

# Globalisation and Commercialisation of Caribbean Music

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In recent years globalisation has been identified, particularly by developing nations, as a source of major challenges, and in some cases a threat to their very survival. However, its musical manifestation precedes the widespread use of the term in political contexts, and the representation of the Caribbean's popular music provides key evidence of this. A central concern of most small cultures is the assimilation and utilisation of foreign influences without distorting the content and representation of the local. Typically, the recording industry's corporate motivations have been capitalist rather than cultural, rarely synthesising the two successfully. This raises concerns about the legitimate representation of the music and the communities from which it emerges, when commercialisation dilutes the art to the point where it may become *only* product.

The homogenising tendencies of globalisation are frequently recognized, when, for example, the expansion of large corporations, such as McDonalds, impinge themselves upon the daily consciousness of the average person from Jamaica to Japan. However, where popular music is concerned, the encroachments of commerce are not always as readily evident, nor are their long-term consequences. This discussion attempts to shed some light on the historical and textual aspects of Anglophone Caribbean music and ways in which they are relevant to the music's "authenticity". Primarily, I will examine how some early forms of international commercialisation continue to influence the marketing and representation of Caribbean music, with a particular focus on the reggae era and the marketing of Bob Marley. This approach is important since most studies of Caribbean popular music forms describe them solely as products without acknowledging that they are also "texts" with which audiences engage.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Kozul-Wright and Stanbury (1998) for an example of a clinical dissection of industry infrastructure with only occasional allusion to musical textual content.

This engagement drives processes of consumption without which the designation of popular music as product has little meaning.

## Corporations and Authenticity

The exoticism associated with the Caribbean as a tropical tourist destination also permeates the production and consumption of the region's music in the industry's Western metropolitan centres. This exoticism can be found in perceptions of calypso, which was the first mass marketed Caribbean music that suffered cultural and aesthetic dilution in corporate hands. Rather than attempting to sell the music on the basis of its aesthetic strengths, the major record companies reconfigure the material to penetrate larger markets. While individual artists may have profited from such commercialisation in the short-term, it is rarely the foundation upon which career longevity is built.

The music corporations have conglomerated rapidly in the past twenty years, and are currently represented by four major companies: Universal Music, Sony Music International, EMI, and the Warner Music Group. While the rapid rise of the internet as an alternative distribution channel has outpaced regulatory legislation and challenged the business models and practices of the majors, they still dominate the international music industry by their almost 80% market share of the global sales.<sup>2</sup> The efforts to turn marginal music into a mainstream commodity are often led by the visions of the large companies and their assumptions about audience preferences. The Euro-American recording industry's way of refining Caribbean music for the global markets is comparable to the historical exploitation of sugar plantations and labour in the region. When this refining process removes the creative heart of the music's organic character, the perennial conflict between culture and commerce resurfaces. Although friction between these two elements is not necessarily inevitable, there has been an ongoing tension plaguing efforts to bring Caribbean music from its peripheral position to wider, mainstream international audiences without undue dilution. In this regard, the record industry functions as an integral component of a hegemonic global political economic order.

Because of its limited economies and small populations, the Caribbean region does not form a particularly large consumer market for the music products. Through the commercial alterations of its own music in the international centres of production, the Caribbean is made, however, a consumer of the mainstream production *practices*. This often generates a continuity between local and global whereby the two become virtually indistinguishable as the result of a reverse cultural

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2 See the BBC News Story, "Sony BMG Deal Under New Scrutiny" July 13, 2006. << <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/5175650.stm>>>.

flow of reformulated versions of Caribbean music from commercial centre to island periphery. The corporate representations of Caribbean music establish new stylistic norms, which influence what is being created in the Caribbean. Almost invariably, the ensuing music sounds less distinctive and more generic. Consequently, the “local” comes to reflect the “global”, replicating the mainstream chart trends and undermining the character of the local.

This chapter examines the rearrangement of Caribbean music by the international record companies in ways that erode its audible musical “locality”. It discusses the production and representational processes of the various musical forms from calypso to reggaeton. However, the primary focus is on reggae because this genre has been subject to a greater degree of commercialisation over a lengthy time span and a wider geographical area than any other music from the Anglophone Caribbean. Even though the major label marketing of calypso precedes the debut of reggae by almost sixty years, there is comparatively little scope for discussing its contemporary global cultural influence beyond the growing adoption of the steelpan as a musical instrument.

In an era of increasingly globalised popular cultures, the idea of authenticity remains highly valid in assessing the value of artistic changes and fusions. The notion of authenticity always requires some degree of descriptive essentialism of the music in question. It is nonetheless apparent that different musical styles, including reggae, possess core characteristics, which contribute to defining them aurally. These features establish fluid but identifiable borders, which highlight the contrast between what is perceived either as genuine departures or misrepresentations by audiences. Authenticity is not represented here as a norm from which there can be no departure, but as a means of measuring *degrees* of departure.

Reggae music subcultures have developed in different countries and sometimes successful local interpretations of reggae have emerged. One example of this is the album *Volcanic Dub* (2001) by Twilight Circus from Holland, which contains dub’s authentic trademark: organic sonic textures created through progressive remixing accentuated by echo, delay, reverb and various inversions of sound. This album is an example of a white European-based musician creating dub that is authentic in its sonic deconstruction, atmosphere and overall sensibility despite the artist’s seemingly limited cultural relationship to the stylistic originators beyond what is transmitted through the music. A distinction should thus be made between music that is commercially and aesthetically divorced from the lyrical, instrumental and production realism of reggae, on the one hand, and interpretations that embrace and validate rather than fragment core components, on the other.

The analysis in this chapter will focus especially on the instrumental texts and the mechanics of recorded popular music in order to underscore how seemingly

minor alterations in the soundscape can have significant cultural impact. The lyrical and literary dimensions will be discussed, too, but the extent to which they have been historically foregrounded in research has undermined possibilities for holistic reading or hearing of the music. Since Bob Marley is by far the most recognisable Caribbean musical figure, he forms the core of this analysis. This chapter is not promoting a puritanical anti-eclectic cultural perspective, but instead explores ways in which musical fusion and sonic reorganisation have been shaped by commercial goals often unrelated to the aesthetic or cultural quality of musical expression. As I have discussed in another essay (Alleyne 1998), the Marley case clearly becomes a template for the hegemonic relationships between major reggae acts and major labels. Moreover, the influence of the “Marley model” can still be witnessed in the twenty-first century, in reggae and other genres, such as dancehall. I will argue that major label involvement in post-Marley reggae culture has been devoid of an understanding of the genre’s aesthetic essentials, and that this has ironically limited economic returns for the recording industry.

The term “appropriation” is used in this chapter primarily to describe the textual utilisation of fragmented rhythmic syntax (isolated parts of the musical text) without effectively “speaking” the language, which leads to diluting the music whilst simultaneously harnessing aspects of its economic potential. The concept of “sonic reorganisation” underscores the contrast between musical elements, which have either been foregrounded or subordinated in local or global contexts. Identification of these reconfigurations helps to exemplify precisely how differences in commercially transformed texts manifest themselves. In order to assess relative degrees of change, some basic historical background is necessary.

## The Pre-Marley Era

The year 1912 is usually cited as the date for the first international recordings of Caribbean music. Lovey’s Trinidad String Band made calypso recordings, reportedly for both the Victor Talking Machine Company and the Columbia Gramophone Company. Calypso is centred in Trinidad, and it is a polyrhythmic style influenced by the cultures of West African slaves, Indian indentured labourers, European modes of musical performance, and the subsequent indigenisation of these elements under and after British colonial rule.<sup>3</sup>

Calypso historian, Gordon Rohlehr describes the early recordings as the beginning of a “process of commercialisation”, implying that the more dynamic

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<sup>3</sup> Despite changes due to shifting technologies and audience tastes, today calypso remains firmly interlinked with carnival activities and its lyrical content largely maintains the same thematic focus as in its past, utilising “satire, ridicule, gossip, and sexual innuendo, and with much emphasis on the highly prized skill of extemporizing, or making up new verses and lines on the spot” (Mason 1998, 21).

aspects of the arrangements were de-emphasised to maximize mass market appeal (Rohlehr 1990, 140; Cowley 1985, 3). It was not until the 1920s that American releases of Trinidad's calypso recordings became more frequent, establishing the foundation for a more consistently viable market base (Cowley 1985, 3, 7). By the mid-1930s, top calypsonians, such as Attila the Hun, Roaring Lion and Lord Executor were recording in New York as a result of sponsorship by a Trinidadian record dealer, and they also featured in live radio broadcasts with American show business celebrities, leading to releases on the Decca label, which subsequently licensed material in Britain (Rohlehr 1990, 78).

However, mainstream America's encounter with calypso was more forcefully shaped by bandleader Paul Whiteman, who already carried the alarming misnomer of "King of Jazz". His appropriation of fragments of calypso aesthetics in his cover version of "Sly Mongoose", for example, assured the genre's exploitation as a novelty soundtrack for urban Western exotic visions of the tropics. This was an extension of Whiteman's distorted sanitisation of jazz in which he employed many of the instruments of the genre without emulating any of its improvisational or emotional dynamics. Amidst all this industry activity surrounding calypso in the early decades of the twentieth century, exploitation of performers was rampant and characterised by contractual reversion of royalties into the hands of record companies and distributors, beyond the calypsonians' grasp (*ibid.*, 149–150).

The full impact of American appropriation and commercialisation of calypso became most apparent in the earliest decades following World War II, with two separate occurrences especially illustrating the inimical role of the record industry in its textual/cultural encroachment on Caribbean music. "Rum and Coca Cola", recalled as "undoubtedly the most famous calypso describing the impact of the American presence on Trinidad" became a major U.S. hit in 1944, made popular by the white singing trio, The Andrews Sisters (*ibid.*, 360). Ultimately, the purported American author, comedian Morey Amsterdam, was proven in court to have stolen the song from Trinidad's Lord Invader who had published the work in a pamphlet in March 1943, and is the song's legitimate owner although the melody's legacy can be traced to a French folk song from Martinique in the 1890s. It is also worth noting that the arranger of the original version of "Rum and Coca Cola", Barbados-born Lionel Belasco, sued successfully in 1947 for plagiarism (Cowley 1985, 9–28).

This song, which reportedly sold over five million copies worldwide in its pirated form, also featured significantly altered lyrics to accommodate the Western conservative cultural sensibilities of the time. The prostitution theme, which identified the American presence as socially disruptive and erosive, readily evident in the "better price" derived from the soldiers, could hardly have received widespread airplay in 1940s' America in its original form, thus prompting a more polite and

politically uncontroversial rendition from The Andrews Sisters. Invader's version subversively addresses the social situation, as exemplified in this verse:

Since the Yankees came to Trinidad  
They have the young girls going mad  
The young girls say they treat them nice  
And they give them a better price.  
(Cowley 1993, 22)

Conversely, the same verse in the Andrews Sisters' version presents a markedly different cultural picture:

Since the Yankee came to Trinidad  
They got the young girls all going mad  
[The] Young girls say they treat 'em nice  
Make Trinidad like Paradise.  
(Cowley 1993, 22)

The anti-imperialistic commentary of the original "Rum and Coca Cola" is therefore thoroughly undermined in the better-known hit version. Indeed, the hegemonic reinterpretation co-opted a challenge to an externally imposed status quo, transforming it into a statement which could be safely articulated by those against whom the satirical polemic was originally aimed. This is a key demonstration of the manner in which access to marketplace discourse has been heavily influenced by international record companies and publishers.

Harry Belafonte's enormously successful 1956 *Calypso* album, released by RCA (which had recently signed Elvis Presley), commodified folk songs and Trinidadian calypsoes with acutely hyperbolic performances. Both the vocal and instrumental articulations were so exaggerated as to bear only minimal relationship to the genre that the album purported to represent. Far from being a mere footnote in the industry's history, Belafonte's album was the first by a solo artist to sell a million copies in the United States, although calypso failed to become more than a passing novelty there. This lack of longevity was no doubt due in part to Belafonte's dilution at a time when few calypso originators were heard or seen in the media mainstream. As Rohlehr (1990, 533) notes,

[I]t hurt Trinidadians deeply in 1957 to learn that Harry Belafonte had become famous world wide for his "calypsoes", some of them watered down sweetish versions of originals which Trinidad normally censored from her radio each Lenten season, and at times beyond.

This commercial de-contextualisation of calypso has limited its marketplace appeal since that era, largely restricting it to carnival related activities and the stifling representation of tropical stereotypes. It has been difficult for major record



companies and distributors to transcend specialist audiences when no widespread appetite apparently exists for the music as sociopolitical commentary rather than merely as a party supplement.

## The Rise of Reggae

Until the 1960s, indigenous Jamaican popular music lacked a strong identity; it was divided between the calypso/folk music orientation of mento, on the one hand, and imitation of American big band and rhythm & blues performers, on the other. The confluence of the birth of ska and the independence from Britain in 1962 set a series of evolutionary processes in motion, although ska was itself subject to considerable international commodification and evolved from a fusion of American rhythm & blues influences and local rhythms.

The independent Blue Beat label tried to fill the U.K.'s marketplace vacuum for ska, but the label probably appealed more towards hardcore followers than potential new audiences. The situation began to change with the emergence of Chris Blackwell and Island Records via Millie Small's multi-million selling version of the R&B hit, "My Boy Lollipop" in 1964. Firstly, distribution was facilitated through licensing the record to Philips. This proved a remarkably portentous alliance since Philips became part of Polygram, which purchased Island Records decades later. Eventually Polygram became part of Universal Music, which now controls Island's reggae (and other) catalogues.

However, what purported to be ska on Millie Small's recording was replete with anomalous evidence of commercial streamlining. Simon Jones (1988, 58) describes the instrumental framework of the recording:

The song was recorded by mainly English session musicians and employed a full orchestral backing. It was a highly polished production, its clean treble oriented sound far removed from the vigorous, bass-dominated recordings emanating from Jamaica during the same period.

This template was utilised later by Island-owned Trojan Records on its string-laden pop-reggae productions for a host of artists (e.g., Bob & Marcia, Nicky Thomas, Greyhound), and set the stage for the commercial framework that would be expanded with The Wailers. Thus, even as an influential independent label, Island's aesthetic formula was directly shaped by the commercial imperatives of achieving airplay by developing a crossover sound.

After the economic potentialities of political independence remained unrealised in the mid-1960s, rocksteady supplanted ska, exerting a reduction of rhythmic pace,

creating space for greater instrumental and vocal expression, and reflecting the country's changing social temperament. The metamorphosis of rocksteady into the even slower reggae around 1968 further reflected Jamaica's deepening poverty and despair while facilitating more of the soulful vocalisations that extended the ongoing influence of American R&B on Jamaican popular music. Through the musical and philosophical influence of Rastafarians whose Jamaican presence began in the 1930s, much reggae adopted theological narratives of spiritual and political liberation, though the very name "reggae" is derived from a dancing style to which the music was also subsequently tailored (Gayle 1996, 29). But apart from minor novelty hit singles in the U.K. and the anomalous transatlantic success of Desmond Dekker's "The Israelites" (1969), reggae lacked the profile and critical credibility as an album-based genre until the marketing of The Wailers in the early 1970s. This eventually led to Bob Marley's emergence as the band's central figure and the genre's first superstar.

The impact of white mainstream pop acts also helped create a mainstream market for reggae especially in the 1970s, with high-profile singles from Paul Simon, Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton, The Eagles, and The Police, altering lyrical and/or instrumental preconceptions, usually in the context of heavily diluted vocal articulation (Alleyne 2000, 15–30). Carl Gayle, writing at the time of reggae's seventies imminent commercial breakthrough, suggests that Paul Simon's 1972 hit single, "Mother and Child Reunion" (for which the instrumentation was recorded in Jamaica),

can't be considered a reggae record just because the backing was done by reggae musicians, and, like many blues copyists, Simon falls down because of his voice... [T]he imitators (like Paul Simon) should be ready to admit that they are imitators and that they can't achieve a true sound, or at least, not yet... White musicians like Paul McCartney... are, so far, wrongly attempting to duplicate it instead of using it to add something to their own type of music". (Gayle 1996, 31)

However, in the same essay Gayle acknowledges the necessity of exposing otherwise inaccessible audiences to reggae to ensure its success and survival, regardless of dilution (*ibid.*, 32). The appropriation of the vocabulary of reggae by these artists led a large segment of the previously underexposed audience to accept this articulation as authentic since this was the form receiving the widest physical distribution, airplay, and general media recognition. However, at this stage in the globalisation of reggae, white performers were usually unable to replicate the syntactical fluidity and organic interaction of the component elements despite having clearly identified several central instrumental and linguistic constituents. For example, comparison between Bob Marley & The Wailers original version of "I Shot The Sheriff" (*Burnin'* album, 1973) and Eric Clapton's massive pop hit cover reveals the degree to which vocal enunciation is often connected to the veracity of the protagonist's social experience, and how Clapton's instrumental and vocal



articulations lack comparable cultural and ontological urgency. Furthermore, despite Clapton's utilisation of the same basic band format, the elements do not cohere in the same manner as Marley's text because in the latter intangible elements of feeling and rhythmic interlocution are involved in conveying the song's anguished realities. In this sense, authenticity or the lack thereof is heavily defined by the incisiveness of the creative statement, instrumentally as well as lyrically.

Marley's material is regarded by many audiences as the apex of "roots reggae", a style which usually describes the representation of specific, harsh sociocultural actualities in appropriately intense and gritty musical contexts. According to one appraisal, "to most Jamaicans a roots record is simply one that concerns itself with the life of the ghetto sufferer – with "reality". Though often informed by the millennial cult of Rastafarianism, it takes in a range of music" (Barrow & Dalton 2004, 135).

## The Marketing of Marley

The 1999 release of the Classic Albums series DVD documentary on The Wailers' 1972 *Catch a Fire* album finally confirmed what some critics had highlighted several years earlier; that the record, which heralded reggae's breakthrough as an album-oriented genre resulted from a series of creative compromises, which potentially undermined its authenticity as reggae. This issue is particularly important because of a mainstream tendency to elevate Marley as an untouchable icon status. There is also a reactionary impulse to treat any critique that is less than unreservedly positive as an undervaluation of his rich artistic and sociopolitical legacy, rather than to contextualise such analyses as indictments of record industry capitalism. Furthermore, as Cooper (2004) has noted, the readings of Marley's lyrical texts have become conveniently amnesiac at worst, and historically revisionist at the very least.

The Wailers were specially selected by former Island Records head, Chris Blackwell, who had monitored Marley's performance evolution for a decade before the group was signed to his label. The clear objective had always been to create a platform for the internationalisation of reggae through their debut album. Although initial sales were quite poor, with only 14,000 copies sold in England after the first year, *Catch a Fire* ultimately created the template for the marketing of Marley and a succession of other reggae bands signed to both Island and major labels in the wake of his breakthrough. Although Marley's eventual chart success was preceded by several of the Trojan label's pop productions (including hits by Jimmy Cliff on both Island and Trojan), these all represented a limited singles-based approach to reggae. Desmond Dekker's "007" (1967) is one of the songs referred to in the *Catch a Fire* Deluxe Edition liner notes as an example of the typical reggae one-off hit "despised by the British rock audience as a kind of dumb novelty music without quality or value" (Williams 2001, 5). *Catch a Fire* ostensibly attempted to be

a cohesive album in ways which no previous reggae release had achieved. As a result, the funding of the album (the given figures vary, but generally it is estimated to be £4,000) was unprecedented for a genre with unproven longevity, and certainly for Caribbean artists. Marley's position as the first regional Anglophone artist to receive this level of financial support is pivotal, particularly in the ways in which it established long-term precedents for the hegemonic mainstream commodification of Caribbean music.

The key issues arising from *Catch a Fire* involve questions of cultural authenticity especially relative to instrumental norms in Jamaican popular music before and during Marley's emergence from The Wailers as a major creative force. Under the supervision of Chris Blackwell, the original 8-track recording in Jamaica was substantially remixed, overdubbed and edited in London to fit the perceived needs of the target Western audience. Although this process undeniably involved Marley himself, the capitalist power to determine the overall character of the finished product is at issue here.<sup>4</sup> As I have argued in other writings, prioritising these commercial considerations "weakened the creative authenticity of the work by introducing musical statements divorced from its cultural context" (Alleyne 1999, 95).

Specifically, and perhaps most significantly, the album featured a distinctly treble oriented mix, which is fundamentally at odds with the instrumental and aesthetic heart of reggae with its drum and bass lower frequency emphasis from which its essential earthy life-force energy is derived. To reinforce the cultural re-contextualisation, the speed of tracks was accelerated, Marley's voice was brought forward in the mix, and guitar and keyboard overdubs were executed by British and American session men who, by their own admission, had either barely or never played reggae before these recordings. Texan keyboardist, John "Rabbit" Bundrick, had worked with Johnny Nash, but Nash's decidedly polished pop leanings meant that Bundrick was ill-prepared for The Wailers' gritty roots articulation. Alabama guitarist, Wayne Perkins speaks of feeling completely unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the music as they were attempting to record his overdubs. Notably, in order to play his parts, he requested that the engineer turn down the *bass*. Blackwell refers to his changes in "Stir It Up" as designed to "make it much less of the reggae rhythm and more of a drifting feel". He adds that "This record had the most overdubs on it. This record was the most – I don't say softened, but more...enhanced to try and reach a rock market because this was the first record and they wanted to reach into that market". (*Catch a Fire* Classic Albums DVD.)

Alarming degrees of creative concession were thus made in the production of reggae's first high-profile album. Richard Williams conversely claims that despite

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4 In a 2006 conversation with Tony Platt (the recording engineer for the *Catch a Fire* overdubs), he told me that Marley displayed a clear willingness to refashion the album for a wider audience.

the passage of three decades since its release, “the unity and integrity of the music are undiminished either by time or Blackwell’s post-production work” (Williams 2001, 8). However, this argument requires rigorous interrogation.

As suggested earlier, the 2001 Deluxe Edition sheds substantial light on the production alterations on the album, while simultaneously emphasising Universal Music’s unflinching determination to maximise income from repackaging Marley’s catalogue. This two-CD release includes a disc featuring the original Jamaican tracks prior to remixing in London. While some song versions consist of an entirely different set of audio tracks, what is most striking is the absence of lead guitar and rock-styled keyboards, yielding further evidence of the extent of later textual transformation in the London phase of production. The introduction to the internationally released version of the *Catch a Fire* album features Wayne Perkins’ decidedly blues-rock guitar vocabulary which, despite being performed with suitable competency, clearly “articulates a different cultural background and experience from that of the Wailers” (Alleyne 2005, 292).

The album’s visual text also demands comment. The Deluxe Edition re-issue features a restored original album cover featuring the Zippo lighter concept, as if to metaphorically and literally invite listeners to ignite the album. It is somewhat ironic that the music contained within was “lighter” in hardcore reggae content. In the early seventies, this cover was soon replaced (partly due to manufacturing problems) by Marley’s rebellious spliff pose, representing the semiotic stereotypes of reggae – dreadlocks and marijuana – as commercial shorthand for the musical contents. Interestingly, this monolithic reading was later partially undermined by the black American punk-driven rock band, Bad Brains, whose frequent album cover displays of dreadlocks led many a confused listener and record dealer to assume that they played only reggae. Similarly, following the success of his 1982 *Killer on the Rampage* album, Guyanese-born Barbados-based musician, Eddy Grant, was motivated to title his 1988 album, *File Under Rock*, to combatively address the cultural reflex of trapping dreadlocks solely within reggae’s stereotypical contexts.

These album cover concerns also have more recent significance, as illustrated by the controversy surrounding the 2005 reggae album by country music artist Willie Nelson, and the creation of two separate album covers, one featuring a marijuana leaf, and the other a palm tree. Retailers could choose to accommodate more conservative consumers, but the apparent plan of the record label (Universal Music, i.e. the keeper of Marley’s catalogue) to issue two versions of the cover from the start says volumes about the connotations of imagery allied to music.

## Posthumous Marley Releases

There have been at least 50 *authorised* posthumous compilations of Marley's music. Even in view of the quarter century since his passing, this is a remarkably high number reflecting commercial opportunism (by both independent and major labels) rather than any effort to appropriately anthologise a vitally important musician.<sup>5</sup> In this case, as in other similar instances, there have been too many re-issues and compilations with only fractional differences from previous releases of the same album. The odd bonus track being added to an original album track sequence, prior to the release of a far more extensive deluxe edition has been a typical strategy of Island's various corporate parent companies in the years since Marley's death. It is, at the very least, highly questionable whether Marley's legacy is positively served by the vast majority of these compilations on a multiplicity of labels.

The status of the *Legend* compilation (1984) as the best selling reggae album of all-time (with more than 10 million copies sold in the U.S.) is a clear indicator of what sells best in the mainstream as reggae. This album is dominated by Marley's lighter more melodic fare, understating the sociopolitical incisiveness of his most lyrically and musically potent albums. For example, there are no selections from the powerful 1979 *Survival* album, which restated Marley's ability to meaningfully address larger issues than the politics of love relationships, which had featured heavily on *Kaya* (1978). It is also particularly interesting that the more politically focused *Rebel Music* (1986) and *Talkin' Blues* (1991) compilations failed to match the sales performance of the much more commercial *Legend*, suggesting a probable disengagement of a large sector of his audience from the key philosophical thematic concerns of his music.

The 1992 release of the song "Iron Lion Zion" is understatedly described as being "comprehensively reproduced after Bob's death" (McCann & Hawke 2004, 113). In effect, the transformation of this song from a sparse, raw roots rendition into a technological extravaganza audibly utilising tools neither desired by or available to Marley in his lifetime constitutes another kind of death; the demise of temporal and textual authenticity in representing his work. The purported original version, allegedly recorded either in 1972 or 1973, is included on the 1992 four-CD boxed set, *Songs of Freedom*. This basic, folk-oriented outing is fully indicative of the time in which it was made. However, in an effort to boost contemporary interest in Marley, Island Records decided to release a radically transmogrified version featuring an extremely bright mix, digital synthesizer bass, an entirely new digital drum track, and newly recorded backing vocals pushed forward in the mix. In effect, the song is taken completely out of its pre-digital era temporal context.

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<sup>5</sup> Ian McCann and Harry Hawke (2004) contains a comprehensive listing of Marley's recordings up to that point.

Perhaps equally alarming was the lack of critical resistance from reggae fans to this type of aural historical revision and its cultural and aesthetic implications.<sup>6</sup>

By the turn of the new millennium, *Time* magazine had declared Marley's *Exodus* as the Best Album of the Century. This international recognition might be viewed as a tremendous victory for music from small cultures, but the album choice is quite conservative in the context of Marley's repertoire, and it certainly does not constitute his best or most representative work. In *Time's* (1999, 1) analysis, *Exodus* is described in the following terms: "Every song is a classic, from the messages of love to the anthems of revolution. But more than that, the album is a political and cultural nexus, drawing inspiration from the Third World and then giving voice to it the world over".

This choice of what is arguably one of Marley's least "revolutionary" albums as the pinnacle of musical excellence for an entire century further suggests a mainstream audience preference, which reinforces the sense of a creative straitjacket being imposed on Caribbean artists, and it also raises further questions about what is perceived as authentic. The corporate dimension of Marley's success during his lifetime is reinforced by the confluence of his American commercial breakthrough album, 1976's *Rastaman Vibration*, with Island Records' distribution association with what was then Warner Communications. Without this important means of access to discourse with U.S. audiences, Marley's career contours and the marketplace presence of reggae would have been significantly altered since he would not have achieved the same degree of market penetration at that point, if at all. Despite the inventiveness of independent labels, alternative distribution has always posed a major challenge to sustaining market visibility even for distinctive artists. It is entirely possible that very few of us would be aware of Bob Marley today without the capitalist channels, which ironically spread his messages of individual and collective liberation from the type of economic tyranny associated with commercial enterprises.

## The Post-Marley Era, Dancehall, and the Digital Dilemma

The immediate post-Marley era saw an increasing emphasis placed on acts which had already developed core audiences, but which had not yet established a consistent mainstream presence despite access to wide distribution. Three such acts, Steel Pulse, Aswad, and Third World, had all been signed to Island Records prior to Marley's death, but departed the label in search of wider success through a succession of major labels. In each instance, the band's career declined

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<sup>6</sup> "Iron Lion Zion" was unavailable in album form until the 1995 release of the *Natural Mystic* compilation by Island Records.

as a direct result of blatant crossover attempts, which appealed to neither their old constituencies nor potential new audiences.<sup>7</sup> These releases were beset by an over-emphasis on R&B and hip-hop elements at the expense of the reggae components at the core of the bands' identities. Fusion and transformation are not actually the central issues here; it is the ways in which sonic change occurs and the commercial premises for it. In each of the mentioned case, there was a clear imbalance between what might be considered to be reggae, and the trend-driven contemporary urban American component, with the latter overshadowing the former. Interestingly, this costly compromise was later publicly recognized by Steel Pulse on their last major label album, *Vex* (1994, MCA) in a song titled "Back To My Roots":

So we took that commercial road  
Searching for some fame and gold  
And gained the whole wide world  
And almost lost our souls  
Some say we should have led the way  
Take it over from Bob Marley  
Got brainwashed by the system, yeah  
What a heavy price we paid.

This succinctly illustrates the cooptation and homogenisation of reggae in the post-Marley era, and its erosive effects on the value of the musical content.

Perhaps paradoxically, one Jamaican rock/reggae fusion outfit, Native, had virtually no commercial impact in the immediate post-Marley era major label gold rush to find the genre's next phenomenon. This anonymity occurred perhaps because the group's organic sound and image were less exotic than that of a typical reggae unit. Native's 1981 RCA album, *In a Strange Land*, features a brand of rock influenced reggae characterised by bold edgy guitars over a solid rhythmic foundation, and integrated with highly literate lyricism. Significantly though, unlike the reggae-tinged pop-rock of their mainstream white British and American counterparts, their instrumental articulation and syntactical execution in both rock and reggae proves equally convincing, thus making Native an excellent point of contrast between reggae integrated with rock, and rock superimposed on reggae.

The commercial failure of the album may have been due in part to its innovative artistic quality, which challenged reggae and "island" music stereotypes in combative fashion. It also highlighted one of the more legitimate, less calculated paths for the development of reggae, though the group's descent into virtual oblivion was

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<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon is discussed in more detail in my essay "Babylon Makes the Rules" (Alleyne 1998).



accompanied by line-up attrition and major stylistic changes encompassing R&B and mainstream pop, duplicating the plight of their less ambitious counterparts.

Despite Native's marginal position, the importance of their earlier stylistic approach has been magnified by the emergence of Orange Sky, a black rock band from Trinidad signed to Granite Records, a recently formed independent American label distributed by the ubiquitous Universal Music. Their international debut album, *Upstairs* released in September 2005, is a new gauge for market reaction to black rock, which remains a comparatively rare musical phenomenon in the Caribbean despite precedents like Native and, even earlier in 1971, Luv Machine, which recorded its debut in the U.K. for Polydor featuring musicians from Barbados among its four members. Orange Sky's current marketing positioning through their alliance with a known rock figure and ready access to an international major label distribution offers tremendous possibilities, but whether audience preconceptions about what constitutes Caribbean music can be overcome remains to be seen. The group's sound is as dynamic live as it is on record, and their integration of reggae rhythms and Trinidadian vocal accents further challenges assumptions that rock from the Caribbean cannot be authentic. As popular music academic, Roy Shuker (1998, 81) has noted, "Locally produced texts cannot be straightforwardly equated with local national cultural identity, and imported product is not to be necessarily equated with the alien".

In terms of the more globally influential dancehall reggae, which first became a significant commercial phenomenon in the early 1980s, the impact of globalising influences can be identified on several levels. One is the effect of digital music technology, which democratised music making globally, but simultaneously has led to replicating the soundscapes designated by the machinery's makers in industrialised countries. As Negus (1992, 31) has noted, "Technology has never been passive, neutral or natural", implying that the music created, particularly in smaller nations, is a direct by-product of externally conceived sonic hierarchies and aural palates. So while more musicians achieved greater access to technology, there was a remarkable homogeneity in the recordings they made, featuring minimalist programming frequently lacking intuitive human dynamics. Digital technology took music production beyond the realms of the rich, propelling genres such as rap and dancehall into the consumer mainstream. Such previously marginal styles were often characterised by different aesthetics from pop norms, projecting sonic abrasiveness that initially reflected considerable social alienation. The contrast to standard pop production practices was often manifested in a mechanical lack of tonal and rhythmic variation typified by drum machine programming, which implicitly rejected the dynamic fluctuations of speed and volume of live percussion performance.

The most progressive technological innovations in Caribbean music preceded the digital era with the deconstruction of dub as a remixed counterpart to the roots

reggae of the 1970s. Moving light years beyond mainstream sonic conventions, dub osmotically reconfigured the soundscape of popular music without ever becoming a major commercially lucrative genre in its own right. From the early days of disco through to more recent developments in multiple ambient and techno sub-genres, dub continues to bestow a futuristic aura on all styles, which are able to successfully assimilate its organic conceptual strategies (Alleyne 2002, 469–475). Nonetheless, despite or because of its transcendent sonic characteristics, dub has always been commercially marginal at best, emblematising a Caribbean consciousness beyond stereotypes.

## Localising the Global: the Case of Barbados

Popular music from Barbados – the most easterly island of the West Indies – has had significant impact on the Caribbean in the past decade, but comparatively little on the world's major markets until recently. The character of the music from the island which has emerged internationally underlines how commercial influences impact on musical identity. In 2001 in a 132-page study titled *The Caribbean Music Industry Database*, Barbados was only mentioned three times, and even then only in incidental contexts. Less than a decade later, closer consideration is required.

Commodification has also taken on a literary dimension, with writers seeking to establish territorial authority. Where Barbados is concerned, this has produced at least three high-profile incidents of inaccurate international documentation, which, in part, reflect the island's marginal status on the global musical map until now. One of Barbados' most historically important musical figures, the late Jackie Opel, is often incorrectly identified in more than one edition of *Reggae: The Rough Guide* as both Trinidadian and Jamaican, due to his extensive session work in the latter country with many prominent musicians, including Bob Marley.<sup>8</sup> Opel died tragically in a car accident in 1970 after developing a new rhythm called spouge (pronounced "sp-oo-j"), designed to become the indigenous popular music of Barbados, but which never really flourished after his early demise. In *The Virgin Directory of World Music*, Philip Sweeney incorrectly describes Trinidad's soca as a forerunner to spouge; however, there was no soca when spouge first emerged several years earlier, thus the chronology is distorted. Similarly, the Barbadian pop band Ivory recorded its international debut album in 1977 for the U.K. based NEMS Records, but in a curious collection of album covers in *Naked Vinyl*, the authors mistakenly assert that the group is from Australasia (O'Brien & Savage 2002, 208–209). Their enormous geographical leap raises crucial questions about the relationships of these writers to their subject matter, ironically further marginalizing what they intend to make popular.

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<sup>8</sup> Their collaborations can be heard on a CD titled *Wailers & Friends* on the Studio One label.

No Barbadian artist had achieved major album sales in America until the respective gold and platinum certifications of the first two albums from the teenager Rihanna. Prior to her slew of hit singles, which began in 2005, the only other Barbadian U.S. chart success was achieved by Rupee, whose “Tempted To Touch” single<sup>9</sup> edged into the U.S. Top 40 in November 2004. Significantly, both artists scored their breakthroughs signed to major labels, thus following the template of major market success traceable back to Bob Marley.

Rupee’s career momentum with Atlantic Records was adversely affected by the label’s failure to release his album concurrent with the single’s chart presence. In fact, Atlantic’s release schedule indicated that a further nine months would pass before his international album debut. However, this could not have been due to the unavailability of the finished recorded product since at least half of the material subsequently released on the *1 On 1* album was already recorded before the deal with Atlantic was signed, having been previously issued on a smaller scale through the Barbadian independent label, CRS Music. This particular situation highlights Atlantic’s marketing myopia with a Caribbean artist directly signed to the label as opposed to the joint venture deal the label has engaged in with the dancehall independent, VP Records (from which Sean Paul arose).

The case of Rihanna provides an almost completely converse scenario. The styles adopted to achieve her mainstream success are largely disconnected from indigenous Barbadian musical identities. Her example challenges the assertions that the cultural imperialism thesis is flawed because it underestimates the potential of local appropriation of the global (Shuker 1998, 79–82). Rihanna’s case is, however, an example of a localisation of the global, in which the text is returned to the primary source of its commercial influence, America. A “local” presence in the music appears marginal, if not invisible and inaudible. Cultural hegemony is here merely disguised in more streetwise attire, all the while reinforcing global cultural homogenisation. As Shuker (*ibid.*, 81) incisively notes, “local music is frequently qualitatively indistinct from its overseas counterpart”, and this instance exemplifies the phenomenon.

A crucial question then is whether there is any evidence in the instrumental or lyrical texts of Rihanna’s songs which speaks of or to Barbados. The title of her 2005 debut album, *Music of the Sun*, invokes a Caribbean aura, which is rarely evident in the music. The growing domestic replication of dancehall and pop styled fusions squarely aimed at hip-hop-conscious youth audiences is precisely reflected in her recordings, further demonstrating the ongoing tension in the Caribbean musical community between creolised sonic identity and an urban American influenced

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9 This song is also available in a reggaeton remix, which bears no rhythmic difference to its original form, its only addition being Spanish-language rapping.

template. “Local” cultural identity as expressed through popular music is now a bricolage of colliding commercial genres whose impact occurs at the crossroads of capitalism. It is between and within the space created by these cultural dis/locations that the R&B/hip-hop/dancehall/pop amalgam exemplified by Rihanna exists.

Essentially, the heightened commercialisation of a performer who was arguably already a commodity first and artist second has meant that her musical identity is distinctly non-Caribbean. As one key example, we should consider the content of her global 2006 hit single, “SOS”. Apart from her performance persona, which she freely admits is influenced by contemporary American acts such as Destiny’s Child, “SOS” recycles the central riff from Soft Cell’s 1982 international chart hit, “Tainted Love”, which was itself first recorded by U.S. singer Gloria Jones in 1964. The main minor alteration to Rihanna’s cover version is almost solely embodied in new lyrics. The liberal sonic reference to the Soft Cell version underscores the politics of commercial safety surrounding Rihanna’s career in which being an artist is not an end in itself, but a means to wealth through product endorsements. Moreover, her talented main producers, Evan Rogers and Carl Sturken, come from a distinctly pop based background, which has never before encompassed Caribbean musical identity.

Rihanna’s overtly constructed sound and image reflect an urban market crossover consciousness, which shares little in common with what might normally be described as Caribbean music, despite *Billboard* magazine describing “Pon De Replay” as “Caribbean infused”, while she has also been erroneously described as a “reggae artist” (Libby 2005, 45; George 2005, 55). According to one radio DJ in Phoenix, “It’s just a good summer song. It’s fun, it’s kind of mindless, you don’t have to think about it” (Libby 2005, 45). Unwittingly, this DJ has perhaps succinctly described what the mass market requires of Caribbean music. On paper, the international chart success presents the ideal commercial scenario, at least in the short term, with major label distribution and marketing yielding massive sales dividends. But in view of Rihanna’s teen market appeal and limited creative self-sufficiency, it seems questionable whether her legacy will be positively resonant in a decade.

In any event, the most widely distributed and commercially effective releases featuring performers from Barbados have occurred under the auspices of major labels. Sporadic associations with independent labels such as VP and Putamayo have usually involved compilations rather than individual artist releases, thus limiting the breadth and depth of any marketplace impact. The internet can play a progressive role in developing Caribbean music outlets in general, but only if there is sufficient marketing autonomy to circumvent reliance on major label distribution. For example, it’s significant that Apple’s iTunes categorizes Rupee’s material under “R&B/Soul”, while Rihanna can be found under “Hip-Hop/Rap”, indicating the identity crisis which Caribbean music is facing, both internally and externally, as an inherent by-product of its mainstream commodification.

## Soundscape Peculiarities

The commercial perceptions of Caribbean musical identities are also being influenced by recordings, which reflect its cross-cultural flexibility, but which simultaneously transmute its character. The New York based Easy Star All Stars album, *Dub Side of the Moon*, is a somewhat unusual example of a (primarily) reggae reinterpretation of a major rock album in its entirety, with the source material being Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973). Since neither Pink Floyd nor the album's original music have any specific roots in reggae culture or common themes other than concerns with the human condition and its inherent sonic ambient spatiality, this seems in many ways one of the least likely cross-genre adaptations. However, Easy Star's musical director Michael Goldwasser stresses that "the lyrics concepts of the [Pink Floyd] album are universal" (Reising 2005, 225). The Easy Star All Stars album, reported to have sold over 70,000 copies, may be an unwitting commentary on reggae crossover politics, loosely parallel to the transformative ideas reshaping The Wailers' *Catch a Fire*. Although the Easy Star All Stars established their market identity with two reggae albums prior to *Dub Side of the Moon*, there's little doubt that their Pink Floyd adaptation coinciding with the thirtieth anniversary of the original album has outsold their other works. This release also demonstrates a fascinating, more visibly emergent cultural intertextuality wherein progressive rock becomes a text reinterpreted by reggae, rather than reggae solely being the object of reinterpretation by rock artists. To some limited extent, this counterbalances the typical centre-periphery relationship with World Music genres on the fringe, but such releases rarely achieve commercial success comparable to the hit albums that inspire them.

Willie Nelson's apparently long-awaited reggae album, referred to earlier in relation to its controversial cover art, is a far more recent oddity. Nelson includes collaborations with several reggae veterans whose individual releases do not achieve the same degree of commercial impact. It is by no means an unusual use of artistic license for a musician to pay tribute to a source of inspiration. However, it was somewhat puzzling to see Nelson's *Countryman* release as America's top selling reggae album at the end of July 2005, having debuted at the top of that *Billboard* chart, outranking even the omnipresent Bob Marley. The fact that his album only sold a rather modest 21,000 copies in its first week also highlights the limited commercial impact of reggae in America despite the decades over which it has been present (Price 2005, 16). If we view this situation in the context of a similarly recent reggae album tribute to Bob Dylan, it is perhaps uncertain how the genre can hope to assert itself independently of associations with major labels and artists.

The international success of dancehall artist, Sean Paul, is also inextricably linked to major label participation. VP Records, with offices in New York and Miami, has its origins in Jamaica. It had achieved street level marketing credibility with Sean Paul's breakthrough album, but the label appeared to lack the necessary



infrastructure and connections to penetrate the mainstream market. Notably though, following the agreement of a wide-ranging international marketing and distribution deal with a major label, Atlantic Records, Sean Paul's *Dutty Rock* album achieved double platinum status in the U.S., selling 2.5 million copies and reaching the Top 10 of the album charts in an almost unprecedented dancehall crossover success. It is quite instructive to witness the terms in which Atlantic's co-president described the deal in 2002: "It's going to be an all encompassing deal to bring reggae to the mainstream in a way that we haven't seen since Chris Blackwell and Island Records" (Hall 2002). Given the context and consequences of Marley's commercialisation previously outlined here, this otherwise innocuous statement becomes auspicious, and it reinforces my argument that the Marley template still looms large in the twenty-first century marketing of Caribbean music.

Reggaeton, initially rooted in Puerto Rico but now ubiquitous across urban Latin America and North America<sup>10</sup>, has integrated in itself the dancehall personae, rhythms and identity. The rising economic and cultural power of the Hispanic populations in the US, coupled with dancehall alliances with the hip-hop world have created a level of mainstream commercial success rarely experienced by any Jamaican dancehall artist. My main point in this brief appraisal of reggaeton is that the Jamaican dancehall has now been commercially overshadowed by its own progeny. Daddy Yankee's 2005 reggaeton album, *Barrio Fino*, (featuring the urban hit "Gasolina") has gone platinum in the U.S. (with sales exceeding 1 million copies) despite its Spanish language focus (Cobo 2005b, 35; Cobo 2005c, 8). This unlikely scenario, originally centred on independent labels, has attracted majors, now pursuing joint ventures and signing acts at a rapid pace. *Barrio Fino* "became the first reggaeton album to debut at No.1 on the *Billboard* Top Latin Albums chart" making both that release and Daddy Yankee the focal points for the analysis of the genre's commercial explosion (Cobo 2005a, 39). From a developmental viewpoint – and in stark contrast to the Rihanna scenario – it is remarkable that Yankee released the record on his own label and under his own publishing company, thereby maximizing the long term benefits of his work (*ibid.*). However, the distribution involvement of Universal Music (again) has proved crucial to its North American success and subsequent invasion of Europe. Universal was the first major label displaying tangible interest in reggaeton as early as 2002, and has subsequently established itself as the avenue of choice for the genre's premier acts (*ibid.*, 41).

Reggaeton's market penetration has been enhanced through the hip-hop alliance courted by dancehall artists, although there is also a Latin hip-hop movement from which reggaeton can draw extensively. The genre's rise to power was initially achieved through compilation albums reminiscent of VP's long-running *Strictly the*

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10 For a broad cultural assessment of reggaeton, see Raquel Rivera's 2003 book, *New York Ricans in the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan)



*Best* dancehall series. However, the parallels seem to end there as reggaeton is arguably yielding more globally commercially successful artists than dancehall had produced in the preceding decade. The American Hispanic population has driven urban stations to respond to the trend and acknowledge both its long-term viability and the growing spending power of its primary consumers. As one radio programmer noted, “It’s not just about Latin listeners; white suburban kids have a lot of passion for it” (Taylor 2005, 47). The sociology of non-English language cultural texts penetrating suburban enclaves and converting that presence into major economic capital requires serious consideration if Caribbean artists and their management associates are to understand the peculiarities of their potential target audiences.

As far as reggaeton’s broader international reach is concerned, Daddy Yankee’s “Gasolina” also registered significant sales in Japan and across Europe (Brandle 2005, 48). We should also note that he was “expected to gross \$5 million in ticket sales” during his 2005 U.S. tour (Lannert 2005, 42). It is difficult to identify many Anglophone Caribbean artists capable of generating this much live income (with individual tickets in the \$90 range) so soon after their career breakthrough release (*ibid.*, 45). Commenting on the commercial power of reggaeton in an interview to promote his 2005 album, *The Trinity*, Sean Paul notes that he has been inspired by Daddy Yankee, but also mentions that he does not know what the reggaeton artists are saying, thereby highlighting the holistic crosscultural power of instrumental texts and their rhythmic relationship to vocal articulation without the consumer having a specific sociocultural grasp of the lyrical content or its relevance to the culture(s) in question (Jones 2005, 61).

The extent of reggaeton’s commercial seizure is easily underscored with reference to the *Billboard* Reggae Chart for 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2005, in which eleven of the top fifteen selling releases were reggaeton, and not Anglophone Jamaican (or other Caribbean) reggae. This clearly indicates that a revolution is already well underway, encompassing both the cultural and economic spheres. However, it should be noted that reggaeton, like dancehall has been susceptible to criticisms of promoting violence and misogyny and has yet to consistently assert itself as a medium for social and political commentary in order to sustain and broaden its relevance instead of becoming a transient event (Romero 2005, 119).

## **Diasporic Dissemination**

We also need to view the Caribbean from a wider diasporic perspective. It is with considerable postcolonial irony that much of the Caribbean’s contribution to global popular music culture has come both directly and indirectly through the pop and R&B genres, and through the black British music scene. The list of examples is probably longer than most people might imagine, including Cymande, Billy Ocean, Joan Armatrading, Eddy Grant, Loose Ends, and Des’ree, but perhaps the

most useful example in the context of this essay is Soul II Soul. So much of the successful music they created at the turn of the 1990s was directly influenced by Caribbean musical and cultural practices that it constitutes another manifestation of the region's identity.

According to one source describing the collective's breakthrough hit, "The combination of reggae rhythm and dance shuffle propelled 'Keep On Movin' to the top of the American R&B chart, a rare feat for a British soul band" (White and Bronson 1993, 448). Group leader, Jazzy B, demonstrates clear consciousness of the cultural, musical and commercial significance of the Soul II Soul success story:

What we want to accomplish is for British black music to be taken more seriously. Being exposed to the British culture produces some different things and it's important for the world to realise that black people in Europe have something unique to offer with all the influences we've had – Caribbean, African, American, and European. We went to a major company like Virgin so we could penetrate the U.S. market and get some form of recognition for what we're doing. British companies hadn't been open to local black music until it became hip to be black. There were those who came before me, like Cymande, David Grant, Light of the World, and Beggar's Banquet, but British black music hasn't been respected universally. (White and Bronson 1993, 455)

This statement raises the issue of artists using the major label as a vehicle for the fulfilment of cultural objectives. It might, however, be argued that in this instance the major label association ultimately eroded the creative strength of the group whose visibility and commercial success thereafter was extremely limited.

The Caribbean cultural connection critical to the group's concept is underlined by Mykaell Riley, an original member of Black British reggae band, Steel Pulse, who had arranged and performed strings on the successful Soul II Soul debut album. He asserts the aesthetic relevance of the sonic perspective:

Soul II Soul was saying 'We want to make an R&B thing from a reggae perspective, from a Caribbean perspective.' So the bass would drop like a reggae bass so it had to be fat, seriously fat, because right next to that you'd be dropping a reggae tune. It had to sit alongside. So in terms of the tempo, in terms of the beat, in terms of the frequency on the bass end that had to respect where reggae was coming from... [T]he main catalyst was Caribbean references. (Personal interview by the author 2002)

The considerable Black British musical contribution in the context of extending the influence of the Caribbean diaspora requires separate analysis (Alleyne 2003). It is, however, clear from observations made within the British recording industry that Black British artists receive very little domestic support and recognition, even when they have conquered America (Harris 2002, 28). So despite more organic integration of the Caribbean musical elements, commercialisation politics have incredibly reified Black British music as virtually a foreign product. The marginalisation of

the local in this case has ironically occurred because of the cultural and media preference for the perceived authenticities of Black American music.

## Closing Chords

There are several inferences which may be drawn from this discussion, many of which revolve around polarities of autonomy and cooptation, independence and incorporation. The idealistic, stereotypical opposition between the innovative “indie” record labels versus the capitalistic major companies does not apply universally; many independent labels are replicating the commercial aesthetic models of majors with whom they have established joint venture deals, reflecting a growing similarity of objectives.

A cursory analysis of reggae market statistics for 2005 published by *Billboard* magazine underscores the extent of the commercial interdependence between the small and large labels. Nine of the Top 10 Reggae Albums Artists of 2005 were affiliated with major labels either directly through special subsidiaries or through joint ventures giving wider distribution and promotional support. Three acts in the list are reggaeton performers, and country music’s Willie Nelson makes an appearance, as does Hasidic Jewish dancehall-styled vocalist Matisyahu. This variety affirms the music’s intercultural appeal, but it also supports arguments of ongoing over-commercialisation. Moreover, this Top 10 listing also features two Bob Marley compilations and another album by one of his sons, Damian Marley, who had previously been dropped from Universal’s artist roster before the company resigned him to release *Welcome To Jamrock*. Six of the Top 15 Reggae Albums of 2005 were by reggaeton acts, five of whom were associated with Universal Music, while only one entirely independent label made that list.

These business factors are not, by themselves, conclusive evidence of cultural imperialism. However, if we examine the musical texts of the top-selling releases, we witness a vacillation between hedonism and nostalgia, while very little creative innovation is evident. In view of the statistical and musical evidence, any argument that the music is evolving and creative despite the commercial determination of the major labels and distribution seems untenable. Most of the analyses of the Caribbean music industry have focused on economics and infrastructure with little reference to the musical text. Such empirical studies are valuable, but they should incorporate in the analysis the less readily quantifiable cultural effects.

The Caribbean’s continued reliance on major labels to provide the industrial capital and primary marketing muscle has increased the breadth, but lessened the depth of its global impact. A greater degree of economic and representational autonomy

and authenticity are essential if the region is to develop its artistic assets in a less mediated manner and to effectively challenge a re-colonisation of its cultural space.

The numbing commercial norms of sonic loops, and pedestrian portrayal of narrative themes of love, lust and loot need to be counterbalanced by alternative creative exploration. Apart from occasional occurrences within dancehall, which in any event is largely afflicted by digital homogenisation, and the remnants of the genre's roots manifestation, reggae culture's cutting edge has been softened by crossover imperatives. The profound and still developing global impact of reggaeton raises particular questions regarding distinctive branding of Anglophone centred music forms, now effectively sold under a different cultural banner, and with almost unprecedented sales. Reggaeton has co-opted rhythmic elements of both dancehall and soca, and so what was previously distinct Anglo-Caribbean musical expression now assumes a Hispanic identity in the global marketplace. This circumstance also re-emphasises the complexities of cultural appropriation, further echoed by the anomalies inherent in the relative success of Willie Nelson's reggae album and the ubiquitous role of Universal Music as a key international vendor of Caribbean music. It is precisely this type of major label dominance which profoundly affects the production, consumption and perception of the music in the international marketplace.

As evidenced by the longevity and frequency of Bob Marley compilations, his aura remains a potent commercial force, not solely as a means of transmitting oppositional ideology, but also as a blueprint for creating and marketing Caribbean popular music after more than twenty years since his passing. The potential futures of Caribbean music forms will rely on the abilities of both artists and entrepreneurs to transcend the aesthetic and economic frameworks within which they are presently restricted due to choice or coercion.

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