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"BABYLON MAKES THE RULES": THE POLITICS OF REGGAE CROSSOVER

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"You can cross over, yes, but if you cross
over too far, you come back soft...."

Junior Reid

ABSTRACT

This is an analysis of reggae in the Euro-American market, and the ways in which conscious commodification of the music has undermined its aesthetic and ideological substance. This erosive process is primarily illustrated through case studies of Bob Marley, Aswad and Steel Pulse, all prominent reggae artistes who have been associated with major record companies from the 1970s to the 1990s. Their encounters with Western economic hegemony and the inevitably concomitant creative compromises are identified as precedent setting. The textual homogeneity which major labels imposed in earlier reggae history has predetermined their approach to re/presentation in the digital Dancehall era. Moreover, the very digital character of modern reggae-oreinted music has rigidified many creative textual boundaries and facilitated mass replication of a formerly distinctive cultural aesthetic in the service of capitalism.

This paper attempts to explore some aspects of the history of reggae artistes in the Euro-American market, particularly those signed to major labels. In so doing, it aims to highlight recurrent instances of textual transformation as a primary characteristic of reggae's international outreach.

The title clearly suggests that the major record companies with whom the prominent reggae artistes have been associated are able to exert the ultimate decision making power regarding stylistic focus and aesthetic image representation. This position does not ignore the conscious collaboration of artists in this process or attempts by some of them to subvert and appropriate the resources of a system which seeks to control them. What the title emphasises is the Western control of the capital through which reggae artistes must seek access to global discourse, and its creative and cultural consequences for the

process of negotiation through the predatory environment of the record industry.

The term, crossover, is used here to describe the commercially-propelled movement of otherwise marginal music into the mainstream market. As reggae artistes continually cross borders between organic eclecticism and overt commercial calculation, critical consideration must be given to the extent to which textual integrity and cultural specificity are compromised or lost in alternative relation to the economic and creative gains of interfacing with wider audiences.

Crossover is discussed here primarily in the context of Euro-American record industry institutions because of the domestic and global economic and aesthetic influence of companies headquartered within that geographical domain. There are, however, other major markets in Africa and Latin America within which reggae artistes, in particular, have made impact. Given the historical, social and cultural interlinkages between these regions and the Caribbean, the use of the term crossover to describe this phenomenon may be inappropriate unless one speaks specifically within the linguistic barrier frame of reference.

More detailed work remains to be carried out quantifying the overall market impact of reggae in such often overshadowed markets. It is, nonetheless, important to acknowledge that demand from these continents may also determine textual formats adopted by internationally-minded reggae artistes. What is clearly apparent, even in this context of 'alternative' commercial success, is that much of the reggae attaining popularity in Africa and Latin America remains mediated through the same major label conglomerates which dominate Europe and America.

This paper chronologically examines transnationalised reggae from the roots breakthroughs of Bob Marley to the digital dynamics of dancehall. While this assessment cannot be exhaustive due to limitations of time and space, focussing on key points and artists still highlights important issues.

Several Jamaican performers – such as Desmond Dekker and Jimmy Cliff – achieved international hit single status in the late 1960s, but sustained commercial impact at the all-important album level did not arrive until Bob Marley's emergence. It is significant that some early reggae singles aimed at international markets displayed characteristics of overproduction to accommodate perceived aesthetic preferences of non-West Indian metropolitan audiences. In particular, the addition of orchestral strings to songs like Bob & Marcia's "Young, Gifted & Black" and Jimmy Cliff's "Wonderful World, Beau-

tiful People" [both released in 1969] sounded like textual impositions rather than aesthetically appropriate expansions. These instances, though not necessarily pervasive, demonstrate textual accommodation of international commercial trends during reggae's infancy. The foreign chart success which such singles achieved probably contributed, in part, to later stylistic adaptations.

Bob Marley's career during his tenure with Island Records is clearly an ideal point of departure since he was the first reggae artist to receive the benefit of large-scale record industry capital to boost his global promotion. While Marley was consciously involved in the process of attracting an international audience, evidence suggests that the head of Island, Chris Blackwell, held and exercised the all-important economic [as opposed to creative] power to hegemonically determine Marley's *final* recorded textual representation.

Several circumstances surrounding Marley's 1972 Island album debut, **Catch a Fire,** are indicative of the forms of creative compromise necessary to negotiate major market access. The songs were originally recorded here in Kingston by the Wailers, but on receiving the tapes in London, Blackwell felt that the marketability of the texts required enhancement, that the appeal to the Western audience ought to be accentuated. Accordingly, he created a treble-oriented mix of the song elements and diminished the presence of the bass, while also accelerating the speed of the tracks. Moreover, Blackwell solicited contributions from British and American session men to dilute the raw intensity of the songs.[1] In effect, what was represented as reggae was a Western commodified reformulation of the textual format.

Marley's documented presence during at least some of the aforementioned overdub sessions suggests a decision to creatively collaborate in a process which would hasten dissemination of his work. It also perhaps points to a recognition of the inevitability of major record company intervention and exertion of influence on the reggae text in marketing it internationally. While the anti-capitalist themes dominating the Wailers' lyrics remained both potent and intact on **Catch a Fire** – and on most subsequent albums – it was

1. Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'N' Mix: Culture. Identity and Caribbean Music* (London: Comedia, 1987) 80; Stephen Davis, *Bob Marley* (Rochester: Schenkman, 1990) 104, 109-110; Simon Jones, *Black Culture. White* Youth: *The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK* (London: Macmillan, 1988) 64; Timothy White, *Catch a Fire: The Life of Bob Marley* (New York: Henry Holt. 1992) 234-235; Mike Alleyne, "Positive Vibration? Capitalist Textual Hegemony & Bob Marley," *Bulletin of Eastern Caribbean Affairs* 19.3 (1994): 78-79.

the instrumental text, the rhythmic sub-narrative framework for anti-Babylonian critique which demonstrated the greatest influence of commercial transformation.

Since the capital which provided Marley with access to discourse came from Blackwell, then this ensured that the aural and visual positioning of reggae in Western markets would largely become a Babylonian construct. The change of the 1974 album title from the proposed **Knotty Dread** to **Natty Dread** exemplifies such reformulation.[2] In domestic terms this may seem an insignificant wordplay since 'knotty' and 'natty' are aurally identical in Jamaica. However, in the context of international commodification, Blackwell's title choice is ideologically detached from the original version, capitalising on the duality of meaning while using the spelling best suited to Western audiences. The linguistic dichotomy of uptown 'natty' versus downtown 'knotty' reflects a musical divergence between metropolitan gloss and ghetto grit.

Albums such as **Exodus, Kaya** and **Uprising,** released during the latter phase of Marley's contract with Island demonstrated, at various points, critical shifts in rhythmic and melodic character, which imbued his music with a greater commercial crossover potential. The emergence of more songs of love and peace, with appropriately light-hearted accompaniment, implied a desire for mass-market consolidation at the possible expense of temporary marginalisation of a militant, confrontational position. Although Blackwell may not have exerted overt influence at this point, he had already helped set a commercial continuity in motion which arguably placed pressures on Marley's discourse in accommodating his various audiences. Any illusion of entirely lost militancy was shattered on 1979s *Survival* album, but the marked sales disparity between this anti-imperialist critique and its more commercial counterparts suggests the greater viability of less progressive texts within the Euro-American market.

Island's exploitation of the Marley catalogue since his death, perhaps best exemplified by the radically remixed and reconstructed "Iron Lion Zion" single, underscores the sense of capital-based autonomy enjoyed by major labels in their dealings with reggae.[3]

2. Davis, 138, Jones, 65.

3. The posthumous reorganisation of this text is confirmed by Ian McCann in *The Complete Guide to the Music of Bob Marley* (London: Omnibus, 1994) 25, 114. He refers to the song as "comprehensively reproduced" with the use of modern technology.

Many of Marley's contemporaries experienced commercial pressures with a variety of major labels, the impact of which surfaced in their textual assumption of pop characteristics and trend-conscious semblances of reggae on selected singles. The inconsistencies characterising the career of Jimmy Cliff, who has probably been signed to more major labels than any other reggae artist (at least five), are indicative of this type of pressure. In his case, the big breakthrough seemed perpetually imminent but never arrived, largely due to the inappropriately commercial revamping which occurred at each major label transit point, especially during the early-to-mid 1980s phase with Columbia/CBS.

To some extent, this circumstance also applies to former Wailer, the late Peter Tosh. Although his core lyrical texts were thoroughly militant during his only moderately productive major label spells with Virgin, Rolling Stones Records & EMI, attempts to break metropolitan market resistance sometimes featured uncharacteristically saccharin love songs as singles. A 1978 duet with Mick Jagger reviving the Temptations' hit "Don't Look Back" (from the Bush Doctor album), and "Nothing But Love" recorded with Gwen Guthrie (on 1981s Wanted Dread & Alive) exemplify this situation.[4]

Marley's premature passing in 1981 left both creative and commercial voids in reggae's international presence. Despite the various levels of commodification and textual reorganisation which occurred during his years at Island, his material and persona transcended the superficialities of the record industry. But he was an exception.

The market potential which he fulfilled left major labels scrambling to sign reggae acts, especially those which displayed a capacity to tread the same ideological and aesthetic paths. This trend had also accompanied Marley's emergence in the mid-70s, with labels like Virgin Records developing reggae artist rosters seemingly overnight, and such fever returned with the new decade. From the outset then, the major labels sought textual sequels to the Marley legacy rather than stylistically distinct acts. This clearly predetermined the parameters within which the prominent reggae acts of the time would operate in their major label encounters.

Among the roots reggae successors in the forefront of this phase were

4. In *The Guinness Who's Who of Reggae*, ed. Colin Larkin (Middlesex: Guinness, 1994) 270, it is noted that many Tosh fans complained of the prominence of Jagger's voice in the mix of their duet. This configuration was certainly calculated to attain maximum crossover appeal.

Aswad and Steel Pulse. Brief analysis of their post-Marley histories points to increasing commercialisation under the pressure of record industry hegemony. Although both groups operated primarily from a British base, they occupied roughly the same creative sphere as Marley.

Common to Aswad and Steel Pulse is a general sociopolitical lyrical consistency (though love songs later assumed prominence) counterposed by transformations within the instrumental texts which belie the appearance of uniform resistance to the capitalist forces of Babylon. In other words, the lyrical position is often undermined by the instrumental con/text.

Aswad's recording career with major labels began in 1976 with Island, followed by a spell with CBS, and then a return to Island on that company's Mango imprint. Despite stylistic development resulting in noteworthy creative moments, their commercial and artistic success was merely average in chart terms. It is probably not coincidental that Aswad's finest album was recorded on an independent label. The 1986 release, *To The Top,* superbly integrated their finest roots elements with impeccably executed dub aesthetics, and it justly attracted critical acclaim and an improved chart profile (though only in the U.K).

Their return to Mango for their next release marked a crucial commercial turning point. The instrumental and lyrical substance which had brought them to marginal prominence became remarkably diluted. *Distant Thunder* released in 1988, was a massive hit album in Europe which marked a distinct change in direction characterised by a lightweight, pop-oriented crossover approach designed to fulfil purely commercial objectives.[5]

It is very significant that the album's hit single, 'Don't Turn Around" (not written by Aswad), was recently 'colonised' for a similar commercial purpose by the white Swedish pop-reggae quartet, Ace of Base. Their enormously successful appropriation of the song implicitly highlights the distance of the text from Aswad's former roots-and-culture ethos. Although the song was written by two white Americans – Albert Hammond and the phenomenally-successful Diane Warren – it was Aswad's reggae interpretation which created the template upon which Ace of Base capitalised. The disparity between the U.S. market impact of these different versions is further indicative of the record industry's racial politics in action, and the dramatic effect of commercial dilution.

5. "Aswad," *The Trouser Press Record Guide,* ed. Ira A. Robbins (New York: Collier. 1991).

Also important is the takeover of Island by Polygram in 1989, the year after *Distant Thunder* was released. The multi-million dollar deal naturally meant that subsequent financial returns on the investment should he maximised, thus exerting further commercial and textual pressure on reggae acts.

In 1990, *Too Wicked* was released and it logically extended the direction upon which Aswad had recently embarked. The album, which might well have been renamed "Too Commercial", featured blatant crossover attempts through digital technology based hip-hop and pop fusions which ultimately diminished both the creative strength of the material and its cultural specificity.[6]

Having recently signed with another independent label (U.S based Mesa Records) for their 1994 album, *Rise and Shine,* one group member reflected on the awkward industry disjunction between creative control and the dictates of commerce, noting that

> The most challenging thing about this project was finding a record company that would let us put the entire project together by ourselves.[7]

It is clearly implied here that major label association is virtually antithetical to the exercise of such creative autonomy, and that artists need to crossover on their own terms. While *Rise & Shine* is not exactly a milestone in Aswad's career, it does clearly indicate movement towards meaningful creative recuperation. Its recent significant sales impact in Japan suggests that the divergence between commercial success and creative substance need not be as wide as frequently occurs under major label auspices.[8]

Steel Pulse also began on Island in the late 70s with a hard core roots identity, achieving average commercial success in the U.K. until the third album. At this point, Island intervened at several levels to fully exert its economic power and increase its gains. Group leader, David Hinds, recalls that the

6. "Aswad," *The Trouser Press Record Guide.*

7. J.R. Reynolds, "Aswad Returns By Way Of Europe," *Billboard* 2 July 1 994: 22.

8. Steve McClure, "Reggae Makes A Splash In Japan," *Billboard* 28 Jan. 1995:57. The *Rise & Shine* album has reportedly sold over 300,000 copies which is almost unprecedented for a reggae in the Japanese market. However, it is worth noting that this sales impact is partly due to major Japanese distribution through Sony, thus sustaining a level of corporate involvement in Aswad's career.

company wanted to determine the album title, impose new producers on the groups dictate the kind of album cover pictures which should be taken, and generally usurp the relative creative autonomy which Steel Pulse had previously enjoyed in these areas.[9] The attempt to develop a smoother, more mainstream sound failed dismally, both aesthetically and commercially.[10]

The group moved on to Elektra where they recorded the excellent (though commercially minor) *True Democracy* album in 1982. But by the time of their next release, *Earth Crisis* in 1984, company intervention reoccurred with the issuing of specific directions to emulate the pop-reggae style of Eddy Grant. The group reportedly recorded the single, "Steppin' Out" specifically to appease the record company."

While *Earth Crisis* was generally considered a creative success, the groups' use of digital music technology had begun to alienate hard core followers. The growing contradiction between the ideologies supporting collective black diasporic resistance to imperialism expressed in Steel Pulse lyrics and the upmarket slickness of their instrumental texts took full effect on *Babylon the Bandit*.[12] Hence, the groups' rebellion against one form of hegemony was counterbalanced by conformity to a different manifestation.

The commercial demise of this album led to Steel Pulse terminating its association with Elektra, though ironically – as if to underscore the album's pervasive commerciality – it won a Grammy award for Best Reggae Recording. The politics of crossover demand such mainstream institutional recognition as a means of gaining broader market access. However, since the Grammy awards are heavily determined by large major label voting blocks, the entire procedure helps reinforce cultural hegemony. Indeed, since the reggae award was instituted only one independent label, Shanachie, has made any impact. In both instances, the artist was the well-known Bunny Wailer who first won in 1991 with *Time Will Tell – A Tribute to Bob Marley* and 'triumphed' in 1995 with *Crucial! Roots Classics*. The retro-content of these releases, however well executed, further underscores the conservatism attached to the Grammy award procedure.

9. Patricia Meschino, "Steel Pulse: Steppin' Out," *Reggae Report* 10.9 (1993): 21.

10. Lee O'Neill, "Steel Pulse," *Reggae Report* 10.9 (1993): 24.

11. Meschino, 22.

12. "Steel Pulse," *The Trouser Press Record Guide.*

Steel Pulse returned to recording in 1988 with yet another major label, MCA. The appropriately titled album, *State of Emergency,* extended an ongoing creative crisis by blatantly attempting crossover with too many love songs and shallow dance-oriented tracks. Further clear evidence of record company textual intervention emerged in preparations for the 1992 release of *Victims.* Hinds asserts that MCA wanted the funky, R&B type songs placed at the beginning of the album, rather than the reggae tracks upon which the groups' reputation had been built.[13] Thus, their primary identity became secondary as hegemonic industrial forces foregrounded the textual dimension perceived likely to stimulate maximum economic returns, simultaneously undermining the groups' cultural profile.

Interestingly, the most recent Steel Pulse album, 1994s Vex, clearly indicates a recognition that dilution of creative and ideological substance had accompanied their continuous commercialisation. In the song, "Back To My Roots", the message is unambiguous: "We took that commercial road/Searching for some fame and gold/And gained the whole wide world/and almost lost our souls."

This album was also recorded with MCA, and thus still retains significant instrumental textual concessions to rap and hip-hop stylings. What seems apparent, though, is that Steel Pulse is seeking to negotiate space within the record industry that allows greater artistic autonomy without sacrificing access to discourse with a large audience. The probability of attaining this goal remains in question.

A broad historical parallel between the commercial consequences of major label association for Aswad and Steel Pulse, and the situation of Third World in this context is also readily applicable here. In its shifts from Island to Columbia to Polygram, similar textual devolution can be discerned, although one might argue that in this case broad eclectic scope was apparent from the first albums. Significance must be attached to Third World's plans to independently release an album to escape the pressures of record company commercial expectations and interference.[14]

The unprecedented popular chart presence of dancehall, particularly in the U.S., heralds a new era of commercial viability for Jamaican music, evidenced by the spate of recent artist signings to major labels. The dancehall

13. Meschino, 23.

14. "Talkin' Entertainment," *Jammyn* 2.2 (1994): 15.

crossover impact in the Euro-American market was partially facilitated by the ongoing association of rap with Jamaican music. As the viability of rap and hip-hop became apparent, many DJ's found an industry ready to capitalise on related musical facets.

Arguably, though, the linguistic characteristics of dancehall which enhanced its cultural specificity also limited its mainstream market appeal, and without access to this mass audience, it could not truly crossover. Brief analysis of the commercial relationship between Epic Records and Shabba Ranks indicates the kind of marketing strategies being adopted to widen the dancehall audience base, and also highlights some of the important textual consequences.

Apart from audio-visual emphasis on the construction of a hyper-macho persona, Epic focussed on associating Shabba with artists already successful in the spheres of rap, R&B and pop. A range of duets with rappers KRS-1 and Queen Latifah, "Housecall" with Maxi Priest, and "Slow and Sexy" with Johnny Gill were undertaken to break market resistance.

Ironically, while Shabba's market profile developed dramatically, the textual articulation of most of these songs bore little overall relation to dancehall aesthetics. The politics of fusion usually dictate the dominance of the most commercially viable component; on both "Housecall" and "Slow and Sexy", the only identifiable component linked to dancehall was Shabba's voice.[15] The instrumental texts were clearly R&B/hip-hop crossover formulations.

Some may de-emphasise the significance of such a textual observation by pointing to reggae's eclectic roots, and its development partially as an outgrowth of indigenous R&B reinterpretation. While the historical relevance is not in question, the coincidence of more recent and clearly calculated fusions with artiste connections to major labels suggests that the commercial context must be foregrounded in considerations of dancehall's crossover capacity.

Dancehall's conformity to mainstream trends to achieve the crossover goal is not limited to 'Top 40' targeted tracks, but also exists, to some extent, at the level of digital music technology application. The overall argument being advanced here surrounds the development of a pervasive textual homogeneity resulting from limited utilisation of drum machines, synthesizers and samplers. The use of the technology is not itself a problem, but the extent to which it has yet to be adequately appropriated is.

15. Rob Kenner, "Top Rankin'," *Vibe* October 1994: 71. Here, Shabba articulates his recognition of the circumstance in stating that "Johnny Gill and Shabba is a song, but its not a real Jamaican song, seen?"

While the replication of textual formats is an international phenomenon, it assumes greater importance in the context of importing such technology. The instruments in question are usually created within Euro-American confines primarily for the domestic market, and there is a real sense in which the tonal palettes are imbued with the cultural perceptions of the point of origin. The implications of using such technology within the Caribbean without maximising its potential to make popular cultural expression distinctive rather than conformative are significant .

The style of drum machine and synthesizer bass programming characterising dancehall records does, to some extent, constitute a means of attaining stylistic distinction. However, the extent to which this has occurred has been insufficient to insulate the music from white commercial appropriation. The six million albums recently sold in the U.S. alone by Ace of Base with their artificially imitative pop-reggae should provide ample warning. Only Bob Marley's *Legend* compilation can compete in U.S. reggae album sales, currently registering over five million copies, but over the course of a decade. The similarly major label sponsored chart successes of UB40 and Snow are also generally relevant here.

What the minimalist use of digital technology in dancehall appears to be doing, among other things, is heightening the susceptibility of Jamaican music to cultural pilferage. Whereas in the pre-digital 1970s white attempts to imitate reggae were far more obviously flawed, in the present era the technology creates a common ground within which reasonably accurate rhythmic replication can more easily occur. In the case of sampling, exact duplication becomes a reality.

One might suggest that there is a level at which appropriation is to be encouraged, to stimulate market hunger for the 'authentic' commodity, and facilitate the crossover process. However, if the commercial reformulation of reggae for crossover purposes facilitates its creative and ultimately economic appropriation through chart success by artists outside of reggae culture, then perhaps this strategy requires re-evaluation. An acute disjunction exists between the ideological content of much reggae, and its Western adoption – by both artist and audience – based primarily on pleasing aesthetic qualities rather than sensitivity to an anti-imperialist polemic.[16] The range of commercially

16. Lise Winer, "Intelligibility of Reggae Lyrics in North America: Dread In A Babylon," *English World-Wide: A Journal of Varieties of English* 11.1 (1990) : 36.

successful pseudo-reggae material performed over the last two decades by Euro-American artists such as The Police, Eric Clapton, The Eagles, and Paul Simon points clearly towards a decontextualisation of the music motivated by product consciousness.

It is being suggested here that the racial politics of the record industry make it far simpler (and it always has) for a white facsimile of a black musical style to capture a market than it is for authentic black representation of the given style to achieve the same success. Moreover, for the reggae artist to crossover with maximum impact, generally the textual representation must become distanced from reggae aesthetics. Maxi Priest's success with "Close To You" and the current monster hit, "Here Comes The Hotstepper" by Ini Kamoze – both No.1 singles on *Billboard's* 'Hot 100' and both major label releases – further exemplify this trend whereby the basis for truly mainstream success is primarily of Babylonian determination.

In the case of Kamoze's song, a nostalgia privileging intertextuality is evident, in which elements of two songs from the '60s and '80s respectively are merged with a hip-hop groove, creating an amalgam of components already rooted in the Western pop world and facilitating the crossover effect. One can also refer to the recent Big Mountain hit, "Baby, I Love Your Way", which capitalises on the song's previous hit status through its writer, Peter Frampton in the mid-'70s, and roughly a decade later in a remake by Will To Power. Moreover, when one considers the groups' major label connection and their multi-racial composition featuring a caucasoid Chicano leader, it becomes possible to perceive how this previously little known outfit rose to crossover prominence.

The divergence in creative conditions existing between major and independent companies is accentuated, for example, by Black Uhuru's release of dub versions of each album project since departing Island almost ten years ago, after their "success" in winning the first reggae Grammy award. Such ongoing textual reinterpretation would be considered a luxury by major labels, pointing to a crisis of corporate vision which limits the creative expression of reggae artists only to the most obviously commercially viable forms.

The movement of the reggae's major label exiles – and some performers still maintaining such associations – towards varying states of overtly demonstrated creative independence, or consciousness of its vital importance, suggests a partial unravelling of the fabric of Western record industry hegemony. Nonetheless, much more practical action needs to be taken to secure

autonomous space. The form of this response will probably have to be determined by the artists themselves.

Engagement in the crossover process is essential to the sustenance of reggae, both economically and creatively. The imperatives of survival demand that artists reach out to wider audiences. The aesthetic implementation of fusions with other commercially viable music forms is important in propelling the textual development of reggae, through the avoidance of stasis and undue insularity.

However, the intersection of raw record industry capitalism with what are, in theory, positive processes corrupts the scenario. Much evidence points to a critical imbalance in the negotiation process, whereby the overriding factor of capital generation operates disjunctively with artistic creativity, imposing pressures on the text which must in some way accommodate these transformative forces to gain access to discourse with an audience.

The implications of major label control pose a continual challenge to reggae artists trying to retain components of aesthetic uniqueness in their quest for international exposure. The transformed commercial texts which achieve chart success arguably influence the subsequent domestic musical articulation, extending the reach of Babylonian power in making the rules.