

## **JASON TOYNBEE**

Jason Toynbee is Lecturer in Media Studies at the Sociology Department, The Open University. He writes and researches on authorship, ethnicity and popular culture with a special focus on music.

Author of *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* (London: Arnold, 2000), his second book, *Bob Marley: Herald of the Postcolonial World?* (Cambridge: Polity) will be published in Summer 2007.

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### **One Step Forward? Translating Jamaican Popular Music in the Core**

Jason Toynbee,  
Department of Sociology,  
Open University, UK

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#### **Abstract**

The penetration of popular music from Jamaica into the core of the world system is an anomaly. To explain it we need to examine the early reception of Bob Marley and the Wailers by British rock music critics, in effect the ‘gatekeepers’ who enabled the band’s international break through. The paper analyses several reviews by the critics from 1973. These, it is argued, depend on strategies of exoticisation and ‘othering’. Yet at one and the same time they tacitly acknowledge the power of the music, and have subsequently provided the basis for its marketing across the world. Such a contradiction, it is concluded, cannot be remedied simply at the level of cultural politics; transformation of the world system is required.

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We can start with a question. What has enabled Jamaican popular music to enter the world cultural system? How come we hear reggae everywhere, when musics from other Third World countries including the Caribbean are excluded? I’m going to try and provide part of the

answer to this question by focusing on the key moment of ‘translation’ of Bob Marley and the Wailers in the UK, after they had released the first of their Island Record albums in 1972. But first it is worth sketching some pre-history.

Before the Wailers there had been limited penetration of Caribbean popular music into the core; two episodes in fact. The first was calypso. From 1935 to 1939 Attila the Hun and Roaring Lion came over to the U.S. every year, to record and perform on network radio. In 1938 Decca and RCA saw enough commercial potential in the style to send engineers to Port of Spain to record other calypso artists. However this interest in field recording by the major record companies was fleeting. By the early 1940s the style had been absorbed by white mainstream acts like the Andrews Sisters who infamously copied Lord Invader’s ‘Rum and Coca Cola’ without attributing it. Very quickly, it seemed, calypso had become a novelty repertoire feature for big bands (Eldridge 2002). Then in 1956 Harry Belafonte (who’d spent the late 30s as a child in St Ann and Kingston, Jamaica) recorded his *Calypso* album which was a gigantic international hit. On the back of it there was some more recording in Trinidad, New York and London. But it was a flash in the pan. By the early 1960s calypso had more or less disappeared from the popular music market in North America and Europe. My sense is that it didn’t last because A and R men (the talent scouts) in the music business still saw calypso as a quaint tropical novelty product, oriented towards an older audience. And this was precisely the moment when rock’n’roll was taking off with its massive, free-spending youth market.

The second wave of Caribbean music into the mainstream was on a more localised basis. From as early as 1960 Jamaican recordings were being pressed in the U.K. and sold to the rapidly growing immigrant community on labels like Melodisc and Bluebeat. There were also UK-Jamaican sound systems, among the earliest being Duke Vin’s. Then in 1964 Millie Small was brought to the UK by the Anglo-Jamaican entrepreneur Chris Blackwell, and had a huge international hit with ‘My Boy Lollipop’ in a kind of pop ska style. Within a year or so the mods, the white working class subculture, were buying authentic ska records and going to Jamaican clubs. The break through records into the British pop charts were then Desmond Dekker’s ‘007’ in 1968, followed by ‘The Israelites’ which made number one early the following year. This marked the beginning of regular singles hits in the UK pop market for Jamaican reggae (Marks 1990; de Koningh and Griffiths 2003).

Crucially, though, the late 60s UK audience was segmented, consisting of British Jamaicans and white working class youth. It had nothing to do with the emerging rock scene. Here the audience tended to be middle class, and self-consciously bohemian. Indeed the rock counter-culture around 1970 mostly despised reggae. Immediately before the Wailers were signed by Island Records, then, the penetration of reggae was still extremely limited. There were strong singles sales of reggae in the UK. But that remained the extent of it; virtually no reggae was sold in Europe, the USA or other countries of the core of the world system. And no relationship existed with the increasingly valuable rock album market.

So when Marley and Chris Blackwell met in December 1971, their breakthrough consisted in an act of creative hybridity. The Wailers, who had been recording as a vocal group since 1963, would be repackaged as a rock band. What did this involve? Most importantly, they needed to present themselves as a self-sufficient performing and writing unit. The Kingston music scene was centred on the production of singles for the primary market of the dancehall. Producers and sound system operators called the shots, on the basis of strong and extremely fast audience feedback from the dance halls. This combination of highly competitive petty capitalism with instant market testing led to very high rates of stylistic innovation and a large repertoire. There was also a strong division of labour between singers, backing musicians, and producers-engineers. Song writing could be done in any of these roles. And reggae involved virtually no live performance except very occasionally in the North coast tourist resorts (Bradley 2001).

Rock on the other hand depended on the infrequent production of albums, but also constant touring, both to promote albums and as a core revenue source. As for writing, it was critical that it came from within the band. Rock culture had a fetish for authorship which I think can be traced back to the persisting importance of romanticism in European bourgeois culture. Lastly, there should be little or no division of labour. Everyone in the band was supposed to be able to record and perform, and except for the drummer perhaps, write too (Toynbee 2001).

The Wailers adapted to the rock regime very quickly and very effectively. In terms of personnel, two Wailers, Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, became singer-guitarists while the third, Bunny Livingstone, sang and played percussion. Carlton and Family Man Barrett, Lee Perry's former house rhythm section, were then added on drums and bass respectively, but now as 'full' members of the band. Finally, all the musicians adopted an inflected, but still recognisable rock image. Key here were Bob Marley's trademark denim shirt and jeans which became the arch signifier of the hybrid project. We can see the Wailers in their new guise playing on the rock TV show 'Old Grey Whistle Test' in 1973.

If the new iconography of the Wailers represented a significant shift towards the rock norm what is interesting is the extent to which rock critics in the United Kingdom (including the enthusiasts) found it difficult to cope with the new phenomenon. There was in effect a kind of discursive gap or lag between the re-creation of the Wailers and ways of understanding them in the critical apparatus of rock. I want to follow up this issue by examining how the British music press dealt with the band during 1973 as it toured, and released the first two Island albums. Unlike in the US where FM radio stations championed new rock music, in the UK the specialist press was the major means of promotion and mediation. Bands simply could not break into the market without press coverage. This mattered, of course, because it was the UK which was used as the launch pad for the Wailers' international success.

How were the Wailers approached by the British rock press? I would identify three broad tendencies. The first might be described, after Hal Foster (1993) as the 'primitive gaze'. We need to recall here the previous British reception of reggae – white working class and Jamaican diasporic. In this context middle class rock journalists found it all too easy to treat the Wailers' as essentially low and 'other' (Middleton 2001).

Here is Steve Lake in the *Melody Maker* reporting on a concert in November 1973. 'Basically they do everything wrong and it works beautifully'. And even more damningly, 'goddam it, the Wailers aren't even musicians in the technical sense at all' (1973a, p. 17). This extraordinary judgement appears in what actually turn out to be a panegyric. It seems that Lake can only conceive of the Wailers as some primitive force, naïve and completely lacking in technique or art. This is of course a classically racist mode of appreciation of African and African diasporic art on the part of Europeans.

Martin Hayman, writing in *Sounds*, has a similar take. Under the headline, 'Wailers' simple message' Hayman writes, 'Bob Marley looks as though he could be a heavy [with] the gleaming eye of a potential fanatic and ... two short furrows which look suspiciously like scars'. As for the performances, we are told that, 'The Wailers communicate very directly with the people, directing the essentially simple message through from the feet to the body to the brain' (1973, p. 10). This is a central trope of primitivism in Foster's terms; identification of the body as receptor of a basic, syn-aesthetic charge which can be produced only by the primitive subject.

The second tendency in early coverage of the Wailers is what might be described as the (Black) Politics reading. This begins to assimilate the projected Otherness of the musicians by setting them up as representatives of a counter-cultural movement. In a review of the album *Burnin'* we learn that 'Marley is an angry young man with a mission' and 'a real threat to society' – precisely recognisable, metropolitan social types. Yet there is also uncertainty about the extent

to which such an interpretative framework can be applied to music makers who, located far outside the subjectivity of rock, remain irredeemably black and Other. Thus, “’Duppy Donqueror” is certainly a beautiful song, [but] the words relate so specifically to Rastifarian ideals that [it] is almost incomprehensible to us white folks’ (Lake 1973b, p. 35).

The last approach I want to identify sits more squarely on rock’s home turf. It consists in elevating the band to the status of virtuoso artists *above* the primitive milieu of reggae. David Milton adopts this tactic when reviewing a concert on the first, *Catch a Fire* tour. He writes: ‘the Wailers use the ethnic merely as a foundation, just as Stevie Wonder and Curtis Mayfield, utilise their soul roots as the core from which springs the seeds of a fertile imagination’ (1973, p. 46). Singling out Marley within the group as the great *auteur* then completes this process. As Milton puts it, ‘[u]nder the leadership and inspiration of Bob Marley, the Wailers have broadened the scope of West Indian music – they have added subtlety, inventiveness and technical virtuosity to the inherent rhythm of their music’ (p. 46).

This account parallels that by Sebastian Clarke (1973, p. 12) in *The New Musical Express*. Clarke is significant in being of Trinidadian origin – he would later write the first book length study of reggae (Clarke 1980). Still, at this stage he remains firmly within the ambit of rock criticism, writing of older Wailers’ material that, ‘although some of the songs are well written, the musical accompaniment and recording quality are noticeably poor’. Apparently the problem is due to a lack of funding and studio availability in Jamaica, and the impossibility, therefore, of spending ‘the length of time required for a record of quality’. Such difficulties can be contrasted with the state of affairs on the Island recordings where ‘the quality is vastly improved, as is the musical accompaniment – arrangements, variety of instruments, vocal backings etc.’ Clarke makes a starkly rock-centric judgement here. What he is pointing to is the fact that earlier Wailers’ recordings don’t sound like rock, whereas *Catch a Fire* with its searing lead guitar and funky clavinet most definitely does.

These awkward, early attempts to assimilate The Wailers into the rock *gestalt* by British critics are important in their own right I think. They demonstrate the contradictions of rock as an aesthetic project: the projection of otherness on to artists and musical forms outside a notional rock ‘heartland’, yet also strategies for bringing in such music on rock’s own terms. Crucially, these reviews lay the ground for the more polished (though just as contradictory) ‘Natural Mystic’ discourse of the later 1970s, as well the posthumous marketing of Marley as ‘Legend’ since the 1980s. It is through such discourses and marketing strategies that Marley has been sold to the world, and thus achieved the status of sole ‘third world’ musical superstar.

This leads on to the issue I want to finish with. What does it *mean* for Caribbean music to be translated, and exploited by the culture industry of the core? One response is to say that it

represents, as Mike Alleyne puts it, a ‘Western commodified reformulation’ (1998: 67). At one level this is indisputable. The problem is getting to grips with what a phrase like this really means.

Capitalism commodifies everything – that is the nature of capitalism. It then Westernises that which was not previously Western according to how it knows its markets. The culture industry is particularly conservative in this respect, and assumes that the market for symbolic goods has a strong ethnocentric bias. Metropolitan audiences either like domestic culture, the reasoning goes, or to a limited extent they’ll accept palatable, translated versions of the culture of the Other.

Now I distrust market-choice arguments. Mostly they provide ideological cover for the prosecution of the de-humanising interests of capital. Yet there is something significant here I think. Metropolitan audiences, constructed as mass markets, *are* parochial in their taste. Take so-called ‘world music’. Even in recent years this has made up a mere 2% of global sales by value – a kind of bohemian niche. The implications of this are that under a market system we should not expect Caribbean music to make many inroads into the metropolitan core. Quite simply, the organisation of the cultural market and the effect of its feedback loop reinforces parochialism. At the same time the economics of dumping at marginal cost enable metropolitan cultural products to go the other way, flooding the Caribbean.

From this perspective, then, the translation of The Wailers looks almost benign. Certainly, it involved an exotic othering of the Caribbean, perhaps even racism, on the part of those journalist gatekeepers who first allowed the music in. But it also initiated a rare episode of musical flow from Caribbean to core. In a world system where cultural values are tied into social and economic structures of inequality, expecting more than this is surely unreasonable. Put it another way: cultural politics on their own are likely to be ineffective in resisting cultural power exerted across the world. What’s needed if we want to challenge the modern day primitive scene is struggle for systematic social change.

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