberts.

The ways in which Afro-American music returned to Africa have been well documented and recorded, and fall outside the scope of this book. There is, however, one feature which does bear comment in the light of our discussion, the tendency of West and Central Africans to favour Afro-Caribbean, and especially Cuban, styles whereas black South Africans have tended to be more interested in jazz. John Storm Roberts has an explanation for this: 'There is no mystery why different Afro-American styles were influential in different parts of Africa. In West Africa and the Congo, Cuban music was returning with interest something that largely came from there anyway, so that there is the most natural of affinities. South African music is quite different from West African and Congo-Angolan. As a generalization, it tends towards rhythmic complexity of singing voices over a regular beat; its poly-rhythms come from the voices, which vary their accentuation relative to the basic rhythm. This is remarkably like jazz, especially the 1930s and 1940s music of Count Basie and others who riffed and soloed against a rock-steady four-four beat.'[30]

This is fair enough, but I cannot help being struck by the fact that in neither West Africa nor the Caribbean have black people been obliged, in recent times at least, to come to terms with a dominant white culture within their own country, while

both black North Americans and black South Africans have. Jazz, as I suggested in Chapter 12, can be seen as a way in which black Americans have worked out their identity in relation to the dominant Euro-American culture; perhaps black South Africans are engaged in a similar enterprise. If there is any substance to this idea, then musical developments in South Africa over the next few years should be as interesting as the political.

In any case, Roberts's conclusion is that 'the root of all African pop styles is a blend of reinterpreted traditional — or at least local — elements with any foreign ingredients that may enhance them . . . In practice, these foreign elements are almost all Afro-American — even many of the apparently non-Afro-American influences have themselves been influenced by black music. Therefore, modern African pop music is a good deal more than a simply 'Westernized' — hence presumably neocolonialist — music would be. In fact, it contains a high degree of Africanism, direct and indirect, and completes a very satisfactory black-music circle binding together the Old World and the New.'[31]

The circle may be complete but it is by no means closed. Those African musicians have themselves been on the move, to the United States and to Europe, bringing their music with them to enliven further every aspect of Afro-American musicking. South African exiles have brought to American and European jazz an emotional intensity and rhythmic concentration that must relate to the new society that is today being born with such agony in their homeland, while West African juju musicians, now a familiar part of the concert, dance-hall and disco scene, have brought their characteristic African blend of intense seriousness and heartlifting gaiety. In addition, the multicoloured balloon of the New Pop has descended upon Africa, sailing away with rhythms and riffs, as it has done indiscriminately with 'well, you name it: soul (in all its forms), jazz (ditto), African (likewise), British, Irish and American folk, Latin, Euro-disco, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, avant-garde classical, reggae, ska, hip-hop, Chinese, Japanese, Indian and God knows what else, including, of course, an indigenous pop tradition that was in any case based initially on a variety of black musics.'[32] Exploitative such

music undoubtedly is, but its ecleticism gives it a vivid flash-in-the-pan vitality that, for all its unashamed commercialism — or perhaps even because of it — is somehow endearing. All of it is serious, even the most frivolous, for it is all concerned with the most serious of all human concerns, the quest for identity.

I have left to the last the most succesful and influential of all musical styles to have emerged from the Caribbean in recent years, since it does reveal the intimate relationship between the emergence of a musical style and the development of a sense of communal identity. The crystallization of a new musical style by means of which black Jamaicans have been able to affirm, to explore and to celebrate a new way of relating to the world, to bring into existence a new kind of musical society, took place at a particular moment in the mid-1960s, when a number of social forces in Jamaica, making for the emergence of a new identity, came to operate together. It is worth looking more closely at those forces, and also at the factors which made it possible for that new identity to be recognized and empathized with by a large number of people beyond that small and impoverished Caribbean island.

When, in 1955, Jamaica celebrated, if that is the word, three hundred years of British colonial rule, with a fine show of loyalty to the 'Mother Country', the old colonial states of mind were already disintegrating. Since the abolition of slavery in 1838, black Jamaicans, especially the members of the small middle class, had learnt to despise their African cultural inheritance, and to look to Europe, and especially Britain, as the source of all cultural values and benefits. Children prepared for the Cambridge Local examinations, the boys in the flannel trousers, blazers and straw boaters of the English grammar-school boy, their sisters in navy-blue serge gymslips and black woollen stockings, imported if possible from England. They entered, or tried to enter, a civil service that was based on Whitehall, and they went to England to study and to fight for the Mother Country in two world wars. As we have already noted, there was only a minute white overclass on the island, but there was an elaborate system of social stratification based on skin tone which could vitally affect one's career prospects in banks, civil service, large overseas firms and the

tourist industry. Three hundred years of British rule had been highly successful, especially in dividing the colonial population against itself. At the same time there was a fair degree of quite genuine acculturation to European high culture; leading church choirs in Kingston were used to giving fine performances of masterpieces of the European choral tradition from *Elijah* to the *Saint Matthew Passion*. And if a proportion of the choristers had learnt their parts by rote rather than by note, who can say that the performances were the worse or the less committed for that?

On a lower social level, Jamaicans absorbed the harmonies of British hymn tunes and sea shanties, the rhythms of waltz and quadrille, the instrumentation of military and drum-and-fife bands, and blended them with African elements in a rich variety of Afro-Christian religious rituals, an African-style three-drum ensemble called *burru*, as well as a four-square dance called *mento*, with heavy bass, a strong fourth beat and often bawdy social-commentary lyrics which were not unlike Trinidadian calypso in social function if not in form. In 1955 these and other syncretistic forms were emerging from the shadow of the European culture and were highly visible, and audible, in the tricentenary celebrations; the African inheritance was ceasing to be an embarrassment and begining to become a source of pride. By 1962, when independence was granted, along with desperate economic and social problems which included massive unemployment and an agriculture in ruins owing to three hundred years of colonial exploitation and mismanagement, the colonial mentality was in full retreat.

One of the signs of this retreat was, paradoxically, a decline in interest in older folk musics among the younger people, especially those who flocked to Kingston looking for work and who found themselves consigned to the same kind of *barrio*, in West Kingston, that we have already noted on the outskirts of other Third World cities. For most of those youngsters, the 'rude boys' or 'rudies', there were only two possible ways out of the *barrio* — through crime and through music. Crime was only too easy to get into, especially as the currency adopted by American drug dealers for paying the *ganja* (marijuana) growers was guns and ammunition rather than money, while

music meant initially a Jamaican version of the rhythm-and-blues that could be heard from AM radio stations on the US mainland (Jamaican local radio was, naturally, modelled on the BBC, and did not broadcast such music). R-and-b, it will be recalled, was the euphemistic name given by the record industry to black blues which had been transformed by the new demands black Americans were beginning to make on US society after fifty years or more of intense repression. It is hard to resist the idea that it was the exuberantly black musicking of Louis Jordan, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Chuck Berry and others which appealed also to those Jamaicans who had come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds but who shared the common desire of that time to shake off the hegemony, both cultural and material, of the colonial power. The older, syncretistic culture of Jamaica must have been associated with an identity that had for too long been static and supine under British dominance; rhythm-and-blues was the music of a people who were, at last, on the move.

The trouble was that in the late 1950s the whole r-and-b style ran into the sand; when about 1964, the music that we know today as rock emerged, it had become transformed in a way that no longer appealed to Jamaicans, who liked their musicking hard, vigorous and black (the emergence of rock was of course a sign that whites had regained control of popular music). There was nothing for it but to make their own — a notable gesture of independence, since one of the characteristic states of mind that is inculcated by colonial rule is the belief, which does not have to be explicitly stated, that nothing indigenous is any good until it has been validated by the guardians of the metropolitan culture. As those guardians are never going to say it is good enough (for that would render the colonial as good as the master, and undo the very basis of colonialism), the colonial is kept in a constant cycle of self-negation which can be broken only by a massive gesture of assertion such as occurred at this time in Jamaica.

There were already a few small record studios in Kingston in the late 1950s, mostly making mento records for the tourists, and the owners of those portable sound systems which had become a feature of Jamaican musical and social life started to make their own r-and-b records, using local talent. (The

minimum equipment for this highly competitive profession was a small truck or van, twin decks, amplifiers and the biggest speakers possible, ready to be set up in a hall or open space on a Saturday night. Each sound-system man kept the titles of his discs very secret, even scratching off the labels, and battles between rivals not infrequently came to the point of legendary shoot-outs.) The records they made were at first not for sale, but in single copies for their own use. Using the usual r-and-b instrumental line-up of horns, guitars, and rhythm section, they attempted to make their own r-and-b records — which came out, inescapably, with a Jamaican accent. Mento might have been repudiated in the mind, but it was in the blood, and those would-be r-and-b performances came out bass-heavy, with tricky bass lines and a powerful back-beat.

Naming, as we have seen, is a vital stage in the growth of a new identity, and the moment when it became recognized that what was being played was not unsuccessful rhythm-and-blues but a new kind of music occurred when the style was christened — by whom, who knows? — ska. Ska had other ingredients also, welling up from deep down in the sub-consciousness of Jamaicans: the sounds of church hymns, of brass bands, of other Latin and Caribbean musics, even of jazz and the religious music of the Revival and Pocomania cults — and of Rastafarianism.

There is no space here to discuss the origins and history of this remarkable religious faith, but two comments are relevant to our discussion. The first is that Rastafari is the first religious faith to be constructed consciously and deliberately on an identity as exiled Africans and to look to Africa for its sources; it was thus very much in tune with other Jamaican currents of feeling at the time. And, second, that like early Christianity it is a faith which supplies an identity for poor people. As one writer has said: 'In Jamaica today the Brotherhood of Rastafari is not just a millenarian sect waiting to go back to Africa but an alternative spiritual nationality that supplies a mass cultural identity for thousands of young Jamaicans stranded between their school years and an endless cycle of demeaning labour and unemployment. For the estimated 75,000 Rastas in Jamaica the beliefs and rituals of Rastafari resolve all the

killing ironies of a white man's god in a brutalized colonial society. Rasta asceticism allows poor people to make their way through the mechanical detritus of the twentieth century with dignity instead of shame and envy.'[33] It is not only a religion of the unemployed, however; many of Jamaica's finest artists — poets, sculptors, painters, actors and dancers as well as musicians — are Rastas. The same writers quote a young Jamaican engineer as saying that 'Rastas have contributed *more* to Jamaican culture than any other group. In time, they've become the conscience of the country. We feel we need them more than they need us.'[34]

The developments in Jamaican life and politics, themselves quite complex, which led to the transformation of ska, first into rock-steady around 1967 and then into reggae in the early 1970s, need not concern us. Those were years of violence, which are not yet over, and they were the years in which the new identity of the Rastas and of the Rude Boys (often finding themselves on the same, wrong, side of the law, especially the drugs law) was being hammered out in opposition to the traditional colonial values, their identities often being confused by the ordinary Jamaicans who found themselves caught in the crossfire. Both Rastas and Rude boys, often recruited for a single recording session, paid a few dollars and thrown out in the street again, had important roles in the development of rock-steady and reggae as at the same time both good-time musics and vehicles of often bitter and vehement social and political comment; nor did the Rasta musicians, despite their intense seriousness and their penchant for apocalyptic imagery, have any monopoly of the latter.

In musical terms, one can perceive in reggae, not an Africanization in the sense of the deliberate adoption of specifically African techniques, but rather a re-integration of scattered African elements from both Jamaican and American popular music: the return to a percussive approach throughout the whole musical texture, even on instruments not commonly thought of as percussive like the electric guitar and organ; the deliberate over-and-over repetition of small melodic and rhythmic figures; the simultaneous use of two or more pulse rates in the drumming; and of course the uniquely powerful emphasis on the backbeat, to the point that beats

one and three virtually disappear, with two and four emphasised by the choppy *(um)-chaka-(um)-chaka* pattern, completely reversing that of strong first and third and weak second and fourth beat which is otherwise virtually universal in western music. All of these techniques, that is, these ways of going about the making of music, show in themselves the emergence of a new identity which says, unmistakably, Here we are, this is how we are, and you can like it. It is a point which is emphasised by the musicians' on-stage demeanour: cool, elegant, with a hint of arrogance which proclaims that they are making no concessions to the world, and certainly none to the audience.

Reggae is also different in another way from other Caribbean and Latin musics. We have seen how Latin and Caribbean musicians, if they were to gain a reputation that extended beyond the local or regional, had been obliged to 'make it' in the United States; those who controlled the means of dissemination there controlled access to the rest of the world. Reggae was the first musical style to break that hold, the first musician to do so being Bob Marley; he had tried, and failed, to succeed in the States and returned home to make his first successful records. This was partly because of the incredibly rapid development of recording skills and technology in Kingston studios, partly because of the initial monopoly possessed by Jamaican rhythm sections of the definite and precise, even finicky rhythms and basslines of reggae. But none of this would have been decisive had it not been for the appeal of its languid, casually elegant rhythms which turn the European rhythmic order upside-down, its combination of good-time sounds and sharp social commentary, and the stance of contained self-possession adopted by the musicians, with which dispossessed people everywhere found they were able to identify.

Another turn of the creative wheel came with the migration of large numbers of people from the British Caribbean — not only Jamaica but also Trinidad, Barbados, St Lucia, Dominica, Grenada — to Britain after the second world war in response to urgent supplications from the British Government and large firms, as well as from organizations like London Transport. Having been encouraged in school, as we have

seen, to believe themselves British, and indeed having been granted full British citizenship by act of Parliament in 1948, they came to the Mother Country, to bitter disappointment in employment (despite the desperate shortage in Britain at that time of skilled workers, and despite the fact that over half of them were skilled, often highly skilled, they found themselves for the most part having to settle for the jobs that no-one else would do) and above all to the chronic hypocritical racism of the British, a racism which only intensified when the immigrants did what people everywhere are apt to do: they married and had children. Those children had the misfortune of coming to adulthood in the late 1970s, when unemployment was beginning to reappear on a large scale in Britain, intensified by the policies of the Thatcher administrations of 1979 and 1983, which believed in confrontation and repression, rather than dialogue and collaboration, as the way to solve the attendant problems.

The style of musicking that was to become reggae had travelled to Britain with the Jamaicans.

> 'Not smuggled in like contraband under false-bottomed suitcases and grips, nor was it absentmindedly left in the trouser pockets of those loose fitting two-piece suits in which the West Indies took the plunge into British society. It was even more insidious than that; it was under the skin, shapeless, formless and nameless, like an invisible implant whose carrier doesn't notice its presence on his person. The transitory Jamaicans weren't consciously aware that it had travelled with them, because it was an integral part of their make-up which there was little reason to isolate, examine or investigate. This was . . . Jamaica on the move, at the head of a Caribbean exodus, invitations in hand, to the colonial motherland, where the children were to be greeted with inferior living conditions and treated with hostility and suspicion. And the spirit of reggae settled down to incubate in boarding houses, nourished on sweat and toil and subjected to immense pressure.
>
> 'Strictly speaking, although the name reggae hadn't yet come into existence, the road to its development was well underway, because at this time Jamaica had begun to break out of its dependence on imported American R & B records, as the staple food for its dancehalls. The frenetic tempo of

> ska had emerged as the indigenous sound of the day. This mood was in turn transmitted to England where the Caribbean community enjoyed music as a means of relief and insulation as much as anything else. There was privacy in the illicit shebeens and basements where nightstalkers converged to drink, socialize and do the new dance.'[35]

It was, initially, then a private way of musicking which was used to support the reality of the displaced West Indians. But its qualities and its sharp power of definition were too obvious for it to remain for long unnoticed by the indigenous young. 'Ska,' says Dick Hebdige, 'obviously fulfilled the needs which mainstream pop music could no longer supply. It was a subterranean sound which had escaped commercial exploitation at a national level and was still "owned" by the subcultures which had originally championed it. It also hit below the belt in the pleasantest way imaginable and spoke of the simplicities of sex and violence in a language which was immediately intelligible to the quasi-delinquent adolescent fringe of working-class culture.'[36]

By 1970 the transformation of ska into rock-steady and then into reggae was complete. It is curious that the white group that was most enthusiastic about the new sound was the skinheads, themselves very much an out-group, subjects of those moral panics which periodically sweep over the English, and with a reputation for robbing old ladies and beating up coloured immigrants. They would attend the same reggae clubs as the young blacks, dancing to the music and imitating as best they could the latters' studied cool elegance. It did not, could not, last; the chasm between the groups was too wide, but for a brief period in the early 1970s it seemed possible that a real rapprochement might occur between the two social out-groups; it is a testament to the way in which people can use musicking and dancing as a way of trying-on an identity, without necessarily being committed to it, that things went as far as they did. The skinheads clearly felt something that appealed to them about the identity of the young blacks and about their style, which was for a time able to overcome the endemic racism of British society, but it was not strong enough to negate it permanently.

Reggae, while attractive to many white people, has still remained the 'property' of blacks in Britain to a surprising extent. It has been largely resistant to the siren calls of commercial success (the Rasta asceticism of many of the groups has contributed to this) and it forms a focus of identity for black British youth. It has taken over from and displaced the musical forms of other Caribbean islands, notably Trinidadian calypso and its offshoots (without, however, ousting them completely — soca is a definite presence in Britain also), much as salsa has among Hispanic New Yorkers. The relationship between British reggae and its Jamaican origins is ambivalent; the two have clearly developed in different ways over the last twenty years or so, even though there continues to be a great deal of overlap as musicians from opposite ends of the Atlantic frequently work together and appear on the same bills. Arguments about 'authenticity', though common enough, are pointless; as we have seen throughout this book, Afro-American musicians have never troubled themselves about such matters unless scholars and experts troubled them, and the only authenticity that matters is truth to the participants' experience, and power to serve their sense of who they are. As far as young black British are concerned, that identity seems to be becoming 'blacker' (clearly such a generalization is dangerous) as they find themselves increasingly isolated, through no fault or desire of their own, from the society into which they were born; it is today not uncommon to meet young black men and women in London or Birmingham who, having passed their school-days speaking local working-class English, now talk broad Jamaican patois, and some who even deny being English at all. There is at the same time, naturally enough, a fringe of musicians who court wider acceptance by moving towards the pop mainstream, but it does not often happen that a black reggae artist or group makes it in pop in a big way; a few years back a poll of fans chose the white reggae-influenced rock group, The Police, as 'best reggae group'.

The spread of reggae influence into the mainstream of pop, while it does little to enrich those who play the music in Kingston, London or Birmingham, does speak once more of that feeling in white people which we have noted over and

over in the history of Afro-American music, which amounts to a subconscious admiration, even envy, of blacks and an empathy, which can cross the lines drawn by racial prejudice, with the values of their culture. The empathy became explicit for a while in Britain in the 1970s with a number of groups, themselves generally ethnically mixed, who made music in cross-cultural styles. Interestingly enough, The Specials, the best-known of these '2-Tone' groups, had found themselves initially unable to carry out their intention of combining reggae and punk in such a way as to get blacks and whites on to the dance floor together, and were forced back into ska for a fusion with which both groups could identify. The members of those groups well understood that a real rapprochement, even a fusion, must happen within the musicking itself; solemn exhortatory lyrics were worse than useless. 'Behind the fusion of rock and reggae lay the hope that the humour, wit and style of working-class kids from Britain's black and white communities could find a common voice in 2-Tone; that a new, hybrid cultural identity could emerge along with the new music . . . The 2-Tone bands were more interested in harmonizing the form and lyrics, the sound and the sense, so that, without being obtrusive, the multi-racial message could be *inferred* by a broadly sympathetic audience. They were giving shape to a sensibility rather than to a political programme.'[37] But they were going against the grain of British society, whose racism was being pandered to by populist right-wing politicians and mendacious national newspapers, and at the end of 1981, after a series of nasty racial incidents, The Specials quit. Nonetheless, the very existence of 2-Tone brought some comfort to those who hope eventually to see a genuinely multi-cultural Britain, even if their demise suggests equally that we are unlikely to see it in the near future.

In the meantime, reggae functions for the beleaguered black community in Britain in much the same way as blues did for American blacks in the early years of this century, as a tool for survival and for the preservation of community in a situation that must be endured, while at the same time functioning for a minority of whites as a 'model for romance, sophistication and elegance.' It is true that the poetry of reggae is more aggressive and explicit in its articulation of discontents

than was the blues — or at least the blues we have on record, which may not be completely representative — and the activities of dub poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah (Johnson testifies to having been moved to write poetry after reading W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*) have shown, even if the outbursts of violence in British cities in 1981 and 1985 had not proved it, that the spirit of resistance is by no means dead. And, again as with blues, there are many, both in Britain and in America, not to mention the rest of the world, to whom reggae speaks clearly and unmistakenly of a human identity in the midst of the 'mechanical detritus of the twentieth century' through which we are all, white as well as black and any other colour, increasingly having to find our way.

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