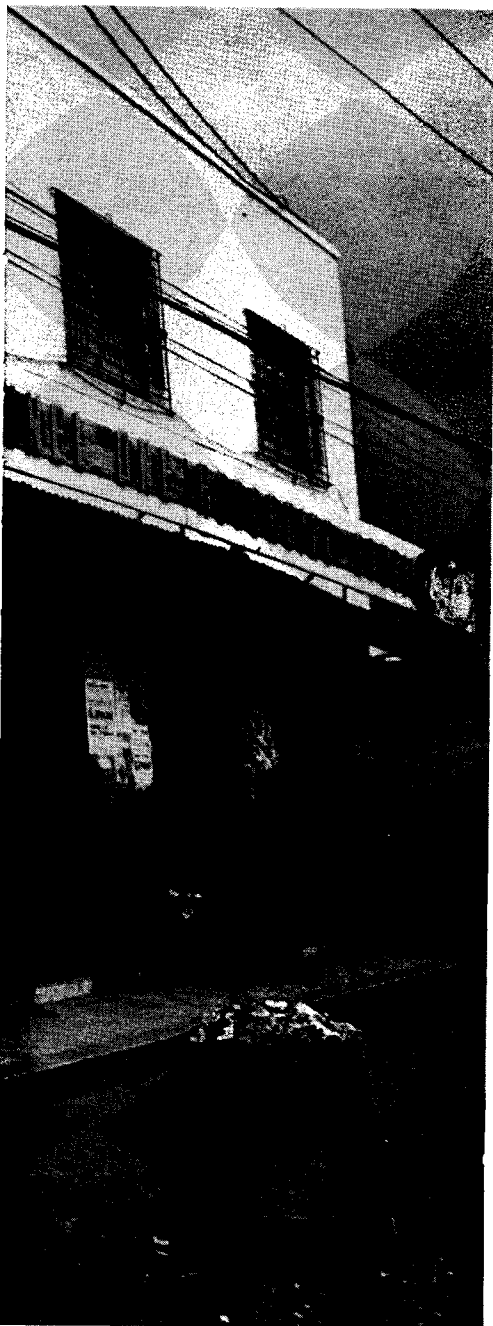




Kingston



# Reggae: Jamaica's Rebel Music

By Rita Forest\*

"On the day that Bob Marley died I was buying vegetables in the market town of Kasr El Kebir in northern Morocco. Kasr El Kebir was a great city with running water and streetlights when London and Paris were muddy villages. Moroccans tend not to check for any form of western music, vastly preferring the odes of the late great Om Kalthoum or the latest pop singer from Cairo or Beirut. But young Moroccans love Bob Marley, the only form of non-Arabic music I ever saw country Moroccans willingly dance to. That afternoon in Kasr El Kebir, Bob Marley banners in Arabic were strung across the main street. . . ." (Stephen Davis, *Reggae International*, 1982).

Reggae, a music barely 20 years old, has penetrated remote deserts in Mali, is played by aborigines in Australia, has hit the top ten in countries all over Europe, and has influenced musicians on every continent. When these sounds get carried around the planet to places where there are only batteries to power the rare tape player, it is certain that a very deep chord has been struck among the masses.

Jamaica, the Caribbean island

from which this burst forth, has been described as a "very small connection that's glowing red-hot" between "two extremely heavy cultures"—Africa and North America. But reggae (and its predecessors, ska and rock-steady) came sparking off that red-hot wire at a *particular moment*—a time in the mid-1960s when Jamaica was in the throes of a mass migration from the countryside to the city. These people, driven from the green hills into the hellish tangle of Kingston shantytowns, created reggae music.

This same jolting disruption of a centuries-old way of life has also shaped the existence of many millions of people in cities around the world today. And the best of reggae, which righteously confronted the horror that is "modern" life for the masses in these citadels, quickly found an international audience of youth overripe to climb to some higher heights:

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\*Rita Forest is a member of the Revolutionary Communist Party, U.S.A., and an activist in the cultural sphere. This article has been slightly edited for publication in *AWTW*.

“Burning and a-lootin’ tonight  
 Burning all pollution tonight  
 Burning all illusions tonight.”

“Burning’ and Lootin’” — The  
 Wailers

By any calculation reggae has been a huge musical explosion comparable in some ways to the birth of rock n’ roll in the U.S. Kingston, for example, has grown to be the largest producer of singles per capita of any city in the world—and almost all of it reggae.

What was it about Jamaica, the times, the world, that gave us this music?

In Michael Thelwell’s novel *The Harder They Come*, adapted from the film of the same name, Ivan, a Kingston “rude boy” (ghetto youth in and around the Jamaican music scene) tries to visit his family’s home in the mountains after several years of living in the city. “Nothing was familiar.... Bush-bush full up everywhere. But...dis couldn’t the right place after all? Right down dere should be the tin roof. You mean say bush-bush grow up, cover it?...”

“There was no evidence of the passage of his generations, the ancestors whose intelligence, industry and skill had created a self-sufficient homestead here. None—at all....”

His grandmother who had raised him up there had died several years earlier; his mother was back down in Kingston working at starvation pay as a washerwoman; his uncles were long gone off the land and had met their ends all over the globe. One died in World War 2 fighting for the British; another went to cut cane in Cuba and was never heard from again; another was serving a life sentence in the Kingston penitentiary for killing his wife....

“Ah shoulda did stay an’ tek care of de place, he thought. The worst insult that people has was sneering, ‘Cho, you no come from nowhe.’...He wanted to go get a machete, to cut a path to the graves and clear the bush away. But...what de raas is de use... What’s the fucken use? He felt empty, and frightened, futile, miserable, and very alone. He would never, he swore, come back ever.”

He continued down the road to

the former home of Maas’ Nattie, the man who’d raised him like a father, and discovered that two American tourists had taken over the backyard and were lazily smoking ganja and sunbathing, stark naked. Ivan watched while one of them tried to milk a male goat, then jumped on his motorbike in disgust and sped away over the mountains and through the foothills choked with bauxite dust, back down to Kingston. From that moment on, he refused to look back, and with nothing to lose, he shot cops and sang his way to fame and notoriety. He was an outlaw, and a fearless hero to those being ground up in this new urban “promised land”—a concrete jungle where you couldn’t even find a clean glass of water, let alone a day’s work.

### 1962: Jamaican “Independence”

In the late 1950s, the Jamaican countryside was getting ripped apart by U.S. capital more intensively than almost any other Caribbean island. They took over from the British plantation-style rule after discovering bauxite there during World War 2. Major U.S. and Canadian aluminium companies appropriated huge areas of land from the peasants and left gaping strip-mined valleys of the burning red dirt all through the Jamaican hills. More people were forced off the land with the stagnation of the British sugar plantations, as well as the growth of tourism. They flocked to Kingston to survive, pitching tin shacks on a reclaimed garbage dump in the harbour. There were a few jobs on the docks and in some new U.S. plants, but for most the pickings were slim and many kept going. In the 1950s and 1960s, one-eighth of the population emigrated. (Today only 2 1/2 of the 4 million Jamaicans in the world actually live on the island.)

As Jamaica lurched from British crown colony to U.S. neo-colony, the island’s local bourgeoisie got a lift as they hitched themselves to this new capital and the freshly-stirred waves of nationalism that surged up off the “independence” celebration in 1962. They had a new style of rule, and a greater freedom and necessity to promote and especially to try to gain control of a “national”

culture.

As it happened, a musical storm of such gigantic proportions and deep roots among the oppressed was growing up from below that it would spin out of their grasp. . . .

There is more than symbolic significance to the story of the son of a white Jamaican ruling class family who was born in the U.S., graduated from Harvard (and not Britain’s Oxford) in the late 1950s, and returned home to Jamaica to do anthropological work among the peasants, investigating folk practices such as *obeah* and musical traditions associated with Pukkumina religion. He soon moved to Kingston, set up a small recording company to document this culture, then turned his attention to the music scene in the West Kingston ghettos and became one of Jamaica’s first record producers. This young music entrepreneur was none other than the current Jamaican prime minister and man-on-the scene for U.S. imperialism, Edward Seaga.

When he entered politics in 1959, Seaga secured a constituency in one of the toughest new ghettos in West Kingston with his music credentials, and introduced guns onto the street along with systematic gangster-style violence to force “loyalty” among this very angry and volatile section of the population. He also put to full use his earlier study of peasant religious practices and superstitions in his political rallies and slogans. This is the man, head of the Jamaican Labour Party, who came to be known internationally as CIAga for his mafiosa-style services and overall political assistance to the U.S. bourgeoisie—which has continually manoeuvred for a tighter hold on its backyard island—and who was publicly denounced for running guns for the CIA into Jamaica in the late 1960s. Exactly how much his early career was sculpted along these lines with outside interests is not entirely clear.

For the next two decades and continuing today Seaga and all rival bourgeois politicians, particularly the up and coming “socialist” leader of the People’s National Party, Michael Manley, would be forced to deal in the currency of the “sufferah,” the sufferers in the city—and

reggae would figure large in this.

### The Rise of Reggae

The first strains of the new music arose as transistor radios cropped up on the streets of Kingston and the rude boys started popping their fingers to the tunes of Fats Domino, Brook Benton, the Drifters and other rhythm and blues singers who were being blasted out from U.S. radio stations in nearby New Orleans and Miami. At the time, the locally-produced music scene was relatively barren, at least compared to Trinidad's calypso or the Latin beats of the Spanish-speaking islands. For the youth, an evening's entertainment was provided by the roving disc jockeys (DJs) holding court from trucks stacked with monster speakers: the "sound system" dance. Competition among these legendary figures was ferocious, each DJ vying for the attention of the crowd who demanded the hottest and newest releases from the U.S. When, in the early 1960s, this pop music became slick and soft and their audience required something new and tougher, DJs like Coxson, Dodd and Duke Reid opened recording studios, and by 1963 a new Jamaican sound was in the air. Ska was a brassy, jumpy blend of rhythm and blues, jazz riffs, rock n' roll, mento (a calypso-influenced Jamaican folk music), gospel, Latin and big band horns, and the African beat of the Rastafarian burru drummers. The originators of this sound included the Skatallites, made up of the cream of Jamaica's jazz men who had grown tired of answering tourists' requests for "Yellow Bird" and bastardised calypso on the hotel circuit. Beginning in 1963, an historic collaboration took place in Coxson's Studio One between the Skatallites and the Wailers, who were one of the expert harmony groups then springing up in the government yards (housing projects) among the toughest youth in Kingston. The astonishing music that issued from these sessions would soon put the new generation of rude boys like Ivan on the stage for the first time.

"Jail house keeps empty/  
Rudie gets healthy

Baton sticks get shorter/  
Rudie gets taller  
...Can't fight against the youth/  
Cause it's wrong

Prediction:

Them people a-going wild  
Dem a rude rude people...  
What has been hidden  
From the 'wise' and the polluted  
Will be revealed

In the heat of the summer sun

Oh Rudie, be wise..."

"Jailhouse," also called "Rudie"—  
The Wailers

Rarely has a song so captured the brooding and insolent confidence of youth coming of age in an uninhabitable place which is itself "new," but already a virtual bomb-site. The musical response at the end of each line came like a threat and a statement of fact—sung in the sweetest of harmonies.

This type of thing was not at all what the local bourgeoisie had in mind for their "post-Independence" Jamaican culture, and all along the way they tried to redirect it—with Seaga often as pointman. At first the Skatallites were ridiculed for playing "bongo" music, but as early as 1964, Seaga, as Minister of Development, tried to take over ska, introducing it at the New York World's Fair with a hand-picked delegation of musicians, passing over the universally-acknowledged rude boy originators. These youth had lately become even more outlawed because of their association with Rastafarian (and ganja-smoking) musicians who were neither respectable nor willing to be hired thugs for either of the two major Jamaican political parties. The official policy on these unruly "seeds": "Kill it, before they grow..." as one famous song would put it.

But in the next few years, as ska slowed down into the "rock steady" style and finally around 1967-68 to reggae, the music became thoroughly dominated by the rude boys. The music took over the sound system dances and jukeboxes, selling huge numbers of singles—but all the while it was almost completely banned from the radio. The national culture was definitely splitting in two, with polite society (to say nothing of the tourist board!) properly

horrified at these rebels wearing their hair in thick "natty" dreadlocks (long, tight curls) who were also beginning to gain a little notoriety internationally as well.

The country was further polarising in all ways. By 1969, Jamaica was listed as having the most unequal distribution of income of any country in the world—truly a "black man's hell in a white man's paradise," as reggae artist Gregory Isaacs would sing it.

Huge numbers of youth, with no jobs, no future and in most cases, no way to ever get off the island, were being bombarded with American goods, culture and enticements via the English-speaking media and relatives returning from abroad. Reggae came like a blast of fresh fury blown back in the face of U.S. imperialism. It was another stunning example of the fact that for all its efforts to forcibly recruit the world to the American way, those people they oppress are just as likely to take such U.S. exports and transform them in their own manner. In the case of reggae, they were beaming back a fierce new music which turned the beat from abroad on its head.

Browsing through bins of old reggae singles, you come across a common graphic theme—a clenched fist in several variations—with label names to match: "Voice of the People," "Bullet," "Wail 'M Soul 'M," "Tit for Tat," "Hungry Town," "Clinch." The upheavals of the world were starting to make themselves felt in Jamaica in brutal ways. The influence of the Black Liberation Movement in the United States also arrived in Kingston where many people found it decidedly unforeign. The Wailers wore their hair in Afros back in the late 1960s before growing dreadlocks, and their "Soul Revolution" album featured them decked out in guerrilla gear resembling uniforms worn by the Black Panther Party at the time.

While reggae, like any musical form, has also produced its share of insipid love songs and boring pop remakes throughout its history, what is striking is that most of the best reggae musicians have always considered themselves "warriors against Babylon," as they refer to the oppressor's system. And the sound of

the music has from the beginning attracted the ears of thousands of youth like Ivan who know from torturous experience that there is no going back to "simpler times." And most wouldn't want to anyhow.<sup>1</sup>

So the stage was set for the rise of reggae in Jamaica—including the fact that Kingston had developed economically to the point it could support an embryonic record industry, an unlikely eventuality in neighboring Haiti, or the Dominican Republic at that time.

But another ingredient was added into this new musical mix.

### The Rastafarians

"...Cause I feel like  
Bombing a church  
Now that you know  
The preacher is lying.  
So who's gonna stay at home  
When the freedom fighters  
Are fightin'?"

"Talking Blues"—Bob Marley

Most reggae musicians hold to the Rastafarian world view. This militant turning of Christianity upside down has had its own odd results—clearly not all of them negative. Right at the moment when Seaga and Manley & Co. had hoped to gather the masses around in a respectable congregation of "freed" colonial subjects content with the new terms of their enslavement, boom! up pops natty dread who wants none of it. Most significantly, the Rastas had no patience for Christian promises of the good life when you're dead and gone. If the times were "dread," the possibility of overthrowing the whole order was also alive in the world, if presently out of reach—and this new creed demanded black redemption here on earth. Africa, the scene of recent struggles against imperialism, was where it was to be found—quite logical for a people stolen from that continent as slaves and stranded on an island which was becoming increasingly intermeshed with the world, but on the most savage terms. They were confronting the violent intrusion of capitalist relations into peasant society which Marx described 100 years earlier:

"In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The newfangled sources of wealth, by some strange wierd spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy."—Karl Marx, "Speech at the Anniversary of the *People's Paper*"

"Rastaman first bring civilisation on ya..." goes a reggae tune called the "History of Captivity" by Carlton Jackson. So it seemed to many in the jungle of Kingston whose history consisted of centuries of slavery, colonial rule and neo-colonial "modernisation"—all of it bearing the stamp of approval of the Christian preacher so gruesomely depicted in *The Harder They Come*.

But, as has happened before in history when an oppressed people mount the stage, preparing to overthrow much that has been held sacred, the pull to at least make peace with your god sometimes becomes irresistible. Rastafarianism considers itself a religion of liberation, doing battle against both real and "spiritual" chains, but relying on much of the mysticism and non-scientific explanations that bind one's origin and to some degree one's destiny to a Creator and his emissaries on the planet earth. In this case, the Christian enforcer of imperialism was replaced by a god and tradition from Africa, complete with a neo-colonial lackey, Haile Selassie.<sup>2</sup> Rastas also held closely to the Bible which was often the only book Jamaicans owned and read, and many of its precepts have gone unquestioned, becoming mingled with African traditions "from ancience" in an attempt to explain and resist the assaults of this modern world. Coupled with this is the tendency to incorporate and extol the widespread smoking of ganja into Rastafarianism (whose mysticism finds a variety of interpretations

within the reggae scene).

Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, has compared the Rastafarian movement to that of the Jewish people at the time "Revelations" was written (around 60 A.D.). This New Testament book, often quoted by Rastas, predicted the destruction of the Roman Empire and "reflected the position of the Jewish people...in that period...a people sorely oppressed by but in many ways marginal to the Empire." He adds that the Rastafarian movement today "to a significant degree finds its basis among sections of society that have been reduced to a largely marginal existence by the workings of imperialism—particularly peasants driven off the land in Jamaica into the cities, or even into other countries such as imperial Britain or the United States, finding themselves in a declassed or semi-declassed situation. That, however, is not the whole picture, because for one thing in a period like the immediate one, where in most countries and on a world scale the forces of the proletarian revolution are still weak and still recovering from recent and devastating defeats (above all the loss of socialist China), more than a few oppressed proletarians will be drawn toward movements like the Rastafarians." (From "Provolutions," *Revolutionary Worker*, October 28, 1983)

The "semi-declassed," or semi-proletarian sector is quite vast in Jamaica because, as in many oppressed countries, the development of the proletariat has been severely stunted by imperialism, confined largely to miners and workers in the tourist industry or government—many of whom are *relatively* well off. Both of the national bourgeois political parties were strong in the miners' unions, for instance, while the more radical Rastafarian movement grew up among these landless peasants forced to hustle in the city—very tough people with nothing to lose, not even a plot of yams, but (partly because of their conditions of life) still fettered with superstitions and practices of an earlier time. This has meant that while most have some understand-

ding that it is the tentacles of imperialism which are choking off their lives, many have come to the conclusion that bringing down this monster can only be done with the help of a force *outside* this world.

This contradictory position has led on the one hand to the creation of songs like the following which mockingly puncture Christian illusions that affect the outlook and struggle of the oppressed:

“Well they tell me of a pie up in the sky  
 Waiting for me when I die.  
 But between the day you’re born  
 and when you die  
 They never seem to hear you  
 when you cry.  
 So as sure as the sun will shine  
 I’m gonna get my share now,  
 what’s mine  
 And then the harder they come  
 The harder they fall,  
 one and all.  
 Cos I’d rather be a free man  
 In my grave  
 Than living as a puppet  
 or a slave.”

— Jimmy Cliff

Yet, the pull of feudalism weighs heavily, and nowhere more brutally than in the “sacred” sphere of relations between men and women. The Rastafarians generally uphold peasant customs regarding the woman as childbearer and obedient mate. In Kingston, less than one quarter of the mothers are legally married, but pressures are so intense in the ghetto that a whole vocabulary has sprung up to describe the most common familial relations: “baby-mother” or “baby-father” referring to the parent. And conversation is littered with expressions like “He bred her,” “He control her,” “He rule her” to describe “normal” love relations.

Among Rastafarians these practices are only modified with attempts to sequester the woman further, “honouring” her as a “queen” while maintaining hegemony in the household. The enraging twist here is that this reaction to the degradation of urban capitalist society ends up being yet another excuse to tighten the chains on women, this



Bob Marley

time in the name of "African tradition." And even some of the best reggae groups put these byzantine sentiments embarrassingly to music:

"She's my queen/  
I'm her King man  
...I a warrior  
with my comforter  
Behold how good  
and pleasant it is  
She'll stand by me  
Birds of a feather  
We worship Jah together...  
Sitting on a throne of gold."  
"Throne of Gold"—Steel Pulse

The kicker comes when the "ministers of the western shitstems" as Peter Tosh describes them, are said to "design it that the woman see herself as the dominant figure" when it's the *Rastaman* that is the rightful "king of the jungle." Ironically, these Old Testament dictums circulating among the oppressed only serve to keep those rulers in power, and once again go to prove Marx's comment: "Everything that exists has this much worth, that it will perish."

### Politics and Religion

"Fighting spiritual wickedness  
In this concrete wilderness...  
It's not my intention to be a warrior  
But constant aggravation make I  
man rude.  
That's why I'm a warrior,  
Reggae warrior...Rasta warrior"  
"Reggae Warrior"—Pablo Moses

By many estimates, over a million people, almost half the population of Jamaica, attended the funeral of Bob Marley in 1981. On his deathbed, Marley was given the Order of Merit (Jamaican version of knighthood), and Prime Minister Seaga presided over the funeral of this man who five years earlier his own Jamaican Labour Party had, it is widely believed, tried to murder.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that great contradictions are in store for a ruling class when an artist rises to world renown status and remains at the same time a sworn enemy (or even serious critic) of their rule. They have on their hands what they would like to claim as a national treasure, and so they

cannot indiscriminately or blatantly snuff them out without suffering great political damage. Yet the strength of the art makes the protest of the artist all the more compelling to the masses.

This situation is full of contradictions for the oppressed as well, particularly in these times when throughout the world revolutionary leadership is lagging behind what is needed, and people have come to look towards the most radical public figures around for some direction. These have often been artists, in part, ironically, because the bourgeoisie is forced at times to watch its step with them. But the problem here lies in the fact that artists are simply not equipped to lead the revolutionary movement, at least not *as artists*. The demand that they do so only undermines the process by which actual revolutionary leadership is developed, and simultaneously tends to drag down their art to the level of tedious pedagogy: people need real propaganda and agitation on the political problems of the world, and instead get an article set to music.

While all art is political because all artists, like everyone else, have a political worldview, and will by necessity bring this to their creations, art fulfills a different human requirement than political education. Confusion on this question has reigned for decades, partly due to revisionist dictates that the artist function as educator and leader. Marley understood this contradiction a bit better: "These songs, people understand them, or they cyann (can't) understand them, but ya have fe sing them just the same. Ya really have fe sing them. What the people want is the *beauties*, mon."

Reggae won its place in the hearts and minds of people on the strength of the "beauties," but in the volatile Jamaican political scene of the 1970s where the masses were courted by demagogic "socialists" and the more open U.S. lackeys, both of whom ultimately maintained neo-colonial rule through naked force, people increasingly looked to reggae artists as their political representatives.

This situation was further complicated by the fact that a great many

reggae musicians, as Rastafarians, are also widely looked to as *spiritual* leaders, and their music as spreading the message of "Jah" to people cast out of their African homeland.

"Cause the wicked carried us away  
in captivity  
Require from us a song,  
But how can we sing  
King Alfa's song\*  
In a strange land?"  
"Rivers of Babylon"—The Melodians

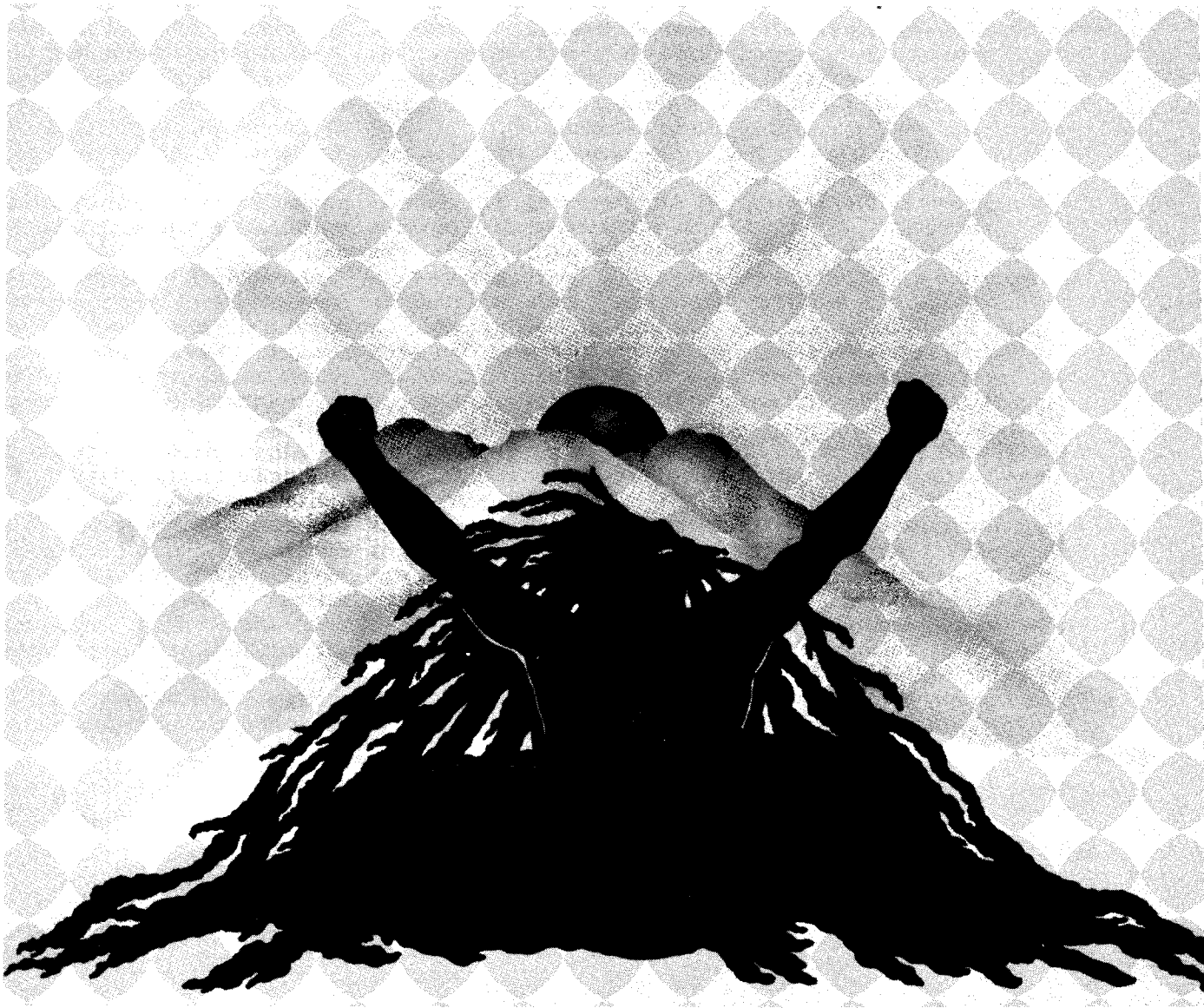
(\*King Alfa led an army against Nebechadnezzar, the ruler of Babylon.)

As Peter Tosh often puts it: "The singers and players of instruments are the only true prophets in this time." This confluence of contradictions raises the ante on these musicians, making their art and lives the subject of intense scrutiny among the Jamaican masses who demand much from individuals they consider political and spiritual guides. But the contradiction cuts both ways. Under pressure to "lead a movement," or at least be "more" than an artist, many of these musicians have nonetheless created soaring works of art.

How can this be? Marley was once asked if "Dem Belly Full" was a tract on starvation and wealth. He answered, no, not exactly. "...Food might be in your belly but there's more to life than just filling it." The very strivings of many reggae musicians for something higher than more food in the belly, even if those aspirations take religious form, have propelled the best of reggae into a realm beyond the pedestrian "protest music" which typically complains and "educates"...and never takes you higher.

This spiritual outlook also tends to veer away from some of the narrowness of the Pan Africanist vision among many Rastafarians. Although this philosophy has chiefly been one of *black* redemption, taking as its legacy the Garvey back-to-Africa movement in the 1920s as well as the African liberation struggles of the 1960s, this sentiment of reggae band Big Youth is widespread: "It's a peoples' music.





I just deal with no one people. I deal with people throughout the earth.” With this philosophy, Jamaican nationalism carries even less weight: “We like Jamaica, but Jamaica is spoiled as far the Rastaman is concerned...when we check out the system here we see death. And Rastaman seh, life.” (Bob Marley)

But if the sights of many reggae musicians go beyond the “fussing and fighting” of Jamaican bourgeois politicking, they still figure large in the class struggle there exactly because they command battalions among the masses on the basis of their political and spiritual authority. This has made life as a

reggae artist extremely hazardous. While it often appears that they can “chant down Babylon” with impunity (especially if they can be harnessed to someone’s political campaign as, for example in 1972 when Manley used the song “Better Mus Come” by artist Delroy Wilson), further down the road they could be found rotting in General Penitentiary or dead in a ditch. The international music press does not usually find it “newsworthy,” but many, many reggae artists have been beaten nearly to death by the cops, spent time in jail or had their records banned from the radio as subversive. Within the last few years at

least a dozen have died under suspicious if not murderous circumstances. And despite rhetoric to the contrary, Manley’s “socialist” regime from 1972 to 1980 provided no safe haven. Bob Marley in 1978: “These things are heavier than anyone can understand. People that are not involved don’t know it...” and “A man look at me and say, ‘Bob, you need protection.’ Can you tell me what that means...I am walking on the streets and a big politician going to call me and tell me say I need protection. Now *they* run the country and they call me and tell me and say, ‘Bob, you need protection.’”



### "We're Bubbling Up on the Top 100, Just Like a Mighty Dread"

There is something to be learned from the course which reggae took within the U.S. market. On the face of it, the promotion of someone like Marley or Peter Tosh might be the last thing one would expect from the corporate tycoons in 1976. This was, after all, the "height" of the lull, politically speaking, in the U.S. No mass movement was propelling such characters onto the stage as had been true in the late 1960s.

Yet this was exactly when major promotion of reggae acts first occurred in the U.S. Island Records, who had first signed Bob Marley (and the Wailers) back in 1972, began in 1976 to throw the tens of thousands of dollars into the backing of *Rastaman Vibration* which was needed to get it played and to push reggae off the ground. It was also around this time that the U.S. media giant, Columbia Broadcast Systems (CBS) did its first significant promotion of reggae with Peter Tosh's *Equal Rights*. And Virgin Records, a recent split-off from the Island label based in Great

Britain, went down to Jamaica in 1976 with fists full of money and signed a number of acts to try to get the edge over Island which always had the lion's share of the reggae market internationally.<sup>4</sup>

Virgin meanwhile hooked up huge direct sales of certain reggae records to Africa—sending, for example, hundreds of thousands of copies of a U-Roy album to Nigeria. This strengthened their capital base tremendously (which, according to most accounts, had originated with South African money). But when several West African countries closed their borders to record imports in 1978 to stem the flow of currency, Virgin abruptly phased out reggae, using the profits amassed from this "fad" to move into mainstream rock. (Ironically, the reggae-influenced group, Culture Club, is their latest gold mine.) Bootleg reggae albums continued to sell in massive numbers throughout Africa.

Royalties due to artists from that period of killer contracts have been systematically denied, and in the late 1970s it was not uncommon to see

Virgin's New York offices besieged by furious dreadlocked musicians demanding what was due them. The Mighty Diamonds, for example, whose 1976 *Right Time* album sold in the hundreds of thousands throughout the world, were told by Virgin that their royalties had all gone to "expenses" and instead have recently been sent a *bill* by the company!

Meanwhile, the American press was hailing reggae as the next big sound, and after years of being confined to a kind of cult following (mainly on college radio, in the West Indian communities, and wherever the film *The Harder They Come* played), reggae broke through to land on big radio playlists.

Explanations for this surprising turn of events are complex. It is often noted that the pop music scene internationally at that moment was dead in the water, dominated by tired stadium rock acts—and anyone with ears had them to the ground for something new, including the music industry. Simultaneously, developments in Jamaica had given rise to



Bob Marley's record factory

the unusual appearance of more than one first-rate musician. Reggae had started attracting the attention of artists like the Black American Stevie Wonder who celebrated and borrowed from Marley, and others like British rock singer Eric Clapton who had their own style of "borrowing," taking Marley's songs and cashing in on hygienic versions. (Amazingly, Clapton's version of the song by Bob Marley, "I Shot the Sheriff," received much heavier radio play than Marley's original, even in *Jamaica*—one of the many tactics used there to keep Marley's influence in check.) Quite significantly, the punk movement which blasted out of England beginning in 1976 made common cause with the spirit of reggae, eventually even creating a music which was a wild kind of hybrid of the two—the "ska" sound of the mixed Jamaican and white "2-tone" bands like Selector and English Beat.

Of course, the U.S. bourgeoisie as a whole could hardly have been happy with the dominant reggae artists of the mid-1970s, "chanting down Babylon" to such an infectious beat. But it seems they may have been temporarily prevented from clamping down<sup>5</sup> on the music in the interests of maintaining illusions of American pluralism in the arts, with the U.S. playing host to world cultures and democratic aspirations. They were, however, assisted in holding reggae in check in a less obvious way by a junior set of cops in the U.S. cultural scene—namely Black radio, which was largely owned and operated by powerful members of the Black bourgeoisie in the U.S.

### Black Radio Blockade

A peculiar situation arose as "white" multi-national corporations like Island Records and CBS, which had a product and a potential market, came head to head with Black bourgeois forces who had no intention of seeing their market invaded by unruly foreigners singing about "blackman's redemption" and "It takes a revolution to make a solution..." At the time it was popularly believed that Island was simply racist and ignorant about marketing anything but white rock. Racist they

were, undoubtedly, in the true corporate tradition, but rarely has that overridden the compulsion to pull a profit—at least not for long. Profitability was certainly the reason they produced such incendiary music in the first place, and why they actually did make significant, though largely unsuccessful, efforts to break into the U.S. Black youth audience which buys vast numbers of records and often sets trends that cross over to the even more profitable Top 40 mainstream.

People like Percy Sutton, who ran the Inner City Broadcasting Corporation controlling major Black radio in New York and other cities formed one major obstacle. Sutton's upward social climb was part of the U.S. ruling class effort to bolster the Black bourgeoisie in choking off the Black liberation movement of the late 1960s. The strata he became part of was marked by a profoundly conservative and provincial all-American outlook, who saw Pan-Africanism, for example, as a means to exploit African goods and markets (a principal source of Sutton's personal fortune). Their greater political interests lay in directing the attention of the Black masses in the U.S. to the most narrow of individual concerns, all in the name of "taking care of business *for real*, forget the violent pipe-dreams of the '60s." They were naturally in a relatively better position to deliver this message than the bourgeoisie as a whole, who were happy to see them take on the job.

This brand of Black nationalism was not compatible with much of Kingston reggae, to say the least, and the Black playlists, discos and media were not opened to this music, which was labelled "white," "unintelligible," "undanceable," "jungle music." It got so bad that, of all the major national U.S. publications, including *Time* and *Newsweek*, the only magazine which never wrote a word about Bob Marley was *Ebony*—the quasi-official voice of the Black bourgeoisie. (This, even after interviewing Marley extensively in their offices.)

The blockade was penetrated slightly in the late 1970s when Marley and others were climbing up the pop music charts, and the record

companies were pumping massive promotional money to the stations. The pressure from below also began to mount, as some determined popularisers helped to make the power of this music felt through concert promotions, smaller radio airplay, and almost hand-to-hand record distribution. The artists, too, tried to connect with Black audiences, playing, for example, Harlem's Apollo Theatre, one of the main venues for Black music in New York City, when they could have easily filled an arena downtown instead.

However, the Black bourgeoisie's opposition to reggae cannot be said to be the main reason for its failure to "cross over," or take root among a Black audience in the U.S.. For one thing, most everyone in the U.S., Black or white, had grown up listening to popular music not characterised by the underlying rhythmic "beat" found in reggae and similar sounds. Then too, the atmosphere of upward social mobility that was promoted off the widespread confusion and disillusionment over the results of the movements of the 1960s affected how some Blacks received the rebel spirit of the music. Added to this was the historic antagonism and competition among West Indians and Blacks in the U.S., based on earlier years of migration by more upper class West Indians who often filled "Black" positions in universities, opened small shops, etc.

### Rat Race

*"Dem a go tired see me face  
Can't get me outa the race."*

—Bob Marley

Reggae's chance at the U.S. mainstream was also relatively short-lived. The big promotional money which had been supporting Marley (and was *de rigueur* for any major rock act) was cut off by Island around 1978. (After this, Marley put his own money into U.S. promotion, especially trying to batter down the doors to Black radio.) Other reggae groups with Island got an even worse deal. All the reasons for this are cloudy, and Island executives are not talking, but strictly on the business level, they may have been wary of

overextending themselves in this music whose U.S. market was seriously (if artificially) circumscribed. And the musicians themselves were not easily "manageable" commodities. Marley, for instance, had refused to continue the U.S. leg of his *Exodus* tour in the summer of 1977 after his toe had been diagnosed as cancerous and he was having trouble even walking on it. Island had urged him to have it cut off so he could continue to do the promotional tour. Marley is also one of the few people on the planet to have turned down an interview with U.S. television "superstar" Barbara Walters.

By 1978, Virgin Records had virtually finished producing reggae, and the other major companies did not sign many new acts after that, even though great music was still coming out of Kingston and Great Britain, and the audience overall was growing. New small companies like *Schanachie* and *Alligator* stepped into the gap, as well as the more established independent labels in Britain, but their distribution couldn't begin to reach the potential audience.

Simultaneously in Britain, reggae hits had mysteriously stopped making it up the pop charts even though they were selling like crazy in the stores. This was particularly suspicious in a country where reggae had been widely popular for over a decade among proletarian youth of all nationalities who listened to it on neighborhood jukeboxes. This rather blatant purging (which would eventually hurt reggae sales significantly) came right on the heels of the 1981 riots in Brixton and other cities in England that were marked by the serious collaboration between the white punks and West Indians.

In 1980, any breaks that might have existed from the vantage point of the U.S. bourgeoisie for the music to be promoted were closed up. All seductive overtures to Manley had been called to a halt when they couldn't wean him of the Soviet bloc sufficiently to swallow a very bitter IMF austerity deal. Classic CIA destabilisation tactics were used to put him out of office, while 600 youths were murdered in the streets by the rival Manley/Seaga parties. When Reagan became U.S. president in

January 1981, his first foreign visiting head of state was Edward Seaga. Jamaica was from then on to become the "showcase of democracy" in the Caribbean, with U.S. gunships to back it up. It was now "safe" to "come back to Jamaica," the TV ads crooned to the tourists. And it was time to show the unruly elements in this backyard of the U.S. just who was running the show.

In the spring of 1981, Bob Marley died of cancer.

The truth behind his death has never been satisfactorily revealed, but it is beyond doubt that having him out of the way was advantageous to all bourgeois interests concerned, including both Jamaican parties. Eight years of Manley had not made the route of pallid reforms, backed by a "heavy manners" police state under Cuban or Soviet auspices, any more attractive to many politically awakened people—including Rastafarians and Marley. And no amount of sugar-coated bullets or outright intimidation had been able to soften him up—his music at the end was as strong as ever. In fact, it is significant that most of the major musicians remained "warriors against Babylon"; reggae had yet to produce a renegade on the order of Bob Dylan, the U.S. singer of the 1960s who deserted the revolutionary camp.

In some ways, the shock of Marley's death put reggae on people's minds internationally more than ever. Sales went up temporarily, but even after that very few record contracts with new artists were signed. Increasingly, Island has sat back and gotten fat on posthumous Marley releases. And currently, their only other reggae projects are re-releases, compilations and live albums of established artists like Gregory Isaacs and Steel Pulse. One of their top executives recently revealed, "We're not putting any more money into promoting reggae—the music sells itself." (A quote which *Musician* magazine edited out of its interview with him, for "space reasons," the author was told.) They've fired the people who were capable of finding, developing and marketing new acts, and apparently their current strategy is to put out old reggae very

cheaply, turn a profit without doing anything for the music—and move on to the next big sound. So reggae, which had always been Island's financial bulwark used to support the much more expensive rock acts, continues to be milked for that purpose.

In Kingston, though reggae still has a shockingly difficult time (and increasingly so) getting on radio playlists jammed with American and British pop, it is no longer on the fringe of things. It has become big business, a regular "national product" on the order of bauxite, tourism and ganja—and has attracted numerous uninspired producers and con-men chasing fortunes. Not that rip-offs are anything new in Kingston reggae business, nor that the outlaw artists who originally put reggae on the map are out of the race. But as competing paths develop in the music and as the audience broadens out, the powers-that-be have been compelled to increase their influence within this scene as well.

Other developments have also worked to temporarily dampen the situation. In Kingston, live concerts have always been a rarity because it was too expensive and there were no proper facilities. The music met its audience in the sound system dances, and in recent years the "DJ style" (artists toasting—rapping—and singing over recorded tracks) has come to be a very popular form itself. The events of the day, the motions in the dance, the comical strivings among the masses to ape foreign ways...are all talked about over a version of a traditional reggae rhythm track. Those artists who can do this with style have become the new stars with the dance hall crowd, and Jamaican producers, who are often dreads operating on a shoe string, have happily turned to the inexpensive productions involved in this kind of music.

This dance hall style rises directly from the masses in Kingston, and DJs and singers make it or break it by way of the live (and at times brutal) response from the audience. This music is also rather hard-going for most non-Jamaicans since it generally relies on rapid-fire patois for its punch. It has gone almost unmarked in the U.S. with some exceptions

like Yellowman and Eek-a-Mouse who, a couple of years ago, took to competing for lewd lyrics (called "slackness" by Jamaicans) and got plenty of airplay from Kingston to New York.

Some observers look to the work of the "dub poets" as the inheritors of the "Marley tradition," but these radical poets who set their words to music have rarely risen to the artistry of the reggae masters, largely because they tend to take on the "mission" of spiritual and political leaders in the most literal fashion, giving lessons not art. And unfortunately, some of their fans and critics actually demand this of them. Said one of Mutabaruka: "One danger I see is that he is...considered an entertainer. He is not, he is a revolutionary." Since when are these mutually exclusive?

One insidious imperialist contribution to the entire scene has been what can only be described as the systematic introduction of hard drugs into Jamaica. In recent years, heroine and cocaine have appeared on the streets of Kingston, not unlike the situation in the wake of the Black people's rebellions in Harlem and Watts in the U.S. in the 1960s. This had taken its toll on reggae; certain "hangers-on" in the business are

known to have hooked more than one musician on cocaine and other hard drugs. The results are all too evident in the music, as well as the violent incidents that accompany all big-money drug dealings.

### The Root Is There

"You can cut down the tree,  
But you'll never,  
You'll never succeed,  
Cause—The root is there.  
And you cannot get rid of  
All of I and I now..."  
"The Root is There"—Mighty  
Diamonds

While the reggae runnings have been rough in the last few years, closing the book on this music is manifestly absurd. In 1898 G. Plekhanov, when he was still a Marxist, commented:

"A given trend in art may remain without any remarkable expression if an unfavourable combination of circumstances carries away, one after another, several talented people who might have given it expression. But the premature death of such talented people can prevent the artistic expression of this trend only if it is too shallow to produce new

talent. However, the depth of any given trend in literature and art is determined by its importance for the class or stratum whose tastes it expresses, and by the social role played by that class or stratum; here too, in the last analysis, everything depends upon the course of social development and on the relation of social forces."

"The Role of the Individual  
in History"

Certainly the last has not been heard from the "sufferahs" in Jamaica whose tastes this music continues to express. Nor from the rebels from Japan to Poland who have taken this music as their own. It is a sure bet that Marley and the rest of the reggae greats, the "creation rockers," will find their way into the hearts and cassette players of the Ivans of the world, right on through to when the "right time" really does come... "If a egg, natty inna de red.\*" □

\* "Natty Dread" by Bob Marley, from a folk proverb meaning: If it is an egg, natty is in the yolk, at the centre of the storm. Eggs in Jamaica are fertilised—and red.

1. The amazing sounds created by Jamaica's intrepid "dub" engineers have also raised world standards for studio production...this, in a city where the water or power might be cut off any time of the day or night.

2. Selassie, a spiritual figure for the Rastas had a certain historical appeal because in addition to being the first Black head of state in the twentieth century, he resisted Mussolini's invasion, making Ethiopia one of the last African countries to succumb to imperialism. He was also originally promoted by Marcus Garvey's early Pan Africanist movement, which formed part of the roots of Rastafarianism. After the African colonies were yanked away from Italy at the end of World War 2, however, this "Lion of Judah" ruled his Black "subjects" for the greater U.S. imperialist empire with a brutal and bloody hand. Before his death, Garvey, too denounced him as a Black slavemaster.

3. Biographies of Marley make a variety of speculations as to who conducted the shoot-out at the Marley compound in 1976, and why. But all evidence from inside sources indicates that JLP thugs actually carried out the dirty work in retaliation for Bob's planned

participation in what was considered a pro-Manley concert. They may well have had the tacit approval of Manley forces who would also ultimately benefit from getting this irrepressible rebel out of the way (the gunmen were never apprehended by Manley's police for instance). And the U.S. bourgeoisie also appears to have had its fangs in this, one indication being the fact that Carl Colby, son of CIA director William Colby, showed up as a "cameraman" at the retreat Bob was secreted to by the Manley government after the shooting.

4. Virgin's reggae ventures present in microcosm the international financial and political thicket which reggae artists were required to penetrate in order to be heard beyond the rather small market of Kingston. After signing many groups at bargain basement rates, Virgin proceeded to promote only a handful, hoping to find a hitmaker like Marley or Cliff, and shelved most of the others. This strategy brought the company quick profits on the big acts and starved out some of the best groups to keep the competition from making money on them, and to keep a stranglehold on the development of the scene. According to some

observers, this rather anarchic flood of foreign capital, doled out by people with little understanding or genuine interest in the music, also resulted in Jamaican producers withholding some of the best music from their studios just to keep it out of the hands of these grubbing soul brokers. ("They want shit, give them shit.")

5. This is not to imply that reggae artists were not subject to inordinate harassment, having their concerts mysteriously sabotaged, or while just walking the streets of Brooklyn and the Bronx in New York City. Peter Tosh was once arrested in Miami customs for impersonating Peter Tosh! Nor does it counter-indicate CIA participation in such harassment in Jamaica itself. Bob Marley appears to have been under constant CIA surveillance for years...just minutes before he was to play a major concert at Madison Square Garden in NYC, an invading army of undercover agents cleared his dressing room of his entire entourage and interrogated him alone on some murder supposedly committed by dreadlocked masked men the night before. □