BLACK CULTURE, WHITE YOUTH

The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK

Simon Jones

Communications and Culture

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PAUL WALTON

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Black Culture, White Youth

The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK

Simon Jones

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Contents

Acknowledgements vii

Introduction xi

PART I HISTORY

1 400 Years **3**
- 1.1 Roots and culture 3
- 1.2 From revival to Rastafari 12
- 1.3 'These sounds lead the way': ska and the birth of the reggae tradition 18
- 1.4 Word, sound and power 23

2 UK Version **33**
- 2.1 'Down here in Babylon' 33
- 2.2 'Step forward, youth' 40
- 2.3 'UK bubbling': British reggae comes of age 50

3 Reggae Gone Clear **57**
- 3.1 From bluebeat to Trojan 57
- 3.2 Roots *Natty Dread* 62
- 3.3 'Oh, what a rat race!' 68
- 3.4 Reggae and the mass media 74

4 White Youth, Black Echoes (1962–82) **87**
- 4.1 Club reggae 87
- 4.2 The Punky Reggae Party 94
- 4.3 Young, powerless and white 100
- 4.4 Two-tone over England 104

PART II ETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction **121**

5 Black and White Youth: The Birmingham Context **126**
5.1 Urban encounters: inner city and outer ring 126
5.2 Club mix 133

6 Black Culture: White Youth **142**
6.1 Style and patter 142
6.2 'Sweet reggae music playing' 152
6.3 'Jah no partial' 166

7 Living a Contradiction **177**
7.1 The limits of white appropriation 177
7.2 'Race traitors' 196

8 'Level Vibes': Shared Experience and the Politics of Race **203**
8.1 Living in the dole age 203
8.2 'Stop this fussing and fighting' 216

PART III CONCLUSION

9 Looking for a New 'England' **231**

Bibliography 241
Index 248

Acknowledgements

Music has long empowered me with a belief in change and better things. It may sound clichéd, but I still feel it to be one of the most potent cultural forces for the creation of new senses of identity, and new kinds of affiliation. In confessing to such beliefs, the first acknowledgement I ought to make is that this book has been forged out of a highly personal engagement with its subject-matter. If I were to pick one reason, out of the many, which caused it to be written, it would have to be my own love of music, and Jamaican music especially. For it was largely as a result of that affection that I was drawn into many of the social situations and networks on which the core of this project came to be based. The personal friendships and commitments which came out of that involvement partly explain why the second half of this study, and in a deeper sense the book as a whole, has a heavily autobiographical flavour to it. Chapters 1 and 2 draw, unashamedly, on my own musical interests and enthusiasms, while Chapter 4 has been written as much from memory and personal experience as from concrete historical sources. As a result, I admit from the start to being deeply implicated, and can make no claims to objectivity or to being an impartial, outside observer.

This book also has a number of more traditional, academic origins. It is the product of postgraduate research undertaken at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham University, and emerges, most immediately, out of my involvement in the Race and Politics Group there. The book also continues in an established tradition of work on youth cultures at CCCS and follows a path trodden by previous ethnographers at the Centre into the surrounding communities

of the West Midlands. As such, it is part of a continued commitment to connect intellectual work in the area of cultural studies to people's everyday lives and experiences beyond the ivory towers of academic research.

While in the best traditions of CCCS ethnography, and through the need to maintain my 'organic' integrity, I have tended to be conspicuous by my absence, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Richard Johnson for his enthusiasm for the initial project and his invaluable advice during its production. Thanks also to the various 'academic' friends and colleagues who offered their constructive comments and encouraging words, especially John Solomos, Dick Hebdige and Paul Gilroy.

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SIMON JONES

'What sort of country will Britain be when its capital, other cities and areas of England consist of a population of which at least one-third is of African and Asian descent? My answer . . . is that it will be a Britain unimaginably wracked by dissension and violent disorder, not recognisable as the same nation as it has been, or perhaps as a nation at all.'

(J. Enoch Powell, Birkenhead, 1985)

'It's like we've all turned out the same in Balsall Heath. There's no racial fuckries round this way! It's like . . . I know there's no such thing as England any more . . . Welcome to India brothers! This is the Caribbean! Nigeria! . . . There is no "England" man! . . . When will they wake up? This is the new world man, this is what is coming!'

(Jo-Jo, Balsall Heath, Birmingham, 1983)

Introduction

Northfield, Birmingham – October 1986

The time is roughly 2 a.m., during the indefinable zone between Saturday night and Sunday morning. The Birmingham suburb of Northfield has shut down, its pubs closed many hours ago, and most of its inhabitants long since retired to their beds – most, but not all. For in a dilapidated block of flats behind the giant Longbridge car plant, something is going on. Life is stirring and people moving to a particular kind of rhythm, with a different sense of time to that embodied by the adjacent monolith to British 'motoring'. Tonight, Scientist Hi-Powa, champion sound system of south Birmingham, are playing a 'musical meltdown', as it says on the ticket, to which 'all posses are welcome'.

Approaching the flats on foot, the faint reverberations of a bass line can be felt several blocks away, carrying through the buildings and along the pavement. As we enter through a broken-down doorway, the DJ's voice becomes audible above the now rumbling bass patterns. Moving swiftly up the stairs, we knock on the door, greet the gateman and enter . . .

The session is 'ram' tonight, the atmosphere hot. Squeezing past the tightly packed bodies, the crowd seems especially young. All posses are indeed present, for the balance between black and white, and male and female, is strikingly even. The blues' young patrons intermingle freely with one another, dancing and talking, joking and smoking. Demon, the MC, sends out big 'requests' and 'special dedications' from the mike to all sections of the crowd, drawing them in, promoting 'strictly niceness', fostering a sense of togetherness. 'Played-by-

the-champion-sound-in-the-whole-wide-world' he exclaims in one rapid breath, introducing a new selection; 'Musical-ting-like-the-"Rambo"-by-the-cat-called-Super-Black'. The needle drops. On hearing the familiar intro, two white girls standing by the speakers in smart evening dress, handbags over shoulders and cigarettes in hand, begin to sway to the rhythm . . . 'Haul and pull it mi selector'; As the needle is brought down on the dub, the excitement moves up a notch. Shorty takes up the mike and begins to chat. After a few standard opening salvoes and bombastic claims to be the 'hardest whiteman inna England', he moves into his own improvised lyrics – the crowd erupts. Whistles and hooters blow all around; 'Listen-Daddy-Scientist-a-go-gi-dem-betta, 'cos-a-we-rule-the-country-area.' As the record comes to an end Shorty winds up his rap, relinquishing the mike with a parting 'Level vibes! seen?'

And 'level vibes' it is, at least for a while, in this small pocket of interfusion deep within the heartland of white working-class Birmingham. The blues continues into the night with the sound system pumping out a lethal selection of soul and reggae right through till dawn. As Saturday night merges into Sunday morning and the drab surroundings of the south Birmingham suburbs become faintly visible through the window, an inkling of a contradiction begins to take shape . . . For here, tonight, something has indeed been going on.

Balsall Heath, Birmingham – December 1986

It's nearing Christmas, and the local community centre are holding a disco for both their junior and senior youth clubs. On my way to the centre, walking past the low-lying, inner-city council houses that have replaced the terraced rows of 'old' Balsall Heath, I hear reggae music echoing from a side-street up ahead. As I approach, the music grows louder and becomes identifiable as Smiley Culture's 'Police officer'. And then, as if to confound my expectations deliberately, around the corner come jaunting two Asian boys, one carrying a ghettoblaster, accompanied by a white girl who can distinctly

be heard DJ-ing along with the music . . . In Balsall Heath, it seems, things are not quite as black and white as they appear.

Outside the club, a group of boys, white, mixed Afro-Caribbean and Asian, are milling around decked out in the ubiquitous styles of youth in the mid-1980s: ski jumpers, baggy trousers, buttoned-up shirts and moccasins. Flat tops mingle with curly perms, baseball caps with berets. Inside, a sound system run by two older Rastas provides the musical backdrop to the evening's proceedings. The younger ones from the junior club dance energetically in the middle of the floor, while a group of three Asian boys stand on the perimeter, coolly surveying the scene. As the posse from outside bursts into the club, the place comes alive with a youthful exuberance.

Shortly, another boy enters with a selection of 12" records under his arm. The posse descend on him, relieve him of the records and begin scrutinising the titles one by one with endorsements and nods of approval. A white boy with a curly perm hair-style, sporting baggy check trousers and knitted sweater deftly snatches a pair of white-rimmed polaroids off the face of his black friend, perches them provocatively on the end of his nose and begins to move, automaton-style, to the music. As his friend attempts to recover them a friendly wrestling match ensues. There is much horseplay in the club tonight, plenty of energy, tomfoolery and high-spiritedness; but no fights, and no 'racial fuckries' . . .

* * *

Balsall Heath, Jo-Jo tells me, is something of a special place; 'Its like ebony and ivory', he eulogises, 'you know . . . perfect harmony.' Jo-Jo is very much a product of the area, a 'black boy/white boy' as he describes himself, raised within the interlocking social networks and shared living spaces that have evolved between its black and white communities over the course of three decades. The fruits of those networks are today most evident amongst a whole generation of young black and white people who have grown up alongside one another and shared the same streets, classrooms and youth

clubs. They are visible everywhere in a whole range of cross-racial affiliations and shared leisure spaces; on the streets, around the games machine in the local chip shop, in the playgrounds and parks, the dances and blues, right through to the mixed rock and reggae groups for which the area has become so renowned.

As a result of this unique rapport and proximity, nothing is, indeed, quite as black and white as it first appears in Balsall Heath. For some young whites like Jo-Jo the exact point at which one ends and the other begins has become somewhat blurred. 'I don't look at it like borders, man' he tells me. Sitting here, talking to Jo-Jo, trying to pin down the slippery and elusive contours of 'race' and 'ethnicity', I attempt clumsily to box him into a corner by reminding of his whiteness – but he isn't having any of it:

> Yeah, but just because I'm white, I don't go around saying 'I'm a *white* man', or any crap like that, you know . . . Man is man, you know, what's the big f***ing difference? I mean, its like, I never met many English people, you know what I mean? . . . Cos when I used to sit down with my mates when I was younger, you know, my mates used to turn round and say like 'Oh my daddy comes from Trenchtown!' and all this kind of stuff you know, sort of, Montego Bay! Spanish Town! all them kinda places man, that's all I ever used to hear about . . . And you'd think to yourself, well where's Portsmouth? [laughs] . . . You know what I mean? When one of the teachers mentioned Portsmouth like, you thought you was off to Jamaica, man!

Sitting here with Jo-Jo, still pursuing our discourse on the state of the nation, I ask him what he feels about England. He seems insulted by the very concept. For Jo-Jo, the sense of national past and glory so brazenly reconstructed under Thatcherism is simply a non-starter:

> I mean like, England has never been an inspiration to me, like 'Great Britain', you know '*We* ruled the waves! Dunkirk!' I mean I didn't know about that, man. I just

read stories and comic books about it . . . and to me it was just a comic, it was just a joke, this great war they go on about. I mean its a load of crap isn't it?

* * *

How is it that sentiments like these could be expressed with such conviction by a young white person in an urban area of Britain in the 1980s? How have they originated and evolved? What kinds of histories and cultural processes do they imply and presume?

These statements, and the brief cameos of inner-city and outer-ring black and white youth sketched out above, emerge from the same urban, regional context, the city of Birmingham in the West Midlands of England. They offer a microcosmic glimpse of embryonic movements and identities not yet fully formed but already in the process of becoming in certain areas of urban Britain. They speak of a whole complex of political and cultural changes which have profoundly transformed the fabric of post-war British society, changes, in turn kindled by historical and social movements which span the course of several centuries.

This book attempts to capture and explore some of these changes by looking at merely one aspect of their recent history, the impact of Jamaican popular culture and music on the lives of young white people. It is concerned with white youth's collective and individual encounters with traditions forged in a quite different historical context, and with the resonance of one set of popular cultural forms, rooted in a non-European heritage, for another. Exactly how these encounters have come about, the forms they have assumed and their political effects and implications are just some of the questions this book will be examining.

While the impact of black culture on white youth is one of the most visible examples of how black settlement has transformed the political culture of post-war Britain, the dominant imagery and explanations of that impact, and of black–white relations in general, remain saturated in contemporary popular racism. The urgency of challenging these representations has grown with the ever more thorough

and sophisticated racialisation of British politics that has occurred in the wake of the 1980/1 and 1985 riots.

In a speech made shortly after the Handsworth disturbances of September 1985, Enoch Powell reiterated his earlier warnings and prophecies about the dire consequences resulting from the black presence in Britain (see above) (Powell, 1985). The language and themes of Powell's prognosis were taken up by a number of right-wing politicians and echoed throughout large sections of the British press. Amidst fears of Britain's inner-city areas being taken over by 'mob rule' and turned into 'no-go' zones where the only law was that of the 'jungle', a number of papers dwelt on the theme that somehow this was not 'England' anymore. Through the imagery of disorder, violence and racial conflict, the inner-city was perceived as an almost different, 'alien' country; alien not only because its inhabitants did not share the cultural values of 'ordinary' English people, but also because rioting, violence and disorder, themselves, were seen as 'alien' to the 'British way of life' and without precedent in a peaceful and law-abiding country (Solomos, 1986).

This association between race, criminality and urban violence in dominant discourses about the working-class city has a history which long predates the arrival of black settlers in post-war Britain. It can be traced back well into the nineteenth century to the depiction of the urban slums of London and Manchester as 'jungles' and metaphorical 'Africas' inhabited by subhuman 'savages' and 'animals'. Some commentators have found a continuity in this racialised pathology of urban life, in bourgeois concern about the 'delinquent' male street gang, stretching from the 'Street Arabs' and 'gangsters' of the mid-nineteenth century, through the 'un-English' 'hooligans' of the 1870s, right through to the submerged racial metaphors in dominant responses to the 'teddy boys' and 'rough' working-class youth generally in the post-war era (Pearson, 1983; Hebdige, 1982; Humphries, 1981). The fact that racial terms have consistently been fashioned against British people themselves is a clear demonstration of their flexibility and historical specificity as social constructions, and an important reminder that 'race' is a relational concept which does not have fixed referents.

In the dominant political and media responses to the riots of 1985, this use of 'race' as a metaphor for urban crisis and decay went further than ever before (Solomos, 1986). The Tottenham disturbances in particular were represented explicitly in terms of racial conflict in some sections of the popular press. Tales of whites abused and terrorised by their black neighbours, and living in perpetual fear of being mugged, raped and harassed, were corroborated in a number of papers and lent a bogus, common-sense objectivity. The salient image was one of whites put upon, 'disadvantaged' and 'under siege' in their own country; 'white people there do feel they are living in an alien and terrifying land' one journalist commented (*Daily Mail*, 9 October 1985, p. 7). These stark images of racial 'war' were combined with perceptions of violence as being a normal aspect of life in certain urban areas, areas which lacked a 'community spirit' and where neighbourliness and care were 'spat on' (*Daily Mail*, 8 October 1985, p. 3). The inner-city was defined as a site of negative interracial encounters, one where black and white people lived side by side yet estranged from one another.

This image of fundamental incompatibility between black and white people is a recurrent theme in the discourse of contemporary racism, and one which rests on notions of the 'natural' irreconcilability and antagonism between different racial groups and their respective cultures. The conception of cultural and racial difference as fixed, neo-biological properties of human nature forms one of the ideological pit-props of the 'new racism', whereby 'race' is defined by the interchangeable discourses of patriotism, xenophobia and Britishness (Barker, 1981; Lawrence, 1982a). Paul Gilroy has shown how such definitions have been elaborated at key moments in the recent 'national past', around the Falklands conflict, the Honeyford affair and selective immigration cases (Gilroy, 1987). The 1985 riots, however, marked the beginnings of a new onslaught on the ideology of multiracialism, and a concerted attempt to devalue the quality of cross-racial relationships. Peregrine Worsthorne of the *Sunday Telegraph*, for example, having already proclaimed in 1982 that most Britons identified more easily with 'those of the same stock'

in the South Atlantic than they did with their black neighbours at home, went on to question the possibility of assimilating blacks at all into mainstream 'British values'. 'Perhaps separate development may be the only sensible answer . . . mixed schooling in Bradford does not work. Nor truth to tell, do mixed housing estates work. Nothing mixed really works' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 29 September 1985, p. 18). Such notions opened the way to the naturalisation of racism as a 'legitimate' response to the 'ethnic minorities' determination to be 'permanently different' culturally, and to shun integration with the white majority (*Sunday Telegraph*, 29 September 1985, p. 18).

The view of black and white cultures as separate and mutually exclusive expressions of racial and national identity is a ubiquitous theme in dominant political discourses around race. As Gilroy argues, the capacity of contemporary racist ideologies to represent nationhood in terms which are simultaneously biological and cultural partly explains their ability to operate across the spectrum of formal political opinion (Gilroy, 1987). For such categories, far from being the exclusive property of the right, are equally to be found in the conceptions of 'race' and 'culture' employed on the left; for example in Labour's invocation of the 'national interest', and in the reliance of certain local government agencies on schismatic conceptions of racial and cultural difference to systematise their funding provision for different 'ethnic minorities'.

These self-same categories have also found an echo in mainstream, sociological and academic race research, much of which remains locked in the strait-jacket of a 'race relations' paradigm founded on the very notions of 'race', 'culture' and 'ethnicity' which popular racist ideologies take as their starting-point. That paradigm, with its compartmentalised study of the relatively fixed cultural characteristics of different ethnic and racial groups, simply mirrors the dominant representations of 'race' in the media and political arena as problems of cultural incompatibility.

This view of cultures as solid and impermeable categories, eternally divided from one another, suggests a total and quite false discontinuity between the experiences and subjectivities

of black and white people. As a political question, however, 'race' cannot be hived off as an issue of relevance solely to black people, nor can its study be reduced to the study of black culture. 'Race', as a category of analysis, can have little explanatory power unless understood as a lived social relation that is experienced by white people as much as by black, and that is culturally mediated and socially constructed in relations *between* black and white.

The interactive dimensions of black–white relations and the question of white responses to black culture, are issues that have hitherto attracted remarkably little serious academic attention or critical analysis. The implications of this neglect become particularly apparent where race analysis is applied to the discussion of white youth cultures. For so much of that discussion has focused on the more overtly hostile and reactive elements in white responses. From the despondency and disillusionment that so often surrounds the issue of race and youth culture on the left, one would think that most young white Britons have swallowed the ideology of 'race' and 'nation', hook, line and sinker. The common assumption is that the white youth of the 'Thatcher generation' are more prejudiced than their forebears. For the dominant imagery that holds sway here remains that of the shaven-head, swastika-bedecked bovver boy, an image which has become something of an archetypal portrait of English racism.

These images offer only a partial view of the whole spectrum of relations between black and white young people. The construction of blacks as culturally 'alien' and whites as monolithically 'racist' obscures other countervailing tendencies, some of which have their origins outside formal politics in popular cultural forms and traditions. For around the 'foreign body' that has invaded post-war Britain are crystallising other, new, and hitherto unacknowledged identities and experiences.

In looking at these experiences, this book attempts to move away from the restrictive terrain of 'ethnic' and 'race relations', to explore the more active, dynamic and syncretic aspects of cross-racial and cultural interactions. While not diminishing the seriousness of young people's racism, it aims to make sense of white youthful experience in a more

constructive way, by focusing on some of the more enabling dimensions of white responses and interracial contact. By doing so, it attempts to open up the question of race in a relatively new way, offering some fresh insights into the complexities with which young black and white people relate to one another in contemporary Britain.

The notion of a connection between black and white cultures is now well-established in accounts of popular culture and music in both Britain and America. Most existing discussion of this connection has focused on the American context, for it is there that many of its historical precedents are to be found. American popular music in particular has been the site of repeated and prolonged exchanges across racial categories for nearly two centuries. Various studies have located this black–white cultural continuum at the very heart of its development (Russell, 1970; Middleton, 1972; Hoare, 1975; Chambers, 1976, 1985; Bane, 1982; Gillett, 1983).

The cultural encounter between Europe and Africa can be traced back to the early half of the nineteenth century to the interaction between the religious/folk music of poor, rural whites and the African-derived spirituals and choral music of blacks (Russell, 1970). The musical offspring of these respective traditions (hillbilly/white gospel and black gospel/blues) eventually combined to form the basis of modern popular music itself (Bane, 1982). While 'secular' black music such as rag and jazz had also long been appropriated by white musicians, it was not until the post-war period that a series of fundamental technological changes in American mass communications and leisure opened the way to new kinds of cross-fertilisation between America's principal musical cultures. These changes rendered modern, urban, black forms available to a mass white audience on a scale hitherto unknown in American history, a situation made possible by the boom in black radio stations, and by the expansion in electronic media and commodities not so readily susceptible to segregation (Russell, 1982). The unique convergence of these profound structural changes with the emergence of a financially and socially more independent generation of young whites, provided the context for the

birth of 'rock 'n' roll' and marked the beginnings of a new phase of white musical appropriation of black forms.

From its very inception, the production and consumption of the 'new' music was the site of a complex of power relations linking both black and white musicians and consumers to the entertainment industry. Those relations turned on the contradictions of using forms inherently opposed to white hegemony, and forged out of the experience of racial oppression, as sources of meaning and pleasure. At the heart of them lay a fundamental tension between white youth's struggles for more responsive and articulate modes of cultural expression, and black musicians' struggles against white cultural and economic power to redefine their music. The result has been a unique cultural dialectic between white appropriation and black innovation which has supplied one of the inner motors of popular music's evolution. It is a dialectic that can be witnessed in the intermittent counter-rebellions of black musicians against the bowdlerisation of black forms, from bebop and 'new wave' jazz, through gospel and soul, to funk and hip-hop.

While the effects of these tensions are detectable along the surfaces of popular music's history, that history cannot be read merely as one of systematic white plagiarism. Since the recording industry can only respond to the independently expressed demands and needs of the young, we need to look outside the narrow logic of 'pop' to uncover some of the sources of its cultural creativity. For beneath its cycles, styles and surface ephemera, there are other questions to be answered concerning the meanings and effects of black music amongst different generations of whites in often very different contexts. It is not just that the appropriation of black forms by white musicians has often involved their real and active transformation into something else, but also that black music has consistently acted as a carrier of oppositional attitudes and sensibilities, and of new, liberating possibilities and pleasures to young whites. For, time and time again, white youth have found in black music a more realistic and resonant account of their experience than established idioms of cultural expression could offer.

White American youth in the early 1950s, for example,

registered their newly-won financial and cultural independence by identifying initially with rhythm and blues, and subsequently with rock 'n' roll (Gillett, 1983; Chambers, 1976). The cultural needs and aspirations of many young whites in the early 1950s had gone largely unfulfilled by a mainstream entertainment industry unequipped to register the changing patterns of leisure consumption in post-war American society. For American youth the rupture between the pre-war era and the post-war experience of social change was captured in the declining relevance of traditional cultural and musical models, and the signification of new models more consistent with that experience, models invariably black and urban in origin (Grossberg, 1984). Rhythm and blues and early rock 'n' roll contained the necessary loudness, excitement and spontaneity through which young whites could signify their opposition to mainstream popular music and mark their difference from the generations of the Depression (Chambers, 1976). Their vocal and instrumental expressiveness, moreover, provided a more pertinent means through which white youth could articulate their collective generational rebellion.

In Britain, black American forms have proved equally central to the development of white youth culture, and popular culture in general, in the post-war period. There is a long tradition of such forms being incorporated into Britain's popular music and dance culture, dating back to the inter-war jazz era and traceable through the dance-band explosion of the 1940s, to the 'trad' jazz and blues revival movements of the post-war era (Melly, 1970; Hoare, 1975). By the latter half of the 1950s, however, urban black music forms had begun to find a more popular audience amongst a younger generation of working-class whites. Beginning with the teds and the skiffle movement in the mid-/late 1950s, through the 'beat' and mod groups and blues-based rock bands of the 1960s, right through to the 'white soul' outfits of the mid-1970s, young white musicians turned to the whole heritage of black American music in order to revitalise rock and pop cultures (Chambers, 1985). At each stage black music's energy and directness of address, its vocal and rhythmic techniques, patterns of audience involvement and stage

drama have all been incorporated into various aspects of those cultures. Within the rock community, for example, black idioms of expression provided the means through which young white musicians could articulate the collective experience of their counter-cultural audience. Black music was valued here for its rebellious edge and its ability to express a particular kind of hedonistic 'freedom' unavailable in the dominant white culture. As dance music, moreover, black American forms have provided successive generations of young whites with a whole repertoire of styles. Through the expressiveness and vitality of their rhythms, they revolutionised popular dance culture as a whole in post-war Britain. Their impact unleashed a new phase in the popularity of public dancing, by cultivating more expressive uses of the body and a greater concern for musical immediacy and emotional spontaneity (Patterson, 1966).

In these and countless other ways, black American music has consistently supplied the raw material from which young whites have created their own distinct forms of cultural expression. In this process, the mechanisms of the mass media and the entertainment industry have provided a bridge between black and white cultures, with popular music itself acting as a conduit for various other social and political forces. In Britain, these structures have proved especially important, for it is largely through the commercial forms of popular leisure that the music, style and culture of America in general, and black America in particular, have been disseminated and made available.

Adapted and made indigenous by white working-class youth, these forms have not only provided new cultural maps in the face of the decline and break-up of older, working-class musical and cultural traditions, but have also been amongst the most potent vehicles by which bourgeois cultural hegemony has been consistently undercut in post-war British society. Various social groups have championed and 'borrowed' its oppositional meaning to signify their 'non-conformity' with the cultural mainstream.

The appropriation of black American music as an 'outside' cultural form has been a key aspect of its ability to fulfil this oppositional role. However, in another sense, its very

externality has also facilitated its consumption by whites at a relative distance from British society's own, internal, racial contradictions. For in the British context, the racial connotations of black American forms have been submerged and mediated by a relative distance between their 'black' point of origin and their 'white' context of consumption. Black forms have tended to be consumed by white British youth and public alike as specifically *American* popular music, the conditions which have shaped them being somewhat removed from white British experience.

This situation contrasts, in many important ways, with the consumption of Jamaican music, that other key black-music tradition which has influenced post-war British youth culture, and whose impact has arguably been more profound and far-reaching. For that impact has been more heavily mediated by the *presence* of a substantial section of the Afro-Caribbean working class in the heart of urban Britain, and by the relative familiarisation of its cultural and political traditions to British society. White engagement with Jamaican music has consequently been bound up with a closer relation to that presence and to these traditions, and with an accompanying encounter with the contradictions of race, that has politicised the forms and conditions of white consumption in ways that Afro-American music has not.

The relative recency of Jamaican music's impact on British popular culture has meant that its full effects and implications are only just beginning to be felt and examined. The first, and perhaps most well-known, work on this subject to date, is Dick Hebdige's study of the stylistic connections between black and white youth subcultures (Hebdige, 1974, 1979). Looking at how successive white groups grew up around the Afro-Caribbean community and appropriated a variety of its cultural forms, Hebdige found a 'phantom history of race relations' played out on the stylistic surfaces of post-war British youth subcultures, and proceeded to 'decode' their meanings by outlining some of the different white responses to black culture (Hebdige, 1979).

Many of these connections are by now familiar and well-ensconced in accounts of youth culture and popular music in

Britain. The subcultural approach in general has become something of an orthodoxy in studies of post-war British youth. However, while it explains how particular styles of black music are appropriated by identifiable and relatively cohesive social groups, subcultural analysis tends to eclipse the more popular, yet equally significant, mainstream forms of white engagement with black and black-derived forms. Since the mid-1970s, the mass marketing of Jamaican music in more radicalised forms has required us to look beyond the spectacular and more marginalised subcultures into the very heart of mainstream pop culture for its impact on white youth. The mass availability of reggae has rendered subcultural theory's counterposition of 'authentic', 'underground' forms of consumption to 'straight' or conventional forms, highly problematic. In Chapters 3 and 4, therefore, I want to go beyond the familiar litany of subcultural forms to explore the broader, more collective patterns of response and affiliation that have followed on from the mass dissemination of Jamaican music, in specific forms, and through specific channels of the mass media and entertainment industry.

In focusing on the submerged, symbolic links between black and white youth, the subcultures approach has tended to overlook the more self-conscious forms of attachment to black culture in conditions of prolonged contact between young black and white people. For the history of white youth's engagement with black culture cannot be reduced to a succession of stylistic responses. These relations have a substantive and not just 'phantom' history, one that is rooted in concrete experience and interaction.

The task of looking at the ramifications of sustained, actual social encounters between black and white young people has only just begun to be undertaken. For, in one sense, it is only recently, with the emergence of a substantial, native-born black population, that young white Britons have been afforded the opportunity of intimate and widespread experience of interracial contact. The greater availability of Jamaican popular forms, combined with certain changes in young people's structural position, have amounted to an

unprecedented shift in the scale and intensity of cross-racial movements amongst the young in some areas of urban Britain.

The first substantial study to capture and explore some of these changes is Hewitt's ethnographic study of the impact of Jamaican creole on the language and culture of young white Londoners (Hewitt, 1986). In its approach and subject matter, this formative work on interracial communication and friendship patterns provides an important precedent for the ethnographic study which comprises the second half of this book. For Part II similarly gives primacy to young people's own lived experiences and cultural knowledges, focusing on music in particular as a medium through which black–white relations are enacted. Following in the tradition of close qualitative work with young people, perhaps best exemplified by Paul Willis's studies (Willis, 1977, 1978), Part II explores the experiences, subjectivities and life histories of a particular group of young white people living in a major urban area of Britain. It undertakes an especially detailed and close-up investigation of the kinds of individual responses generated by white engagement with black culture and black people. Using those responses, Part II attempts to trace out the parameters and dynamics of race as a social and political category, by looking at just some of the ways in which its contradictions are lived out on the terrain of everyday social existence by one group of young white Britons.

Before we can begin to tackle these questions however, and assess the nature of black culture's impact on young white people, we need an elementary understanding of the specific forms of Jamaican popular culture, their long-term historical origins and their contemporary significance both within and beyond the Afro-Caribbean community in Britain. This is important because one of the key features of contemporary racism has been its capacity to devalue or render 'invisible' the role of blacks as historical and political actors in their own right. The consequences of this can be seen in many dominant sociological approaches to the study of Afro-Caribbean cultures which continue to be informed by a partial, Eurocentric knowledge of their history. It is still widely assumed, for example, throughout large areas of race

relations research, that the African cultural heritage of Caribbean peoples was completely destroyed by slavery and replaced by a 'weak', 'unstable' and 'bastardised' form of the slave-masters' culture. It is against this historical backdrop that many popular and sociological accounts of contemporary forms such as Rastafari and reggae have been propounded. Conventional explanations of these forms invariably rest on a highly truncated and selective view of the Afro-Caribbean past. Severed from their Caribbean context of origin, they are explained in the British context as key components of an Afro-Caribbean youth 'style', and simply one more post-war subculture, to be added to the orthodox list of teds, mods, skinheads and punks.

By this approach, youth's attachment to reggae and Rastafari is seen as symptomatic of the generational breach in the black community between an essentially rural, religious and 'accommodating' 'parent' culture, and an urban, secular and 'separatist' 'youth' culture (Lago and Troyna, 1978; Garrison, 1979; Cashmore, 1979; Brake, 1980). This 'generational conflict' theory is merely one example of the common tendency to subdivide the Afro-Caribbean community into different life-styles and typological responses, whether along lines of musical taste, language, age, gender or relation to the law (Pryce, 1979; Troyna, 1979).

What these various typologies neglect are both the unifying experience of racial domination, an experience shared by all blacks, young and old, male and female alike, and the common linguistic, musical and political traditions that exist already within the Afro-Caribbean community. These historical and lateral continuities raise doubts over the applicability of such models to the analysis of Afro-Caribbean cultures, and qualify the use of 'subculture' to describe forms shaped by a common history of racial oppression.

The view that African-derived forms were completely eliminated or abandoned in the Caribbean context is particularly difficult to sustain given the available historical evidence, evidence which suggests that the slaves and their descendants were by no means the 'passive' victims of slavery, nor the mere 'recipients' of European culture. Using some of this evidence, I want to provide in the first chapter

an historical platform for the subsequent sections of the book, by briefly outlining some of the key strands of Jamaican popular culture which have played such a prominent role in the dynamic encounter between black and white young Britons. For forms like reggae, their key features, principles and institutions, are deeply rooted in the folk culture of Jamaica, a culture in turn embedded in non-European forms and forged out of centuries of racial domination. To put those forms in their proper historical context, it is necessary to go back to the very genesis of an identifiably 'Afro-Caribbean' culture. I want to begin therefore by looking at the impact of slavery and colonialism on the historical experience of Afro-Jamaican peoples, for they have so heavily determined the evolution of Jamaican cultural and musical traditions that it is within such experience that their roots must initially be sought.

Part I

History

1 400 Years

1.1 Roots and culture

There now exists a substantial and growing body of research into Afro-Caribbean cultures to confirm that Afro-Caribbean people did not 'lose' their African cultural heritage, but retained important elements of it in their language, religion, political philosophies and particularly their music. Premissed on an increasingly detailed and sophisticated knowledge of traditional West African cultures, historians and anthropologists have begun to shed light on the mechanisms of retention and adaptation under slavery by which key aspects of those cultures were preserved, blended with European forms and maintained in a whole array of practices and beliefs in the New World. While the number of convincing cases of survivals traceable to specific West African origins has been reduced, researchers have uncovered new kinds of retention in the forms of fundamental values, cognitive orientations and basic assumptions about social relations (Price and Mintz, 1976; Kopytoff, 1976; Crahan and Knight, 1979; Robinson, 1983). For while examples of individual survivals, with specific ethnic origins, exist in abundance in diasporan folk cultures, these forms are themselves invariably the product of years of intermixture between different African traditions, a process by which many such survivals have lost their ethnic specificity and become 'African' in a more general sense (Bilby, 1985).

The strongly oral character of traditional West African cultures increased the likelihood of their successful transfer and retention in the New World, the immanent and 'invisible' nature of forms such as language and music making them particularly able to survive under conditions of enslavement (Barrett, 1976; Brathwaite, 1981). Enormous amounts of knowledge would have been carried over into the New World

in this way in the form of spiritual belief systems, frames of reference, moral codes, medical and healing crafts and concepts of kinship and land tenure (Robinson, 1983, p. 174). For the slave owners, these apparently 'non-material' aspects of African culture proved almost impossible to eradicate. For while plantation slave cultures developed within the parameters of the slave system, they did so at a relative distance from white institutions. Because of the impossibility of constant surveillance, the slaves were able to construct their own autonomous spheres of social and cultural life that lay beyond the control of the slave owners (Henry *et al.*, 1982; Robinson, 1983). It was in these spaces that the slaves organised themselves and created their own characteristic 'creole' cultures.

It is the uniquely syncretic and creolised quality of these forms which, more than any other feature, stamps the distinctiveness of Afro-Caribbean cultures. For those cultures were no more derivative or imitative of European forms, than they were unproblematically 'African'. Rather, they were dynamic syntheses of European and African elements in which European cultural forms were creatively appropriated by the slaves, welded with retained African forms and remoulded into indigenous Afro-Caribbean cultures in a complex process of 'creolisation' that evolved over the course of four centuries.

In Jamaican plantation society the African element of this creole culture was stronger and more prominent than in any other New World slave system. The specific social and cultural configurations of that society combined to create something of a cultural vacuum in which Africanisms could survive and develop. From the outset, the Jamaican slave system faced a number of internal problems and contradictions, including widespread corruption, inefficiency and absenteeism amongst the planters. The large-scale sugar plantations of the Jamaican system resulted in particularly sizeable concentrations of African labour in which the proportion of African and creole slaves to Europeans was amongst the highest in the Western Hemisphere (Patterson, 1967, ch. 10). The particular harshness and brutality of the Jamaican slave system also produced a relatively high

turnover of labour, and a steady transfusion of new Africans from markedly similar regional and tribal origins (Patterson, 1967, ch. 5). The rugged and mountainous interior of the island, moreover, enhanced the possibilities for revolt and successful escape, enabling groups of slaves to establish large and long-running 'maroon' communities from as early as the seventeenth century onwards (Price, 1973). These maroon settlements were perhaps the most visible demonstration that blacks never fully consented to European domination. Within their confines were nurtured music and dance forms such as the Koromanti in which the African heritage was stronger than anywhere else on the island (Bilby, 1985). The very existence of the maroon communities was a continual thorn in the side of the British, while for those enslaved on the plantations they remained a source of cultural and political inspiration, providing a symbol of rebellion as much as a real avenue of escape.

Together, these factors go far in explaining the greater incidence of rebellion in Jamaican slave society and the countless examples of slave insurrection that run through the course of its history (Craton, 1982; Patterson, 1967; Price, 1973). Besides maronage and open revolt, however, resistance manifested itself in a myriad of preserved African religious and cultural forms. From the very inception of slavery, these forms emerged in contradiction to those of the dominant European culture, consistently undermining the colonialists' attempts at cultural hegemony over the slaves. Their preservation under slavery thus became a main pivot of political struggle.

Cabral has noted how the cultural sphere often acquires an overriding significance in channelling and mobilising resistance amongst colonised peoples (Cabral, 1973). Since slavery could only be maintained by the organised repression and denial of the slaves' cultural life, it was accordingly within that culture that the seeds of opposition were to be found. The domination of slavery was experienced collectively by blacks in the form of cultural and racial oppression. It only followed, then, that their specifically cultural responses to such oppression should become the raw material out of which their resistances were manufactured. This is not to

suggest that *all* the cultural expressions of the slaves and their descendants were invested with political meaning or reducible to conditions of political and economic struggle. Rather, it is to acknowledge the specificity of black ideological struggles over the signification of 'culture' – struggles at the heart of which lay a complex negation of European cultural dominance.

The rebellious implications and unifying potential of African-derived cultures were recognised by the slave owners who met virtually their every expression with brutal suppression. In the British West Indies the legitimacy of colonial authority and the existence of social order were seen to depend on the eradication of African religious and cultural practices, and the outlawing of traditions that celebrated blackness. For the slaves, conversely, the preservation of an autonomous, collective 'black' identity was a basic impulse of black resistance and a necessity of survival under conditions of enslavement (Hoetink, 1979; Robinson, 1983).

Language provides an excellent example of how nearly all creole cultural forms were forged out of this fundamental cultural and political dialectic. Under the plantation system, the use of African languages was forbidden by the slave owners and subject to harsh punishment. African linguistic elements nevertheless survived through a complex process of language recomposition out of which distinct creole tongues emerged (Dalphinis, 1978). The various West African languages spoken by the slaves were reworked and blended with European forms in the need for a common means of communication, not only between the slaves and the planters, but also between the slaves themselves. These processes would have been facilitated by the relatively similar speech patterns and common tribal origins amongst the slaves (Patterson, 1967; Barrett, 1976). The pidgins spoken by the earliest slaves were progressively expanded over the course of two or three generations into a comprehensive creole vernacular or patois with its own characteristic, African-inflected vocabulary, syntax and grammatical structures (Dalby, 1971, 1972; Dalphinis, 1985).

From their very inception these creole languages fulfilled a semi-clandestine function, enabling blacks to communicate

with one another in the presence of whites with some measure of safety. In the American context, an impressive catalogue of research on black speech has been compiled which sheds light on some of the cultural mechanisms involved in these processes. It shows how, through the use of ridicule, subterfuge, inversion and allusion in communication, and a reliance on intonation, rhythm, contextual definitions of words and non-verbal/paralinguistic features to convey meaning, the dominant white values and racist caste definitions that were built into the slave system were challenged, broken down and reconstituted in a black context (Kochman, 1972; Sims Holt, 1972; Smithermann, 1977; Genovese, 1976).

Initially forged as a language of resistance under conditions of racial domination, Jamaican creole emerged as the inherited speech of the black peasantry and working class in the post-slavery period. Its importance in the lives of black Jamaicans reflected the strong oral traditions in Jamaican popular culture as a whole. Those traditions, in themselves, functioned as key repositories of the Afro-Jamaican cultural heritage. Aphorisms, practical knowledge, communal values and folk history were faithfully preserved and transmitted in rhymes, proverbs, anecdotes and metaphors, most of which were African in origin (Barrett, 1976).

Of all the cultural elements retained by black slaves in the New World, musical forms were amongst the most apparent legacies of their African past. Studies of both traditional West African and Afro-Caribbean music have shown how a whole variety of musical features and principles were retained in the black musics of the New World in the form of musical styles, rhythmic constructions, vocal and instrumental techniques, and in basic aesthetic traditions, modes of communication, and idioms of expression (Nketia, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1982; Chernoff, 1979; Bebey, 1975; Storm Roberts, 1973). These features amounted to a whole reference system of musical practices which was carried over from traditional West African forms and recreated within New World slave cultures. Of all these features, the principles of polyrhythm and syncopation were amongst the most visible legacies of the slaves' West African musical heritage. The

strict adherence to metre and tempo (the renowned West African 'metronome' sense) remained a basic building block of musical expression in Afro-Caribbean music. As an organising principle, and an aesthetic of musical evaluation, rhythm, generally, became one of the fundamental matrices underlying all black musical expression in the New World.

In Jamaican slave society these rhythmic principles were retained at all levels of the island's musical culture. Opportunities for music-making amongst the slaves, however, were from the start heavily determined by the social relations of the plantation system and by the responses of individual slave owners; responses that varied from outright hostility, to indifference and active encouragement. Those forms that were considered too 'African' and threatening by the colonialists were officially banned and brutally suppressed (Johnson, 1983; Clarke, 1980). Dancing and music-making were permitted to flourish only when not interfering with work (for example, during seasonal holidays and festivals) or when actively assisting the labour process (for example, in work-songs) (Patterson, 1967; White, G., 1983a). Work-songs were amongst the earliest forms of music to be practised by the slaves in the New World context. These were invariably combinations of European sea-shanties and melodies and call-and-response patterns drawn from West African work-songs. Here music retained its traditionally intimate connection to the labour process. The content of work-songs, however, took on an added political significance under plantation conditions, by being used to scandalise and ridicule the slave owners and overseers, and to protest against the slaves' status (Patterson, 1967, p. 254; Brathwaite, 1981; Johnson, 1983).

From the very earliest days of slavery the influence of European music forms was indelibly stamped on the slave's musical culture. In Jamaica, the diversity of those influences was considerable, ranging from French and Spanish music, to various regional forms of British folk and religious music. Such influences were invariably mediated to the slaves through the mulattos and 'freed' slaves, or by the European staff and indentured labourers. Appropriated by black musicians, these various European forms were infused with

African creative models, motifs and rhythmic structures. The results were indigenous, uniquely 'creole' music forms which became central in the music and dance culture of the slaves. This 'creolisation' process was precipitated by the slave musicians being required to play in two distinct settings, as 'entertainers' for the slave-owners, and as performers in the autonomous spaces of the slaves' social and cultural life. It was in this latter context that the most strongly African modes of musical expression were practised during slavery, practices invariably related to secret cultural and religious observances such as myalism, obeah and kumina. Initially developed within the confines of maroon culture, many such practices were later transmitted to the slaves on the plantations by myal and obeah leaders. These leaders were often themselves musicians and, in keeping with West African political and religious traditions, usually combined the roles of healer, historian and military organiser (Brathwaite, 1981).

In many West African societies musicians were traditionally the guardians of historical knowledge and spiritual wisdom, responsible for preserving the cultural heritage of a community and transmitting it through song. The music-making process served to strengthen communal bonds by encouraging collective behaviour and referring people to collective traditions and communal sensibilities (Chernoff, 1979; Nketia, 1975; Bebey, 1975). This traditional status of music as a vehicle through which communal values and group sentiments were expressed took on an added significance in the slavery context. Music came to be one of the most effective ways of articulating a collective response to racial domination. Its ability to preserve a sense of racial identity was especially important in slave cultures, where music became a site in which self-dignity could be restored, as much as a relief from oppression (Patterson, 1967; Storm Roberts, 1973).

Under conditions of enslavement, musical activity in itself became a crucial autonomous space of cultural and political freedom, a site of unsupervised 'freetime' onto which non-musical activities were displaced. Funerals, frequent events because of high slave mortality, likewise became important spaces in which to plot revolts and cement loyalties, since they were often the only opportunities for slaves to associate

with any degree of privacy (White, G., 1983a; Patterson, 1967). Out of these funeral rites emerged various West-African-derived wakes and forms of ancestor worship such as kumina, a practice of more recent origin introduced to Jamaica in the post-emancipation period by indentured labourers from central Africa (Brathwaite, 1978; Johnson, 1983; Bilby, 1985). Forms like myalism and obeah, besides their magical and healing functions, also played a crucial role in unifying different tribal groups amongst the slaves, serving as powerful ideologies of resistance through the administering of oaths and fetishes to protect insurgents (Patterson, 1967; Schuler, 1979). Burru was another musical practice in which African traditions were retained virtually intact throughout the slavery period. From its origins as a work-song, burru developed into a topical form addressed to current events and to individuals in the community who were guilty of misdeeds. Its use by black musicians as a form of moral control and social criticism in slave communities was strongly reminiscent of the 'griots', the professional musicians of traditional West African society. Like the griots, burru musicians served both as peoples' historians and as commentators on topical issues, using humour and satire to circumscribe anti-social behaviour or moral infringements (Bebey, 1975, pp. 22–8; Chernoff, 1979, pp. 70–4).

The musical forms that were associated with these various practices were heavily African in character, and of all their constituent elements perhaps the most visibly 'African' was the drum. The drum stood as a vivid reminder to the Europeans that the slaves had not fully lost their African cultural heritage. Universally feared for its ability to convey messages, rally crowds and instil courage into the slaves, the drum came to be identified with sedition and revolt in the minds of the slave owners as a powerful signifier of blackness and racial solidarity (Martins, 1983). For the slaves, the political and semantic importance attached to drumming traditions was a reflection of the strongly 'vocal' and language-like qualities of instrumental music and non-verbal sounds generally in traditional West African musical expression. The practice of using instruments as speech-surrogates was a common one in African music and was

partly a product of the analogous features of speech patterns and musical forms in African oral cultures, whereby music 'spoke' as much as speech was musical. (The renowned 'talking drums', for example, were able to duplicate speech patterns by producing tones that were linguistically comprehensible.)

It is here, in the relationship between language and music, that the African heritage retains one of its most profound and enduring legacies in the folk-culture of Jamaican peoples. For the same rhythmic sensibility that permeates Jamaican creole speech-patterns is also to be found throughout the island's musical culture. These linguistic features of Jamaican music grow out of traditional West African musical practices, practices in which the music's semantic inflexions and communicative power can be modified by different playing techniques, and by the manipulation of melodic movement, tonality, musical texture and rhythmic organisation. As Nketia has pointed out, in much African music the verbal meanings imparted in songs are complemented and enhanced by those which lie within the structure of the music itself:

> While the song texts provide the significant changes in thought, mood or feeling, it may be the music that defines or expresses the general character of the occasion or the spirit of the performance. Hence, the musical function of a category of songs and consequently its form of expression would be maintained even where the texts contain nonsense syllables, archaic words or difficult allusions, or where the style of delivery makes comprehension difficult. We must thus recognize that the basis for the appreciation of a song may be linguistic, musical or both.
>
> (Nketia, 1975, p. 205)

This tradition of non-verbal communication became a central feature of black music in the New World, where instrumental music often overshadowed 'lyrical' expressions in semantic importance. In Jamaican slave culture, African rhythms of great complexity were preserved in forms such as kumina, while burru duplicated the exact pitch, size and

number of drums of its West African parent form (Clarke, 1980, pp. 52–3).

In the New World context, however, drums were often restricted to the beating of dance rhythms, losing their explicitly communicative function. The harsh punishment meted out by the slave owners to practitioners of drumming almost meant that drums had to be substituted by improvised percussive devices such as shakers, graters, rattlers and stamping tubes, or supplanted by other instruments which took on highly rhythmic, drum-like functions and qualities (Herskovits, 1970, p. 135; Johnson, 1983). This practice of substituting instruments for one another, and shifting rhythmic functions and structures from percussive to melodic instruments, was already an established practice in African music, and one that was accelerated in the New World context by the adoption of Western instruments and sound sources (Nketia, 1979, p. 16).

Although forced underground during slavery, African drumming, dancing and singing traditions were never completely eradicated. Resurfacing periodically during rebellions, they were maintained throughout the post-emancipation era up to the contemporary period, providing an unbroken link with Jamaican folk culture's African heritage.

1.2 From revival to Rastafari

The abolition of slavery in Jamaica in 1838 marked the beginnings of a spiritual and cultural renaissance amongst black Jamaicans, the most dramatic expression of which was the growth of various mass religious movements amongst the ex-slaves. Sparked off by the introduction of black baptisms into Jamaica in the late seventeenth century by Afro-American preachers, these 'native' forms of Christianity provoked an enthusiastic response from black Jamaicans. The mass support they engendered climaxed in the emergence of the Jamaican Revival movement in the early 1860s.

Revival became the dominant Afro-Christian tradition in post-emancipation Jamaica. Like most forms of black

Christianity, Revival fused rites and ceremonies drawn from the European church, such as prayers, hymns and Bible-reading, with African-based forms of worship and practices absorbed from myalism and kumina, such as drum music, spirit possession and dancing (Johnson, 1983).

A rich variety of African musical features was retained in the music of revival, not only in drumming and percussion, but also in African-derived vocal idioms such as parallel harmony, antiphony (the repetition and answering of musical phrases), glissando (the slurring and sliding of notes) and melissima (pushing a single syllable through several separate notes) (Clarke, 1980, pp. 21–4). The participatory qualities of traditional African music, through its emphasis on *group* musical activities and dialogue between audience and musicians, were nowhere more evident than in black church music. Here, the retention of such qualities was everywhere visible, in audience response and participation (through handclapping, dancing, percussion and other forms of rhythmic embellishment) and in call-and-response singing patterns and verbal exchanges between preacher and congregation (White, G., 1983a; Johnson, 1983). In the more Africanised religious forms, such as kumina, drumming and singing patterns played a crucial role in inducing and regulating altered states of consciousness, the most dramatic example of this being spirit possession.

The political importance of these movements in the historical experience and consciousness of the Jamaican masses is often overlooked in Eurocentric accounts of Jamaican popular culture, in which 'religion' is assumed to be the 'opiate of the masses'. A closer examination of Jamaican religious traditions, however, reveals a complex fusion of 'spiritual' and secular themes, and a strong 'present-world' orientation, which helps to explain why, throughout Jamaican history, resistance and political protest have consistently manifested themselves in religious terms (Schuler, 1979; Post, 1970). The colonialists, for their part, knew only too well that upsurges in religious activity amongst the black masses were invariably preludes to rebellion and armed revolt.

From its inception black Christianity sought to rework

European Christian doctrines. Black church leaders inverted 'accepted' Christian themes in a complex semantic and ideological struggle over the theology of the Christian Gospel. The Bible in particular became a major source of alternative values, ideas and images in the collective popular consciousness of the black masses (Post, 1970). Originally, as the only reading matter permitted to them by the colonialists, it had provided the means through which to make sense of their subordination and expose the hypocrisy of slavery. Black Jamaicans drew analogies between their own historical experience and that of the Old Testament Jews. Of particular interest to them were those biblical passages which either concerned themselves with the liberation of oppressed people (the Israelites), referred to people as 'black' (Psalm 68), or mentioned 'Ethiopia'. God was seen as the liberator of the weak and downtrodden from the power of the oppressor. The symbols of redemption, judgement and the Promised Land supplied black Jamaicans with metaphors of liberation in which they sought their own reflection and through which they channelled their hopes and aspirations for earthly freedom (Post, 1970; Cone, 1972).

The development of the revival tradition and the growing connections between black church movements in the Caribbean, America and Africa bore fruit in the rudiments of a black nationalism amongst the Jamaican masses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was within these black churches that the seeds of a pan-African racial consciousness were first sown, thereby laying the foundations for the emergence of Garveyism, Ethiopianism and, eventually, Rastafarianism in the 1920s and 1930s (Post, 1978). That consciousness was spearheaded by black churchmen who travelled freely between Africa and the New World, and communicated a knowledge and awareness of Africa to those in the Caribbean in a real and dramatic way (Clarke, 1980, p. 38). The struggles of African nations and peoples against European colonial domination, in this way, became stamped on the collective consciousness of the black masses (Campbell, 1985). The independence of Ethiopia in particular from white colonial rule stood as a symbol of African resistance. The sparse but significant biblical references made to 'Ethiopia'

cultivated a renewed awareness of Africa amongst the Jamaican masses and a sense of having participated in history (Post, 1970).

It was out of these various traditions that Rastafari emerged in the mid-1930s in Jamaica against a backdrop of severe economic deprivation on the island. The unique coincidence of Haile Selassie's coronation in Ethiopia and that country's subsequent invasion by Italy, with the pronouncements of the Bible, the prophecies of Garvey and the knowledge of African people's anti-colonial struggles provided the framework for a new deification amongst a small section of Jamaican peasants and workers, that of Rastafari (a name taken from the pre-coronation title of Haile Selassie). For these early forerunners of the Rastafari movement Selassie took on the role of messiah and liberator, a black king of the only African nation free from colonisation by Europe (Post, 1978; Campbell, 1985).

From its inception the Rastafari movement sought to rejuvenate a sense of pride in blackness amongst the Jamaican working class and peasantry, inverting the doctrines of white Christianity by placing God in Africa and the 'exiled' 'sufferers' in Jamaica. Rastafari built on the long traditions of black radicalism in Jamaican popular culture by fusing the pan-Africanist themes of Garveyism and Ethiopianism with a whole spectrum of folk elements drawn from burru, kumina, revival and maroon culture (Campbell, 1980, 1985).

The creolisation of Jamaican folk music continued apace over the post-emancipation period, accelerated in the latter half of the nineteenth century by the input of European dance forms into the island's musical culture. Polkas, reels, waltzes and especially the quadrille were learned by black musicians who were required to play at the 'grand balls' of planter society, and fed back into the black population. There, unsupervised and unhindered by Europeans, the traditional fiddles and fifes of forms like the quadrille were combined with creole musical elements such as drums, banjos and the rumba box (Johnson, 1983; White, G., 1983a). More importantly, perhaps, these 'ballroom' styles introduced a common harmonic system, based on the European, 8-note diatonic scale, that was quickly grasped and adapted by

slave musicians (Bilby, 1985). The musical result was a more syncopated, 'Africanised' form, whose tonalities were similar to the quadrille, but whose rhythmic orientations were decidedly non-European. It was these distinctly 'creolised' music styles which formed the basis for Jamaica's first national popular music and dance forms, the mento.

Mento was perhaps the most characteristically 'creole' of all of Jamaica's folk music forms in its ability to absorb a whole variety of elements from surrounding folk-styles, such as work-songs, wakes, and ring-songs. The similarity of its syncopations and rhythmic patterns to those of its close Trinidadian relative, the calypso, reflected the increasing inter-island migration in the Caribbean area during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like calypso, mento was a topical song genre of protest, ridicule and gossip and continued firmly in the African musical tradition of satire and social criticism (White, G., 1983a). Forms like mento and calypso provided news for the black population, serving as principal media of public debate and dissent through which the colonial authorities could be mocked and criticised. Here, the retention of African-derived musical principles was once again visible in the use of music, specifically, as one of the most effective vehicles of political protest and organisation.

Mento remained the dominant form of Jamaican folk music until the 1930s and 1940s. That period, however, saw the beginning of a number of fundamental shifts and changes in Jamaican popular culture and music, changes precipitated by the growing industrialisation and urbanisation of Jamaican society generally. Shifting patterns of migration throughout the Caribbean and Americas in this period, together with the break-up of rural communities through forced expropriation and lopsided economic growth, caused a massive displacement of the Jamaican peasantry and a rapid rate of rural–urban migration (Beckford and Witter, 1980). The result was a dramatic expansion of surplus labour in the urban slum areas of Kingston. Drawn from the rural areas of Jamaica, this floating population of surplus labour brought with it cultural and musical elements from the whole range of Jamaica's creole folk culture, including kumina, myalism, revival, mento and burru.

The traditional functions of many of these forms were maintained and adapted to the urban context. The burru tradition, for example, was upheld by the large numbers of burru migrants who settled in the ghettoes of Kingston in the 1940s. Its singing, drumming and dancing traditions became absorbed into the culture of the urban black poor, being used specifically to welcome home ex-prisoners into the community (White, G., 1983a, p. 30). With their close proximity to the newly-born movement of Rastafari, forms such as kumina and burru were seized upon by the early Rasta brethren as something of 'pure' African forms, untainted by Western influences. Lacking any musical forms of their own, the drumming traditions of burru in particular were adopted and progressively taken over by the Rastafari as their traditional form of musical expression.

The evolution of burru illustrates one of the enduring features of Jamaican popular music and culture, that of the continuous infiltration of African-based reference points and cultural principles into contemporary, urban, Jamaican popular forms. It is this feature which explains the strongly indigenous, 'roots' character of contemporary Jamaican music. Those roots are visible in the music's concrete links with the whole spectrum of traditional, neo-African and creole folk music forms and can be heard to this day in the many remnants and echoes of those forms which are detectable throughout modern Jamaican popular music (Johnson, 1983).

This unique juxtaposition of traditional and modern forms lies at the very heart of contemporary Jamaican popular music. For while the changes wrought in Jamaican society by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation brought about a unique merging and fusion of these long-standing musical and cultural traditions, they also had the effect of exposing Jamaicans to a wider variety of external, modern, and particularly Afro-American popular music forms. Consequently, it is at the juncture of these various traditional and external musical influences, that contemporary forms of Jamaican popular music really begin to emerge.

1.3 'These sounds lead the way': ska and the birth of the reggae tradition

By the 1940s the popularity of mento amongst black Jamaicans was beginning to be eclipsed by a growing fondness for contemporary Afro-American forms like swing, jazz and especially rhythm and blues. While still popular in urban areas, younger Jamaicans began to dissociate themselves from mento as a rural music that was too reminiscent of the harsh deprivations of peasant life and incapable of reflecting the urban, working-class experience (White, G., 1983a). The harder, electronic rhythms of the urban jump blues and the loping, shuffle tempo of southern R & B artists like Amos Milburn, Fats Domino and Louis Jordan proved more appealing to working-class Jamaicans. Born out of a similar rural–urban transition in the American context, the preoccupations and subject matter of rhythm and blues proved more relevant to the pressures and conditions of urban life. The emergence of a state broadcasting corporation, the growth in radio ownership and the importing of recorded music by returning migrant workers and US servicemen stationed on the island, all contributed to the growing availability of black American music. However, it was the sound system which was most particularly responsible for the popularisation of R & B amongst the urban, black working-class.

Sound systems first began to appear in the late 1940s in the form of large radiograms playing recorded music at house parties, parties which provided a source of revenue for ghetto dwellers in a manner similar to the black American 'rent party'. By tapping the growing demand for R & B the early sounds attracted a large working-class following, particularly in the ghetto areas of Kingston. The early sound operators attempted to keep abreast of their rivals with the most exclusive and popular tunes of the day, thereby attracting the largest crowd and custom. The keen sense of inter-sound rivalry, in which survival and keeping ahead of one's opponents depended on wits, originality and improvisation, provided a certain stimulus toward musical and technological

advance. As the sound systems expanded in economic scale and size, they developed into mobile musical institutions of public entertainment, playing at parties and dances in local halls, bars, nightclubs and backyards (Johnson, 1983). In this way, the sound system provided a genuinely popular source of collective entertainment for working-class Jamaicans, many of whom, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, were unable to afford record-players. From their inception, the sounds were tightly bound to the community which they served and which, in turn, sustained them. Jamaican popular music was, and continues to be, forged out of this close cultural dialectic between the sound system and its audience. Perhaps more than any other form, this uniquely Jamaican cultural institution has exerted the greatest influence on contemporary Jamaican music, so much so that nearly every musical and technological innovation in its recent history has originated from within its confines.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, R & B had begun to lose much of its original impetus. The less robust, more diluted rhythms of rock 'n' roll failed to capture a mass appeal amongst black Jamaican audiences (Clarke, 1980, p. 60). It was the sound-system operators who responded to the drying up in the supply of danceable R & B by stimulating the production of an indigenous Jamaican version for local consumption (Johnson, 1983). This Jamaican R & B, or 'blues' music as it was called, evolved through the mid- and late 1950s and early 1960s into a unique Afro-Jamaican music form that came to be known as 'ska'. Ska emerged out of the melting-pot of creole forms and retentions that existed in the ghettoes and slums of Kingston in the late 1950s. Since many early ska musicians hailed from these self-same ghettoes, it was not surprising that such forms were strongly reflected in ska, in its rhythmic echoes of kumina, burru and mento, and its call-and-response vocal and instrumental passages drawn from revival music (Reckford, 1982). While ska drew heavily on all these indigenous folk forms, its immediate origins were in American R & B. Working-class musicians, with formal training in jazz and military music, appropriated the 12-bar blues frame, 4/4 drums, stabbing

piano rhythms and walking bass patterns of R & B and blended them with the polyrhythms and strumming off-beat guitar of mento (White, G., 1983b; Clarke, 1980).

The influence of R & B on Jamaican music, rather than a form of cultural imperialism, was a sign of the growing cultural and political dialogue between blacks in the Caribbean and North America, and the increasing homogenisation of black music in the western hemisphere as a whole (White, G., 1983b). The use of parallel developments in Afro-Caribbean music by Jamaican musicians was to become an ongoing feature of the reggae tradition, reflected in the various appropriations of R & B, gospel, soul, jazz and funk. Ska, then, was in no sense a departure from Jamaica's indigenous creole culture, but rather, a conscious reworking and Africanisation of R & B. Ska was more rhythmic and syncopated, its most noticeable difference being its accentuated off-beat rhythm drawn from mento. Ska also placed an even greater emphasis on the bass, originally one of the most attractive features of R & B and one that was crucial to the music's danceability. Both these features, the bass and the off-beat rhythm, were to become familiar characteristics and anchor principles of subsequent Jamaican popular music.

The production of Jamaican R & B and early ska revolved around a small caucus of recording artists and studios who were tied almost exclusively into the sound system business. The manufacture of records for public consumption was initially limited and secondary to the requirements of the dance. It was not until the turn of the decade that other, non-sound-system-entrepreneurs began to explore the commercial possibilities of manufacturing locally recorded music for more widespread consumption. The sound-system-based businessmen, however, were better equipped to respond to the needs of their working-class audience, and soon followed into mass production of records, quickly establishing an embryonic infrastructure of studios, pressing plants and recording labels (Johnson, 1983). As consumption of recorded music increased, the industry continued to gather momentum throughout the early and mid-1960s. It was in this period that most of the present-day economic structures and cultural practices of the Jamaican recording industry were forged.

The production of Jamaican music, from its very inception, became a focal point of struggle over its economic and cultural control, a struggle waged largely between 'producers' (entrepreneurs who supplied the financial backing for recordings and hired vocalists on a song by song basis) and the abundance of predominantly working-class musicians and singers. The non-existence of copyright and publishing laws opened the way to highly exploitative practices by the handful of producers who monopolised recording and production facilities (Clark, 1980, pp. 73–4). Most of these early producers were not themselves musicians but were usually sound-system operators and businessmen who exercised little control over the actual composition of songs. Musical arrangement was left largely in the hands of the singers and musicians themselves. Thus while the producers had an ear for the most popular and profitable sounds, it was the session-players who ultimately controlled the music's form and its possibilities.

A unique method of production and distribution was evolved in this period to suit the peculiar nature of the Jamaican market, a method that survives to this day. It involved the production of one-off, custom-made acetates, known as 'dub plates', for exclusive play on individual sound systems, alongside that of records for general consumption, records which were usually variants of the above. Records would also be released in 'limited editions' as a way of testing their popularity before making them generally available through retail networks. This method of consumer enticement was an effective way of guaranteeing sales and lessening investment risks in a fragile and relatively small Jamaican record-buying market. In addition, the exclusivity of much sound-system music was a means of ensuring high attendance at dances.

Disseminated through the sound system, ska rapidly became a vibrant, popular cultural force and a key vehicle of political expression for the black working class. Held in contempt by middle-class Jamaicans, and initially excluded from the state-controlled media, ska undermined the domination of white American popular music in the island's 'official' musical culture, thereby directly challenging the

cultural hegemony of the colonial bourgeoisie (Hylton, 1975). Early attempts by government representatives to incorporate the music and control the direction of its development, by diluting its musical and political content, were largely unsuccessful, and the music's creative base remained firmly rooted in the working-class ghettoes of Kingston throughout most of the 1960s.

The gaining of independence in Jamaica in 1962 ironically signalled a growing disparity in the distribution of wealth on the island. Distorted economic growth merely served to widen the gap between the dispossessed masses and the ruling élite (Beckford and Witter, 1980, p. 74). The legacies of slavery and colonialism were inherited in the apprenticeship system, in the neo-colonial power structure and in the unchanged colour–class basis of the Jamaican social structure (White, 1967). The result was a dramatic intensification of the class struggle in the mid-1960s, social unrest reaching its height in the political violence that surrounded Jamaica's first general election in 1966.

The changing social and economic climate of Jamaican society in this period was mirrored in the corresponding shifts in style, form and lyrical content of Jamaican popular music. The optimism of the immediate post-independence period, reflected in the vibrant, up-tempo quality of much early ska, soon began to fade into disillusionment under the impact of growing unemployment, ghettoisation and the social disequilibrium generated by underdevelopment. Jamaican music consequently began to express new moods and tensions, becoming simultaneously more sombre and introspective. By 1966, these changes were being registered in the emergence of a new musical style, that of rocksteady.

The transition from ska to rocksteady was initially dictated by the slowing-down of dance paces from the frantic leg-work of the former to the more sensuous 'hip-work' of the latter (Johnson, 1983). These shifts soon became detectable in the changing drum and bass patterns of the music itself. Rocksteady's most noticeable difference from ska was its enhanced use of the electronic bass, which by then had replaced the acoustic bass of the latter. The bass player's greater use of rests and gaps in the bass line enabled the

drummer to improvise more with syncopations and fills on the tom-toms and hi-hat cymbals (Griffith, 1977). Greater prominence was also given to percussion and Rasta drumming styles, and the off-beat quality of Jamaican music was further accentuated by the drummer playing together on both snare and bass drums on the third beat of the bar in a style known as 'one drop'.

1.4 Word, sound and power

The emergence of rocksteady marked the beginnings of a period of heightened political awareness within Jamaican music, an awareness that reflected the growing political solidarity and militancy of black people internationally. By the late 1960s this incipient race- and class-consciousness was beginning to acquire a great spiritual depth under the impact of Rastafari, which had expanded beyond its lower working-class origins into a mass social movement and a symbol of protest for thousands of Jamaicans (Beckford and Witter, 1980). By the early 1970s Rastafari had become the dominant influence in Jamaican popular music, providing a source of inspiration for both Rasta and non-Rasta musicians alike, and supplying the frame of reference for a whole new generation of ghetto musicians typified by groups like the Wailers. Under the movement's influence, the protest element that had become such a characteristic feature of Jamaican music became more articulate and thoughtful (Hebdige, 1974). Political and historical themes became more prevalent, conveying an acute awareness of slavery and colonialism and the links between past and present forms of oppression.

The late 1960s also saw the beginnings of a movement towards artistic and financial autonomy amongst younger musicians dissatisfied with the exploitative practices of the old producer–artist set-up. These developments enhanced the opportunities for musicians and producers alike to record more creative and explicitly political material. The late 1960s and early 1970s was consequently a period of considerable experimentation and technological advance within Jamaican

music, a period that began with the emergence of reggae in late 1968.

In reggae, the rhythmic interplay of instruments reached a new level of sophistication and complexity. The rhythm guitar added an extra half-beat to the classic Jamaican offbeat, giving a 'gummy', sticky quality to the music that was further accentuated by keyboard phrasing. The music as a whole became a more integrated and total ensemble of complementary rhythms, highlighted by an even greater use of percussion (Reckord, 1982; Griffith, 1977). The bass in particular took on an increasingly rhythmic, almost drum-like, function and acquired a distinctly vocal quality, 'saying' phrases and pausing for effect. This use of pauses and rests, together with the omission of whole bars by the bass player, served to highlight the underlying percussion and polyrhythmic instrumentation of the music. This process of rhythmic evolution entered a new phase in the mid-1970s with the emergence of 'rockers'. Rockers had a slower, more down-tempo beat than early reggae. Exponents of rockers drumming like Sly Dunbar and Leroy 'Horsemouth' Wallace selfconsciously extended the Africanisation of Jamaican popular music through the use of Nyabinghi drums and experimentation with cross-rhythms and syncopations often as complex as African ones (May, 1978; *Black Echoes*, 19 November 1977, p. 9).

The increasing technical sophistication of the recording process, as a result of the introduction of multi-track recording, opened up new possibilities in sound engineering, possibilities realised in the late 1960s with the innovation of dub. Dub originated through sound engineers experimenting with the separation of different tracks and instruments in the studio. Through the use of echo, reverb and phasing, and by means of skilful tape-editing, the dub engineer was able to transform the music in endlessly different ways. Originally recorded exclusively for sound-system play, by the early 1970s these 'versions', as they were known, began to appear on the B-side of every '45' single release as a dubbed variant of the A-side.

The coming of sixteen- and twenty-four-track studios saw dub evolve into a complex process of musical enrichment and

an identifiable genre of the reggae tradition. Dub became an art form in itself, with the engineer attempting to clarify or enhance the meaning of a song by the selective 'dubbing in' and reprocessing of certain key words and phrases from its original lyrics. Through the dub process both the musical structure and the implicit meaning of a song could be transformed in endlessly different ways.

While the effectiveness of dub was dependent partly on retaining vocal and lyrical fragments of the original song, by the mid-1970s such fragments had begun to disappear altogether from the music. The expressive and semantic power of dub was carried by sounds, melodies and rhythms alone, sounds which had the capacity to convey emotions and express the weight of feeling without being linguistically comprehensible. The communicative power of dub in much rockers music, for example, lay in its ability to signify experiences and forms of subjectivity purely through the connotations of its drum and bass patterns, and through the use of echo and reverb. Many existing commentaries on Jamaican popular music have tended to overlook these non-verbal dimensions of reggae in favour of a more limited analysis of its explicit lyrical meanings. Reggae's unique effectiveness, however, lies in the dynamic interplay between *both* these, verbal and non-verbal, modes of communication and their distinctive fusion into an organic musical whole.

It is in the non-verbal qualities of dub that reggae's non-European heritage is most apparent, for its aesthetics run counter to nearly every canon of Western, popular musical taste. The repetitiveness and simplicity of its drum and bass patterns, through their ability to add depth and meaning to the music, defy evaluation according to standard European musical criteria. In one sense dub is an extension of the subversion inherent in the musical structure of *all* reggae, since it protects itself from simplistic and fixed interpretations (Hebdige, 1974). It emerged, in part, as a response to some of the contradictions posed to reggae artists by the increasing commodification of their product by the international recording industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is tempting to see in the innovation of dub one aspect of the ongoing struggle of musicians to resist the reification and

packaging of reggae in specific commodity forms tailored to the international market. For dub is an implicit attempt to circumvent some of the obstacles posed by these processes to the dissemination of political messages, through a greater reliance on inferred and immanent meanings which are designed to be activated primarily in the context of consumption itself. As Paul Gilroy has pointed out, it acts as a bridge between 'overtly committed and apparently unpolitical records alike', providing a consistent matrix which unites all reggae at the level of form (Gilroy, 1982, p. 301). Reggae, similarly, develops within its own traditions of tried and tested 'riddims', orthodox drum and bass melodies which run through the course of the music's history, constantly assuming new musical forms and rhythmic patterns. The cultural sanctioning or 'versioning' of these familiar tunes and rhythms is an accepted and long-standing practice in the reggae tradition, whereby musicians continually treasure their own heritage and musical past. In this way reggae is produced within the parameters of its own unique aesthetics, conventions and 'standards'. It amounts to a whole 'language' of forms and idioms of expression which are transformed and adapted by individual musicians in endlessly different styles and combinations.

Since the birth of ska, Jamaican popular music has become a unique chronicle of the collective historical experience of the black working class in the recorded form. Jamaican popular song has faithfully reflected that experience in its lyricism, consistently and graphically representing the complexities and contradictions of everyday working-class existence, from its problems of survival and poverty, through its many ironies and paradoxes, to its love and humour. Coming from the same background as their audience, most musicians and singers invariably have an understanding of these problems and conditions based on personal experience, an experience which the reggae lyricist attempts to translate into a common language of collective symbols and images in which the wider community can recognise itself most readily. To this end, the themes of protest, captivity, prophecy and moral exhortation, which form much of the raw material for reggae lyricism, are often couched in biblical metaphors and

imagery, for example in songs like 'Armaggideon Time', 'Blood and Fire' and 'Holy Mount Zion'. The polarity of class interests in the wider Jamaican society, moreover, is reproduced in the dichotomies of 'haves'/'have nots', 'society'/'sufferers', 'righteous'/'wicked', 'natty dread'/baldhead' and 'them'/'us' (Johnson, 1975a). To add spiritual and philosophical weight to a particular song, the reggae lyricist is also able to draw on the rich source of rhymes, riddles, folk-stories and proverbs in Jamaican oral culture (Johnson, 1983). In this way, reggae lyricists attempt not only to articulate the collective consciousness of their audience, but also to organise and politicise it, by working on the practical ideologies and elements of 'good sense' that already exist in the popular culture of the Jamaican working class.

In these processes Rastafari plays a critical role. Since the mass conversion of reggae musicians to the movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jamaican music has become saturated with its political discourses, symbols and insights. Through the political vision of Rasta, the reggae lyricist attempts to jettison the Eurocentric value system of the neo-colonial bourgeoisie, by expounding Afrocentric values and fostering a sense of collective racial identity. The lyrical preoccupations of reggae, however, extend far beyond mere statements of solidarity and anti-racism. Paul Gilroy has identified three other principal sets of discourses that recur throughout their subject matter; first, a critique of waged labour in the forms in which it is made available to or withheld from blacks, accomplished through a countervailing celebration of leisure as 'freetime' and a glorification of sexuality as symbolic of the freedom from the oppression of work; second, a questioning of the legitimacy of capitalist law and state authority, expressed in common concerns with the theme of 'freedom', with the nature of 'crime' and with demands for 'equal rights and justice'; and, last, a belief in the importance of historical knowledge in the realisation of that freedom, conveyed in the emphasis on 'roots', tradition, continuity and historical responsibility (Gilroy, 1987). In these senses reggae can be seen to continue within the most fundamental of African musical traditions by functioning as

a vehicle of learning and education as much as a source of entertainment. For reggae songs offer topical commentary on any number of social, economic and political issues, keeping pace with current events on a virtually day-by-day basis. The role of the DJ is central here. Rooted, like so many other features of Jamaican popular music, in the sound-system context, the DJ phenomenon developed originally in the R & B–ska period as a way of humanising the potentially passive experience of dancing to recorded music by filling in the gaps between the records and providing rhythmic embellishment through scatting and rhythmic breathing (Johnson, 1983).

While the slowing down of ska gave the DJs more time to express themselves, in the form of spoken introductions or 'talkovers', it was the innovations in rocksteady, and in dub particularly, which enabled the DJ, or 'toasting', tradition to reach its full potential. The slower rhythms of rocksteady provided the ideal backing for the more fluent and poetic lyrical statements of DJ exponents like U-Roy. U-Roy's innovative style of toasting was tagged 'musical talking' for its ability to correspond to the chord changes in the music. On songs like 'Wear you to the Ball' and 'Runaway Girl', he would take his cue from the lyrical fragments of the dubbed 'version' to improvise his own lyrics, thereby modifying and expanding the song's original meaning (Clarke, 1980, pp. 120–1).

From the late 1960s onwards toasting commentaries became increasingly articulate, addressing political and cultural themes with a high degree of improvisation and originality. The early 1970s saw the emergence of Rasta DJs like Big Youth who toasted over heavily-dubbed rhythms often unencumbered by vocals. Lacing his lyrics with biblical references and imagery, Big Youth delivered comments and insights into the workings of mental and material oppression, voicing a political consciousness as sharp as that of the reggae lyricist. Through the use of heavy unrestrained patois, his toasting synchronised linguistic and musical patterns at a level which often transcended specific verbal meanings, conveying an overall mood of dread and foreboding; for, like dub, this form of toasting was an attempt to extend communication beyond words. Through the use of apparently

nonsensical vocal sounds, toasting was itself a commentary on the inadequacy of language as a means of expressing certain truths and meanings.

The DJ's art, similarly to that of the reggae lyricist, grows out of the rich oral traditions of Jamaican popular culture, drawing on its wealth of proverbs, nursery rhymes, ring-songs, word games and work-songs (Johnson, 1983). The DJ phenomenon is historically rooted in those African oral traditions in which musical expression and speech forms are intimately related. The genre is steeped in the gossiping, mocking and social commentary forms of the burru and mento, similarly functioning as a key channel through which news and information of a topical nature is communicated. Equally, the forms of joking, boasting and trading of ritual insults characteristic of DJ-ing are features whose origins are all deeply rooted in the African traditions of story-teller, 'broad talker' and people's musician (Abrahams, 1972; Toop, 1984). The similarity of toasting to its close Afro-American relatives, 'scatting' in jazz and 'rapping' in soul, point to shared roots in a common West African musical and oral heritage.

It is through the institution of the sound system that the DJ artists remain organically connected to the audience from whom they continually draw their inspiration and whose collective moods and concerns they seek to reflect. The close relationship between DJ and audience signifies the communalism of the sound-system experience, an experience which is a test of a DJ's popularity and relevance, and one through which they must continually pass in order to remain successful and respected. The DJs' art is dependent on spontaneity, wit, good timing and an ability to narrate issues of a local and topical nature, while simultaneously rhyming and linking words together in key to the music's rhythms and syncopations. Through the sound system, the practice of DJ-ing itself also remains a democratic form of personal and class-identified expression both in the sense that the DJ is a spokesperson for the audience and that anyone can step up and 'hold the mike'.

The central role of the DJ in the 'live' context of the dance-hall, points to one of the most important, yet

consistently neglected facets of the reggae tradition, namely the social relations of its consumption. Most commentaries have hitherto ignored this most fundamental dimension to reggae's meaning and effectivity. For it is only in the context of consumption, through the sound system in particular, that the music is socialised and fully brought to life as an expressive totality of various communicative and signifying practices, including dub, DJ-ing, singing and dance.

To date (1987) the sound remains the principal context of musical activity for a large proportion of the black working class, and one of the main institutions through which reggae's audience is able to exert some control over the music, by demanding danceable and relevant music. Crowd response and participation through dance and vocal encouragement, play a critical role in shaping the sound-system experience as a whole. The interruption and constant 'cutting-back' of a popular record to its opening bars helps to increase the sense of drama and anticipation amongst the audience. Along with the DJ's exhortations and interjections, such practices help to socialise the dance event as a whole, by making it 'live' and turning it into a creative performance.

The identifying characteristics of Jamaican music, its form, function and cultural conventions, are still heavily mediated by the requirements and social relations of the sound system. The semiotic and expressive power of reggae is enhanced in the dance-hall context, where the music is heard as a complex fusion of words, sounds and melodies. Modern-day sounds are able to recreate the dub process 'live' through the deployment of various sound effects, and an awesome battery of technological hardware which enables the music to be transformed in an infinite number of ways. This is part of an ongoing, dialectical process whereby the technological means of musical reproduction, in the form of turntables, amplifiers (amps) and speakers, have been humanised and incorporated into the reggae tradition as musical instruments in themselves. In this process, it is recorded music that is the principal source of raw material in a complex process of creative improvisation in which new texts are continually being produced and reproduced, and new meanings wrung from them.

In the dance-hall context, the physical power of reggae's bass is also a key source of pleasure for the dancers, its transmission crucial to the impact and carrying-power of the music. Its periodic retraction and reintroduction, along with other elements of the rhythmic ensemble, serve to enhance considerably the excitement and enjoyment of the music. Musical and lyrical meanings, moreover, are underlined and expanded by the careful selection, ordering and counterbalancing of particular songs and melodies. Through the endless 'versioning' of familiar rhythms, the sound system acknowledges collective historical traditions and sensibilities in black musical culture through the playing of timeless originals and contemporary favourites.

The characteristic forms and institutions of the reggae tradition, and most of its key conventions and principles, continue to be heavily shaped by the historical and social experience of the Jamaican working class. Despite being overlaid by market forms, reggae continues to be produced out of a particular kind of dialectic between artists and audience, sound system and crowd, which retains a firm foothold in this Jamaican point of reference. However, while reggae remains partially anchored in the experience of the Jamaican working class, its 'meaning' is by no means fixed or unitary, nor reducible to that class alone. The growth of an indigenous recording industry in Jamaica over the 1960s period, and the subsequent re-commodification of reggae by the international leisure industry in the 1970s, has supplied the infrastructural means for reggae's dissemination to disparate communities of Afro-Caribbean peoples in the metropolitan countries. It is these very processes of commercial development which have partly enabled reggae to acquire a mass popularity and relevance which extends far beyond the boundaries of its original context of production, embracing not only the British black community but other social groups in the population at large.

Since the beginnings of large-scale Jamaican emigration to Britain in the 1950s, the history and development of Jamaican music has been intimately bound up with the experiences and fortunes of the metropolitan Afro-Caribbean community. Many of the cultural, musical and political traditions already

outlined have acquired a particular importance in the British context. In the following chapter I want to look at the way some of these forms and traditions became established in that context, how they were shaped by the specific conditions and struggles of post-war Britain, and how they acquired a widespread relevance and popularity throughout the black community, particularly amongst the young.

2 UK Version

2.1 'Down here in Babylon'

The large-scale migration of a substantial section of the Afro-Caribbean working class to Britain in the post-war period marked the beginnings of yet another chapter in its historical experience, a chapter which saw the rooting and remaking of many of its diverse cultural and political traditions in the very heart of urban British society. From the very earliest days of post-war black settlement, Afro-Caribbean people began to rebuild and adapt their cultural and leisure institutions to life in Britain. The need for such institutions was enhanced by the stark realities of racism in the leisure sphere. For the same racism that operated in the job and housing markets also operated to bar black workers from many white working-class leisure institutions, such as pubs, clubs, dance palais and bingo halls (Sivanandan, 1981/82, p. 113).

Faced with such exclusion, blacks were forced to rely more heavily on their own institutions of entertainment and recreation. Growing out of the embryonic network of jazz clubs that had existed in London since the 1930s and 1940s, a thriving music-and-dance culture soon began to emerge in a number of black-owned and black-managed night-spots that sprang up in the metropolis. Such clubs catered for the diverse groupings that comprised London's black population in the immediate post-war period with an appropriately eclectic musical diet of highlife, calypso, and Latin American music, as well as jazz and R & B.

In addition to these 'public' leisure venues, the cultural life of Afro-Caribbean people in this early period was also expressed in a number of more 'private' leisure activities conducted within the black community, activities such as church gatherings, cricket socials, wedding receptions,

weekend and bank-holiday outings and house parties (Gutzmore, 1978). Afro-Caribbean people used music especially as a way of filling the gap in their consciousness between the lives that they had left behind and the circumstances in which they found themselves in Britain. Phillips points out that many Afro-Caribbean settlers, having arrived in Britain, made one of their first purchases a large radiogram that could be employed to provide music at social events (Phillips, 1982, p. 117). Hinds also observes that the radiogram became 'a standard piece of furniture' in every black dwelling (Hinds, 1980, p. 50). Social gatherings revolved around regular 'Saturday-night parties' which became a universal form of entertainment amongst Afro-Caribbean workers and a major focus of weekend leisure.

It was through these embryonic leisure institutions that many, specifically Jamaican, musical traditions first became established in Britain's black communities. The growing influence of those traditions, and the subsequent hegemony that they acquired in the Afro-Caribbean community, was in part a reflection of the numerical superiority of Jamaicans in the black population. For while the black community embraced a diversity of Caribbean nationalities, Jamaican settlers constituted, and still constitute, roughly 60 per cent of the Afro-Caribbean population in Britain (Henry *et al.*, 1982, p. 60). While the first wave of Jamaican migrants was drawn predominantly from the rural areas of the island, the second wave, in the mid-1950s, included a larger proportion of urban, working-class Jamaicans (Smith, 1977, p. 44). Howe contends that it was representatives from this latter group who were largely responsible for importing and maintaining cultural institutions such as the gambling house and the sound system (Howe, 1973).

The sound system was adapted to the specific conditions of urban British society in the form of 'shebeens' or 'blues parties' held in private houses or basements. The dwellings of working-class blacks were amongst the few resources available for independent entertainment and leisure activities. Growing out of its traditional function in the Caribbean, the shebeen served as much as a means of entertainment as a source of revenue; revenue acquired largely through sales of

alcohol to pay for exorbitant rents, make domestic purchases or send money home to dependants in the Caribbean (Clarke, 1976). The recreational function of the sound system was of particular importance in the British context as a refuge from a hostile and isolating white society. In this early period of black settlement, recorded music also provided a vital medium of political and cultural communication with the Caribbean, relaying news of the home society to its expatriates in the metropolis.

Howe notes that by 1955 these institutions were well established in the larger black communities like Notting Hill in London (Howe, 1973). The blues party and gambling house, however, were largely independent of the state's laws which regulated the activities of equivalent white working-class institutions. As Howe points out, their hours of activity stood in contradiction to the rhythm of the working day. For blacks, the all-night entertainment of the blues party represented a suspension of the ordered time and space associated with waged labour and with the dominant culture generally. In the British context this earnest pursuit of leisure in the non-work period was all the more poignant and subversive. The practices of the shebeen and gambling house indirectly impinged on the labour process by disrupting this 'leisure'–work equilibrium. As such, they came to be regarded as a threat to public order and to the discipline of urban life by state bodies such as the police. This period consequently saw the beginnings of a tradition of black cultural resistance spilling over into the public domain that was to become a key feature of black struggle in the decades to come.

As early as 1957 shebeens and gambling houses began to enter into popular white consciousness in the form of various public calls for 'tighter supervision' of the 'rash' of clubs emerging in the black community (Howe, 1980, p. 10). The small group of unemployed people whom such institutions had freed from waged labour increasingly began to attract attention from the police and the media. Police reports on the black community helped to create the climate for a 'clamp down' on shebeens and a broadening of the crusade against 'black crime' and vice (Howe, 1980, p. 10). This, the

first of many post-war moral panics around crime and race themes, together with the support granted by prosecuting magistrates, gave the police *carte blanche* to mobilise against the black community. The late 1950s consequently marked the beginnings of a massive police penetration of the community and its leisure institutions (Hall *et al.*, 1978, p. 350). All aspects of black cultural life, from wedding receptions to private parties, became liable to interruption and suppression, with police raids and prosecutions becoming commonplace in black residential areas. The pretext for such actions invariably rested on a contravention of the licensing laws through the illegal sale of alcohol (Hilliard, 1981).

Police intrusions into black cultural and leisure space continued throughout the 1960s in the form of systematic harassment of various black cultural events. The late 1950s, however, had marked something of a turning-point in the post-war history of the black community. The confrontations between blacks and local white racists on the streets of Notting Hill and Nottingham in 1958, together with the murder of an Afro-Caribbean worker, Kelso Cochrane, in the following year, had highlighted the need amongst blacks for greater self-reliance and militancy (Sivanandan, 1981/82). The events of 1958 in particular had demonstrated the willingness and capacity of blacks to organise, collectively, against racial attack. During the Notting Hill disturbances, the black community's cultural and leisure institutions had been at the centre of these struggles, with shebeens and gambling houses acting as rallying points and bases from which the defence of the community was organised (Howe, 1973, p. 335).

As a consequence of 1958, the early 1960s saw the emergence of a culturally more self-sufficient and cohesive Afro-Caribbean community in Britain. The 1960s as a whole witnessed the construction of a whole 'colony society' in the larger areas of black settlement as a defensive corporate response to the more pronounced forms of public racism in British society (Hall *et al.*, 1978, p. 351). This winning of cultural space, in which an alternative black social life could flourish, was most noticeable in the expansion of autonomous cultural, economic and leisure institutions within black

communities throughout Britain. Black restaurants, cafes, churches, food shops and a network of night-clubs and record-shops emerged to cater for the cultural and recreational needs of Afro-Caribbean people.

One of the earliest and most important of those needs had been a burgeoning demand for recorded music within the black community; for the settlement of black workers had created a substantial export market for Jamaican, and other Caribbean music, in the form of thousands of potential record-buyers. In Britain, Jamaican music found an even larger and more avid audience than in its country of origin, with sales of records frequently exceeding those in Jamaica itself during the 1960s. Britain rapidly became one of the Jamaican recording industry's largest and most lucrative markets, its fortunes intimately bound up with the tastes and demands of Britain's black population.

In the early period of black settlement it was the sound systems, along with a handful of individual entrepreneurs, that had been largely responsible for importing and disseminating Jamaican music in Britain. Much of this business was conducted on a one-to-one basis and usually involved special arrangements with personal contacts in Jamaica. However, in answer to the increasing demand for Caribbean and Jamaican music in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there emerged alongside this network an infrastructure of independent and initially white-owned enterprises specialising in the wholesale import and retail of calypso, Jamaican r'n'b and early ska. By far the most important of these labels was Island Records.

Island had been established by Chris Blackwell, a native white Jamaican, who had already been involved in record production in Jamaica. Having seen the greater marketing potential of Jamaican music in Britain however, Blackwell had signed licensing deals with all Jamaica's top producers and set up operations there in 1962. Rapidly overtaking its main rivals, Island, with its co-label Trojan, subsequently became the principal sales and distribution outlet for Jamaican music in the 1960s, releasing over 400 singles between 1962 and 1968 alone (Dalke, 1979). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Trojan took over the company's

mantle to become the largest producer and distributor of reggae in Britain, controlling over 75 per cent of the reggae market until its collapse in the mid-1970s (Gayle, 1974; Randall, 1972).

The Island–Trojan complex helped to establish an infrastructure for an indigenous reggae industry by building a mass market for Jamaican music in Britain's black communities. It was around this market that a largely self-sufficient and autonomous network of black-owned import, distribution and retail enterprises was constructed in the early-to-mid-1970s, forming the core of a thriving British reggae industry (Gayle, 1974; Gayle, 1975a). The vast majority of such enterprises were owned and run by working-class blacks, financed from their own slender resources and sustained by purchasing power within the black community (Clarke, 1980, pp. 154–5). For the smaller record labels, working on low overheads, sales of as little as 3000 records could be sufficient to make a profit, while larger enterprises like Third World were able to sell well over 50 000 to a pre-established, predominantly black market, purely through exposure in clubs, import shops and sound systems. Many of these businesses operated in close conjunction with these leisure outlets forming a tight, interlocking circuit of import, distribution and consumption.

This 'roots market', as it came to be known, was almost wholly autonomous from that of the mainstream pop industry. The lifeblood of this market was the network of import shops that existed in every major black community in urban Britain, and accounted for an estimated 95 per cent of reggae record sales (May, 1977c). Given reggae's lack of mainstream radio exposure and the refusal of many white-owned record-shops to stock it, such shops functioned as important broadcasting and promotional media for the music. More than simple retail outlets, they signified cultural space for the black community with their own characteristic practices and modes of consumption attached to them. Regular customers would expect to be played the whole range of latest releases by the shop-owner, and while a handful of albums might be on display, their attention would be focused on the celebration and critical appreciation of the music.

Of all these institutions, however, the sound system remained the principal medium through which reggae was transmitted, heard and collectively experienced within the Afro-Caribbean community. From the small nucleus of shebeens in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the British-based sound-system tradition had evolved into a distinct genre of its Jamaican parent form. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, sounds had become established in all Britain's major black communities. Many were run by younger operators who adopted similar titles to their Jamaican forebears such as Duke Reid and Sir Coxsone (Gayle, 1976a). The sound system became a key pivot of leisure activity amongst a large section of the black community, and a regular accompaniment to a wide range of Afro-Caribbean social functions and family occasions. Moreover, as one of the main self-supporting areas of black life, the sound system, and the reggae industry more generally, also became important survival strategies and sources of income apart from waged labour.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Britain's sound-system culture began to undergo something of a transition, one partly dictated by the changes in Jamaican music described in the previous chapter. Oppositional songs began to predominate, with Rasta and African themes increasingly working themselves into the music. The increasing preponderance of this 'roots' music, with its 'harder' rhythms and more 'conscious' lyrics, served to politicise dances and blues parties in a new way. The atmosphere at such events, Gayle observes, became tangibly more tense and 'dread', the attitude of dance-goers more serious and reflective (Gayle, 1976a).

These changes were just some of the signs of a much wider process of politicisation occurring in the black community generally in this period, a process of major significance in the history of post-war black struggle in Britain. Such changes, however, were determined not only by developments *within* the British black community, but also by a number of wider political shifts in the black diaspora as a whole. Together, these shifts laid the basis for a profound political transformation in the Afro-Caribbean community in Britain

during the 1970s, a transformation most apparent in the mass engagement of young blacks with the pan-Africanist movement of Rastafari.

2.2 'Step forward, youth'

The predicament of younger Afro-Caribbeans born or brought up in Britain had been steadily worsening since the late 1960s, particularly in the spheres of education, employment and relations with the police. Far from guaranteeing 'assimilation', black youth's experience of the British education system only served to depress their opportunities for employment and advancement by positioning them at the lowest end of the labour market (Hall *et al.*, 1978, p. 340). Those young blacks who had passed through the school system felt the closure of the job market on racial grounds all the more acutely. Confronted by racism from employers, and disproportionately affected by Britain's gathering economic crisis, Afro-Caribbean school-leavers faced an unemployment situation far worse than that of their white peers (Hiro, 1973). This predicament was further compounded by a growing polarisation between the police and the black community generally, as a result of increasingly territorial and repressive policing tactics in black areas (John, 1970; Humphry, 1972). Such tactics bore down particularly heavily on black youth, who were singled out for especially brutal treatment. The extent of such tactics was such that by the early-to-mid-1970s police malpractice had become a regular experience for large numbers of young blacks.

The recognition and experience of institutional racism and economic deprivation amongst young blacks had the effect of stimulating forms of cultural and political consciousness that had been in the process of emerging in the black community as a whole over the 1960s. Island affiliations within the Afro-Caribbean community had already been gradually receding since the earliest days of black settlement under the immediate pressures and shared experiences of racism in Britain. Accelerated by the impact of black liberation

movements in Africa and America, the 1960s had witnessed the growth of a mass political consciousness based on a common 'black' identity which owed no allegiance to any one particular Caribbean nationality. By the early 1970s, this homogenisation of Caribbean identities was becoming increasingly noticeable amongst the young.

One of the earliest manifestations of these processes was the widespread adoption by young blacks, regardless of their Caribbean nationality or that of their parents, of a generalised form of Jamaican-based creole language, or 'patois' (Hall *et al.*, 1978, p. 351). Nowhere was this process more evident than in the education system where patois was taken up by young blacks, reinvested with political meaning and used as a key weapon of cultural resistance. Its denigration by white teachers as 'monkey talk' or 'inferior' English only served to underline its importance amongst young blacks as a refusal of standard English and an assertion of an alternative black subjectivity. Creole became one of the principal vehicles through which the school's attempts to gain cultural hegemony over young blacks was contested. Used by black pupils to subvert and challenge the authority of the teacher, it functioned as a means of opposing the white middle-class forms in which education was experienced and received (Donald, 1982, pp. 45–7). For many young blacks, 'patois' became *the* language and symbol of opposition, used self-consciously, and in preference to standard English, as an expression of cultural strength and a code of solidarity both inside and outside the school context.

The mass adoption of patois by Afro-Caribbean youth was but one example of the rising tempo of black cultural and political struggle in this period. It was only one aspect of a generalised process of radicalisation that included school strikes, refusal to register with social security agencies, resistance to police harassment and a widespread rejection of low-paid, manual labour. The key to this explosion of political consciousness amongst black youth lay primarily in their mass engagement with the political culture and philosophy of Rastafari. However, while the structural position of young Afro-Caribbeans in the early 1970s provided the fertile soil in which these new forms of politicisation

could grow, it was developments in the reggae tradition which initially sparked them into motion.

Given the cultural and economic dependency of the British reggae market on the Jamaican recording industry, it was unsurprising that the political developments in the reggae tradition in the late 1960s and early 1970s should have had such a resounding significance for the black community in Britain. With the increasing commodification of reggae, internationally, this umbilical cord between Britain and the Caribbean became a unique conduit of latent political forces which had major implications not only for blacks, but also, ultimately, for whites.

The sequence of historical events that these processes followed has already been outlined by Paul Gilroy, beginning with Island Records' attempt to build a market for reggae amongst both black and white audiences, through the release of the film *The Harder They Come*, to the careful promotion of the Wailers by Chris Blackwell (Gilroy, 1982, pp. 297–8). While initially falling far short of its intended impact on white listeners, the Wailers' music, Gilroy observes, had a cataclysmic effect on the black community. The defiance and rebellion expressed in their first two albums for Island, *Catch a Fire* and *Burnin'*, presented a compulsive unity of populist, anti-imperialist and Rasta themes, which 'set the black community aflame' (Gilroy, 1982, p. 299). The race- and class-consciousness expounded in songs such as 'Get Up, Stand Up' and 'Burnin' and Lootin'', and the pan-Africanist–historical themes of 'Slave Driver' and '400 Years', fell on the receptive ears of young blacks, whose experience they were seen to address directly (Gayle, 1976a). Together with the Wailers' tour of Britain in the early 1970s, this unprecedented exposure of Rastafari aroused intense interest in the movement within the black community. The Wailers' music inspired the radical consciousness of a whole generation of Afro-Caribbeans by providing them with a coherent political philosophy through which to theorise and contest their oppression.

The Wailers, however, were far from being the only reggae musicians to contribute to the popularisation of Rasta.

Transmitted largely through the sound systems, roots artists such as Big Youth, I-Roy, U-Roy, Dillinger, Junior Byles and Max Romeo made a considerable impact on young blacks in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The political messages disseminated by these artists proved to be of equal relevance to conditions in Britain and in Jamaica. By the latter half of the 1970s a whole new generation of international roots artists had emerged, following in the footsteps of The Wailers. The music of Burning Spear, Gregory Isaacs, Dennis Brown and Black Uhurù, for example, provided young blacks with a continuing source of cultural nourishment and political education, and contributed immeasurably to the further popularisation of Rastafari as an international social movement.

The 1970s as a whole were characterised by an extraordinary degree of synchronisation between the political ideologies expounded in Jamaican popular music and the conditions of race and class oppression experienced by blacks in Britain. From 'Message to a Black Man' through 'Step Forward Youth', to 'Police and Thieves' and 'War Inna Babylon', Jamaican music proved consistently able to articulate a politics that was resonant to the predicament of black British youth. British sound systems played a key role in diffusing, organising and consolidating the growth of this, Rasta-informed, political consciousness. The early and mid-1970s saw a dramatic increase in the number of more powerful and militant 'youth' sounds committed to the politics of Rastafari. The names of these sounds, such as Jah Shaka-Zulu Warrior, Sufferer Hi-fi, Frontline International and People's War, reflected the upsurge in Rasta consciousness and militancy amongst black youth. By the late 1970s a vibrant, youth-orientated sound-system culture had become established in virtually every major urban area of Britain. Organised into units of ten to fifteen members, each with delegated roles and responsibilities, and coordinating a variety of maintenance skills, sounds became a way of life and an important form of cultural self-activity for thousands of black youth (Burt and Hilliman, 1978). In the face of continuing and widespread discrimination from white leisure

institutions, they provided young blacks with a valuable cultural resource and an alternative sphere of public entertainment.

Many of the new city-centre discos that flourished in the early 1970s under the management of large entertainment corporations, operated racist entry quotas or openly excluded blacks (Mungham, 1976, pp. 88–9). Such discriminatory door policies, together with the inability of most clubs to cater for black musical tastes, forced many young blacks to build their own autonomous leisure spaces out of a small circuit of town-halls, youth clubs, community centres and black-owned or black-frequented night-clubs (Caesar, 1976a, 1976b; Gayle, 1974, p. 14). Many sounds established residencies at these venues and with their immense drawing power would regularly play to large crowds of young blacks. As centres of cultural and leisure activity, such venues represented space won through struggle and were, accordingly, invested with considerable political meaning. Moreover, as some of the few sites in which blackness could be openly expressed and political statements freely aired, they also signified the ritual boundaries of the community, transgressions of which were seen as symbolic violations of its space.

With the increasing criminalisation of black youth's political culture in the early 1970s, blues parties, dances and a whole range of other cultural venues became explicitly identified as sources of disorder and criminality by certain state bodies. In particular, such venues began to receive unprecedented attention from the police, for whom they represented an unacceptable level of black cultural autonomy that lay outside their jurisdiction. The police response was systematically to suppress a whole range of black cultural and political activities in a number of large-scale operations during the 1970s. The targets for such operations were invariably those which held some symbolic significance for the black community, such as restaurants, night-clubs, blues parties, local fairs, reggae concerts and black youth clubs (Gutzmore, 1978; Institute of Race Relations, 1979). Mass police intrusions into such spheres, and persistent police harassment of black events generally sparked off a series of

large-scale confrontations and clashes between 1971 and 1976. This period accordingly witnessed a dramatic escalation of the struggle over cultural space, as the community's leisure institutions became the focus of a particularly intense political conflict with the police. Against a backdrop of growing concern over the 'problem' of black youth, the police considered any mass gathering of young blacks to be a threat to public order. This was graphically demonstrated by the events which surrounded the 1976 Notting Hill carnival.

From its inception in the mid-1960s, the carnival had steadily grown from its traditional Eastern Caribbean base to become the most important public cultural celebration of the black masses in Britain. Gutzmore argues that the introduction of reggae and sound systems in 1976 into a traditionally local, calypso-based event, dramatically increased its political content and cultural appeal (Gutzmore, 1978). Attempts by the local authorities to ban carnival and remove it from the streets were unsuccessful, and the police were consequently drafted in as the primary agents of control. To them, the carnival represented a political and cultural threat. The number of officers deployed was consequently increased from the sixty local constables used at the 1975 carnival to approximately 15 000 at the 1976 event (*Black Music*, August 1979, p. 26).

The transformed carnival went ahead, attracting blacks from all over Britain and swelling the numbers attending from 100 000 in 1974 to 500 000 in 1976 (*Race Today*, September 1976, pp. 173–7). The harsh enforcement of the ban on alcohol and marijuana, together with the indiscriminate use of brutal policing measures, were taken as extreme provocation by young blacks, precipitating fierce resistance by them.

Notting Hill was the first major public confrontation between the state and the black community in the post-war period. The comprehensive defeat of the police's attempts at the carnival's mass cultural suppression secured its place as a central symbol of defiance and survival within the black community, and marked a second turning-point in the history of black struggle in Britain, following the events of 1958.

While Notting Hill signalled a new stage in the black

community's mass confrontation with the state, it also marked the beginnings of a more thoroughgoing and widespread impact of black cultural and political life on the white community. It was of little coincidence that the period in the run-up to Notting Hill had seen the symbols and rhetoric of Rastafari acquire a mass character in the black community. The confidence and militancy shown by black youth there was a clear indication of the central position that the movement had come to occupy at the heart of black struggle in Britain.

The forms of cultural and political struggle evolved by young blacks in this period, while shaped by their specific experiences of racism and stamped by uniquely British circumstances, did not represent a 'break' with the political and cultural traditions of older Afro-Caribbeans. Rather, they were a rearticulation of forms and themes echoed throughout the Afro-Caribbean community and rooted ultimately in the long-term musical, linguistic and political continuities described in the previous chapter. The musical and cultural forms that acquired such a resonance amongst the Afro-Caribbean young, such as Rastafari and reggae, were key components of a mass social movement whose characteristics could not be equated with those of white youth subcultures. These forms achieved a lateral scope that cut across age and gender divisions within the black community, the broad appeal of their themes and discourses amongst blacks making it difficult to conceive of them as mere youth subcultural styles.

While thousands of young black men and women embraced the stylistic trappings of Rastafari, in the form of colours, locks and headgear, the movement's political scope extended far beyond its more flamboyant adherents. Gilroy has rightly argued that Rasta symbols stand at one end of a broad continuum of belief which spans both age and gender differences (Gilroy, 1982, p. 290). Attempts to define Rasta affiliates by empirical 'membership' criteria, he argues, or by their adherence to a fixed set of core tenets of belief such as repatriation or Haile Selassie as God, signal a fundamental misunderstanding of the movement's populist character. For

Rastafari grows out of the religious, cultural and political traditions in Jamaican popular culture as a whole. It attempts to bring order to the practical ideologies, political traditions and communalist sensibilities that already existed amongst Afro-Caribbean peoples (Gilroy, 1987).

These continuities are perhaps most visible in common oral traditions and political–philosophical concepts. Rasta language forms, for example, are an outgrowth and reworking of Jamaican 'patois', in which standard English words and phrases have been reconstructed and given new meanings in accordance with Rasta's world-view and political interventions (Pollard, 1980, 1982). It is through such speech patterns that the political culture and philosophy of Rastafari has brought its greatest influence to bear on the black community. For more than any other cultural form, it is the operation of this shared language which signals the extent of the movement's appeal. The reggae tradition, through DJ-ing in particular, has played a key role here in popularising Rasta speech patterns amongst young blacks, serving as a rich source of terms and catchphrases in their everyday speech.

The use of creole forms in general remains one of the single most important symbols of black identity, and the principal means by which the disparate strands of black youth culture are bound together and the boundaries of the black community signified. The centrality of these linguistic practices points, once again, to the importance of oral traditions which lie at the very heart of expressive black cultures.

By the mid-1970s, the common currency of Rasta terminology and political concepts amongst young blacks was being signalled by the ubiquitous use of words and expressions such as 'seen', 'pressure', 'Babylon' and 'dread' (Small, 1983; Hewitt, 1986). It was not surprising that concepts such as 'Babylon system' with its incisive critique of the systematic nature of capitalist oppression, should prove so widely relevant to young blacks, given the nature of their encounters with the state. The notion of 'Babylon' provided black youth with a critical tool with which to grasp the race and class mechanisms responsible for their subordination,

while the discourses of 'truths and rights' and 'equal rights and justice' supplied a complementary ideology of liberation which insisted on progressive and revolutionary change.

The dynamics and conditions of racial oppression in the British context lent the politics of Rasta an added poignancy for young blacks, placing the movement's positive evaluation of blackness to the forefront of its appeal. Rasta's discourses of exile, estrangement and dispossession proved highly apt to the circumstances of blacks in Britain, while its notions of 'tribulation' and 'sufferation', founded on the specificity of black experience, provided a cultural bulwark against the racism of the dominant society.

With its materialist critique of the power structures of capitalism, and its negation of the ideologies which supported them, Rasta amounted to a whole method of political thinking and 'overstanding' social reality. The importance attached in the movement to the practice of 'reasoning', the active questing after knowledge through what Gilroy has termed 'collective processes of dialectical enquiry', pointed to Rasta's democratic and open-ended political philosophy, in which different interpretations and levels of identification were possible within a broad structure of central themes (Gilroy, 1982). As a result of such practices, the key tenets of Rasta philosophy remain a continual source of debate and reassessment.

The intervention of women into the movement is perhaps the clearest indication of how its discourses remain open to specific modes of interpretation according to the different needs and experiences of its adherents. The Afro-centric aesthetics expounded by Rastafari proved particularly relevant to young black women for whom they offered an antidote to the commodified images of femininity and sexuality in white, 'Western' culture. Black women used the space they had won for themselves in the movement as a platform from which to wage their own distinctive form of feminist struggle. By questioning some of the more theological doctrines and taboos which placed restrictions on women, and by appealing to the distinction between God and Man, black women have been able to redefine the image of black Rasta-womanhood and register their centrality to the

movement. The forms of communalism, kinship and supportive child-care developed by Rasta women have provided a crucial foundation to the movement as a whole in Britain, supplying a base from which black women have proceeded to organise themselves into welfare collectives, women's groups and autonomous educational groups (*Caribbean Times*, 1981).

The selective appropriation of Rasta concepts by those not fully engaged in the movement is an indication of Rastafari's mass character as a social movement. As an historical and political overview of racial oppression, Rasta was available as an analytic resource to large numbers of black people. The sociological counterposition of 'false' ('criminal'/secular) to 'true' ('religious') Rastas conceals the processes by which the movement's language, symbols and ideals have been used to bring philosophical and political meaning to individual and collective action by blacks in general. The relevance of Rasta discourse, moreover, to other social groups beyond the Afro-Caribbean community, including Asian and white youth, is just one example of the broad and diverse uses to which these discourses have been put, and one which fundamentally undermines the notion of Rastafari as a 'separatist' 'subculture' of withdrawal.

The widespread use of kinship terms like 'dread', 'Idren' and 'rasta' as generalised forms of address amongst those with no outward signs of affiliation is perhaps the clearest indication that these forms are more deep-rooted and extensive within the black community than is commonly assumed. For in the movement's insistence that all black people are Rastas lies a confirmation of its ability to create and reaffirm an interpretive, spiritual/historical community. It is in Rastafari's attempt to foster forms of organic solidarity and to establish an alternative set of ideals and a Utopian elsewhere (Zion), that the movement reveals its origins within black Christianity and its overlapping connections with other, contemporary, black spiritual and social movements.

2.3 'UK bubbling': British reggae comes of age

Perhaps one of the most significant developments in the evolution of black British culture since the mid-1970s has been the emergence of an indigenous reggae tradition forged in the crucible of specifically British circumstances by second- and third-generation black Britons.

While expatriate Jamaican and Afro-Caribbean musicians had long been living and performing in Britain, the emergence of a characteristically British genre of reggae music began in the early and mid-1970s with the appearance of a whole new generation of reggae musicians inspired by Rastafari in general and the Wailers music in particular. A whole string of British reggae groups, such as Misty, Aswad, Steel Pulse, Matumbi and Black Slate, emerged in this period, reflecting the growing political awareness and confidence of black youth. Songs like Delroy Washington's 'Streets of Ladbroke Grove', Steel Pulse's 'Handsworth Revolution' and Tubby Cat Kelly's 'Don't call us no immigrants' sought to articulate experiences and conditions of oppression that were specific to black life in urban Britain. As Keith Drummond, lead singer of Black Slate, explained:

> You don't know what they're going through in Jamaica. You can only read about it secondhand. So sing about the sufferation you're going through here . . . They say you can't make reggae unless you're a sufferer. Well, its not just the Jamaicans who suffer. We suffer too, and now we're singing about our own condition.
>
> (*Black Music*, July 1977, p. 18)

This gradual weakening of artistic and creative dependency on Jamaican forms of expression is a key feature in the development of British reggae. While, musically, many of the first wave of indigenous reggae groups were heavily derivative of the Wailers, the emergence of the Lovers' Rock movement in the mid- and late-1970s was the first sign of a specifically British genre of the reggae tradition (Futrell, 1980; Garratt, 1985). Lovers' Rock provided a showcase for the talents of a new generation of black British female reggae vocalists. The

movement partly reflected the increased financial strength and autonomy of young black women in Britain and owed a great deal, in terms of both consumption and production, to their support and independent activity.

Lovers' Rock emerged initially as something of a reaction to the harder, male-oriented rhythms of Jamaican roots reggae. Roots did not always cater for the specific tastes of young women who demanded that the music represent their experiences and meet their needs (Futrell, 1980). Young black women began to make their presence felt in the reggae tradition as vocalists in their own right. A plethora of artists and all-female reggae groups emerged over the latter half of the 1970s, including, amongst others, Brown Sugar, '15,16,17', Black Harmony, Alpha, Simplicity, Sister Love, Cassandra, Louisa Marks, Jean Adebambo, Carroll Thompson and Janet Kay. Musically, Lovers' Rock reconciled the popularity of soft soul and reggae amongst many black women by merging the two into a specifically British reggae genre (Garratt, 1985). The sophisticated style projected by many of the music's female performers also offered an alternative model of black womanhood to the 'roots' image of Rastafari (Steward and Garratt, 1984).

Lovers' Rock acquired a universal appeal in the black community that traversed all age groups and both sexes. Its mass popularity was signalled by the huge sales achieved by artists like Carroll Thompson, whose album, *Hopelessly in Love*, sold over 35 000, and by the domination of the reggae charts by black female artists in the latter half of the 1970s and the early 1980s (Garratt, 1985). In dance-halls, blues and parties, Lovers' Rock provided something of a relief from the heavier, roots-orientated Jamaican music which had dominated the sound-system scene since the early 1970s. The majority of Lovers' Rock records were built around slow, sensuous, one-drop rhythms perfectly crafted for dancing purposes. The social relations of the music's consumption were central to its popularity and enjoyment. The close couples dancing, so characteristic of Lovers' Rock, served to foster solidarity between black men and women at a deeper level than mere 'courtship'.

Such was the impact of Lovers' Rock on the sound-system

scene that, in response to the growing demand for the music, a number of identifiably Lovers' Rock sounds began to emerge, attracting large numbers of female followers. Sound systems in general began to cater for a wider cross-section of tastes and needs within the black community. Smaller 'hi-fi' sets and 'big people' sounds, playing specifically for older black people, were increasingly to be found entertaining patrons in pubs and private parties with a diverse selection of calypso, soul, Lovers' Rock, 'revives' (oldies) and soca (a fusion of calypso and disco). This sphere of black entertainment was only the tip of a much larger 'invisible' market for 'big people' music, one that catered more for older and female record-buyers and existed completely outside the networks of mainstream pop.

The Lovers' Rock boom precipitated a number of changes in many of the hitherto male-dominated spheres of reggae culture in Britain. Fresh from their success in the Lovers' Rock market, many young black women went on to make their presence felt in all areas of the reggae industry not only as musicians and vocalists, but also as DJs, producers, label-owners and sound-system operators. Women DJs such as Ranking Ann, Bionic Rhona, Lorna Gee and Sister Audrey brought their own distinctly female styles, humour and militancy to bear on the toasting tradition. Recent years have also seen the emergence of a new kind of female Lovers' Rock artist, whose songs combine emotional and romantic/sexual themes with cultural and political issues. Ranking Ann's 'Liberated Woman' and Sister Audrey's 'English Girl', for example, related gender-specific issues to everyday social relationships, addressing both anti-racist and anti-sexist themes with equal assertiveness.

The success of Lovers' Rock also gave a financial shot in the arm to the British reggae industry, helping to break its dependency on Jamaica. The successful recording and manufacture of reggae for local, domestic and sound-system consumption by pioneering artists like Dennis Bovell finally put paid to the notion that the 'authentic' version could only come from 'yard'. In the early 1980s this process began to be accelerated by developments in the Jamaican industry increasingly beset by major problems of economic recession

and creative inertia associated with the Seaga period of government. In response to the dearth of creative, oppositional music emanating from Jamaica, this period saw something of a revival in music from the earlier, and more vibrant era of rocksteady, and a shift in the locus of creativity in reggae production from Jamaica to Britain. The early 1980s consequently saw new studios, musicians, artists and labels flourishing, together with an increasing preponderance of reggae hits being manufactured and recorded in Britain. The wider political events of 1980/81, such as the Deptford Fire, in which thirteen young black people died in mysterious circumstances, and the wave of insurrection which subsequently swept Britain's inner-city areas, had the effect not only of galvanising black political feeling, but also of helping to unleash a burst of musical creativity within the indigenous reggae tradition. In the wake of these events, a number of records were released commenting on the riots, the fire and their political aftermath. It was in the DJ tradition that this thematic and stylistic break was initially, and most dramatically registered.

While the addressing of DJ lyrics to local events and circumstances was nothing new on the sound-system scene, by the early 1980s new, characteristically British, linguistic forms and terms of address were beginning to emerge. These trends precipitated the emergence of an original, wholly indigenous style of British Dj-ing, with its own unique inflexions and subject-matter, perhaps best exemplified by the 'fast-style chat' of 'MC-ing'. The art of 'fast style' revolved around the ability to improvise and deliver a non-stop stream of lyrics at great speed, while rhyming as much as possible. Many such lyrics narrated incidents and anecdotes and relayed images of urban life often entirely specific to Britain. Through these particularly articulate forms of social and political commentary, and the employment of complex narratives and characterisations, the exponents of the new style captured the specificity of the black British experience more closely than any other form of indigenous reggae hitherto. This departure was also signalled in the structure of the music itself. While still relying on reprocessed 'standard rhythms from the rocksteady era, the uptempo and

computerised drum and bass rhythms used in many records represented a clear break from the caricatured musical and rhythmic patterns of much early British reggae.

Smiley Culture's 'Cockney Translation' was a prime example of the new style with its fast, 4/4 drum and bass rhythm. The song typified the fast-style genre with its distinctive combination of patois terminology and cockney rhyming slang, and its literal phrase by phrase 'translation' from one into the other.

Perhaps more than any other song, 'Cockney Translation' marked the coming-of-age of the indigenous reggae tradition, for it represented one of the first genuinely popular forms of black British culture to attempt to incorporate and transcend the fundamental contradictions of black Britishness by redefining the concept of 'Britishness' itself. By reflecting the very real fluid linguistic situation that existed amongst young blacks, 'Cockney Translation' captured something of the changes that had occurred in black British culture since 1981. The song itself was premissed on the existence of a rich, indigenous black verbal culture which encompassed a diversity of linguistic practices and speech forms, one in which new, anglicised words and phrases were generated at a high rate of turnover. It was a culture in which young blacks did indeed move freely between 'standard' English grammar and vocabulary, a Jamaican-derived form of black British creole and regional working-class accents, combining influences from all three.

The rearticulation of Caribbean creoles and Jamaican popular music forms according to the changing expressive needs of black youth is symptomatic of how black British culture as a whole has been mediated by urban British experience, and how the meaning of blackness itself is being constantly remade and redefined according to British conditions. The content and character of that culture has been, and continues to be, shaped, not only by British, urban, working-class culture, but also by external cultural and political influences from elsewhere in the black diaspora. Black British culture has always been comprised of a complex of independent but interrelated parts which have drawn on the culture and politics of blacks both in the Caribbean and

in America. While Rasta and reggae culture were certainly the dominant political and cultural forms in the black community over the 1970s, they were by no means the only ones. Afro-American culture and music, together with various forms of black Christianity, have been, and remain, highly influential in the black community as complementary and parallel vehicles of expression.

In the early 1980s, partly in response to the relative stagnation and temporary redundance of Jamaican reggae, the centre of gravity of black musical and cultural identification began to shift somewhat, not only towards Britain, but also towards black America. The political rejuvenation of soul music and the internationalisation of the New York counter-culture of hip-hop renewed the relevance of black American music amongst many potential young black British reggae affiliates. Its themes of urban survival and its body culture of dance and movement proved more applicable to conditions of mass structural unemployment, and to the experience of police harassment and drug abuse, than much of the music emanating from Jamaica. In the oral style of the South Bronx, Gilroy has observed, young blacks:

> found a language which allowed them to speak directly about the social and political contradictions generated in the urban crises of the overdeveloped world. 'The Message' had hit home. Its imagery of urban entropy, its resolute modernity and targets of its criticism all contrasted sharply with the language and style of Rastafari which were grounded in antiquity (Gilroy, 1987, p. 190).

The eclipse of Rasta's cultural hegemony opened the way to a more pluralist balance between the diverse influences and traditions which comprised black British culture. While the more dogmatic tenets of Rasta, together with its implicit distancing from 'Babylon society', were discarded, many of its spiritual and political concepts, including its stress on black unity, its pan-Africanism and its analysis of racial domination, were maintained or articulated in different forms by the revitalised church or from within soul and hip-hop cultures. The boundaries between these various cultural and

political elements, as a result, became increasingly blurred. Premissed on the continuities between 'rapping' and 'toasting', and 'scratching' and dub, the previously separate cultures of soul and reggae began to coexist and overlap at several points, for example, in the mixed programming of soul and reggae on pirate radio stations, in the playing of reggae at soul venues, the opening-up of sound systems to soul culture (evident in the influence of rap on fast-style) and the mass appeal of the new styles of DJ-ing amongst funk and hip-hop devotees.

The form of consciousness articulated in Smiley Culture's 'Cockney Translation' signalled the passing of black British culture into a new phase of political maturation, and marked the beginnings of a new kind of offensive on the dominant culture. As the expressive culture of young blacks has continued to evolve into new, organic and uniquely British forms the impact of the black presence on British life has become more widespread and profound. The populist appeal of black culture and music has made it a central reference-point for the struggles of other young people, creating an important space for dialogue between black and white youth. For while the discourse of 'Cockney Translation' captured something of the race and class character of black struggle in Britain, through its ambiguous terms of racial and ethnic identification, its ability to bridge the cultural identities of both black and white working-class youth also suggested something fundamental about the changing relationship between different sections of young people in urban Britain. Its commentary on the association of black and white urban languages highlighted the syncretic nature of cultural forms generated at the juncture of race and class experience in contemporary British society. Having looked at some of those forms in relation to the black community, I want now to move on and explore some of their effects with regard to the white community.

3 Reggae Gone Clear

3.1 From bluebeat to Trojan

In the previous chapter we saw how an embryonic network for the wholesale import, distribution and retail of Jamaican music was initially established in Britain by a handful of small, largely white-owned enterprises. While many of these enterprises were initially set up in response to demand from a predominantly black custom for Afro-American, West African and various forms of Caribbean music, it soon became evident that a significant minority of whites were also showing interest in the music. While larger companies like EMI attempted to break into this nascent market for black music by manufacturing their own forms of calypso and high-life, for example, it was the smaller independent companies such as Melodisc who had the greatest success.

While established as early as 1946, Melodisc began to import Jamaican music specifically in the late 1950s, launching its Bluebeat label as an outlet for ska (Clarke, 1980, pp. 139–40). The label grew to be of such importance to the marketing of Jamaican music in Britain in the early 1960s that the genre of ska as a whole came to be known by the name 'bluebeat'. Melodisc acquired the release rights to music from many of Jamaica's leading producers and artists, particularly Prince Buster, whose British releases appeared almost exclusively on the Bluebeat label (Gillett, 1983, p. 379). Despite having no independent distribution of its own, Melodisc was nevertheless able to sell large quantities of Jamaican music to white consumers throughout the 1960s.

Of all the recording companies involved in the marketing of Jamaican music, however, both in this early period and in the decades that followed, it was Island Records that played by far the most important part in connecting the music to a mass white market. I noted earlier how Island had been

established in Britain by Chris Blackwell in 1962. Once in Britain, Blackwell continued his attempts to manufacture a more marketable and widely acceptable form of Jamaican music. Island's first successful venture was in 1963 with Millie's 'My Boy Lollipop'. 'My Boy Lollipop' was essentially a diluted form of ska and was reputedly based on a hit by the Jamaican group, the Migil 5, entitled 'Mockingbird Hill'. The song was recorded by mainly English session musicians and employed a full orchestral backing. It was a highly polished production, its clean treble-oriented sound far removed from the vigorous, bass-dominated recordings emanating from Jamaica during the same period. It was perhaps for this very reason that 'My Boy Lollipop' reached number two in the British pop charts in 1964 and went on to become an international hit, selling 6 million copies worldwide (Rice *et al.*, 1977, p. 128).

The huge success of 'My Boy Lollipop' signalled the commercial potential of mass marketing a popularised form of Jamaican music to whites. As far as the 1960s were concerned, however, the record remained something of an anomaly. It owed much of its success to being licensed to Philips, the smallest of the four major recording companies, along with Decca, EMI and Pye, who between them controlled over 90 per cent of the British record market in the early and mid-1960s (Gillett, 1983; Frith, 1983, p. 97). The monopoly exercised by these major recording companies over access to mainstream retail outlets, national distribution networks and broadcasting apparatuses formed an impenetrable matrix against smaller, independent labels like Island. Apart from Millie's 'My Boy Lollipop', only two other Jamaican singles made the top twenty between 1962 and 1969, Desmond Dekker's '007' and Prince Buster's 'Al Capone', both only after months of exposure in the clubs. Despite this lack of pop chart success, Island continued to sell large quantities of Jamaican records to white audiences throughout the 1960s. An example of the selling power of some of Island's early releases was provided by the mass popularity of Derrick and Patsy's 'Housewives Choice', which reputedly sold 18 000 copies in the first five days of its release in 1962 (Williams, 1972a).

Seeing the resistance to Jamaican music in the established pop industry, Island, from 1967 onward, began to expand into the more lucrative rock market. With the money earned from the licensing and distribution of Jamaican music, Blackwell proceeded to build a profitable rock 'empire' between 1968 and 1972, based largely on album sales in Europe and America. Reggae releases were phased out from the Island label which became reserved almost exclusively for the company's roster of rock artists that included groups such as Free, Jethro Tull, Fairport Convention, Traffic and King Crimson. As Gillett points out, this was a calculated move by Blackwell to dissociate the label from the image it had acquired in the music industry:

> after all those years as a specialist minority music label, Island had to be seen to shake off its associations in order to be taken seriously as a 'pop' and 'rock' label by the British media . . . Prejudices die hard and the simplest way was for Island to drop all West Indian names from its roster.
>
> (Gillett, 1983, p. 390)

Most Jamaican music was subsequently released on Trojan, Island's partner label formed in 1968 and previously a distribution organisation called the Beat and Commercial Company. While continuing to supply the roots market, Trojan followed in Island's footsteps to seek a marketable formula for Jamaican music, and undertook the task of breaking down some of the prejudices of the entertainment industry and media towards reggae (Clarke, 1980). Trojan released a whole series of 'pop reggae' productions, aimed specifically at a mass white audience. Although some of these were manufactured in Britain, most were recorded by Jamaican producers like Harry J and Lesley Kong who were aware of the commercial demands of the wider, international market. Kong in particular explored the possibilities of a popularised version of reggae that could overcome radio resistance, arguing that the music 'should be remixed to be pleasing to the BBC airwaves' (Mulligan, 1969, p. 11). Trojan flooded the British pop market with a whole spate of

ballads, gimmicky instrumentals and cover versions of pop and soul hits, most of which employed softer melodies, weaker bass-lines and string accompaniments.

The BBC's newly created national pop station, Radio One, succumbed to the Trojan approach, and the company achieved major success with a total of seventeen Top Twenty hits between 1969 and 1972 (Rice *et al.*, 1977). The most successful of these was Desmond Dekker's 'Israelites' which reached number one in 1969 and was the first in a whole string of Top Ten hits that included Bob and Marcia's 'Young, Gifted and Black', The Upsetters' 'Return of the Django' and Jimmy Cliff's 'Wonderful World'. The following year also saw the Pioneers and Desmond Dekker, again, reach the top five, while in 1971 Dave and Ansell Collins had a number one hit with 'Double Barrel'. In this same period, budget-priced compilation LPs in Trojan's *Reggae Chartbusters* and *Tighten Up* series also proved highly popular within the mainstream record-buying market regularly selling an average of 60 000 copies each (*Melody Maker*, 21 July 1972, p. 15).

The pop reggae boom of the late 1960s and early 1970s was the first significant intervention of Jamaican music into mainstream pop culture. Trojan's success alerted the music industry to the mass marketing potential of reggae amongst a white audience. One music business commentator regarded the 'mass market breakthrough of reggae' as being one of the most important developments in the industry during 1969. 'Against all odds' he observed 'reggae has become a consistently saleable commodity.' However, the same writer conceded that the 'essential monotonous simplicity of the sound makes it an unlikely contender for mass appreciation' (Mulligan, 1969, p. 11).

Such doubts suggested the deep prejudices that existed against Jamaican music throughout many sections of the music industry. Some of the strongest of these lay within the rock market, where Jamaican music had become the object of considerable hostility. Here reggae met with trenchant criticism from fans who complained about its 'lowering of musical standards' and its associations with skinheads (see 4.1) (*Melody Maker*, 29 November 1969, p. 40). For middle-

class rock fans, reggae was simply 'yobbo' music, its skinhead connotations 'odious to any half-educated mind', while musically it was judged to be 'boring', 'repetitive', 'joke music' and a form of 'rhythmic rot' (*Melody Maker*, 29 November 1969, p. 40).

The widespread hostility towards reggae within the rock market constituted a major marketing problem for those recording companies seeking to 'break' Jamaican music to a wider audience. For companies like Island, who had a secure foothold in the rock market, such problems were especially apparent. Island's answer was to evolve a specific set of marketing strategies to circumvent the racism which narrowed reggae's appeal.

The company's apparent 'withdrawal' from reggae in the late 1960s, was not quite as complete as it originally appeared (Gillett, 1983, p. 390). Island maintained their involvement in Jamaican music through artists like Jimmy Cliff, the company's prototype reggae star, and through the film project, *The Harder They Come*. The use of film to render Jamaican music more accessible to white consumers was to become a familiar marketing strategy of Island (see 3.3). *The Harder They Come* was intended to whet the appetites of white record-buyers by presenting them with a caricatured and romanticised vision of the music's place of origin (Gilroy, 1982). However, while the film generated modest sales for its accompanying sound-track album, it failed to generate the level of mass white interest for which Island had hoped. Blackwell turned his attention to the company's newly signed Jamaican group, the Wailers.

Island's campaign with the Wailers, and with Bob Marley specifically, established several important precedents in the mass marketing of reggae which were to have a major bearing on the way the music was subsequently handled by the international leisure industry. The period 1972–6 was consequently something of a watershed in the history of Jamaican music internationally. For it was largely in this period that Island, through their campaign with Marley, opened up the possibilities of mass white consumption which were so crucial to the development of white youth culture in the latter half of the 1970s and the early 1980s.

3.2 Roots *Natty Dread*

In an attempt to anticipate trends in the rock market, Island had signed the Wailers in 1971, with a view to building a new and larger audience for reggae. Island evolved a specific promotional campaign to market the group as an alternative to the company's rock artists who by the early to mid-1970s had already begun to fade in popularity. The thinking behind this move was later confirmed by Blackwell who admitted that rock music had become 'stale' and that Marley's music had 'an energy and a fresh feel to it' (Gayle, 1975b, p. 13). When Blackwell paid an £8000 advance to the Wailers to record their first album, a previously unheard-of sum for a reggae group, he initiated a marketing campaign which went against all established principles of handling reggae. The decision was made to promote the band as a fixed, self-contained 'group' of musicians within the rock tradition. The Wailers' music was depicted in terms of a 'new', 'progressive' innovation in Jamaican music which represented a break from the reggae of the late 1960s that had been so despised by rock fans. As Blackwell later explained:

> Reggae up until the Wailers' first album was perceived as rather quirky music in general . . . It wasn't a music that had any respect, and I felt that the best way to market the Wailers was to change it from being a singles music to being an album music, and the best way to do that was to market them as a group and to make an album and release an album first . . . 'cos in the way Jamaican music was marketed before there was never a group image and we were really at the height of group consciousness.
>
> (Interview with Chris Blackwell, Capital Radio, 1982)

As Blackwell points out, the reggae industry, both in Jamaica and Britain, had previously revolved around the production and marketing of singles rather than albums. Singles, on the whole, were cheaper to manufacture, had a quicker turnover and required lower levels of investment. By being more responsive to individual choice, they were generally better suited to the consumption habits of reggae's

black audience. The vast majority of albums released within the reggae market, moreover, tended to be 'various artists' or 'greatest hits' compilations. The rock market, in contrast, was based on album sales by particular artists or groups which although requiring greater initial investment ultimately yielded much larger profits. The Wailers' transition from a studio, singles-based vocal group to an album-based touring band signalled an attempt to repackage reggae in a form tailored to the consumption patterns of the rock market. Since the late 1960s, that market had revolved around the sales of albums and cheap, stereo hi-fis (Frith, 1983, p. 143). Rock albums were designed for consumption by an attentive, stationary audience prepared to sit and listen for a considerable length of time. As Davis points out, the order of songs on such albums was pre-arranged in the production process:

> the European and American audiences that Blackwell wanted the Wailers to penetrate were accustomed to getting their music from albums on which ten or more tunes clicked together in a more sustained atmosphere. Bob Marley was asked to make the first reggae *album*, which Blackwell would then transform into a record that could appeal to the rock fans who were his principal customers.
>
> (Davis, 1983, p. 95).

Blackwell's decision to market reggae as an album music and to establish the Wailers as more profitable transnational artists heavily shaped the production and packaging of the Wailers' debut LP for Island *Catch a Fire*. The first important change in the production process was the scale of financial investment made in recording the album. As Blackwell explained:

> In Jamaica they were just making records on a very limited budget. And the records were made very much just for the Jamaican market. And they weren't in stereo. Their early records were great for what they are, but for getting to a wider market they needed more money spent on them.
>
> (quoted in Gayle, 1975b, p. 13)

Blackwell doubled the customary rates for Jamaican session musicians, enabling them to record for longer than the standard two and a half to three minutes (Williams, 1972c, p. 33). In accordance with Island's marketing plans, *Catch A Fire* was recorded in stereo. The latest technical facilities of the recording process were employed to 'clean up' the music. The upgraded standards of sound reproduction were designed partly to broaden the music's commercial appeal by undermining the common accusation made by rock fans that reggae was a music of 'inferior' quality. Although the backing tracks for the album were recorded in Jamaica, they were subsequently remixed and edited in London under the supervision of Blackwell (Clarke, 1980, p. 107). As part of this process, session musicians were brought in to overdub rock guitar, tabla and synthesiser parts over the Wailers' music (Davis, 1983, p. 95). In addition, Blackwell accelerated the speed of the Wailers' basic rhythm tracks by one beat, thinking that a quicker tempo might enhance the music's appeal to rock fans (Davis, 1983, p. 95). Afro-American-influenced rhythms and back-up vocals were also employed to lend a 'cosmopolitan' flavour to the music.

These transformations amounted to a distinct move away from Jamaican music's traditional emphasis on drums and bass towards a more 'produced' sound, filled out by keyboards and guitars (Johnson, 1983). The addition and remixing of instruments became a permanent feature of Island's production of all the group's subsequent albums. Island attempted to repeat the production formula of these early recordings with other artists like the Heptones. Such strategies, however, met with mixed success. By adding rock guitar, emphasising the treble and percussion at the expense of the bass, and occasionally increasing the speed of the original rhythm tracks, they tended to alienate both pop and roots markets (*Black Echoes*, 13 February 1976, p. 6; 28 February 1976, p. 18).

Unlike most previous reggae albums *Catch a Fire* was retailed as a full-price LP, and was the first in a series of glossily packaged and well-produced stereo albums that could be promoted, reviewed and consumed in rock terms as complete 'works of art'. Island's innovatory marketing

strategies were most clearly reflected in the elaborate packaging and design of their album sleeves. *Catch a Fire*'s pop-art sleeve cover, designed in the form of a large cigarette-lighter, was a novel selling-point. The double sleeve of *Burnin'*, the Wailers' second album, opened out to reveal assorted photographs of Rastas in various 'dread' poses. The song lyrics on the *Burnin'* album were printed on the inner cover, making them accessible to white consumers in an unprecedented manner. These ploys seemed to confirm Island's intention to sell the Wailers as 'rebels' by stressing the uncomprising and overtly political aspects of their music.

By the time *Natty Dread*, the Wailers' third album, was released late in 1974, it was clear that the image of Marley in particular as a licentious, ganja-smoking 'Rasta rebel' was to be a central feature of Island's marketing campaign. The album's sleeve carried an impressionistic and romanticised portrait of Marley which emphasised his locksed hair in a way designed to evoke a sense of eroticism and fantasy in the intended white rock-fan. With the album's release, the key icons of ganja, locks and Rasta colours became firmly established as the symbols most effective in selling reggae to whites. In accordance with this strategy *Catch a Fire* was later re-packaged with the cigarette-lighter cover replaced by a full-sized photograph of Marley smoking a large 'spliff' of marijuana.

The company's marketing strategies were further reflected in the occasional alteration of album titles. Hence the third album's original title, *Knotty Dread*, taken from the Wailers' Jamaican 45 release, was subsequently changed to the more ambiguous *Natty Dread* (Davis, 1983, p. 126). This alteration involved a subtle, but critical, shift in meaning. 'Knotty' implied a sense of uncompromising Rasta militancy and race-consciousness symbolised by the extolling of locks, while the more innocuous 'Natty' had connotations of 'hip' style and being 'fashionable' in white parlance.

Island's intention to promote the Wailers as a rock group was further confirmed when the company organised a concert tour of Britain in 1973. The band's itinerary took in a string of predominantly college and university-based rock venues and included national radio and TV appearances on Radio

One's show, *Top Gear*, and on BBC 2's *Old Grey Whistle Test.* The staged spectacle of the live 'gig' was one of the mainstays of rock culture both as a promotion medium for companies through which to stimulate record sales, and as an important channel of expression and consumption for artists and fans respectively (Frith, 1983). By the early 1970s the staging of rock concerts had become dependent on a vast technological infrastructure of sound equipment. By contrast, such live 'spectacles' were rare in the context of the Jamaican music industry, largely based as it was around sound systems, studios and a handful of session musicians. The sophisticated hardware and instruments of rock technology, taken for granted by most English and American groups, were far beyond the incomes of most of Jamaica's ghetto artists. The economic realities of life in West Kingston militated against the formation of financially autonomous 'bands', in favour of vocal groups and solo artists who relied on session musicians both inside and outside the studio. Although Jamaican groups had toured British night-clubs intermittently during the 1960s, the leap in the scale of exposure entailed by the Wailers' tour was a major new development in the marketing of reggae. Live promotion subsequently became one of the most important channels through which reggae was made available to a mass white audience.

Despite the media interest generated by the Wailers' British tour, and by their first two albums for Island, the 1972–3 campaign was something of a false start in terms of mass popular acceptance. *Catch a Fire* sold only a modest 14 000 copies in the first year of its release (Davis, 1983, p. 101). The group's eventual breakthrough came two years later, with their second British tour, undertaken in the wake of *Natty Dread.* That breakthrough was achieved under the new title of 'Bob Marley and the Wailers' after the original group had disbanded. The change in title indicated both a reorganisation of the group's personnel and a marketing ploy by Island to push Marley as the band's frontman and 'star'. As Carl Gayle explained:

> It became obvious to Island pretty soon that Marley was the one to pin the genius tag on. Bob, with his rebel rasta

image, was projected as the key figure to the exclusion of Tosh and Livingstone.

(Gayle, 1975b, p. 13)

The intense media interest that surrounded the Wailers' 1975 tour of Britain, together with the escalating sales of *Natty Dread*, signalled Marley's commercial breakthrough to a mass white audience. The tour was the climax of a two-year promotional campaign by Island. The subsequent release of the single 'No Woman No Cry', a love-song aimed directly at the pop charts, and the successful 'live' album of the London Lyceum gig, marked the beginnings of Marley's entry into mainstream rock and pop culture (Gilroy, 1982; Davis, 1983). Eric Clapton's Top Ten hit with a cover version of Marley's 'I Shot the Sheriff' in 1974 had bestowed a measure of credibility on reggae and paved the way for Marley's acceptance within the rock community. Island's decision to cast Marley in the role of solo star was canonised in the front pages of the rock press from which he was hailed as 'reggae's first superstar' (*Melody Maker*, 26 July 1975) (see 3.4).

The release of Marley's hugely successful fourth album *Rastaman Vibration*, for which the advance orders totalled 600 000, was the prelude to a whole string of concert tours, chart hits and top-selling albums in the late 1970s. As the whole machinery of the pop-music industry swung into action behind him, a flood of 'Bob Marley' ephemera hit the market in the form of T-shirts, posters and scrapbooks. In response to this rapidly widening audience, Marley's music underwent something of a shift in emphasis away from the roots-orientated sound of earlier albums towards a more pronounced pop flavour. Albums such as *Exodus*, *Kaya* and *Uprising* included a greater proportion of love-songs and softer melodies designed to appeal to the widest audience possible (Johnson, 1977).

By the end of the decade Bob Marley had established himself as a top-selling, international recording artist. His success gave a financial boost to a mid-1970s music industry ailing under the impact of the recession and the stagnation of rock culture. In 1981 a London spokesperson for Island

estimated Bob Marley's world-wide album sales to be in excess of $190 million (Davis, 1983, p. 228). It was after his death, however, that the scale of Marley's commercial importance was revealed. The release of the album, *Confrontation*, marked the beginning of a posthumous marketing campaign designed to make fresh revenue from old catalogues and unreleased material. That campaign reached fruition in 1984 when the company attempted to remarket Marley as a 'legend'.

Launched on the anniversary of Marley's death the *Legend* campaign was aimed at a broad-based, record-buying public. The *Legend* album, a compilation of Marley's 'greatest hits', was heavily promoted through television advertisements and video releases compiled from old film footage. (Companies like K-Tel had already proved television to be a highly lucrative medium for record marketing with their successful series of chart-hit compilation albums promoted almost exclusively through television advertising.) Island's campaign revolved around the attempt to present Marley as an all-round entertainer and a pop-hero of 'legendary' proportions, a strategy reflected in the seemingly deliberate omission of the term 'reggae' from the campaign and in the attempt to surround Marley's music in a posthumous aura of nostalgia. On the video film which accompanied the chart hit 'One Love', for example, Marley appeared as a 'cute' and 'lovable' father-figure, while in full-page press advertisements it was proclaimed that 'the legend lives on'. Marley was promoted as a household name on the basis that 'everyone should own at least one Bob Marley album'. Such was the campaign's success that Island took the second biggest share of the UK market in 1984, *Legend* being one of the company's biggest-selling albums for ten years.

3.3 'Oh, what a rat race!'

The success of Island's campaign with Bob Marley marked the beginning of a period of intense commercial activity in the international marketing of reggae. Island had shown that it was possible to sell reggae to white consumers and had

pioneered the marketing techniques for doing so. In the wake of Marley's success, Island expanded further into the reggae market, building up a roster of artists that included Burning Spear, Third World, Inner Circle, Zappow and Max Romeo.

The company's move into films as a promotion medium for reggae signalled a new phase in the commercial development of the music. It was Island, once again, that had pioneered the use of film as a marketing strategy with *The Harder They Come*. Feature films such as *Exodus*, *Rockers* and *Countryman*, together with the sound-track albums which they advertised, formed part of a concerted strategy to market reggae in a form which presented no threat to white consumers. The cinema was an ideal medium through which to promote reggae to whites in a way that avoided some of the contradictions of attending live concerts, sound-system dances and reggae shops. Coffee-table pamphlets and books were merely an extension of this process. Some were little more than promotional vehicles for specific recording companies, while most were simply travelogues or compendiums of glossy visuals which focused on the imagery of locks and ganja, and, as such, formed part of a general strategy to market reggae as an aspect of rock culture.

The success of Island's campaign with Bob Marley tempted other independent record companies to become involved in marketing reggae. Of these, by far the most significant was Virgin. Virgin had begun as a mail-order retail outlet for progressive rock music in the late 1960s, and had subsequently evolved into a national chain of record stores and an independent label specialising in 'underground' rock. The company had begun exploring the sales potential of reggae as early as 1974. In 1976, however, following the collapse of Trojan records and Island's breakthrough with Marley, Virgin's director Richard Branson publicly announced that the company was 'keen to break into the reggae market' (*Black Echoes*, 7 February 1976, p. 3). The financial collapse of Trojan, hitherto the biggest distributor and retailer of Jamaican music in Britain, had left something of a gap in the reggae market (Gayle, 1976b). Virgin was one of many independent labels which attempted to fill that gap.

The company proceeded in early 1976 to sign up several

leading Jamaican artists, including Johnnie Clarke, U-Roy, the Mighty Diamonds, the Gladiators and I-Roy (*Black Echoes*, 7 February 1976, p. 3; 27 March 1976, p. 1). The company's intention was to promote such artists to both black and white audiences. For this purpose, Virgin created a specific label, the *Front Line*, as an identifiable outlet for reggae. Under the *Front Line* banner, the company released the first of two compilation 'sampler' albums, intended as a cheap introduction to reggae for a white audience unfamiliar with the music. Retailing at 69*p*, and billed in the music press as 'a beautiful album for the price of a single', the LP was designed specifically to whet the appetites of reggae's new consumers and to seduce them into buying the full-priced albums that it advertised.

Between 1976 and 1979 Virgin conducted an extensive promotional campaign involving radio plugs, record-shop window displays, fly-posters and press advertisements (*Black Music*, May, 1978, p. 36). A central feature of the campaign was a major concert tour of Britain in 1976 by the Mighty Diamonds and U-Roy (*Black Echoes*, 14 August 1976). Island had shown with Marley that live appearances at large rock venues could be one of the most effective means of promoting reggae. Virgin followed suit, making reggae available to substantial numbers of whites through the concert hall. Extensive national tours by artists like the Gladiators, Culture and Toots and the Maytals became regular events in the late 1970s. Collective promotion of artists, under the banner of slogans like 'The Front Line in Music' and 'Sounds of Reality' was another common feature of Virgin's campaign, a campaign which appealed even more explicitly than Island's, to rock definitions of 'progressive' 'protest' music.

Faced with the same marketing dilemma as the one that Island had faced four years earlier, Virgin similarly decided to repackage reggae and promote it as something 'new' and radically different from what had gone before. Album covers, once again, became a key selling-point. The sleeve of the *Front Line* album, for example, featured a dramatic picture of a blood-stained hand grasping a single strand of barbed wire. On the individual albums advertised by the *Front Line*, artists were frequently depicted in varying states of stoned, 'dread'

moodiness and belligerence. Cover artwork and photography homed in on the, by now, familiar imagery of locks and ganja. The sleeve design of U-Roy's *Dread inna Babylon*, for example, portrayed the artist shrouded in a cloud of ganja smoke that covered more than a third of the album's sleeve, while the front cover of *Well Charged*, a dub LP released on Virgin, likewise involved a close-up, mug-shot of an anonymous, bleary-eyed black face, spliff hanging out of the mouth in a state of apparent 'stonedness'. The sleeve of Peter Tosh's *Legalise It*, in a similar vein, depicted the artist crouched in a field of ganja, smoking a pipe. The intention was to create a specific kind of visual appeal that would catch the eyes of potential white consumers. In Peter Tosh's case that appeal rested on an attempt to represent the artist as a new counter-cultural hero to the rock audience. Thus, as one journalist proclaimed in a review of his *Legalise It* album, 'Tear down your Dylans, your Guevaras, your Maxfield Parishes and your maps of middle earth and pin up your 1976 style hero' (*Black Echoes*, 31 July 1976, p. 14).

The massive promotional campaigns mounted by both Virgin and Island played a central role in the popularisation of reggae in Britain in the 1970s. The distribution access of these companies to high-street record-shops, including Virgin's own chain of retail outlets, enabled reggae to be disseminated to a whole new generation of white pop and rock fans. Both Island and Virgin succeeded where other companies had failed in introducing reggae both to mainstream record shops like HMV and Our Price and to national chain stores like Boots, W. H. Smith and Woolworths. In doing so, their marketing strategies were assisted by the retailing revolution that took place in the mid-1970s in these latter stores, with many high-street multiples moving into record sales. Those strategies helped to create and consolidate the burgeoning interest in reggae amongst white youth. Moreover, by gaining access to mainstream retail outlets they paved the way for other independent companies like Greensleeves to acquire national distribution for more roots-orientated reggae releases (*Black Echoes*, 26 November 1977, p. 2).

The success of independent labels like Island and Virgin

in breaking reggae commercially alerted the mainstream recording industry to its economic viability. With the music's marketing potential secured, there began something of a 'stampede for reggae' amongst a number of multinational companies competing for financial and legal stakes in what was a 'new' and relatively unexplored field (Gayle, 1976b). The mid-1970s ushered in an era of international commercialisation of reggae, reflecting the increasingly transnational character of the recording industry generally in this period, with its ever more fluid movement of capital across national boundaries, and its tendency towards ever greater concentration and vertical integration (Berger and Peterson, 1975). Multinational companies like EMI monopolised increasingly large areas of the music business, eventually subsuming 'independent' companies like Island. From 1975 onwards, a number of these multinational entertainment corporations, such as NEMS, CBS and WEA, began to involve themselves in the production and distribution of reggae (Gayle, 1976b, p. 21).

For these companies, reggae was a rich grazing-ground requiring low levels of investment but yielding substantial profits. Jamaica was merely one of several Third World countries which represented relatively untapped musical and cultural resources for the multinational giants of the leisure industry (Wallis and Malm, 1984). There, reggae artists could be bought relatively cheaply with much smaller advances than those demanded by equivalent rock groups. The sheer poverty of most reggae musicians made such advances appear large in Jamaican terms, disguising the relations of unequal exchange between artist and recording company (Clarke, 1980, p. 165).

Third World countries functioned not only as sources of exploitable talent but as marginal markets themselves (Wallis and Malm, 1984). The growing demand for black music in parts of Latin America and Africa opened up a third side in a lucrative, latter-day 'golden triangle' of record production and distribution. Island had been one of the first to recognise and exploit the potential of profitable overseas markets for reggae. By the mid-1970s, however, Island was being rivalled as the main international distributor of reggae by Virgin.

Virgin had reputedly sold £150 000 worth of reggae in 1975, a year in which the company was not yet directly involved in releasing reggae but was exporting other companies products to Third World markets (Clarke, 1980, p. 167). The trade routes forged by Virgin and Island have been followed by other multinational companies like CBS who have similarly attempted to meet the burgeoning demand for Afro-Caribbean music in the Third World by connecting their reggae product to lucrative markets like that of Nigeria (Wallis and Malm, 1984, p. 82).

In contrast to the relatively sustained involvement of companies like Island, most of the majors had a more predatory relation to the reggae market, shying away from any long-term financial commitments. Larger companies tended to venture into the reggae market only on the basis of an established best-seller. Behind such strategies invariably lay a distribution or licensing deal which enabled master-tapes or release rights to be bought from reggae entrepreneurs in exchange for a flat royalty rate. The result was a cheap deal for the major company who were spared the production costs if the record flopped (Frith, 1983, pp. 138–40). It was an attractive way of avoiding risks and overheads in an uncertain market like that of reggae, a market of which most majors had little knowledge. The greater relative costs and investment risks were placed on the shoulders of small reggae-producers and independent labels who hired studios and musicians, paid for cutting and pressing of discs and were invariably denied the kind of credit facilities that the majors took for granted. This licensing strategy partly explained the success of those records which intermittently 'crossed over' from the reggae market into the pop charts (*Black Echoes*, 14 June 1979, p. 9). In promoting such records, the majors were able to rely on their national distribution networks and access to the media to ensure their chart success. Dennis Brown's 'Money in my Pocket', for example, provided the WEA corporation with a hit on their subsidiary label, Lightning. Other examples of reggae 'cross-over' hits include Althia and Donna's 'Uptown Top Ranking', also on the Lightning label, Errol Dunkley's 'OK, Fred' and Janet Kay's 'Silly Games', both on the Scope label, another

subsidiary of WEA, and Sugar Minott's 'Good Thing Going' on RCA.

Of those major companies that signed reggae artists to their labels, most invariably attempted to repackage and reprocess them for the pop market. A handful of companies such as CBS, RCA and EMI briefly flirted with British reggae groups in the late 1970s. CBS signed the Reggae Regulars; Tradition were signed by RCA and Black Slate and Matumbi by EMI. However, since most majors had insufficient knowledge and experience of reggae to market and promote it effectively, the customary pattern of these contracts was for a group to be signed for one or two albums and then dropped.

The majors' international involvement in reggae proved to be equally fickle. CBS typified the multinationals' policy on 'unpredictable' Third World markets, a policy of quick entry and withdrawal in order to maximise profits. The involvement of even the more apparently 'committed' independent companies in Jamaican music proved to be somewhat transient. It was widely speculated that Virgin, for example, having lost one of their major Third World markets for reggae, Nigeria, because of the introduction of strict import controls, withdrew their investments in Jamaican music as a whole (Clarke, 1980, p. 167; *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1980, p. 9). By 1980, Virgin had begun to terminate their contracts with Jamaican artists, many of whom left the 'Front Line' label dissatisfied with the company's lack of investment and promotion. Thus, while companies like Island maintained some form of commitment to Jamaican music well into the mid-1980s, by 1981 Virgin's involvement in reggae had virtually ceased.

3.4 Reggae and the mass media

While companies such as Island and Virgin were responsible for packaging reggae for a mass audience, it was certain specific institutions of the media which played the major role in its widespread dissemination to white consumers. Of these, two of the most influential were the music press and,

especially, radio. Such institutions functioned as important intermediary channels through which reggae was further handled and processed. Because of their intimate relationship to the recording industry though, they stood halfway between the production and consumption stages. Music papers, for example, operated as musical 'interpreters' and consumer guides for their readerships as much as vehicles of promotion and publicity for the recording industry; their news items, interviews, album and concert reviews synchronised with the industry's own production and marketing cycles (through record releases, tours, press releases, etc.) (Frith, 1983, pp. 173–4).

During most of the 1960s Jamaican music received scant coverage in the music press. Most of that coverage consisted of hostile and derisory criticism. It was not until the early 1970s that a small number of music journalists began to pay any serious attention to the contemporary popular forms emanating from Jamaica. In this period sympathetic commentators like Richard Williams and Carl Gayle were heavily responsible for introducing and interpreting this 'new' Jamaican sound to a white readership. Island's campaign with the Wailers found ready allies within the rock-music press where a handful of journalists picked up on the musical and political shifts represented by the Wailers' first two albums. Richard Williams of the *Melody Maker*, for example, attempted to draw reggae into a familiar frame of reference and justify its status to rock fans as a valid, contemporary popular music form (Williams, 1972a, 1972b, 1972c, 1973a, 1973b).

Bob Marley was tagged by Williams as the 'first genius of reggae', and 'the man who's about to give it that big shove out of its normal cultural confinement and into the rest of the world' (Williams, 1973a, p. 13). In his formative review of *Catch a Fire*, Williams spelt out the album's correlation to the rock tradition by pin-pointing those features most likely to appeal to a rock audience. Echoing Island's own marketing predicament, Williams pleaded the album's case to a rock readership of whose hostility he was well aware:

The problem – how to communicate the excitement of this

> album to people who are already prejudiced against what it represents . . . I'm taking for granted that most readers of this paper still believe that reggae is a crude form of musical expression with a complete lack of creative potential.
>
> (Williams, 1973b)

In contrast to the 'rubbish' that had hitherto been put out in the name of Jamaican music, *Catch a Fire* had upgraded the sound quality of reggae, to the extent that the album could be 'enjoyed on headphones'. The Wailers had also introduced a radical slant into reggae which resonated with the revolutionary pretensions of progressive rock. Hence as Williams pointed out:

> Many pop fans will be surprised to learn that reggae musicians are writing songs with lyrics as uncompromisingly revolutionary as anything Grace Slick or John Lennon ever penned.
>
> (Williams, 1972a, p. 37)

Williams's early articles in the *Melody Maker* were amongst the first accounts of reggae in the rock press to attempt an explanation of its broader significance as a black musical and cultural phenomenon. The interest shown in the Wailers' music by rock journalists like Williams complemented Island's campaign to market reggae as 'progressive', 'rebel' music. Following the company's breakthrough with the band in 1975, Marley rapidly became a major focus of attention throughout the rock press. Journalists quickly realised that his 'eccentric' appearance and uncompromising life-style could have a novel appeal to a rock audience disenchanted with its increasingly unfashionable heroes, and accordingly placed him firmly within the traditions of rock protest by dubbing him the 'new Dylan' and the 'black Mick Jagger'.

As reggae's popularity burgeoned, lengthier, more analytical articles on reggae began to appear in the rock press, fostered by a series of promotional visits to Jamaica organised for journalists by companies like Island. The importance of the music press as a publicity medium for reggae was such that

by the late 1970s journalists were being transported *en masse* to Jamaica by recording companies to cover the island's music scene. The 1978 'One Love Peace Concert', for example, which featured Bob Marley, was attended by an estimated 160 journalists and cameramen, one third of whom were especially flown in by Island (*New Musical Express*, 6 May 1978, p. 7). As a result of these excursions, certain journalists began to adopt a more 'sociological' approach to the music. A series of lengthy reports on the 'JA scene' subsequently appeared in the rock press, attempting to situate reggae within a broader, if somewhat caricatured vision of Jamaican society as a poverty-stricken Third World country, torn by political strife and corruption (*New Musical Express*, 16 October 1976; 23 October 1976; 27 May 1978; 3 June 1978; *Melody Maker*, 12 June 1976). Much of the photography that accompanied these articles continued rock-culture's preoccupation with the conspicuous and flamboyant aspects of Rastafari and roots exotica. Rock journalists revelled in all the extra copy to be made out of locks and ganja, and terms like 'natty' and 'jah'. This approach was typified in the coverage of reggae in the *New Musical Express* with its zany, lampooning style of journalism, reflected in its subheadings and picture captions.

The aesthetic criteria of rock criticism employed by the *New Musical Express* derived heavily from the underground press of the late 1960s (Frith, 1983). As self-appointed ideological guardians of the rock spirit, concerned with maintaining its commitment and 'authenticity', many rock journalists were naturally drawn to reggae as an 'uncommercial', 'rebel music'. This resulted in a tendency to focus almost exclusively on the protest element in reggae, which in turn had important consequences for the way the music came to be interpreted by white fans. The rock press's emphasis on reggae's political and revolutionary rhetoric, as the aspect most immediately comprehensible to its readership, together with its relentless patronage of the imagery of locks and ganja, reinforced the process whereby all reggae became identified with 'heavy', 'roots' Rasta styles.

The coverage of reggae in the rock press consisted of a complex mixture of raw enthusiasm, serious commentary,

romanticism and undisguised voyeurism. At a time when reggae was becoming increasingly fashionable, that coverage undoubtedly played a significant role in fostering white interest in the music, consolidating the symbols by which reggae came to be widely identified amongst large numbers of young whites. At the height of their popularity in the mid-to-late 1970s, the four principal weekly papers of the rock press commanded a considerable influence as opinion guides amongst rock fans. Among them, *Sounds*, *New Musical Express*, *Melody Maker* and the *Record Mirror* shared a combined circulation of 600–800 000 (Frith, 1983, p. 166).

As the era of the 'album-buyer' and 'thinking rock-fan' began to disappear in the wake of punk, the circulation of the four major rock weeklies suffered a serious drop. The post-punk vacuum in popular music journalism was filled by a new generation of glossy, colour pop-magazines, typified by *Smash Hits*. Launched in 1978, *Smash Hits* catered for a younger audience that cared little for political commitment and artistic integrity, and even less for the tortured analytical prose of the 'old guard' rock papers. Building its popularity around simple, uncomplicated journalism, chart information, song lyrics and full-page colour pictures of artists (tailor-made for pinning on bedroom walls) *Smash Hits* began to challenge the hegemony of the old guard. By the end of 1984, its circulation had reached over half a million, while that of its nearest rival, NME, slumped from 202 000 in January–June 1979 to 123 192 by the same year. While coverage of reggae artists in *Smash Hits* was invariably restricted to the handful of artists who regularly represented the music in the pop world, such as Musical Youth and UB 40, the publishing of lyrics, and the stress on appealing aesthetics and images allowed for a more diffuse dissemination of black forms, images and styles to younger white fans.

The most consistent journalistic support for Jamaican music in Britain, however, came from the black music press. Music journalism in Britain has a strong tradition of 'specialist' publications aimed at different areas of popular – and especially black – music taste. This sphere of the music press has long functioned as an important outlet for the consumption and 'serious' appreciation of Afro-American

forms like jazz, blues and R & B. While of more recent origin, a number of Jamaican music 'fanzines' run by amateur enthusiasts have also appeared sporadically since the mid-1970s. The first major national publication to give regular coverage to reggae, however, was the monthly magazine, *Black Music*. Launched in December 1973, the journal, with its glossy presentation and relatively expensive price of 25*p*, attempted to reach the expanding and potentially lucrative audience for black music in Britain. Its somewhat studious, analytical approach was aimed particularly at the more discerning music fan, both black and white. *Black Music*'s publishers, the giant press group IPC, saw the magazine as an open door to the 'specialist' market. As *Race Today* speculated:

> IPC are thought to be using *Black Music* as a test operation to see how to most effectively get into the market. They intend to be more popular than the specialist blues and soul magazines and yet retain that particularly black identity.
>
> (*Race Today*, December 1973, p. 325)

Whilst the magazine's coverage was heavily balanced towards Afro-American forms, *Black Music* provided limited scope for more detailed and analytical articles on reggae by freelance journalists like Carl Gayle. Gayle was one of the first black journalists in Britain to write substantially about Jamaican music from within its cultural and political traditions, pioneering a style that was much emulated in the pages of other music journals. It was a style that remained faithful to its subject matter by attempting to convey the messages of the music and its artists as far as possible on their own terms and in their own idioms. Gayle's articles were frequently influential in exposing roots artists, little known outside the black community, to a wider audience. His early articles on the reggae group, Burning Spear, for example, were directly responsible for generating interest in the band amongst both record companies and white fans alike (*Black Music*, October 1975, p. 4). Gayle was one of the few early writers on reggae who were sympathetic to

Rastafari, exposing and lending support to its ideals through his own political engagement with the movement.

Black Music was joined in 1976 by a cheaper weekly newspaper, *Black Echoes*, which also employed freelance journalists and gave regular coverage to reggae music. By the late 1970s, *Black Echoes* was the only weekly national newspaper that dealt substantively with most aspects of the reggae tradition. The paper developed into an important channel of promotion for the reggae industry, reaching the growing numbers of whites who were interested in consuming the music in an undiluted form. *Black Echoes* played a major role in consolidating this section of the market through its mail-order advertisements, its charts (compiled from the sales returns of reggae shops) and its record reviews, feature articles and news information on sound-system dances and tours by artists.

While the audience reached by the music press tended to consist of a narrower, more 'committed' group of reggae enthusiasts, and in the case of the rock press a more middle-class, student readership, the broadcasting institutions of the mass media tapped a potentially larger, and much more popular audience for the music. Of all those institutions it was radio that arguably played the most important role in exposing Jamaican music to white audiences. That exposure, however, did not generally come about through the channels of mainstream broadcasting. During the 1960s, forms like ska and rocksteady faced a blanket prejudice within the entertainment industry and mass media. The BBC's monolithic broadcasting structures proved particularly impervious to Jamaican music, and it was left largely to the pirate radio stations like Radio Caroline to give – albeit highly limited – air-play to the music. By setting themselves up on installations off the coast of Britain, the pirates had managed to evade the broadcasting laws which gave the BBC a monopoly of the air-waves, and, along with Radio Luxembourg, had provided the principal broadcasting outlet for black music generally in Britain in the 1960s. In 1967, however, the BBC responded by outlawing such stations with new legislation and creating its own 'top forty' station, Radio One (Frith, 1983, p. 124).

By the late 1960s, the more popularised and diluted forms of reggae such as the Trojan material, had begun to permeate into mainstream daytime listening on Radio One. Most reggae records however were automatically disqualified from national air-play by the BBC's methods of chart compilation (Partridge, 1973, p. 14). Jamaican music was sold predominantly through independent shops whose sales returns were not taken into account by the BBC charts. Since Radio One relied heavily on the charts as its principal barometer of popular taste, most reggae records simply never reached the play-lists, despite their ability to outsell rival pop discs. Many Jamaican releases regularly sold tens of thousands of copies in this way, without ever denting the pop charts (*Melody Maker*, 20 September 1969, p. 27).

During the 1970s reggae continued to meet with considerable indifference within the broadcasting media. The hostility of Radio One's DJs and programme producers was well known throughout the reggae industry (Clarke, 1980, pp. 149–56). Reggae was generally considered to be 'unmarketable' and 'unpopular' in most spheres of the music business, and much of it was accordingly filtered out from the mainstream pop market by those decision-makers and taste-arbiters whom Frith calls the 'gatekeepers' of the industry (record company executives, artist and repertoire personnel, promoters, shop-owners, etc.) (Frith, 1983, p. 92). For many radio producers, reggae's perceived lack of harmony and unsophisticated musical arrangement failed to measure up to the standards of white pop, while its overtly political or sexual lyrics were regarded as 'unsuitable' for mainstream programming. As far as the BBC was concerned, this was a reflection of the corporation's inherent conservatism which, in musical terms, was translated into an emphasis on technical quality of recordings, and on the building of a mass audience of individual consumers and private listeners. The result was that a premium was placed on 'relaxing', reassuring and unobtrusive music which meant that only the more palatable and least 'offensive' reggae records were selected for air-play. Derek Chinnery, former head of Radio One, summed up the BBC's official position on reggae, arguing that:

> It seems to be a regional interest, there doesn't seem to be much of a national demand for reggae . . . there's no strong indication that our listeners want more reggae. And of course there's an awful lot of reggae that's simply not suitable for Radio One. Some of them have strong political content while others are just poor quality records.
>
> (*Melody Maker*, 9 October 1976, p. 36)

The crudest example of these criteria in operation was the BBC's overt censorship of reggae through the periodic banning of specific records. Max Romeo's 'Wet Dream', for example, was banned by Radio One in 1969 for its suggestive lyrics, while in 1975 a dub-toasting record by Rupie Edwards entitled 'Irie Feelings' suffered a similar fate as a result of its oblique reference to marijuana.

Eschewed by national pop radio, most Jamaican music was consigned to the realms of 'minority'/'specialist' taste, of interest to black people alone. It was within this sphere of broadcasting however that reggae achieved its most significant breakthrough.

The early 1970s saw the launching of several local BBC and independent commercial radio stations. While much local radio proved to be parochial, consensus-oriented and highly pedestrian in presentation, it did allow scope for a limited amount of 'minority' programming. BBC Radio London's *Reggae Time* and Radio Birmingham's *Reggae, Reggae* were amongst the earliest weekly reggae programmes to be broadcast. A number of independent local radio stations, set up in the mid-1970s under the auspices of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), soon followed into black music programming. With greater needle-time than the BBC, and a legal obligation to satisfy 'minority tastes', such stations provided further limited opportunities for the transmission of reggae music.

The launching of reggae programmes on local radio gave an unprecedented degree of access to Jamaican music for white listeners. While aimed primarily at black audiences, formative shows like Steve Barnard's *Reggae Time* on Radio London were instrumental in arousing interest in reggae

amongst a wider, white listenership. The importance of radio as a medium for the dissemination of Jamaican music was considerably enhanced in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the massive expansion of local reggae programming. While in 1976 only four out of the eighteen local radio stations in Britain had weekly reggae programmes – BBC Radio London, BBC Radio Birmingham, BRMB (Birmingham) and Capital (London) – by 1980, the number of reggae shows had increased to ten, and by 1984 it had more than doubled, with twenty-four reggae shows dispersed throughout the country broadcasting to virtually every major urban area of Britain.

Perhaps the most well-known and successful of these programmes was Capital Radio's *Roots Rockers*, presented by a white DJ, David Rodigan. Rodigan began his broadcasting career in 1977 as co-presenter, with Tony Williams, of BBC Radio London's *Reggae Time*. Moving to Capital in 1979, Rodigan began hosting his own show, *Roots Rockers*, with a programme format that was partly derived from a prototype reggae show on Jamaican radio – Michael Campbell's *Dread at the Controls* on the Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation. Rodigan combined Campbell's presentation style, which mixed records with jingles, sound effects and patois catchphrases, with a format that consisted of interviews with artists, oldies, exclusive music and new releases. With that format, Rodigan built up a large audience throughout the south-east of England. Relying on his extensive personal knowledge of the music, Rodigan managed to present reggae on its own terms while remaining broadly popular with both black and white listeners. As he himself explained:

> I don't believe in trying to dilute the musical format . . . Nor do I ever think 'Oh, that's a bit heavy, they might not understand that', despite the fact that a lot of white people might think 'well what the hell does that mean'. Because the people that make the music know what it means; the black audience who may have been born and bred in this country but nevertheless feel an affiliation because of their blood, roots and culture to that music, they know what it means. Now the odd thing is that I didn't come from that

kind of background, and yet I feel as closely affiliated to that as they do, and I know there are lots of other white people who do as well.

(Interview with the author, 25 October 1983)

For many white listeners, particularly those living in areas of negligible black settlement, radio provided an ideal opportunity for reggae to be heard and experienced in a more private way. As a key contributor to this process, Rodigan himself was well aware of radio's potential to foster interest amongst those who would not otherwise have the opportunity or inclination to buy or listen to the music:

I know there are a lot of people that listen that don't go to reggae clubs and don't come out where I'm playing because they think they're going to be inhibited or whatever, but make their presence known through letters . . . you know, people who live in Sussex, terribly quiet sort of residential areas who write in saying this and that about the show and buy their records on mail order, but don't actually go and drink Special Brew, smoke a spliff and buy twenty pre-releases in Dub Vendor on a Saturday. They actually do it in a different way.

(Interview with the author, 25 October 1983)

In recent years, the broadcasting monopoly of the BBC and the IBA has been increasingly challenged by the steady growth in the number of independent, 'pirate' and community radio stations operating in explicit defiance of Home Office regulations. While black music pirate stations have long been in existence since the early 1970s, the early 1980s saw a massive boom in the number of small, land-based, and often black-run stations broadcasting soul and reggae (Hind and Mosco, 1985). Established primarily to cater for the neglected needs of the black community, stations like London's Horizon and LWR (London Weekend Radio) have also given a major impetus to black music's popularity throughout large sections of the white population in the south-east of England. Birmingham's PCRL (People's Community Radio Link) has likewise seriously challenged the dominance of local, BBC

and independent stations by building up a mass listenership that extends well beyond the boundaries of the black community. The mass popularity of the pirates, demonstrated through listening figures that run into millions, through their influence on local record sales and through well-attended gigs run by the stations, gives some indication of the extent of the vast audience for black music uncatered for by mainstream radio.

The pirates represent a more genuine form of broadcasting democracy, not only by providing an alternative to the bland professionalism of mainstream radio, in the form of DJs who share the musical tastes and interest of their audience, but also in their very existence which is itself a measure of the ability of listeners to exercise their cultural power by 'voting with their dials'. For younger listeners in particular, pirate stations, and radio in general, provide a unique means of access, through taping, to records they would be otherwise unable to hear or afford. Moreover, reggae-orientated stations like the now defunct Dread Broadcasting Corporation (DBC), by mixing music with cultural and political issues, and presenting it in the language, style and idioms of the dance-hall, managed to disseminate undiluted black musical traditions to white listeners in a manner unprecedented in the history of British broadcasting.

The effects of the pirates' popularity caused both BBC and IBA local stations to increase their reggae output, with Capital Radio extending Rodigan's show from two to three hours, and BBC Radio London adding two extra reggae shows to their weekly schedule. The exposure of reggae on local radio, coupled with the steady rise in the popularity of the music generally since the mid-1970s, also brought a gradual acceptance of Jamaican music on national radio. By the mid-1970s, it was possible to hear reggae during daytime peak listening-hours, albeit sandwiched between standard top forty output. In addition, the advent of Channel Four, together with the challenge to state broadcasting represented by the pirates, forced the BBC to concede to the programming of a national reggae show, *Culture Rock*, hosted by Radio One's first black female presenter, Miss P. (a former DJ on the pirate station DBC).

While Britain still awaits its first national black music station, the dissemination of reggae over the air-waves continues to bear a heavy responsibility for maintaining and cultivating mass white popular interest in the music. Radio presenters like David Rodigan and Miss P. are in one sense reggae ambassadors as much as DJs. Their programmes, and their many equivalents up and down the country, have come to represent important cultural spaces in which the music is transmitted, celebrated and heard on its own terms and largely within its own traditions.

4 White Youth, Black Echoes (1962–82)

4.1 Club reggae

The impact of Jamaican popular culture and music on white Britons dates back to the very earliest days of post-war black settlement. The relatively dispersed and fragmented nature of the Afro-Caribbean community in Britain meant that its leisure institutions were, from the start, obliged to adapt to the needs of white Britons. It was in this period that the importance of the leisure sphere, as one of the principal sites in which black and white people encountered one another, became established.

These cultural connections and patterns of exchange were first played out in the nascent music-and-dance culture that centred on certain specific London night-clubs in the immediate post-war era. The jazz clubs of Soho had long been pioneering islands of intermixing, particularly between local whites and black US servicemen, both during and before the war. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, young whites had begun to intermingle with West African and early Afro-Caribbean migrants to the sounds of calypso, highlife, jazz and R & B. While initially peripheral features of the R & B and jazz scene, Afro-Caribbean and specifically Jamaican music forms became increasingly prominent in the dance palais and clubs of London in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Following the events of 1958, and the growing visibility of an indigenous Afro-Caribbean cultural and community life, the impact of Jamaican music began to be registered on groups of young whites living in close proximity to areas of black settlement. As a result of the music's exposure through the black club scene and the handful of shebeens and record shops that catered for mixed clienteles of blacks and whites,

some young whites began to express a fondness for ska. In clubs like the Flamingo and the Roaring Twenties, the dance styles that accompanied the music were emulated by young white R & B fans, popularised and eventually absorbed into mainstream white dance culture in the form of the 'shake' and the 'jerk' (Patterson, 1966). The ska was only one of several black-music dance forms whose impact accelerated certain shifts in the popular dance culture of post-war Britain, shifts, for example, towards the use of the whole body in dancing, the use of improvised movements and the erosion of gender-stereotyped dance roles (Patterson, 1966).

By 1962, a small number of whites had begun noticeably to emulate the sartorial style of young Afro-Caribbean males in forms that were to provide the basis for the 'mod' subculture of the early and mid-1960s. For these early forerunners of the mod movement, ska, with its raucous instrumentation and exaggerated, 'unorthodox' rhythms, became an alternative to the white popular music of the day. Amongst the more 'hard core' mods, ska and rocksteady records, like those of Prince Buster, acquired something of a cult status, their patronage imbued with clandestine connotations (Hebdige, 1974). For many young whites in this period, Jamaican music's appeal lay precisely in its esoteric qualities. This particular form of attraction tended to produce a knowledgeable, 'specialist' fanship amongst the music's more enthusiastic affiliates. For the more committed young white fan, part of the attraction of Jamaican music was in the process of consumption itself, in hunting down and 'discovering' what was felt to be an 'underground' form. For the avid white record-collector, this kind of affiliation did not necessarily rely on direct social encounters with black people. As David Rodigan, one of this 'first wave' of Jamaican music enthusiasts, recounts, it was quite feasible to become affiliated to the music in a 'private' way that was not dependent on any particular kind of proximity to the black community:

> You didn't need to have black friends so to speak, because I lived in a village outside of town (Oxford) therefore I didn't live in the black community . . . You only needed to

go to the record shop and listen to the music that had arrived that week.

(Interview with the author, 25 October 1983)

Throughout most of the 1960s, Jamaican music remained something of an underground form. Most white consumption of the music was confined to the clubs and took place at a relative distance from mainstream pop culture, and aside of Millie's *My Boy Lollipop*, which remained something of a cultural anomaly, it failed to break through to a mass white audience.

It was not until the end of the decade that Jamaican music received its first significant acknowledgement in the realms of pop culture. The momentum for this process was initially generated outside the pop world and drew in particular on the patterns of shared social and leisure space, and the forms of interaction between young blacks and whites that had already been evolving in certain areas of Britain over the 1960s. By the latter half of the decade, white interest in the newly formed 'rude boy' subculture of the Afro-Caribbean young was being cultivated through a number of mixed leisure-sites dotted around the south-east. In the London area sound-systems like Sir Neville, for example, began to play an increasing number of 'out-of-town' dances, attracting large white audiences that frequently outnumbered black patrons. Elements of the black rude-boy style, such as the cropped hair or 'skiffle', short, narrow trousers, the loose-limbed 'macho' walk and selective phrases of patois, began to be appropriated by some young whites and translated into an equivalent 'white rude-boy' style. By 1968, these elements had crystallised into the visible and selfconscious style of the 'skinhead' (Hebdige, 1974).

The early forms of skinhead culture were evolved in close proximity to the black community. Young whites invaded blues parties and pubs in black areas of south and east London, and 'did the reggae' with young Afro-Caribbeans in youth clubs and discos. For the skinheads, it was the danceable, punchy rhythms of rocksteady and early reggae, which held the greatest attraction. The skinheads also expressed a particular fondness for instrumentals, sing-along

tunes and 'rude' records (i.e. those with sexual references). The music's rough-and-ready qualities suited the aggressively proletarian sensibilities of skinhead style and culture, and stood in direct contradiction to the white rock music espoused by middle-class youth, a music devoid of meaning and relevance to these, Jamaican music's most enthusiastic, working-class fans. The equal disdain and contempt in which rock fans held 'reggae' and skinhead 'hippies' symbolised the class divisions and the uneven appropriations of black music within white youth-culture during this period. At a time when progressive rock was at pains to distinguish itself from pop and black music, most rock fans considered reggae to be the very height of bad taste. For the skinheads, conversely, reggae was everything that progressive rock was not; rhythmic, spontaneous, unpretentious, supposedly 'crude' and unmistakably working-class in origin.

The skins' patronage of reggae nevertheless played a key role in introducing the music into mainstream pop consciousness in 1969. With much Jamaican music shunned by the recording industry in the 1960s, their independent take-up of reggae was all the more significant. Records like the chart-topping 'Israelites' by Desmond Dekker owed much of their initial success to the support of a large skinhead audience, support which helped to set in motion Jamaican music's first mass intervention into British pop culture. For two years, between 1969 and 1971, pop reggae managed to capture the attention of a mass white audience with its novel dance rhythms and appealing hooklines.

The dulcet strains of Trojan reggae, while owing little to the highly-charged rhythms emanating from many Jamaican studios, served to introduce a new rhythm and musical language to a whole generation of whites. While often buried beneath lavish orchestral backings and over-polished productions, that rhythm was carried into the discos, youth clubs and homes of thousands of young whites, who discovered Jamaican music through a diet of Trojan 45s and Reggae Chartbusters LPs. These records specified musical and rhythmic orientations quite different from anything hitherto heard in mainstream British pop culture. For the mass appeal of songs like 'Israelites' rested not on their

lyrical discourses, since their patois terminology was largely indecipherable to most white listeners, but on their danceable and profoundly attractive rhythms. The importance of those rhythms to reggae's attraction was clearly signalled by the massive success of Dave and Ansell Collins's 'Double Barrel' which reached the top of the charts in 1971. 'Double Barrel' represented one of the last in the flurry of reggae hits that invaded the pop charts between 1969 and 1971. Of all the records of this period, 'Double Barrel' was perhaps the closest to contemporary forms of Jamaican popular music with its heavy bass, its dub overtones and its scatted 'talk-over' interjections. 'Double Barrel' not only marked the end of an era of pop reggae success, but also represented something of a 'limit case' to mass white identification with Jamaican music at this particular juncture. For even by 1970, white youths' brief flirtation with Jamaican music had begun to show signs of waning.

The 1960s' miscegenation between young blacks and whites had rested on certain fundamental contradictions as far as race was concerned, contradictions which by the end of the decade had increasingly begun to place those who identified with black culture in a profoundly ambiguous position. Outside the youth clubs and discos where black and white intermixed, in the spheres of school and work, the predicament of black youth had been steadily worsening, as a result particularly of racism in the job market and friction with the police (see 2.2). White youth were now increasingly to be found thrust into competition for an ever-shrinking number of jobs with their black peers and former class-mates. Divisions and conflicts premissed on these divergent experiences increasingly began to manifest themselves in the leisure sphere, in the shifting racial composition of certain London youth clubs, and the re-segregation of those leisure spaces in which black–white interaction had originally begun. McGlashen described this situation in the late 1960s and early 1970s as London's 'great reggae war':

> Black teenagers suddenly found youth clubs attractive. Starved for years of places that would let them in, they travelled across London to anywhere with good sounds

> . . . White youngsters who had been happy with a one-third black minority, found themselves outnumbered; they fled or called in reinforcements or heavies. The game of musical clubs lasted perhaps nine months. Black teenagers wandered around a shrinking circle of youth clubs that played their music to the accompaniment of clashes, petitions and frantic committee meetings. Most youth clubs chucked their reggae records in the dustbin. Segregation returned.
>
> (McGlashen, 1973, p. 21)

The reality of the situation outside the youth clubs, and the Powellist political climate of the period, militated against any deeper appreciation of the music on the part of the skinheads. Hebdige cites the particularly poignant example of a mixed youth club in south London where skinheads reacted to the playing of 'Young Gifted and Black' by singing 'Young, Gifted and White' and cutting the wires to the loudspeakers (Hebdige, 1974, p. 40). The realities of racism, together with ideological and political shifts inside the black community, served to exclude the skinheads from the leisure spaces they had earlier shared with young blacks. The sound-system and blues scene recoiled into a more compact and exclusively black cultural sphere in order to preserve itself from the white interest and intrusion which threatened its autonomy (see 2.2). The presence of whites diminished till all but the staunchest few remained. To most young whites, roots clubs, reggae shops, blues parties and sound-system dances became intimidating black domains and 'no-go' areas (Gayle, 1974; May, 1977c). The tougher rhythms and more 'conscious' lyrics, characteristic of much Jamaican music in this period, helped to restore some of the esoteric pride of the sound-system scene. Most young white people were unable to empathise with records which spoke of 'black unity', and which dealt increasingly with the specificity of black experience. The political encounters of Afro-Caribbean youth with the Black Power movement, and subsequently with Rastafari, placed firm limits on the degree of their involvement.

The 1960s interlude was ironically terminated by the

impenetrability of the very culture which had attracted white youth in the first place. In national terms, the extent of black–white interaction in the 1960s had anyway been highly uneven and confined to specific areas of urban Britain. In the suburbs of Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle, for example, the black components of skinhead style were much less present (Hebdige, 1974). In such areas the links with Afro-Caribbean youth were a good deal weaker, and often non-existent. The adoption of skinhead style revolved more heavily around the culture of the football terraces and around forms of racism directed towards the different, Afro-Caribbean and Asian, sections of the black community with equal venom. By 1972, the fragile relationship that had been built up between black and white youth during the 1960s appeared to have completely dissolved. As Gilroy notes, the terms on which young black and white people related to one another had begun to change:

> The rise of an articulate British racism, often aimed squarely at the distinct experiences and preoccupations of the young, destroyed the possibility of essentially covert appropriations of black style music and anger which had been the characteristic feature of the mod and skinhead eras. 'Race' had to be dealt with, acknowledged as a primary determinant of social life and, in the same breath, overcome.
>
> (Gilroy, 1987, p. 172)

The growth of an oppositional black culture amongst the Afro-Caribbean young, in the form of Rastafari, pushed the black-youth/white-youth dialectic into a new political phase, with far more thorough implications for the politics of race amongst the young. It was not until the latter half of the 1970s, however, that many of these implications began to be realised in a realignment of the relationship between black and white youth cultures, albeit on new terms and in new forms.

While reggae had only been widely available in a relatively diluted form until the mid-1970s, Island's campaign with Bob Marley rendered accessible a more radicalised yet

musically cosmopolitan form of Jamaican music for mass white consumption. Thus, while for many black fans Marley's apparent 'incorporation' into mainstream rock and pop culture marked the end of his cultural and political credibility, for white youth it signalled the beginnings of a mass encounter with Jamaican popular music which was to have major effects on youth culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

4.2 The Punky Reggae Party

The fruits of Island's campaign with Bob Marley were first signalled by the successful 1975 British tour, during which Marley played to large, mixed audiences in London, Birmingham and Manchester. However, it was not until the following year that the mass gravitation towards reggae by white youth really began. That process must be understood against the backdrop of an increasingly inert and clichéd rock culture in the mid-1970s. As one journalist succinctly put it:

> The white kids have lost their heroes; Jagger has become a wealthy socialite, Dylan a mellow home-loving man, even Lennon has little to say any more. So along comes this guy with amazing screw top hair, and he's singing about 'burning and looting' and 'brain wash education', loving your brothers and smoking your dope'. Their dream lives on.
>
> (*Black Echoes*, 26 June 1976, p. 12)

In Marley's music a generation of white rock-fans rediscovered the oppositional values which so much contemporary rock music appeared to have lost. The marketing campaigns conducted by Island and Virgin caught the eyes and ears of white fans increasingly dissatisfied with mainstream rock. For while Marley made compromises in his musical style, by successfully combining reggae with other international pop forms, his songs maintained a political militancy and a counter-cultural quality which appealed deeply to young whites. In the universal, egalitarian themes

which he addressed, white youth found meanings with which to make sense of their own lives and experiences in post-imperial Britain (see 6.2). The live performances to which Marley regularly attracted large white audiences throughout the 1970s, often witnessed the remarkable spectacle of thousands of young whites chanting 'Rastafari' in unison and singing 'stand up for your rights' along with the band.

The promotion of Marley as 'reggae superstar' by sections of the recording industry served to encourage his reception as a 'hero figure' amongst thousands of young whites. Indeed, the projection of reggae as a whole as 'rebel music' and the imagery by which many other artists were marketed as 'protest' figures and counter-cultural heroes, enhanced their political appeal amongst those white youth disillusioned with the complacency and self-indulgence of many rich white rock-stars. It was out of similar concerns and conditions that the punk movement emerged in 1976 as something of a reaction against rock's increasing technological sophistication, the gigantism of its live concerts and widening gap between audience and artists. Punk challenged the musical orthodoxies and aesthetic criteria of rock which had become dependent on recorded rather than live performances and on the primacy of albums over singles (Laing, 1985). It was no coincidence, therefore, that many punks chose to register their rejection of the 'dinosaurs' of rock culture through a strong identification with reggae. Reggae was particularly suited to signify that opposition. It had the political 'bite' and the spontaneous, participatory qualities that were absent from so much contemporary pop. Reggae singers, by addressing themselves to the concerns of everyday life, and to themes of poverty, suffering and protest, were felt to have an authenticity that was lacking in rock. In its attempt to 'shock' mainstream morality and culture, punk found in reggae and Rastafari a rich source of subversive and forbidding qualities, qualities of 'dread', of conviction and rebelliousness (Hebdige, 1979; Laing, 1985).

There were similarities between the discourses of punk ('Crisis', 'Anarchy in the UK') and those of Rastafari ('Armaggideon Time', 'War inna Babylon'). Punks drew analogies between their position and that of Rastas on the

basis that both faced discrimination as a result of their appearance and beliefs. Such connections were immortalised in the Bob Marley song 'Punky reggae party' which acknowledged the links between the two movements, proclaiming that while 'rejected by society' and 'treated with impunity', both were 'protected by their dignity'. Punk and new-wave groups like the Ruts, the Clash and the Slits incorporated reggae and Rasta rhetoric directly into their music. The Clash, for example, played live in front of a large backdrop of the 1976 Notting Hill riots, wearing stage clothes stencilled with phrases like 'Dub' and 'Heavy Manners'. (The riot at Notting Hill was a seminal event in punk culture and had provided the inspiration for the Clash's 'White Riot'.)

At many punk gigs, reggae was frequently played during the interval between bands, as the only acceptable alternative to punk (Hebdige, 1979). Punk artists like the Sex Pistols' John Lydon, moreover, openly declared their enthusiasm for reggae, an enthusiasm which in Lydon's case was pursued further into an experimentation with dub in his subsequent group, Public Image Limited. The Clash also paid homage to the music by recording their own version of popular root songs like Junior Murvin's 'Police and Thieves' and Willie Williams's 'Armagiddeon Time'. (Thousands of copies of the originals, together with cult records like 'Two Sevens Clash' and 'Uptown Ranking', were also bought by punks on import.) Besides the Slits, several other all-female and mixed new-wave bands, such as the Mistakes, the Au Pairs and the Raincoats, also employed reggae rhythms in their music (Steward and Garratt, 1984). Some groups began the practice of putting instrumental or dubbed versions of their songs on the B-sides of their singles. This practice, clearly borrowed from the dub mixes on soul and reggae 12-inch records, opened up possibilities for new kinds of experimentation with instruments, sounds and voices, through an appropriation of dub techniques.

Reggae was adopted by the punk movement for its ability to signify, in a particularly graphic way, white youth's own struggles for political and cultural power. In the same way that young white rock-musicians in the 1960s found in the

blues a particularly apt means of expressing the collective experience of youth, so the model for punks seeking to recreate rock as a communal music in the mid-to-late 1970s was reggae (Frith, 1983, p. 20). Like the organic artists of the reggae tradition, punk musicians insisted on relating musical expression to the mundane concerns and experiences of everyday life. Punk's concern to expose the oppressive nature and boredom of everyday life under capitalism resonated with reggae's antipathy to commodity forms, its emphasis on 'roots' and its faithful documentation of topical issues and current events. That resonance was itself partly predicated on white youth's own developing political consciousness of Britain's gathering economic and social crisis, experienced increasingly in the form of unemployment.

It was in Punk's challenge to orderly consumption and its deconstruction of reified notions of pleasure that the movement intersected most clearly with reggae's own refusal to distinguish between 'leisure' and 'politics'. Reggae's ability to integrate explicit lyrics with musical intensity, its spontaneity, performance-orientation and commitment to improvisation, all proved profoundly attractive to young whites increasingly alienated by the predictable musical products of mainstream rock and pop culture. Reggae's contribution to punk's demystification of pop ideology and its reaffirmation of young people's creative power was everywhere evident, in the movement's DIY approach to music-making, its directness of expression and its attempts to close the gap between artists and audience. The fruits of this connection were realised not only in the democratisation of musical performances and band formation, but also in a widening of access to the means of production and distribution themselves. Here the parallels with the reggae industry were striking, in the emergence of an autonomous network of independent labels, distribution organisations and retail outlets. Such connections were made concrete in organisations like Rough Trade, which provided a distribution service and retail outlet for both punk and reggae records.

In these ways the impact of reggae created scope for new kinds of opposition and new ways of being 'political' in white youth culture which reflected the continuity of cultural

expression with political action in black musical traditions. Many of these connections were made explicit in Rock Against Racism (RAR), an organisation formed in late 1976 by a loose political alliance of musicians, fans, media workers and anti-racist/fascist activities (Widgery, 1986). While conceived, most immediately, as a counter-response to the racist utterances of certain prominent rock musicians, RAR was also formed against the backdrop of a resurgence of popular racism, and a rise in the tempo of nationalist, right-wing activity, particularly amongst the young.

RAR drew its momentum from the informal dialogue between black and white youth which had sprung up in the shadow of Bob Marley and the punk intervention. By openly acknowledging the political influence of black music forms in white youth-culture, it attempted to politicise the links between punk, the recession and race politics. RAR gave vent to the strong anti-racist feeling and the passionate opposition to fascist violence and police harassment that already existed amongst substantial numbers of young whites in Britain. The extent and depth of that feeling was reflected in the letters pages of *Temporary Hoarding*, RAR's publication, which revealed the range of local concerns and personal experiences around race issues. Letters of sympathy and protest conveyed both the strength of white youth's affiliation to black music as well as their sense of outrage at the racism of their parents and peers. Capturing the prevailing mood of urgency and spontaneity, the paper's editorial wrote:

> Everyone wants to tell us their experiences, their fave local bands, their ideas about how to fight fascism, about their bigoted families, about mates beaten up, about anger and frustration about their town, about racism in their street, their blocks of flats, about fear – helplessness.
> (*Temporary Hoarding*, Winter 1977, p. 1)

RAR's decentralised structure meant that it was at the local level that the organisation was often at its most effective. At a host of small provincial venues, black and white musicians collaborated under RAR's umbrella in a spontaneous manner that often relied on local, informal friendship networks, and

in settings wholly autonomous from the mainstream music industry. In less than three years, RAR successfully managed to stage nearly 800 gigs and was instrumental in putting reggae groups into venues from which they had hitherto been excluded. Bands like Steel Pulse, Aswad, Black Slate, Misty and the Cimarons, for example, regularly appeared alongside punk groups at town hall and open-air carnivals, giving thousands of whites in provincial areas the opportunity to hear reggae, often for the first time, in familiar surroundings.

The organisation's activities climaxed in the late 1970s and early 1980s in a series of major anti-fascist demonstrations organised in alliance with the Anti-Nazi League. The three great RAR/ANL carnivals were amongst the largest anti-racist political mobilisations that had been seen in post-war Britain. The ANL had been formed a year later than RAR with the specific intention of defeating the National Front at the polls. With its broader social and political constituency though, and its tendency to lay the problem of racism in Britain exclusively at the feet of the NF, the ANL served to narrow and undermine many of RAR's wider political objectives. For RAR's was a much broader anti-racist vision premissed on the collective transcendence of 'race' in concrete settings. Under the simple banner of 'love music, hate racism' RAR pioneered new sorts of links between politics and music, providing both a broad, cultural challenge to racism and an emotional alternative to nationalism and patriotism. With its slogan of 'militant entertainment', RAR put into practice the concept of music as a source of both pleasure and political education that was so characteristic of black music in general and reggae in particular.

The political alliance between black and white, and the anti-racist sentiments that RAR helped to foster during its brief history, suggested something of the shared political concerns between different sections of the working-class young. Through the impact of reggae, the punk–RAR experience as a whole succeeded in cultivating an unprecedented awareness of race amongst the mainstream of white youth. However, while the RAR/ANL intervention succeeded in winning over large sections of those most vulnerable to fascism and nationalism, the process of

politicisation spawned by white youth's mass engagement with reggae culture and Rastafari was by no means assured of leading in a 'progressive' direction. The accompanying encounters of young whites with the contradictions of race showed themselves to be equally capable of generating more reactive and explicitly racist responses.

4.3 Young, powerless and white

Punk was a contradictory and politically precarious movement as far as race was concerned. While some punks were drawn to the very exclusivity and impregnability of Rasta, for others, the movement's insistence on the specificity of racial oppression and on the exclusive discourses of 'roots' and 'identity' constituted precisely the same barrier to white penetration as it had done more than five years earlier. Punk's attempt to express an affinity with Rasta and reggae culture by subverting the symbols of nationalism, (for example in the Sex Pistols' iconoclastic use of the Union Jack and the Queen's figurehead) and by drawing parallels between the experience of racism and the position of dispossessed whites in songs like 'White Riot', all contained ambiguities which were susceptible to fascist manipulation. Such contradictions were unsurprising given that punk was born out the same social and economic crisis that had produced the rise in nationalist right-wing activity. For the same powerlessness, desire to shock and sense of anger at official smugness expressed by punk's more working-class constituency, were precisely the same motives and feelings which steered jobless and powerless young whites towards organised racism.

These contradictions began to manifest themselves in explicitly racist forms through the less ambiguous use of fascist and nationalist symbols such as swastikas and Union Jacks by some sections of the punk audiences. The coincidence of the revival of skinhead culture with the resurgence in organised fascist activity became increasingly noticeable at punk gigs by bands like Sham 69, who began to attract

sizeable contingents of increasingly vocal Young National Front supporters. While the connections between nationalist, right-wing organisations and the resurgent skinhead movement were at first by no means automatic or reciprocal, the skinhead style became progressively inflected with a racist connotation, as organisations like the British Movement and the National Front consciously sought to forge a link between its exaggerated working-class imagery and racist/nationalist politics.

In the late 1970s both organisations began to concentrate their efforts on mobilising the young during their leisure time, particularly on football terraces, at rock concerts and on the streets (Murdock and Troyna, 1981). The political lessons of RAR were not lost on groups like the National Front and British Movement whose youth wings attempted to match the Left's interventions, measure for measure, with their own mirror organisations such as the Anti-Paki League and Rock Against Communism (RAC). The youth organisations of the far right revealed an impressive ability to relate to, and express the concrete problems and needs of powerless white youth. Rather than simply 'duping' their young recruits, such organisations merely acknowledged and capitalised on the very real sense of boredom and disillusionment that was the frequent experience of the dole for many white youths. They did so by making 'race' the basis for working-class unity and coherence, a coherence defined against middle-class authority, the state and, above all, 'foreigners' and 'blacks'. In the youth-oriented publications of the far right, such as *Bulldog* and *Young Nationalist*, youth culture was treated as a battleground and a site of 'race war'. *Bulldog*'s response to the 'arrogant' and 'intimidating' 'black-power cult' of Rastafari, and the 'Paki-power' of Asian youth, for example, was to invert the left political discourse of 'black and white, unite and fight', by invoking the slogan of 'white youth unite and fight'. Thus, echoing Bob Marley, *Bulldog* told its readers that the time had come for them to 'stand up for their rights':

> We cannot allow ourselves to be pushed around any

> longer. The time has come for white youths to unite. We must stick together in the fight against black violence.
>
> (*Bulldog*, no. 23, p. 5)

The imagery of 'black power' and violence tapped a deep-seated resentment of black youth-culture's autonomy among some sections of white youth. Playing on young whites' perceptions of black youth as 'arrogant' and 'threatening', and on the very real rivalry that existed at street level in some areas, such imagery mobilised complex feelings of fear, envy, and begrudged admiration for the solidarity and combativity of young blacks, for example, against the police. It was a solidarity and cohesiveness which white youth were seen to lack, and attempted to create through their own defensive assertion of white working-classness. The fabrication of imaginary contexts of origin and belonging, through the creation of a mythical white ethnicity, was one way in which this was achieved by those young whites who felt neglected and excluded in terms of their own lack of 'culture' and 'history' (Hebdige, 1981).

Bulldog's translation of the discourses of reggae and Rastafari into the slogans of 'white power' suggested something fundamental about the political potency of black youth culture. For, while feared and resented by some whites for its racially specific discourses, its musical and cultural forms remained profoundly attractive to them. The contradictory nature of that attraction required the far right to struggle constantly against the pervasive influence of black culture amongst white youth. The widespread popularity of black music, style and dance forms amongst the young was recognised as a specific threat to the political designs of organisations like the British Movement and the Young National Front. In pointing out that threat, *Bulldog* rejected the implicit multiracialism of soul culture, warning its readers that:

> The record and cassette is more powerful than the T.V. or newspapers as far as youth is concerned. Disco and its melting pot pseudo-philosophy must be fought or Britain will be full of black worshipping soul boys.
>
> (*Bulldog*, no. 23, p. 10)

The far right's inability to make sense of the appeal of black dance culture's 'irrational' and 'emotional frenzy' amongst the young was an acknowledgement of the powerful forms of pleasure attached to the consumption of black music by whites. Those pleasures presented a major obstacle to the right's attempts to mobilise white youth around different political and cultural objectives.

Bulldog's 'Rock Against Communism' column, conceived as a direct answer to its left counterpart, was one such attempt to promote an alternative musical culture, purified of black influences. Exploiting the ambiguity in punk's discourses, the RAC column featured a regular chart composed of songs and groups specifically chosen for their racial connotations. Lyrics and song titles such as the Angelic Upstarts' 'Brave New World', the Clash's 'White Riot' and the Cure's 'Killing an Arab' were given explicitly racist readings (*Bulldog*, November 1978, no. 10, p. 5). Some song titles were chosen merely for their colour reference, for example, 'White Noise' by Stiff Little Fingers, a song about British army torture in Northern Ireland (*Bulldog*, November 1978, no. 10, p. 5). Groups like Sham 69 and 'white reggae' acts like Madness and Bad Manners, all of which attracted hard-core skinhead followings and were labelled as 'fascist' in the music press, were also adopted by RAC as specifically right-wing bands, while groups like the Specials were referred to as 'The Specials Plus Two' thereby excluding the band's two black members (*Bulldog*, no. 17, p. 5) (see 4.4).

It was the 'Oi' movement, however, more than any other post-punk trend, which was claimed as the exclusive property of the far right. Oi was seen as the natural heir to punk, preserving its 'authentic' 'white spirit' in its anti-authority and explicitly racist lyrics (*Bulldog*, July 1982, no. 28, p. 3). 'Oi' was defined as an emphatically British form of white working-class folk music. Bands like Cock Sparrer, the Cockney Rejects and Skrewdriver projected an aggressive 'East End' working-class identity, their songs heavily overladen with football chants and addressed to the concerns of the white, male adolescent, working-class gang. Songs like 'Class War' by the Exploited, 'Master Race' by the Four Skins and 'Blood on the Streets' by the Criminal Class

compounded race and class themes from a selfconsciously 'white' perspective. Through the notion of 'white oppression', Oi inverted racism by making whites the victims of 'black violence' and 'pro-black' police discrimination. In this way, the discourse of Oi fed into the skinhead movement's own mythology about itself as subject to unprovoked assaults by blacks and police alike, denied jobs, spurned by the press and continually forced to the back of the queue (Hebdige, 1981).

While the growth of popular racism and right-wing nationalism amongst the young formed one pole of responses towards black youth-culture in the post-punk era, there were other social and cultural currents in the same period which produced a quite different set of responses. For the same race and class determinants that underpinned these overtly reactive movements amongst young whites were also responsible for generating other, more syncretic, cultural formations that came to be represented and played out at the very heart of pop culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

4.4 Two-tone over England

One of the legacies of punk had been to stimulate an unprecedented level of interest in reggae amongst young whites, an interest that was signalled most immediately by the flurry of hits, particularly in the lover's rock genre, which 'crossed over' from the reggae market into the pop charts (see 3.3). Punk's championing of reggae, together with the mass availability and exposure of the music within the entertainment industry, served to establish it as a central feature of white youth-culture in Britain. These developments opened the way to more popularised and diffuse forms of engagement with Jamaican music and culture, and to the direct incorporation of reggae into white youth's cultural repertoire. In musical terms, one of the most immediate effects of these processes was to encourage the formulation of various, new, rock/reggae hybrids.

Traditionally, most white musicians had found Jamaican music hard to imitate. Since the late 1960s various pop and

rock artists had attempted to experiment with reggae rhythms, achieving intermittent chart success with near approximations of Jamaican styles. Reggae, however, did not easily lend itself to musical appropriation. For most rock musicians, Jamaican music was completely alien to the R & B and blues traditions to which they were accustomed. By the late 1970s, however, as a result of punk, a number of groups were drawing openly on reggae music styles as sources of inspiration and creativity. While a number of new-wave artists attempted to produce one-off, popularised versions of reggae, it was the bands of the two-tone movement who were the first to come up with a more convincing and organic fusion of Jamaican music and rock. For two-tone represented one of the first indigenous pop forms in Britain to mediate a direct relation to the reggae tradition and the black experience.

The decentralisation of music-making and the boom in local bands brought about by punk paved the way for various, distinctly regional, appropriations of reggae, the most successful of which was two-tone. Two-tone's roots lay deeply embedded in the unique social and geographical proximity that existed between black and white communities in certain inner-city areas of the West Midlands. The multiracial composition of bands like the Selecter, the Specials, the Beat and UB40 reflected the unprecedented degree of rapport that had been built up between black and white youth in those areas, their music premissed on the experience of a whole generation of young people who had been to school together and shared the same streets, communities and leisure activities (see Chapter 5).

Hebdige argues that punk had created something of a 'crisis in confidence' within the British recording industry (Hebdige, 1983). The unpredictability of youthful, musical trends that followed in its wake, opened the way for more flexible and less cautious signing and management policies which gave more power to young musicians to control their own products, by having a greater say over release dates, cover designs, mixes and promotion strategies. This had the effect of removing some of the obstacles and checks which normally slowed down the industry's response to demand, and thereby accelerated the process whereby new styles and

sounds were generated (Hebdige, 1983). This fluidity in the recording industry was partly borne out by the rapidity of two-tone's intervention into mainstream pop culture in late 1979. The Specials' first release, 'Gangsters', achieved cult status within a matter of days and went on to become the largest selling, independently distributed single of that year.

The interest in Jamaican music cultivated by punk had encouraged some young whites to seek out the 'authentic' roots of reggae that lay behind the music of artists like Bob Marley. The 'ska revival' music of two-tone provided an ideal opportunity for those white youth who had identified with reggae culture during the punk period to maintain their affiliation to the music. There were differences in musical style, however, between the various two-tone bands. The Selecter were the most obviously reggae influenced. The Specials used a more up-tempo fusion of ska and rock, while the Beat drew on a whole range of punk, reggae, calypso and soul influences. Jamaican forms supplied the characteristic upbeat guitar, the keyboard shuffle and the drum-and-bass foundations that were crucial to the music's danceability. The most common, characteristic feature of the two-tone sound, however, was its distinct synthesis of the rhythmic pulse of Jamaican music with the drive and cynical resentment of punk.

Two-tone music was born out of its exponents' various attempts to reflect the heterogeneous tastes of their mixed audiences. In order to appeal to both black and white sections of the audience, groups like the Coventry Automatics (the forerunners of the Specials) were forced back to earlier, less 'separatist' and more up-tempo forms of Jamaican music, such as ska and rocksteady. As Linval Golding, the Specials' guitarist, pointed out, ska had an energetic quality that was more suited to the post-punk mood of white youth:

> I don't think white audiences can enjoy straight reggae so much as ska. Reggae's too heavy, it's too laid back for today's generation who wants to let off steam and energy. They want to jump a bit.
>
> (*Black Music*, February 1980, p. 27)

Two-tone's revival of the music of ska and rocksteady was accompanied by a revival of the sartorial styles and symbols associated with the era. The two-tone style was based on that of the 1960s' 'rude boy' movement, and consisted of tonic suits, loafers, pork-pie hats and cropped hair. Its most distinctive features, however, was the black-and-white check design found on the band's record label and promotional material. The two-tone logo suggested the possibility that a new hybrid cultural identity might be achieved through the music. As Hebdige points out, its colour symbolism signified the multiracial ideal of black and white, 'adjacent yet separate, different but connected like squares on a chessboard' (Hebdige, 1983, p. 160).

The exponents of two-tone were united in their hope that the humour and style of both black and white working-class youth could find a common voice in the movement's music and identity. Their hopes were largely vindicated by the mass enthusiasm for two-tone's unique style, music and cultural politics shown by the young across the length and breadth of Britain. A series of extensive national tours undertaken by the two-tone roster between 1979 and 1981 succeeded in dispersing the music to the most provincial areas of Britain (*New Musical Express*, 25 August 1979; 27 September 1980). The two-tone bands criss-crossed the country, playing to packed dance halls. The rowdy, exuberant atmosphere of the concerts underlined two-tone's importance as a predominantly live and visual dance music. While the bands addressed serious political and social issues, it was two-tone's infectious dance rhythms which drew in the crowds. Pauline Black, the Selecter's lead vocalist, summed up the music's politics by telling the audience at the beginning of the group's set that 'you're here to dance, and then to think' (*New Musical Express*, 23 February 1980, p. 48). The impact of two-tone's live performances revolved heavily around this combination of deadly serious lyrics and 'good-time' dance rhythms. Taking their cues from the reggae tradition, the groups worked in and out of the popular, attempting to merge political sensibilities with the music itself. Thus, as Pauline Black elaborated:

> while we're trying to entertain people, we're also trying to give them something to think about . . . we catch them with the beat, then try to make the lyrics something they can relate to.
>
> (*Melody Maker*, 6 October 1979, p. 20)

Most of the two-tone bands relied on their own local, shared experience of urban life for the raw material of their lyricism. First-hand experience of racism, of police harassment and the dole formed the basis for songs like 'Concrete Jungle' by the Specials and 'Black and Blue' and 'Too Much Pressure' by the Selecter. The two-tone bands also dealt directly with the wider political issues of youth, race, unemployment and Thatcherism. Songs like the Specials' 'Do the Dog' attacked the petty tribal divisions and subcultural rivalries amongst the young in a cynical manner reminiscent of punk, while the Beat's 'Stand Down Margaret' captured youth's disillusionment and anxiety about their future in Thatcherite Britain. The latter song was important not only because it offered a condensed, yet highly articulate, political critique of Thatcherism, but also because of its use of dub techniques to enhance that critique. While the album version of 'Stand Down Margaret' contained the original lyrics in their entirety, with additional toasting by Ranking Roger, the single, 'Best Friend', was backed by a complex and sophisticated dub of the song. 'Stand Down Margaret (Dub)' used a whole range of sound effects and mixing techniques to explore the instrumentation and drum and bass patterns of the music. The end result was a novel fusion of punk, reggae and jazz influences with calypso phrasing and dub effects. The song's meaning was enhanced by the selective dubbing-in of the key phrases 'work', 'whitelaw', 'short sharp' and 'world war' from the original lyrics. In this way, the dub process transformed the song into a series of basic political statements around the interrelated themes of unemployment ('work'), racism ('whitelaw'), state repression ('short, sharp') and nuclear weapons ('world war').

The Beat's use of dub was far from being the only example of the reggae tradition's political and musical influence on two-tone. All the bands, without exception, acknowledged

their debt to that tradition by covering many original ska, rocksteady and reggae songs. The Specials also included the veteran Jamaican trombonist, Rico, in their line-up, while the Beat displayed their commitment to the reggae tradition by releasing music by roots artists like the Congoes on their own 'Go Feet' label.

It was around the issue of race that two-tone made its most dramatic cultural and political intervention. While the two-tone bands displayed an active commitment to political organisations like Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, playing at various benefit gigs and demonstrations, two-tone music gave shape more to a sensibility amongst the young rather than to a concrete political programme. Songs such as the Specials' 'It doesn't make it alright' and 'Its up to you' reflected the hopes and aspirations of many young black and white people with their advocacy of tolerance and mutual respect. In a more poignant sense, the movement's message could also be inferred from the combined presence of black and white musicians on stage. Thus, as the Beat's Ranking Roger argued, 'Once you've said it, you don't need to say it again or you'd be pushing it down people's throats . . . All you got to do is look on stage and you see unity' (*Black Music*, October, 1982, p. 21).

The mere existence of multiracial bands, and their mass exposure through the channels of mainstream pop, were powerful signifiers in their own right. 'By simply doing what we do, and being who we are', as one member of the Selector argued, 'we *are* rock against racism' (*New Musical Express*, 23 February 1980, p. 7). Two-tone's political ideals were founded on a set of shared anti-racist assumptions and common values which were given expression in the music itself. Its exponents variously described the movement as 'a non-separation of things' and a 'bringing together', using music as a 'common language' and a 'common ground' (*New Musical Express*, 23 February 1980). In this way, the groups themselves symbolised and 'lived out' the two-tone message. By acknowledging and reflecting the contradictions of race, the movement attempted to straddle the cultural and political difference between black and white, without permitting them to become a source of division. Thus, as Charlie Anderson of

the Selecter pointed out, 'The most important thing is the music – we all like the same things, and although we come from different backgrounds, those differences make us what we are' (*Melody Maker*, 6 October 1979, p. 20).

The two-tone bands attempted to use the stage as a platform from which to confront the increasingly vocal racist groups in some of their audiences. Contingents of young fascists had been present at the earliest two-tone gigs. The Specials, and Madness in particular (the only all-white band in the early two-tone entourage), regularly attracted the more patriotic and racist elements of the skinhead revival, who saw in the two-tone style an accurate historical reflection of themselves. The chanting of racist and fascist slogans and the sporadic violence at gigs was a constant reminder of the forces which threatened to undermine two-tone's fragile 'unity'. The contradictions of race, far from being banished by the music, were reproduced in the concert hall, where they enhanced the already fraught and tense atmosphere characteristic of two-tone gigs.

The synchronisation of the Specials' chart-topping 'Ghost Town' with the summer rebellions of 1981 was a fitting climax to two-tone's brief reign of success. Within days of the riots, the Specials were topping the bill at the Leeds anti-racist carnival. The cultural drawing-power of their music was confirmed by the massed legions of two-tone fans who attended the rally, of whom a large proportion were young Afro-Caribbeans and Asians. 'Ghost Town' held the number one position during the week in which black and white youth clashed with the police in Britain's inner-city areas, its sharp evocation of crisis conditions and urban decline providing an apt sound-track to the summer rioting. The song itself employed a straightforward reggae-based rhythm, much slower than the customary up-tempo beat of two-tone, suggesting the sombre nature of its subject-matter. Its political message, enhanced by the toasted interjections of Neville Staples, suggested the possibility that black and white youth might find common meanings in their shared post-industrial predicament.

Two-tone's legacy lay not only in the popular character of its anti-racist politics but also in its projection of black

cultural forms into the heart of pop culture. Its use of dub, toasting and reggae rhythms, and its fusion of musical 'entertainment' with political realism, all reflected the influence of Jamaican music's characteristic political and cultural traditions. Over the course of two-tone's short-lived history, those traditions occupied a central position at the heart of pop culture for a period of nearly two years. The movement's success paved the way for other groups to intervene in mainstream pop with musical styles more closely related to contemporary reggae.

The most immediate benefactors of the mass white interest in Jamaican music fostered by two-tone were UB40. Whereas the bands of the two-tone movement synthesised black and white musical forms, UB40 attempted to reproduce reggae as faithfully and accurately as possible. Following in the wake of two-tone at the close of the 1970s, UB40 emerged in the early 1980s as the most popular and successful purveyors of reggae within mainstream pop.

Like the two-tone groups, UB40 owed much of their initial success to their ability to retain a measure of autonomy from the established music industry. Their debut album, *Signing Off*, was the first number one album to be recorded, pressed and distributed entirely through independent channels. The band's relative independence and control over their music afforded them the opportunity to release and popularise their own explicitly political material. The first album, for example, contained songs about Thatcherism ('Madame Medusa'), imperialism and apartheid ('Burden of Shame') and black civil rights ('King', 'Tyler'). The band, moreover, declared their specific intentions to encourage a wider appreciation of reggae by producing a popularised version that could open up the pop market to Jamaican music. As Robin Campbell pointed out:

> We actually set out in the first place to popularise reggae. That was our intention . . . Originally, we saw ourselves as ambassadors but I don't think we do anymore, because to a certain degree we've been successful.
>
> (*New Musical Express*, 3 September 1983, p. 6)

UB40's characteristic sound was tailored to the pop market through the use of softer melodies, greater instrumentation, more polished vocals and songs with strong hook-lines and choruses. The band saw this as a deliberate ploy to convey the music to as large an audience as possible, thereby creating interest in more roots-orientated reggae. As Campbell, once again, argued:

> I wouldn't ever claim credit for every success that reggae's had in Britain, but I think we've played no small part in it. Our success has no doubt helped people like Black Uhuru and Gregory Isaacs who now have chart albums and singles. Our success has opened a lot of people's ears to reggae.
>
> (*New Musical Express*, 3 September 1983, p. 6)

It is almost impossible to test Campbell's assertions, and accurately assess UB40's role in stimulating white interest in Jamaican music. While in the minds of many young whites, the band are the be-all and end-all of reggae, they do nevertheless provide something of a marker for the music in mainstream pop.

The band themselves have maintained a commitment to the reggae tradition by supporting local artists and by paying homage to their sources of inspiration on the album *Labour of Love*, a collection of cover versions of old reggae hits. They have managed to sustain the strongly radical flavour of their music by continuing to focus their songs around issues such as unemployment, race, ecology and nuclear weapons. The consistency of their chart success, moreover, suggests the continued relevance of reggae amongst mainstream white youth, whether as oppositional or dance music, or as a rhythmic counterpoint to mainstream rock and pop.

The spaces in pop culture carved out by two-tone and UB40 have enabled black groups like Musical Youth to intervene and reach a mass white audience with musical styles and forms firmly rooted in the reggae tradition. Musical Youth's meteoric rise to fame in 1982 with 'Pass the Dutchie' was a seminal event in reggae's history within mainstream pop. The song was a version of a well-known

roots hit by the Mighty Diamonds entitled 'Pass the Kouchie'. The replacement of 'kouchie', which referred to a form of ganja pipe, by the more innocuous 'dutchie', a cooking pot, was a calculated move to widen the record's appeal by minimising the possibility of media resistance. Even before the band's record company, MCA, had finished grooming them for pop promotion, 'Pass the Dutchie' had already forged its way to the top of the charts. In the first week of October 1982 it was reported that the record, having reached number one, was selling twice as many copies as its nearest rival (*New Musical Express*, (NME), 9 October 1982). By the end of that week the single had sold over half a million, making it the year's fastest selling single. The band received unprecedented media coverage for a black reggae group. NME reported that in the space of four days Musical Youth had appeared on *Top of the Pops*, *Blue Peter*, *Razamattaz*, the *News at Ten*, the *Nine O'Clock News*, the *Late, Late, Breakfast Show* and Radio One's *Roundtable*, while also making the front page of the *Daily Star* and the inside pages of the *Mirror*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail* (*New Musical Express*, 9 October 1982). With an average age of 13, the group's mass appeal clearly rested partly on their status as a novelty act within the media, and also on their projection as the acceptable face of black youth. The group, for their part, showed themselves to be well aware of this process. As Junior, the band's drummer, astutely observed:

> I think a lot of people still think we're a novelty. Some of them probably don't even care about the music. They see us on *Top of the Pops* and go Aaah, the lickle kids are doing so well. And they go out and buy the record.
>
> (*New Musical Express*, 9 October 1982)

As Junior points out, these endearing images of black adolescence were central to the band's popularity amongst a mass white audience. 'Pass the Dutchie' nevertheless opened up the cultural politics of reggae to a whole new generation of young whites through its exposure of Rasta symbolism, patois and toasting traditions. By shrewdly co-opting contemporary Jamaican rhythms and employing the DJ-ing

styles of the moment, Musical Youth rendered black forms available to a mass audience of largely uninitiated young whites.

The video that accompanied 'Pass the Dutchie' also played a crucial role in the band's intervention, receiving several successive plays on *Top of the Pops*. Filmed partly inside a court-room and partly on the banks of the River Thames, with the Houses of Parliament as the backdrop, the video used the icons of Rasta and reggae culture to signify a semantic 'turning of the tables' on the British power structure and legal system. The group's tender age, moreover, and their image in the media as 'schoolkids cum popstars' created an immediate point of identification for younger whites. From 'Pass the Dutchie's' opening proclamation that 'this generation rules the nation', the record immediately created its own youth-specific audience. For the 'musical youth' specified in the group's title referred as much to the political culture of which the band were junior ambassadors, as to the 'generation' of young white fans who were able to relate to that culture through their music.

While Musical Youth's intervention was a significant 'moment' in the mass dissemination of Jamaican music through mainstream pop culture, in the post-punk era of the early 1980s such breakthroughs were few and far between. In the confusion of trends that followed in the wake of two-tone, reggae and Rasta culture were reduced to simply one of many 'ethnic styles' that were plundered and selectively recombined into musical forms which, while clearly drawing on reggae rhythms, owed little to the principles of the reggae tradition. The playful and stylised use of 'white dreadlocks' was a prime example of this relocation of black symbols into contexts drained of any connection with black cultural and musical traditions. Jamaican and black British reggae artists were overlooked by the recording industry in favour of more marketable white pop acts who employed reggae as simply a stylistic ingredient in a successful hit formula. It was highly ironic, and somewhat symptomatic of the 'new pop' sensibility, that Musical Youth's 'Pass the Dutchie' should be toppled from the number one spot by Culture Club's 'Do You Really Want To Hurt Me' (Rimmer, 1985). Compared

with Musical Youth's evocative anthem to the reggae tradition, Culture Club's was an altogether more bleached affair, complete with white toaster, which almost deliberately distanced itself from its black, specifically Jamaican musical sources.

Black reggae artists have continued to make sporadic forays into pop culture in the mid-1980s, perhaps the most notable example being Smiley Culture. The success of his 'Police Officer' and 'Cockney Translation' indicated the potential of the new, indigenous reggae styles to attract a whole generation of younger whites to whom Bob Marley was but a distant 'legend' encountered through slick TV commercials for his posthumous product. Unlike the more Rasta-oriented Jamaican reggae of the 1970s, these songs addressed the peculiarities of British urban life in a language that was part patois and part 'English', with rhythms that were more upbeat, and with lyrics which, while amusing, had serious undertones that were relevant to the experience of white youth in the 1980s.

The intermittent success of artists like Smiley Culture has reaffirmed the power of mainstream pop as one of the principal media through which black images and styles in general, and Jamaican popular forms in particular, are popularised amongst white youth. The precise effects of these processes on young whites however remain particularly difficult to gauge on a mass cultural level. One approach is to see in the continued popularity of black artists, and the mass white consumption of commercially-mediated forms of black culture, a massive endorsement and 'election' of black music through exercises of cultural choice and consumer power. Here, the dominance of black performers in pop culture may have a number of unforeseen, potential consequences with regard to the politics of race.

First, in a more negative sense, there is the constant possibility that the overrepresentation of blacks in the leisure sphere might serve to reinforce common-sense stereotypes of blacks as 'entertainers'. Such representations might have the effect of obscuring the position of blacks in other spheres of society or depoliticising black struggles generally. In another sense, however, it might be that positive forms of attraction

to, and mass enthusiasm for, black music can act as complex signifiers of race in other, more contradictory ways. Here, individual and collective adulation of black performers, and their status as cultural and musical 'heroes' for whites, might have the potential to give meaning to race through the attachment of positive attributes to particular artists, or through their association with powerful feelings and pleasures tapped by the music. That potential can be considerably enhanced when the music itself is focused around particular themes and issues to do with race.

The surface ephemera of mainstream pop culture might play an important role here by providing the means through which these images are disseminated to young white fans, whether in the form of posters, scrapbooks or record sleeves. So too, with the rising prominence of video in the promotion of pop, might film have acquired a special significance in the relay of black images and styles. Mainstream video shows and television programmes like *Top of the Pops*, for example, remain amongst the most important channels for the transmission of black and black-defined styles to a mass white audience. While in comparison with white acts, black artists are still too infrequently seen on television, when they do appear black forms and images can be disseminated on a truly national scale and with a greater immediacy than by any other single medium.

These processes might have far-reaching effects on young whites. For it may be that mass-mediated representations of black performers have the potential not only to give meaning to race, but also to deprive it of significance. Here black music's ability to address subjects, such as sexuality and gender relations, in non-race-specific modes, and its capacity to articulate universal pleasures and emotions not reducible to blackness, can serve as powerful deconstructing agents or black stereotypes, by rendering the performer's 'racial' characteristics meaningless or irrelevant in the consumption process. The attachment of positive values to black artists, above all, opens up the possibility of those values being associated with the black people encountered by whites in their everyday lives. Moreover, given that forms like reggae are so heavily connotational of other fields of black culture,

their propagation through the channels of the mass media can also provide an entrée to that culture for provincial young whites, or for those living in areas of negligible black settlement.

The signifying power of reggae and its pedagogic potential to inculcate wider understandings of black culture or racism depends, ultimately, on the forms of its consumption in specific social contexts, and on the circumstances of black–white relations generally in any one given location. To pin down the potential meanings and uses of reggae for young whites, and the precise kinds of subjectivity it might express and produce, requires a different kind of approach to the one that has been employed in the preceding pages. For these questions cannot be tackled by merely examining the broad movements of white youth culture, or by 'reading' the key sounds and stylistic shifts of popular music. Empirical data, gleaned from sources such as the charts or from record sales, are notoriously unreliable guides as to which sections of the white population might be consuming reggae at any point in time, in what ways and with what effects. Independent analyses of musical texts in themselves also offer only partial clues to the consumed meanings attached to them by whites. For such texts do not yield fixed representations or simple, one-to-one 'reflections' of white experience. Because of the ability of some reggae songs to hold many different meanings, the subject positions articulated by them may be multiple and contradictory. Young whites' reasons for liking reggae may also be as diverse as the infinite variety of contexts in which they hear and experience the music.

The meanings elicited by reggae, then, only became activated in particular sites, and in relation to any number of surrounding cultural forms, practices, events and social experiences. The cultural affinities and musical tastes of young whites are inseparable from their tastes in clothes, friends and their personal–political orientations. Their 'readings' of reggae are always shaped by wider factors to do with age, neighbourhood, schooling experiences, leisure options and class position, factors which are often locally produced and regionally specific. These are questions that are better approached through more contextualised and

detailed methods of investigation. In the remaining sections of the book, therefore, I want to look at the meaning of reggae and black culture, and the conditions in which they are encountered by young whites, in just one such specific regional context of urban Britain.

Part II

Ethnography

Introduction

What does it actually mean to young whites themselves to have grown up alongside black people, and shared the same classrooms, neighbourhoods and leisure spaces with them? What is it exactly that draws them to forms like reggae and Rastafari? What kinds of feelings and attitudes are produced by their identification with such forms, and by their engagement with the black community generally? Moreover, what problems do these processes entail and what political consequences might they have?

In the second half of the book I want to explore these questions by looking at the experiences of a group of young white people in a specific historical and regional context of contemporary urban Britain, the city of Birmingham in the West Midlands of England. The following chapters are based on a series of interviews conducted with this group, ten of whom were young men and six young women, between 1982 and 1985.

The chapters loosely reflect the biographical stages of experience undergone by those concerned and follow a broadly 'chronological' pattern, beginning, in Chapter 5, with an overview of some of the contexts in which young whites encountered black youth and black culture in Birmingham generally, moving on, in Chapter 6, to look at individual responses to black cultural forms, exploring some of the contradictions involved in these processes in Chapter 7, and, finally, looking at some of their broader determinants and potential political outcomes in Chapter 8.

The methods of research employed in the study were somewhat 'unorthodox' in relation to conventional ethnography, relying on a highly personalised approach which stemmed largely from my own 'non-academic' interests and involvement in the subject matter. It was these – mainly musical – interests and enthusiasms, rather than any prior

research intentions, that led me to forge the contacts within the local community which came to form the basis of the research. My initial route of introduction came through a local white boy from the south Birmingham area, who was involved with a local sound system and had a large number of black friends. It was through this one key friendship that I was pulled into the local reggae music culture, and introduced into a whole network of people and places that seemed another world away from the academic and student circles of Birmingham University.

The autumn of 1981 began twelve months of drifting within this network, letting myself be swept along by the tide of events and adapting to the objectives and sense of time of those around me. In this period, whole days and weeks were spent simply 'moving' with friends and acquaintances. Most weekends centred on social and musical events, whether a sound-system dance, blues party or live gig. Through regularly frequenting these occasions, I became closely involved with one sound in particular, African Scientist, and began travelling with them to dances in the 'van-back', lifting speaker-boxes, contributing money and records, and, to all intents and purposes, becoming an honorary member of the crew. From the start, I was accepted as a 'music lover' by the other members, who confirmed my position in the sound by nicknaming me 'Rodigan', in respect for my knowledgeable and 'serious' appreciation of Jamaican music. This was a particularly high accolade since Rodigan, a white DJ on London's Capital Radio, was well-respected in the black community (see 3.4).

The decision to write about the people and the situations that I had encountered in my everyday movements was made some time after this initial period of involvement. For at one point, it seemed that in taking on this life-style, I was becoming so absorbed in the music, and in the experience of simply living and feeling my social surroundings, that all sense of my research obligations was being lost. With my formal research period and, perhaps more seriously, my grant, coming to an end, I began to question the viability of doing research of any kind. It was only through the persistent encouragement of those around me, and through a sense of

obligation to the people that I had met, that I was spurred on to write the project, the bulk of which was eventually completed over a period of two years while unemployed.

In undertaking the study, then, I was from the outset placed at a considerable advantage, by being able to observe black–white interaction in a spontaneous and continuous manner and by having access to a whole network of prior contacts through which to set up interviews. My personal friendships with many of the respondents, and the fact that I was already a 'familiar face' on the scene, enabled me to initiate discussions with relative ease and, more importantly, to introduce a tape recorder without unduly hindering the conversation.

The interviews were invariably begun by asking respondents how their friendships with young blacks had been initiated or, for example, where they had first heard reggae. The conversation would then move on to how those friendships evolved, and to discussing the attraction of reggae and other aspects of black culture. It was in this way, by getting the respondents simply to narrate their life histories and express their feelings, that some of the most illuminating statements and insights emerged. Beyond the opening exchanges of the interview, direct questioning around specific points was found to be unnecessary and relatively unproductive, since it tended to produce rather stunted responses and stereotyped attitudes. Loosely structured interviews, on the other hand, which allowed respondents to speak freely and candidly on their own terms, produced far more interesting results. Open-ended and more oblique forms of questioning gave scope for more self-reflective and ruminative kinds of responses, enabling those concerned to initiate any particular line of discussion or convey any experience which they themselves considered to be important.

What emerged was a series of autobiographical accounts of largely past experiences, and present feelings and attitudes. Since the majority of respondents were in their late teens, and even early twenties, at the time of interviewing, these accounts had a heavily retrospective feel to them and were interspersed with many reminiscences of early adolescent and teenage experiences. Most of those interviewed were

thus at an age where they had already formed definite opinions on the lived experience of their 'youth'.

While many of the group were linked into the same local, social network and often knew each other personally, they did not represent an identifiable 'subculture'. Though connected by common experiences and modes of involvement in black culture, these young whites were not bound stylistically into a selfconscious or cohesive social group. Nor, however, were they in any sense a typical 'sample' or cross-section of youthful white experience of black culture as a whole. The aim of the study was not to make any claims of quantitative representativeness by generalising from the experiences of the inevitably limited numbers interviewed. Rather, it was to examine the more qualitative inner dimensions of those experiences. A large-scale statistically-based study would have been unable to capture the kind of narrative detail, and subtle patterns of thinking and feeling generated by individual responses and autobiographies.

From the beginning, it was the study's intention to place the emphasis on *white* responses since it was these, rather than black responses, that I felt were problematic, under-researched and in need of investigation. Initially, it had been the numbers of white participants in selected areas of the local reggae culture that had surprised and intrigued me, and it was accordingly this phenomenon which I set out to capture and explain. Although the respondents' black friends were occasionally present during the interviews, and contributed to the study through a number of informal discussions, I deliberately did not undertake a detailed study of their experiences and attitudes. This was not through lack of willing interviewees. Numerous contacts were available through friends engaged in the local sound-system scene and the Rasta movement. I nevertheless felt that there were good practical and political reasons not to attempt an equivalent analysis of black youth's responses towards white youth. My own position as a white researcher would have been sufficiently contradictory to make a genuinely accurate canvassing of black responses more difficult. Whether I would have been able to solicit recorded responses as candid and as wide-ranging as those gleaned from the young whites

to whom I spoke remains doubtful. The experiences and motivations involved in black–white interaction from a black perspective, touched on a whole set of political questions which I felt unqualified to examine, and which, ultimately, I thought would be better tackled by someone more strategically placed within the black community.

Finally, while most of the material quoted in the following chapters is based on a 'core' of recorded interviews, I have also relied heavily on my own observations and local knowledge as well as countless, informal, one-to-one and group discussions. The choice of quotes from the mountain of transcribed material has necessarily been selective and inevitably shaped by my own personal judgments and biases. As someone who considers himself to have a personal stake in many of the issues raised in the following pages, it would be both naive and dishonest not to admit that my intimacy with the subject matter, through a variety of personal commitments, political concerns and musical enthusiasms, has indelibly stamped itself on the study's presentation, character and conclusions.

5 Black and White Youth: The Birmingham Context

5.1 Urban encounters: inner city and outer ring

The West Midlands of England, and Birmingham in particular, is a region rife with contradictions when it comes to matters of race, for race has long occupied a paramount position in the area's political and social history. Birmingham has been the site of a particular kind of conjuncture between the decline of its manufacturing base and its changing employment structure and patterns of population replacement, a conjuncture which has produced an especially intense encounter between its black and white working-class communities. That encounter has in turn been visible in a series of confrontations about housing, employment and settlement patterns, and in the city's strong traditions of right-wing nationalism and working-class conservatism which have served to establish it as the unacknowledged 'capital' of racist reaction in Britain.

The experience of 'race' for large sections of the local white population appears accordingly to have been broader and closer than in most other areas of urban Britain. And yet, at the root of this experience there lies a fundamental contradiction. For out of this same regional history and this same experience there has also evolved an unprecedented rapport between certain sections of the black and white communities, and a more dynamic encounter between their respective cultural and political traditions. It is a rapport founded on decades of close living and interaction in certain areas of the city, and one that has become most visible amongst the young.

In looking at the different contexts in which black–white interaction occurred in the Birmingham area, two broad social settings began to emerge, the inner city and the outer-ring suburbs. These two settings were each characterised by their own socially and geographically specific patterns of leisure space, housing and settlement, and family and kinship structures. These patterns and social conditions played a key role in determining the kinds of contexts in which young black and white people came into contact with one another, the nature of their interaction and the availability of black cultural forms generally. The result, as far as the experiences of those interviewed were concerned, was that two distinct but related sets of life-histories and background 'routes' of introduction could be discerned; first, amongst those young whites from inner-city areas, brought up in close proximity to the black community, and second, amongst those from predominantly white working-class areas.

In an earlier study of housing patterns in Manchester's inner-city community of Mosside, Ward showed that slum clearance, and the process of residential succession in the area, had taken place, in such a way as to have a 'communalising' effect on its residents (Ward, 1979). As a result, racial distinctions received less emphasis than in other inner-city areas, and gave way to joint political action around common housing interests.

To a certain extent, a similar process has occurred in certain of Birmingham's inner-city communities where the process of population replacement has positioned black and white communities in close proximity to one another. For, contrary to the popular image of the inner city as a site of racial conflict between different 'ethnic minorities', there is a sense in which its living spaces are genuinely shared by a multiplicity of social groups. Examples of such close living are to be found in most of Birmingham's inner-city areas, but perhaps most notably in Sparkhill and Balsall Heath. Balsall Heath in particular has become renowned for its relatively unsegregated character. It is one of the oldest areas of black settlement in the city, and migrant workers and families of Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Irish and indigenous working-class origin have settled and coexisted there since the early 1950s.

The links between these communities have been strengthened by time, and by a common experience of privation, and despite having undergone successive phases of slum-clearance and redevelopment, the area has retained a strong community spirit.

As a result of these concrete social ties and links, the cultural lives of both black and white communities have become harmonised around the shared spaces and cross-cutting loyalties of street, pub and neighbourhood. Multiracial kinship and supportive neighbourhood networks, produced by mixed marriages, friendships and dating patterns, have progressively eroded the boundaries between black and white. Leisure activities have clustered around a similar set of focal points and shared institutions, including cafes, restaurants, grocery stores, pubs, gambling houses and betting-shops. The specifically musical spaces and institutions of the Afro-Caribbean community, such as dances, blues parties, record shops and social functions in general, also have a long tradition of white inhabitation that dates back to the 1950s.

This juxtaposition of black and white is a phenomenon by no means unique to Birmingham. Equivalent shared communities and organic cultures are to be found in many other parts of Britain where black and white live in close proximity to one another. Evidence of similar forms of close living and shared experience exists in many urban inner-city areas, while Liverpool's Toxteth, Cardiff's Butetown and Bristol's St Paul's remain perhaps the best examples of long-standing, mixed communities, all of which are over three generations old.

Of the sixteen people interviewed, five had grown up within precisely this kind of multiracial, inner-city environment, an environment in which the networks of shared living and leisure space were already an established fact. Jo-Jo's background was typical in this respect. Born and brought up in Balsall Heath, Jo-Jo had an Irish father and Scots mother who had settled in Birmingham in the early 1950s. Like many of the Irish families in the area, they had developed close ties with black neighbours by sharing the same survival strategies, living spaces and supportive child-care networks. (The parallel experiences of Irish and black

migrant workers generally was an important foundation of much of the interaction between the two communities.) Jo-Jo recounts how, through being brought up in these kinship networks, he had experienced intimate contact with black people from a very young age:

> You see, I was brought up by mainly black people. I was passed around about three different families . . . 'cos when my mum and dad first came to Birmingham they lived in the same house as this old black woman [a one room flat in a multi-occupancy house]. And my mum used to look after her, you know, give her lots of things and say 'look after the kids'. Cos my mum was still young then and she wanted to go out and whatever, and there was always some West Indian granny in the street that would do it. So my mum kind of kept her as a regular person to look after all of us [Jo-Jo was the youngest of seven brothers]. And I was left in this house on Durham Road with this black lady named Granny and she knows everyone of us right down from the oldest . . . I tell you there was five [black] kids I ever played with [names them individually] . . . and we all played together, and like, you know, we used to make mud pies together. And it was like I just grew up with them man. That's the way it was. It was just a natural thing . . . I grew up with everyone in Balsall Heath.

While Jo-Jo's childhood experiences may seem somewhat untypical in their intimacy of contact, in an area like Balsall Heath it was not uncommon to find large numbers of young whites who had grown up within, or in close proximity to, the black community. Pre-adolescent intermixing between black and white children was the norm rather than the exception in such areas, and invariably began at infant school and in local play-areas. In addition, a small, but significant, number of young whites, including two of those interviewed, had also been brought up in mixed family households alongside black step-relatives and family friends. Such cross-cutting kingship ties generated a unique level of familiarity with black people from an early age and led to

exceptionally intimate experiences of black community and family life.

The remainder of those interviewed had grown up in the outer-ring suburbs of south Birmingham, in areas such as Northfield, Rubery, Kings Norton, Longbridge and Bartley Green. The social geography of these areas, with their large, sprawling housing estates, contrasted markedly with that of the inner city. The black population here was obviously far smaller and more dispersed, and comprised largely of council tenants, workers employed locally (for example, at the Longbridge car plant) and a handful of black families who had moved from the inner city to the suburbs during the council's slum-clearance and rehousing programmes in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Sutcliffe and Smith, 1974). Predictably, these areas were characterised by much lower levels of black–white contact, and by much stronger and more prominent forms of both informal and organised racism.

Despite this profile, however, pockets of shared experience and intimate black–white contact did exist in the outer ring, albeit on a more limited basis. The local council's housing policy of deliberately dispersing black families across large areas of the suburbs, while placing those families in a more vulnerable position, ironically also had the effect of producing unique patterns of black–white interaction and mixed relationships. On the whole, though, white experience of black culture in the outer ring was of a more distanced and diffuse kind. The vast majority of young whites in these areas did not experience anything like the intimacy of contact with the black community, and at such an early age, as those in the inner city.

For many young whites from outer-ring areas it was often school, and secondary school in particular, that provided their first important point of contact with young blacks. Indeed, throughout Birmingham as a whole, school was a major site in which black and white youth first encountered one another outside their immediate neighbourhoods, and thus a key area in which mixed friendship patterns were first established, peer groups formed and cultural influences mediated. Many of those to whom I spoke admitted that it

was at school, through their involvement in mixed peer-groups, that they had first begun to 'pick up' certain aspects of black culture. School, in addition, was also one of the principal sites in which single-sex, one-to-one 'best-friendships' were initially formed with individual black pupils. Such school-based friendships with young blacks were highly common in both inner-city and outer-ring secondary schools.

While many mixed friendships, particularly in the outer ring, were of the most fleeting kind, some young whites developed close relationships with their black schoolfriends, relationships which often led to quite intimate forms of involvement with individual black families. These adolescent routes of introduction seemed to evolve through a similar pattern of events that invariably developed from 'playing together', progressed to 'stopping for tea' and culminated in 'meeting the family'. For those with no pre-adolescent contact with the black community, these mechanisms could prove to be particularly important in their initiation into black cultural and family life. John, for example, had spent most of his childhood in West Heath, a white working-class suburb of south Birmingham, but had later begun attending a secondary school in Balsall Heath where he had struck up a close friendship with one of his black classmates. John recounted how football figured prominently as the initial basis of the friendship:

> The only thing the world went round till I was eleven was football, and Clive was the best footballer in our year. So that's why a lot of people liked him and wanted to be his friend. And it just so happened that Clive was black and he came from Balsall Heath, like tougher areas from where I come from and from where most of the other white kids come from.

Shared enthusiasm for football was a familiar mechanism of friendship formation between male black and white schoolfriends. This was perhaps unsurprising given the centrality of football in adolescent boyhood culture generally.

The role of street football has long been important as a way in which young male adolescents have learned a distinctive kind of class sociability and masculinity.

Respect for young blacks as 'good footballers' and 'tough fighters' was a common source of attraction and basis of friendship in mixed, male adolescent relationships. Amongst some, this sense of boyhood admiration for the sporting abilities and masculine qualities of their black friends could become a powerful mechanism of introduction to black cultural forms. In Ian's case, for example, his close black friend, Kevin, had taken on the role of mentor and initiator in black culture. Ian told how he had held Kevin in high esteem as an inner-city youth who was well-versed in black culture, and how Kevin had introduced him to previously uncharted spheres of leisure activity:

> I can still remember the day when I first met him, 'cos I was really happy that day . . . and he was kinda different from us, because he came from Balsall Heath, and he was kinda hard [cool] like, and everyone respected him. But he was really influential, like. We used to go all places together like Bournville [see below] and buying records and that. I used to go to Don Christie's [local reggae record shop] with him all the time . . . and that's when I started getting reggae and going to blues.

These kinds of adolescent 'partnerships' could act as key mediators of black cultural and musical influences for both white girls and white boys. Through their initiations into black culture, and through practices such as the circulation and borrowing of records, music forms like reggae were brought to the attention of young whites in a highly personalised way. It was largely through their friendships and peer-group associations with young blacks, that most of the respondents were introduced to the whole range of leisure spaces where reggae was most salient. Indeed, for many white youth, while school was an important site of mixed friendship formation, it was at the point where such friendships spilled over into the leisure sphere that the impact

of black cultural and musical influences began to be most comprehensively realised.

5.2 Club mix

Traditionally, it has been within the broadly-defined terrain of 'leisure' that black cultural and musical forms have most frequently and intensely been experienced by white youth. It was here, as we saw earlier, that reggae was most widely disseminated and consumed through the whole complex of mass media and commercial leisure outlets described in Chapter 3. In Birmingham specifically, reggae was available through a combination of national and local outlets such as radio, tours by popular reggae artists and a number of retail outlets that included reggae record shops, independent records stores and multiple high-street outlets. In addition, reggae was encountered through a wide range of youth-specific leisure spheres in which young black and white people came into contact with one another. It was in these spheres that the mass-marketed forms of black culture and music became enmeshed with, and mediated by, actual social encounters. The specific contexts and situations in which these encounters were enacted were of course continually changing and shifting, from particular pubs, cafes and night-clubs, for example, to shopping precincts, parks, skating rinks and amusement arcades. I want to focus here on some of the more consistently important of these contexts, such as youth clubs, discos, live-music venues and various forms of leisure provision associated with the black community, such as house-parties, blues and sound-system dances.

'Official' leisure provision for young people in Birmingham covers a large number of different institutions. Youth clubs, in themselves, varied tremendously from area to area in their social and cultural composition, for example, from the predominantly white youth clubs of the suburbs to those inner-city clubs which were almost exclusively black. These latter institutions tended to be those catering specifically for the black community and were invariably attached to black

leisure organisations or community centres. The balance of relations between black and white youth in the more 'integrated' clubs fluctuated between situations of explicit rivalry, through an uneasy truce, to a more fluid and genuinely organic interaction. This latter situation was most commonly to be found in the youth clubs of south-central Birmingham in areas such as Highgate, Balsall Heath and Sparkbrook. The clienteles of these clubs were often comprised of an amalgam of Afro-Caribbean, Asian, white and mixed-race youth, their composition reflecting the relatively fluid intermixing between black and white youth found in local schools and in the neighbourhood generally. Emerging out of these local patterns of shared living and leisure space, their social character mirrored the extent to which an organic youth culture had evolved in the area, one constructed out of common leisure practices and composed of diverse elements and influences under the hegemony of Afro-Caribbean forms (see 8.1).

A number of similarly 'mixed' youth clubs also existed temporarily in the suburbs of south Birmingham in the mid-to-late 1970s. These clubs, held in church halls and local schools in areas such as Rubery, Bartley Green, Northfield and King's Norton, were well known in their time for their relatively unsegregated character. One such club in particular, in the Bournville area of south Birmingham, acquired considerable notoriety during the late 1970s, not only as a site of interaction between black and white youth, but also as a source of antagonism with local racists. Its history was fairly typical of other racially-mixed youth clubs in the Birmingham area.

The club began as a 'heavy rock' and pop disco frequented mainly by local white youth, along with a handful of young blacks. The relative abundance of youth clubs in the white working-class suburbs of Birmingham contrasted with the almost complete lack of official leisure provision for black youth in inner-city areas. This situation encouraged young blacks to look further afield for leisure venues that could accommodate their musical tastes and cultural needs. (An almost identical situation existed in London during the late 1960s and early 1970s; see 4.1.) Groups of young blacks in

search of such venues accordingly began to frequent youth clubs in the outer ring, transforming them from pop and rock discos into soul and reggae discos. Lisa, a local white girl who frequented the Bournville club in her early teens, described how its clientele changed:

> When I first went to Bournville it was all white people and heavy rock. There was only a few black people at the very back in the corners but then it just changed completely. Cos all of a sudden Bournville became the place to go for a whole set of youth from up town. And from when one posse moved in, all the others began to infiltrate the place. And obviously they didn't want to listen to 'heavy metal' all night, so they brought their own records down with them . . . And so what happened was the black people gradually worked their way down to the middle, with all the rockers at the front and the rest were just neutral, normal, people. And then it worked its way to an absolute majority of black people, and white people that wanted to mix with them. Cos a lot of the heavy rockers just run when they saw loads of black people coming in.

This process of social reshuffling described by Lisa was undergone by several other youth clubs and discos in the south Birmingham area. The ratio of black to white and young men to women, however, differed from club to club. In some, the balance was reported to have been fifty–fifty, while in others it was more predominantly black. In addition, at certain clubs white men and women attended in roughly equal numbers, while at others the clientele was composed largely of black boys and white girls. It was clear from talking to those who frequented such clubs that they were important courtship settings in which mixed-dating patterns were initiated and played out. Pat, another white girl who had reguarly attended a youth club in Northfield described again how this process of intermixing came about:

> See, what happened, is we all used to go to the same youth clubs when we were school kids, and we all used to mix together. And then people from different areas started

> going to them clubs, 'cos they was the only clubs on in the week . . . It was like all the guys from up town just discovered there was life up country [the suburbs and outer ring] and girls too. So they used to come down. And that's how everyone got to mix together, sort of, this one's going out with this one, and that one's going out with that one.

For those from white working-class areas these various local youth clubs and discos were important sites of interaction with young blacks, in which many received their first introduction to black culture. Through these sites, black styles and forms were made available to local young whites in a manner hitherto unknown in many suburban areas of Birmingham. For young white women in particular, dating patterns with black boys, as suggested above, could also be important modes of introduction to black culture and music. While black-male/white-female mixed relationships were still the dominant pattern in many areas, the race and gender balance of interracial dating showed signs of shifting somewhat during the research period towards a notable increase in the numbers of white-male/black-female relationships (seven out of the ten young men interviewed had had black girlfriends at some point). The crucial role played by dating patterns was apparent throughout the entire leisure sphere, where any number of sites could provide the backdrop for courting relations and sexual encounters between young blacks and whites.

Having outgrown the youth-club scene, many subsequently graduated to more 'adult' commercial forms of leisure provision in the form of city-centre night-clubs and discos. Reggae has always survived in a small number of leisure spaces that have been carved out of the city-centre night-club scene by young blacks. Recognisably 'black' clubs, though, have long sat uneasily with the commercial entertainment network in Birmingham, and have experienced a chequered history that has been continually dogged by licensing laws, police harassment and underworld manoeuvrings. Blacks continue to be excluded from these venues which operate racist door policies and quota systems and which enforce

dress restrictions aimed specifically at barring Rastas. Despite its traditionally 'segregated' patterns of black and white leisure-space however, the city-centre night-club circuit has intermittently played host to a handful of mixed venues, squeezed in between the identifiably 'black' clubs and the mainstream white discos. In addition, some clubs have adopted a policy of opening their doors to reggae on certain nights of the week, and nearly all of Birmingham's discos, at some point in time, have been known to hold regular 'reggae' and 'soul' evenings.

While many of these black-music spaces have come and gone, some with the very shortest of life-spans, venues which are locally known as focal points of black–white interaction have long existed in the city club scene. (One of the most well-known and long-running of these was the Rainbow Club which for many years played reggae and soul to mixed audiences of black and white young men and women on a regular basis.) A steady stream of local young whites have over the years 'discovered' Jamaican music in these 'mixed', yet black-music-orientated, clubs. Whether in the form of particular pubs, wine bars, or nights at specific discos, such venues have always managed to survive in some part of the city's entertainment network, their locations, like their musical and stylistic inflexions, continually changing with each new generation of black and white youth.

For some young whites, the youth club and disco scene could operate as something of a stepping-stone to an involvement in the black community's own music and leisure institutions. Crossing this threshold was a move of considerable importance, and one which, as we shall see, was not without its accompanying problems and contradictions. However, for those who had built up friendships with young blacks in the contexts of school, neighbourhood and youth club, this transition was accomplished with relative ease. Indeed, in certain areas of Birmingham, white experience of blues parties and sound-system events was widespread. In the suburbs of south Birmingham, for example, sound systems could be found playing regularly at church halls, pubs, blues and private parties. Catering primarily for the small black population in the outer-ring areas, these events also attracted

considerable numbers of local whites. While the music at such events would occasionally be provided by inner-city sounds, increasingly it was the growing number of 'country' sounds based in the suburbs who were to be found supplying the entertainment.

Originally, most of these 'country' sounds were simply small 'hi-fi' sets, often run by older blacks living and working locally and playing mainly at private house parties. Neighbouring whites of all ages were to be found at these small, often family, celebrations and parties. A number of the respondents had gained their first experience of the black community's leisure activities by being invited, through their black friends, to events such as these. With the consolidation of the black community in the outer ring, many of these 'hi-fi' and 'big people' sounds began to be challenged and overtaken by larger 'youth' sounds run by younger blacks and more heavily roots-orientated. By the late 1970s, young whites whose interest in reggae had been stimulated by their involvement in the local youth-club scene, began to frequent the various dances and parties run by these sounds in growing numbers. In recent years the scale of white involvement and participation in the reggae scene in parts of the outer ring has expanded to such a degree that it is now not unusual to find white youth comprising over 50 per cent of the audience at some events. In addition to these independently-run events, sound systems are also to be found playing in selected white working-class pubs in outer-ring areas on specific nights of the week. Here, an often quite extraordinary mix of black and white can occasionally be found, with sound systems playing not only to regular white interlopers in the local reggae culture, but also to older, white working-class drinking fraternities and local peer-groups existing on the fringes of that culture.

The social geography of the outer ring has lent these suburban 'sessions' and 'country blues' a distinctive cultural character and flavour. Building on the mixed friendship patterns that already exist in the outer ring, many of these spaces have evolved into unique cultural forms and institutions, which while largely black-derived and organised, continue to be patronised by genuinely mixed audiences.

In contrast to the outer ring, the social composition and accessibility of black music and leisure institutions in the inner city has always been a good deal more uneven. Blues parties, night-clubs and sound-system dances in certain districts have long tended to be more exclusively black in attendance and 'off-limits' to all but a handful of whites. However, in other parts of the inner city, the leisure institutions of the black community have a tradition of being more accessible. In Balsall Heath, for example, it has long been possible for whites to attend blues relatively freely, in a manner unknown in other inner-city areas. For young whites brought up in such areas, these institutions were invariably encountered at a relatively young age through the kinds of neighbourhood, kinship and friendship networks mentioned earlier. Whites from adjacent areas, and from the suburbs in particular, were also increasingly to be found being drawn in to the inner city from outside by the attraction of the black community's leisure institutions. Indeed it was precisely through these institutions in the Balsall Heath area that many of those to whom I spoke had acquired their first experience of blues parties and sound-system events.

The levels of white participation in black and black-defined leisure spaces generally began to increase noticeably in the early 1980s, precipitated partly by changes in the musical culture of young blacks. The growing convergence of soul and reggae cultures outlined earlier served to bring about a unique crossover of musical and cultural influences between black and white youth (see 2.3). For while that convergence broke down some of the barriers between soul and reggae factions amongst black youth, it also opened up new routes into reggae culture for white youth. Young white affiliates of soul, funk and hip-hop began to encounter reggae through their black peers, and through attendance at the increasing number of leisure spaces where both soul and reggae were played. The growing popularity of new forms of British reggae, such as fast-style DJ-ing, also became visible, not only on the dance floors, but in the increased white patronage of reggae record shops in the city centre.

Whilst always secondary to sound-system-based forms of entertainment in the black community, the live music scene,

as I noted earlier, has traditionally been an important channel for white consumption of reggae (see 3.2, 4.2). Live performance, in Birmingham, as in other parts of the country, has long been a key site in which white audiences have encountered and experienced reggae, and in which musicians from different communities and backgrounds have intermixed and exchanged traditions. Local black reggae bands have for years been playing to mixed audiences on the circuit of pub and club venues in Birmingham where live rock and black music is regularly featured. In areas like Moseley and Balsall Heath the rock and reggae communities have a tradition of being fairly closely integrated, with a casual basis of exchange having long existed between black and white musicians. Many of these connections were given concrete political expression in the local punk and RAR movements, which often played host to both punk and reggae bands on the same bill, and which themselves served as routes of introduction to reggae for some young whites.

The proximity of black and white communities, and the networks of shared social and leisure space characteristic of some Birmingham inner-city areas, have been highly conducive to the formation of mixed reggae and rock bands. In certain pubs in the Balsall Heath and Moseley areas, black and white musicians of all ages and backgrounds have long been jamming together on a regular basis. (Something of a similarly integrated music scene also existed in Coventry around the city's pubs and working-men's clubs). Most of the multiracial groups that emerged from the West Midlands in the late 1970s, and went on to form the core of the two-tone movement, emerged from precisely these surroundings. The members of UB40, for example, came together in the Moseley–Balsall-Heath area of Birmingham as neighbours and ex-schoolfriends who were, originally, all on the dole. Countless other, if less successful, mixed reggae and rock bands were formed in this way out of their respective members' shared experiences and common enthusiasms for Jamaican music.

The cross-racial appeal of two-tone music locally was reflected in the often highly eclectic, mixed audiences that some of the bands attracted to their live gigs. Birmingham

gigs by two-tone bands like the Beat, for example, drew a wide cross-section of youth, including Asians, Rastas, 'beat' girls and young white two-tone fans. Indeed, the West Midlands as a whole was the centre of a vibrant 'rudy' subculture that grew up around two-tone music. At the height of the movement's popularity, Birmingham's Top Rank night-club staged regular mod–rude-boy 'revival' discos which attracted a large, young clientele of black and white 'rudies'.

The two-tone movement, and the live reggae music scene in Birmingham generally, played a key role in popularising reggae amongst a wider audience. For many young white affiliates of Jamaican music, their interest in the two-tone bands, and in other, more popular exponents of reggae, such as UB40 and Bob Marley, was an important means of initiation into 'roots' music, functioning for some as a threshold to more intimate forms of engagement with black culture. The effects of these more-commercially-mediated forms of reggae, moreover, extended well into the heart of white working-class areas, where black forms were not so readily available through sustained social interaction. For young whites living far from the inner city, such forms were often their only point of contact with black culture. Nevertheless, around these commercial channels and outlets there existed a large, popular, though more diffuse market for reggae, a market in which the music was just as prestigious and relevant to its young white, suburban affiliates as to their inner-city counterparts.

6 Black Culture: White Youth

What attracted these young whites to the expressive culture of black youth? What kinds of pleasures and meanings did reggae hold for them, and how were the linguistic practices and political philosophies of their black peers appropriated and used by those concerned?

Having 'set the scene' by sketching out some of the main sites in which black cultural forms were encountered by white youth in the Birmingham context, I want now to return to some of the questions raised at the end of Part I by looking more closely at some of the individual responses that resulted from those encounters.

6.1 Style and patter

The appropriation of black styles of dress and dance is by now a well-acknowledged and established feature of white youth culture, with numerous historical precedents. Styles of dress and appearance have long had a particularly extensive impact on white youth. In Birmingham, as in most major urban areas with large black communities, the influence of black styles was commonplace, and sufficiently widespread as to be detectable amongst suburban young whites who had little or no contact with young blacks. Indeed, black styles of dress had acquired such a common currency amongst the young generally, that it was often difficult to ascertain the precise cultural derivation and symbolic meaning of individual items. The vast majority of young whites undertook a highly selective appropriation of black styles, displaying only minor indications of black influences, (for example, a skirt here, or a jacket there). The specific forms that these influences took,

moreover, were continually changing in tune with the ever-turning cycles of youth fashion. Thus, by the mid-1980s, the styles associated with reggae culture and the 'roots' look of Rastafari had already become somewhat outmoded, and were being rapidly replaced by new styles associated with funk and hip-hop culture (such as 'curly perm' hair-styles, hooded anoraks, sportswear and casual 'designer' clothes).

The enormous diversity of stylistic influences exhibited by white youth in Birmingham, and the many different levels of appropriation of black style, made it difficult to advance any overall readings of their political and symbolic significance. It was only within specific social contexts, and particularly through relationships with young blacks, that the meaning of stylistic appropriations became activated and clearly visible. It therefore tended to be amongst those who had large numbers of black friends, and fairly close contacts with black youth culture, that the most interesting cultural and political meanings of 'style' were disclosed.

Most of the young whites to whom I spoke admitted to having passed through a 'phase' of overt affectation of black styles of dress and appearance in their earlier youth and adolescence. Many told how such styles had 'rubbed off' on them during the course of their everyday interaction with black friends and peers. Maureen, for example, explained that she and her white friend Lisa had unconsciously 'picked up' certain black dress and hair styles as a consequence of 'going round' with young blacks in their early teens:

> We did go through a stage when we dressed like them, but not because we wanted it to be known that we went out with black people. We had our hair crimped, but that was only because you liked crimped hair, it wasn't because other people done it. We used to wear all the clothes like red pleated skirts, 'jesus boots' [sandals] and leather coats and all that. But that was only because we was going around with the people and picked up certain fashions.

Maureen's attempt to play down the symbolic significance of appropriating black styles concealed the often deliberate and selfconscious motivations that lay behind such actions.

Ian, for example, openly confessed to consciously adopting straight trousers, in preference to baggy ones, after his first visit to one of the local youth clubs described above:

> I remember when I first went to Bournville, baggy trousers was the in thing and I'd wear my best pair of baggy trousers, but I remember like, all of a sudden, I narrowed up my trousers. That was a direct influence and I'll admit that. Cos you'll find that the baggy trousers was largely a white fashion thing and the narrow trousers comes from the sixties rude boy era, and the black kids was still going on with it. But I never thought about it much at the time. I just wore these narrow cords because I liked them and because my friends was wearing them.

For those, like Ian, with large numbers of black friends, adopting black styles was one, particularly visible, way of expressing an affiliation to their black peers. 'It just made me feel more part of what they were dealing with' confessed Ian. Amongst the more enthusiastic young whites this experimentation with black styles of dress and appearance could result in attempts to reproduce a complete roots-style 'look' modelled around the more flamboyant trappings of Rastafari. In Shorty's case, he saw this as part of a whole 'stage' of identification which included the adoption not only of black clothing styles, but also of Rasta colours (red, gold and green), patois speech patterns, standing postures and walking styles:

> I'd be more into the styles and fashions in them times, around 13, 14 . . . like the way I used to talk and dress . . . like Gabbicci tops [make of cardigan popular amongst young blacks] and cut trousers, and the way you walked, it all played a big part, cos like four years ago I'd say most of the black guys who were Rastas were really bouncing. And a lot of people, especially white people, identified you as a Rasta if you wore a hat and bounced up and down . . . that was as good as being a Rasta.

This attempt to emulate a carbon-copy 'dread style' of

appearance was invariably part of a stage of adolescent affectation of black youth style, and was often focused on a strong enthusiasm for locks, and for the aesthetics of Rasta. Pete, for example, candidly admitted that he had passed through a phase of 'wanting to be like' the Rastas he had encountered in his neighbourhood and at his local school:

> I loved 'em when I first saw 'em . . . cos I used to see them at school and round by where I lived. I used to just look and think 'yeah man, its hard', I just wanted to be like them . . . I thought it was brilliant. I used to think they looked hard when they walked down the road with their heads in the air, with their big hats on.

The feeling of wanting to be like one's black peers, and 'different' from one's white peers, was a common motivation for youthful white appropriations of black styles. Pete had gone to the lengths of growing his hair, and using vaseline to make it entwine into 'locks'. (Indeed, I was told of other young whites who had put wax or vaseline in their hair to speed up the relatively slow process of 'locksing' straight hair.) When I asked Pete why he had decided to grow his hair, he made the following revealing confession:

> I dont' know . . . It just come . . . it just grew . . . it was like to be different . . . when I was that age I thought I'd love to have been a black man . . . I've changed my mind now though . . . But if I was black now, I'd have big long locks all down here [points to his waist] . . . I'd look the part then wouldn't I?

However bizarre Pete's admission might appear, his earlier wish to 'be black' was in one sense merely an extension of the feeling of 'wanting to be like' his black peers, a wish implicit in the response of others who were perhaps not quite so candid. While Pete's experience represents a particularly intense form of white adolescent identification, it must be seen as one moment of enthusiastic affiliation in a developing relationship with black culture. Overt and enthusiastic appropriations of other elements of black style were not

uncommon amongst young whites with large numbers of black friends. Such appropriations tended to be part of a 'naive' adolescent phase of affiliation and a product of growing up with black friends who were themselves going through a particular stage of their youth. White adolescent participation in black culture in this sense involved a considerable measure of black complicity and encouragement, a complicity which suggested a certain 'naivety' on the part of black youth as well as white. Colin, for example, admitted that this tacit approval had encouraged him in his early teens to continue emulating the styles of his black peers; 'I carried on doing it' he pointed out to me '. . . cos none of my black friends seemed to mind, and like, most of them supported me.' While experimentation with black styles was commonplace amongst certain sections of white youth, for the vast majority such phases were of the briefest duration, and by the mid-to-late teens many signs of stylistic influence had been dropped.

Style, then, was only one dimension of youthful white involvement in black culture from which little could be deduced about the nature and meaning of that involvement. A more telling and concrete register of black culture's impact on young whites was the adoption of black speech patterns. Some formative work has recently been undertaken in the area by Roger Hewitt, whose study is the most substantive to date of the linguistic dimensions of black/white interaction and interracial adolescent friendship patterns (Hewitt, 1986). Hewitt found that the acquisition of creole by some young whites occurred almost involuntarily in school and street contexts its usage growing and developing alongside that of their black peers. By their mid-teens, patois was being used unselfconsciously by those with a high proportion of black friends as part of their normal conversations and peer-group banter with young blacks. Hewitt found that the levels of use of creole by young whites varied from the use of odd words and phrases to full-blooded usage as fluent as that of some young blacks. The forms and contexts of such usage followed familiar Afro-Caribbean patterns. Patois could thus be variously used as a means of conveying specific tones and emotions (such as sarcasm, joy, anger, irony, humour and

drama) in association with questions of competition, prestige and personal excellence, in reference to the opposite sex or, perhaps most commonly, as a form of abuse.

Hewitt suggests that, under certain conditions, creole was employed as an interactive strategy between young blacks and whites. Its use by young whites could assist in processing the political and ideological discontinuities between black and white within small 'pockets' of interracial friendships. Indeed, in some contexts, white creole usage could be instrumental in shaping such friendships, and in mediating black–white relationships across a wide range of social contexts. Such use, however, did not automatically signal friendship. It was required to rest on close, pre-established ties if it was not to result in harsh condemnation from young blacks. Indeed, imitation and insensitive or jocular use of creole, could be as much a means of identifying with black friends as a way of conveying or displacing racist attitudes towards them.

All the young whites interviewed displayed varying degrees of creole influences in their speech. All, equally, admitted to having passed through a phase of regular patois usage in their early and mid-teens. Most described their acquisition of patois in terms of having simply 'picked it up' from black friends through the course of everyday exchange. Patois was adopted as a way of expressing an identity with black friends, as much a bid for inclusion and acceptance by them as an expression of affiliation to black culture in general. Paul, for example, regarded his ability to use patois as being an essential and normal part of communicating with his black peers:

> I feel sometimes that when I'm talking patois to some people I'm being understood better. If I talked to them, say, like 'Urr, know what I mean like' [affects drawling Birmingham accent] they might think 'Oh, God, what's this guy'. So sometimes you gotta meet them on the level and chat the way they chat, like.

While many regarded their experimentation with black speech patterns as being part of the earlier, adolescent phase

mentioned above, it was clear from informal discussions with the respondents that patois forms continued to influence their everyday speech. Although its full use was reserved for specific contexts, for abuse, anger or for just 'messing about', patois phrases and words cropped up time and time again in conversations both with myself and with others. Maureen, like many others, admitted to using the 'odd word now and again', 'To tell you the truth I still use bits of slang like "slack" and "extra", like words that you come out with because you're so used to hearing them around you all the time.'

Others, likewise, confessed to 'lapsing into' patois on occasions and had clearly incorporated specifically Rasta terms like 'seen' and 'dread' into their everyday vocabulary. Indeed, words like 'man', 'guy', 'whole heap', 'hard' and 'wicked', together with terms of ridicule like 'shame' and swear words such as 'raas', had acquired a general usage amongst young whites throughout Birmingham as a whole. The catchphrases of the moment amongst young blacks were continually being passed on to, and picked up by, young whites. Reggae records especially served as key sources of terms and expressions. Phrases employed by certain DJs had found their way into the speech of many white youth, while the styles popularised by more mainstream artists like Musical Youth were often to be heard being employed by even younger whites.

Many creole lexical items and grammatical features had crept quite unconsciously into the everyday speech of white youth, forming part of a generalised multiracial local vernacular spoken by young blacks and whites alike. On any weekday afternoon these items could be heard being openly used by white youth in their daily interaction both with each other and with young blacks, whether on buses, in the street or on their way home from school.

While patois functioned as a cultural mediator of black–white interaction, it was also used by young whites in contexts from which blacks were largely absent. With its high prestige and 'street credibility', patois could be employed in all-white company for display purposes or as a mark of difference from white peers uninitiated in black culture.

Shorty admitted to occasionally using patois in this way in front of other young whites:

> Sometimes I might go to a pub and there's no black guys there and they might say 'what do you think of that and I'll go 'yeah, seen! . . .' or on the bus, when its really full and I'll be having this conversation with Flux [black friend] and we'll be sitting at the back just DJ-ing for ages and having a laugh.

In this way, whites like Shorty, who were conversant with patois terms and catchphrases could themselves become transmitters of black-speech influences to those who had little or no contact with young blacks.

The association of patois with conflict and assertiveness in black usage, made it particularly amenable to use in an oppositional mode by young whites. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the school context where white usage often paralleled that of young blacks. As a vehicle of resistance and an emblem of cultural difference, patois could be used to exclude and confound authority figures such as teachers. Shorty, for example, recounted an incident at his secondary school where he was allegedly expelled for 'answering back' to one of his teachers in patois:

> It was a history O-level class, and there weren't any black kids in that class and this teacher, right, I kept arguing with him all the time in patois. I started swearing and cussing him down and he couldn't understand it like [laughs] and he'd be really mad, he'd say, like, 'stop mumbling, stop that mumbo jumbo' and all this.

Jo-Jo also told of a similar school incident in which he had drawn on a particularly crude form of patois abuse, along with a deliberate flaunting of black style, to defy school authority in the classroom:

> I used to walk into school every day in flash clothes, long leather [coat], brand new shirt and a gold chain. I was twelve years old man. I was walking into school with a

> quarter of weed in my pocket and I'd just be sitting there and the teacher'd go 'blah, blah, blah', and I'd say 'I'm not f***ing doing that' you know what I mean . . . 'You do your work!' [shouts] and I'd go 'f*** off' [mumbles belligerently]. So he comes up and he says 'Get your face in the corner.' I says 'Who do you think you're speaking to?' He says 'You *hear* me *now*!' [shouts louder]. I says 'go and get f***ed man!' . . . An old saying I used to use was 'Go f*** pussy and breed a dog', an old patois saying, one of the wickedest things you could say . . . so I said that to him, and he slapped me right across the face man! So from then on I was marked . . . bad!!

Both these examples vividly demonstrate how it was language, specifically, that was often used as one of the most graphic means of registering opposition to the schooling process. Patois could be deployed in a similar manner in any number of contexts to contest and challenge adult authority figures in general. The sense of pride in both Shorty's and Jo-Jo's ability to confound their respective teachers suggests something crucial about the oppositional resonance of black cultural forms for some young whites. This oppositional borrowing was a common feature of white appropriation which extended well beyond the school context. For many young whites, black forms could serve as vehicles through which to express their own experience of domination in contexts where blacks were not always present.

Both the above cases suggest how the appropriation of black forms could involve the adoption of a surrogate black persona which could be used to bolster individuality and prestige in relationships with white peers. Such identities, as we saw earlier, could draw upon a range of linguistic, stylistic and cultural elements. However, as the above examples also suggest, these appropriations clearly contained gender specific elements which corresponded to the gender differentiation in black culture itself. Consequently, in the case of some of the young male respondents, their appropriation of black forms tended to be underscored by a specifically masculine kind of attraction to black style as 'cool'. In this sense, Colin confided that he would dress 'the way he dressed' (i.e. in black style)

because it made him feel 'confident', 'good', 'It was like being a stepping razor, you know, you feel dangerous, like the way you feel when you're going out and you're dressed criss [smart].'

In instances like these, dressing in black styles, by making the respondents feel 'different' and boosting their self-pride, was a way of commanding respect from their peers, both male and female. In some cases, however, this kind of narcissistic appropriation of black-male style could easily slip into a more openly masculinist and oppressive form of self-projection in relations with young women. Black style was valued, in this sense, not for its aggressive 'hardness', in a white working-class sense, but rather as a way of approaching and 'handling' women that reflected the importance placed on individual skills with the opposite sex in black-male adolescent cultures. Shorty in this sense admitted to adopting black stylistic elements and speech patterns in his mid-teens, for the specific purpose of attracting girls:

> I might have had about four or five girlfriends at one time when I was about fifteen, sixteen, at school . . . You know, I just kinda hit it off with all the girls, with the talks and things . . . the way I used to talk and the styles and that, and perhaps the girls used to like it, but like now I don't really go on with things like that no more. I'm more humble in a sense.

While Shorty confessed to having reformed his behaviour from the excesses of his earlier youth, the models of masculinity provided by black boys remained strong points of attraction for white male youth generally, and could be incorporated into their own repertoire at an early age. This was confirmed by John who admitted that some white boys were attracted to what they perceived as black boy's 'freewheeling' attitude to relationships with girls. John, however, felt that such appropriations were shaped more by the power relations of gender than by any specific cultural attraction to black forms:

> The whole business of moving with more than one woman, that rubs off on everybody . . . like, relating to it through a

> sort of cool style which says, like its OK to deal with more than one woman . . . But that's something that some white guys do anyway.

While the impact of black style on young white men could be employed to bolster their masculinity, the evidence suggested that, amongst young white women, black female styles could be appropriated, conversely, to resist and negotiate gender subordination. This was again particularly apparent in the school context, where mixed female peer-groups, pitched against male adolescent culture, could form along gender lines, temporarily undercutting racial divisions between black and white girls. There was a suggestion also of white girls relying on certain aspects of black femininity to defy school rules and to undermine 'ideal' conceptions of feminine passivity and charm. This was achieved through a whole variety of strategies that could include the courting of deviant and exaggerated images of femininity, the use of black speech patterns and various forms of vocal and 'unfeminine' behaviour stereotypically assigned to black girls. For some young white women, black feminine cultures could also provide models of more 'adult' forms of womanhood, elements of which could be appropriated to resist youth-specific forms of gender-stereotyping within the school system. This could take the form of a semantic guerilla warfare against school dress regulations, involving the use of make-up or the flagrant ignoring or subtle reappropriation of school uniform. These same strategies and uses of black feminine culture and style could also be deployed outside the school context in a number of 'public' and leisure spheres. Here, black feminine styles (particularly the 'chic', smart styles of dress favoured by many young black women) could be adopted by young white women to boost their confidence and self-dignity in relations with boys.

6.2 'Sweet reggae music playing'

Of all the black, and specifically Jamaican, cultural elements encountered by white youth, reggae was by far the most

popular and significant. For it was generally through the reggae tradition that the political culture of black youth had its greatest impact. I mentioned earlier that most conventional understandings of reggae tend to focus almost exclusively on the music's lyrical dimensions at the expense of other characteristics, such as its structure, rhythm and texture. The importance of these latter features to reggae's meaning and effectivity was largely borne out by the significance that the respondents attached to them. As initial foci of attraction, and sources of pleasure, the lyrics of reggae were often secondary to the music's non-verbal sounds. For while all showed some understanding of reggae's lyrical discourses, it was the music's different rhythmic emphasis and formal principles, its bass, off-beat and polyrhythms, which initially captured their interest. It was by these features, moreover, that reggae was most widely identified and easily distinguishable from other forms of popular music within the white audience at large. As I argued earlier, for the vast majority of white listeners the music's initial appeal was not dependent on its lyrics making literal sense, but on the capacity of its rhythms and vocal and instrumental sounds to hold other kinds of meaning and pleasure (see 4.1). Indeed part of the appeal of some reggae songs lay in the very unintelligibility of their lyrics, or, as will become evident in the following pages, in their susceptibility to selective and different modes of interpretation.

This relative unimportance of lyrics, as an initial basis of attraction to reggae, was clearly apparent in discussions with the respondents about the music's appeal. John, for example, on first hearing reggae at a local youth club disco, confessed that the lyrics had been of no particular relevance or meaning to him:

> When I first went along to Bournville I didn't really think about the lyrics or the artist. I just took it for what record I liked on the night and what I didn't . . . It took me ages to find out what certain records meant.

For many young whites reggae did not begin to assume a specific cultural and political importance until their mid-to-

late teens, and was initially consumed as simply one of several musical styles in a wide-ranging diet of soul and pop. Paul maintained that it was the 'reggae beat' that was the main attraction for those younger whites passing through the earlier phases of affiliation:

> I can see why some of the youngsters like it when they hear it, when they're about 14, 15, especially if they've got black friends in them ages. They hear the constant beat of the music . . . it gives you an uplifting feeling, it makes you feel on a natural high.

As Paul suggests, there was something in reggae's intrinsic appeal that was intimately bound up with both the pleasures and frustrations of 'growing up'. It was not only that the music articulated feelings of boredom, fear and powerlessness associated with youth and adolescence, but also that it provided a physical grounding and sense of self-identity by which to combat and survive those feelings. Here, the music's appeal turned on its ability to evoke and produce certain emotions within its young white listeners which transcended specific verbal meanings. For reggae, first and foremost, produced a 'feeling' rather than any explicitly political attitudes. Its power lay in its capacity to capture a particular 'mood' or sentiment by a combination of both verbal and non-verbal sounds; sounds which were able to express intimate personal feelings and voice desires that were not race-specific. Thus, Paul confessed to me that 'Sometimes when I want to express something I can say to a person "listen to this record – that's the way I'm feeling".' In a similar manner, others appraised particular songs or records as 'saying something', purely on the basis of an expressive dub, or an especially evocative horn section. Particular 'rhythms' were also enthusiastically endorsed for their communicative potential in terms similar to those used by young blacks, such as 'wicked', 'bad' or 'dread'.

For many young whites, the syncopations and textures of reggae's drums and bass patterns had a capacity to produce certain kinds of sensual pleasure not tapped by other forms of popular music. John saw reggae's unique musical and

rhythmic properties, and particularly its bass, as being the direct antithesis of white rock music:

> The thing about reggae is that it's easier on your ears. 'Cos the one thing that bugged me about heavy rock, was that it was just a lot of noise . . . just high frequency sounds, which gets to your ears a lot faster. Whereas reggae's more bass-oriented; you can listen to it all night 'cos it's less aggravating.

Reggae's unique empowering qualities, as I suggested earlier, rested on its ability to act on both mind and body simultaneously (see 1.4). For its strongly affirmative qualities lay not only in its lyrical proclamations but also in its capacity literally to 'move' the body, both physically and emotionally, and to organise structures of desire and feeling.

Of all reggae's characteristic features, it was the physical power and prominence of its bass which seemed to hold the greatest attraction. While for some, the bass captured the eroticism and overwhelming sensuality of reggae music as a whole, others felt that it epitomised the music's 'anti-authority' and 'rebel' qualities. Here the unique appeal of the 'reggae beat' was further specified by Pete who confessed that the 'music' was initially more important to him than the 'singing'. When I asked him which aspect of reggae he enjoyed most, his reply was unequivocal, 'Its the bass, man! the bass! . . . It gets you in the gut, like . . . Most times I don't listen to the singing. The singing's like going on and that, but I listen to the bass.'

Reggae was felt by some to communicate something subliminal in its down-to-earth rhythms (Ruth, for example, described the bass line of one of her favourite records as 'subterranean'). Jane, for her part, found in reggae's rhythms strong echoes of the body's own pulses:

> Its heart music . . . music of the heart, it just gets you right there [lays her hand on her chest] . . . Reggae's like a heart beat, its the same kind of rhythm, there's something very crucial about rhythm and I'm not sure what it is.

It was in the 'live' context of consumption that reggae's drum and bass rhythms, and the sensual 'feel' of the music, were at their most effective. Through its characteristic mode of transmission, via the hardware of the sound system, reggae was materialised at the site of the body, to be 'felt' as much as heard. The experienced pleasures of these effects was considerably enhanced in the sound-system context where the bass provided an immediate material relation to the music. As Ruth graphically explained, such effects often pre-empted the impact of any verbal meanings:

> At first, right, when I went to the blues, all I could hear was the bass, I couldn't hear the words . . . I just loved the music, and the dub plates, and the whole feel behind them. I just used to listen to it, right going 'tss, tss, tss, tss' [imitates the sound of the treble speakers] and 'durr, durr, durr, durr' [imitates the bass] and I thought how do they make it sound like that? Have they got mixers on it or what?

The pleasures of consuming reggae in these social contexts were intimately bound up with dancing. For dancing was the fundamental site at which such pleasures became realised in the movement of bodies. It was here that the sense of self-emancipation specified in reggae, through its celebration and freeing of the body, and its calls to 'free up yourself', became most apparent. These sensual qualities were at their uppermost in forms like Lovers' Rock where the music's direct courting of sexuality generated a heightened sense of self and body. While Lovers' was enjoyed (and disliked) equally by male and female, the close-couples dancing that accompanied the music proved particularly popular amongst young white women. Indeed, some, like Lisa and Maureen, were so familiar with such dance forms that they proclaimed 'we just dance like that anyway . . . its our way of life'.

Most of the respondents admitted to having experimented with reggae dance styles as a result of their involvement with black youth, and their participation in the kinds of shared leisure spaces mentioned earlier. The more enthusiastic affiliates incorporated the styles they had picked up from

their black peers into their own repertoires of cultural expression. John, for example, reminisced about his initial enthusiasm for 'skanking', a popular dance form amongst young blacks in the mid-to-late 1970s, and described how he had adopted the style himself, after witnessing it being practised at a local youth club:

> That used to amaze me, right, 'cos a lot of the youth were just starting to knot up [grow locks] and they used to get in this circle right and you'd hear a whole heap of noise coming from this circle, so you'd just bustle up and see two guys in the middle challenging each other with some wicked form of skanking, right. And that fascinated me, and ever since then I've loved skanking. I picked up on it real fast and I'd practise the moves at home while I'm listening to my records right. And we'd all sort of mess around, me, my sister and my cousin. And they'd show me the dances they were learning.

While some were attracted to the more popular and fashionable dance 'moves' of the moment in reggae culture, for others, reggae's appeal lay in its simplicity as dance music, a simplicity which Shorty contrasted with the specific steps and movements required in other forms of music:

> With reggae its just the beat, the beat and the dancing that I'm accustomed to. Reggae's just perfect dance music. Like with reggae you can just do anything, you just move. Whereas to funk you have to do this and to new romantic you have to do that, but with reggae, you know, you can get away with like just nodding your head.

For those who maintained their allegiance to reggae culture, the music, in this way, could come to represent a kind of cultural stability amidst the constant ebb and flow of youth cultural styles. For the more 'committed' affiliates, reggae had an integrity and lack of 'pretentiousness' that was counterposed to the transitory and 'superficial' fashions of white subcultures. This was evident in Ian's strong enthusiasm for sound-system culture, and his support for the basic

principles of 'leisure' and 'entertainment' on which the black community's leisure institutions were founded. Ian felt that the 'dead atmosphere' of some city-centre night-clubs was no match for the drama and excitement of a sound-system dance, and contrasted what he felt to be the sound system's participatory and democratic structures with the regulated and depersonalised forms of leisure provided by mainstream commercial discos:

> They're a ten till two, start–stop entertainment. You go there and they say 'You can't start until you're through the door and then you have to stop when you come out.' It's like a factory-run entertainment. But with a blues or a sound, there's something there . . . you're not churned in and out, 'cos the people who's running the entertainment are in the same position as the people coming through the door. You go to Faces [one of Birmingham's top night-clubs] they couldn't give a shit. As long as they can clock up three, four hundred people a night, they couldn't give a shit. They'd kick everyone of 'em in the face if they had the chance! . . . They're not concerned with people! It's just a business, and all they wanna do is just suck you dry with the bar there.

Behind this critique of Ian's was an implicit recognition of the struggle of black music and leisure institutions to socialise musical events and practices in the face of more reified, and individualised forms of consumption. Ian extended this view to include record-buying, seeing in the culturally specific forms of consumption associated with reggae shops preferable alternatives to the more 'passive', pre-determined forms of 'white' high-street stores:

> It's more like a market situation, you can go in and you can choose, and if you don't want it, you say 'I don't want it' . . . you can pick and choose. You go into somewhere like HMV and you either pay for it or you don't.

Ian's feelings about reggae record shops and sound-system-based musical events were echoed by many others. Both Pat

and Anne, for example, also counterposed the leisure institutions of the black community with 'mainstream' and 'official' leisure provision for the young in the white community.

> The blues was hard cos it was different from a disco, you could do what you wanted and it was all night, something what young people want instead of shut at 12.00 or 1.00. (Pat)

> Being English people, and living in Northfield, it was just boring to me. I used to go to discos up Shenley, but it was just boring . . . they played a bit of reggae and I liked it. But the blues was so different, it was just brilliant, the music had so much more feel to it. (Anne)

This attraction to the 'different' was a recurring theme throughout the responses of these young whites and one which invariably rested on a comparative preference for 'black' as opposed to 'white' musical and cultural forms. For some, it was precisely because the black community's culturally-specific leisure practices and institutions were perceived as 'alien' within the dominant culture, and 'different' to 'normal', English leisure activities, that they were so profoundly attractive. The strength of that attraction was such that some respondents felt a powerful sense of 'belonging' to reggae music and its traditions. It was the sound system which, more than any other form, seemed to symbolise and 'sum up' those traditions. Through it, reggae's unique practices and conventions articulated a spirit and sense of community so potent that it was able to draw in and include some young whites.

The 'language' of reggae was felt to be a universal one by many, able to express common feelings and experiences not only in its implicit musical structure but also in its analytical discourses and lyrical content. A few attached such overwhelming significance to these aspects of reggae that they confessed to being only interested in reggae songs that had a 'good meaning behind them' regardless of their musical style. All, without exception, felt there was 'more to reggae'

than to other forms of popular music in its content 'Each record tells a story' explained Pat, '. . . about things that have gone on, like'. Jane, similarly, found in many reggae songs, a source of both personal and collective spiritual nourishment:

> It's telling people something through music, through something that most people like and enjoy. It gives you a lot of wisdom. Cos in your heart, you know you feel that way, and when you listen to it you know that other people are thinking on them same kind of ways and it kind of gives you more strength.

As Pat suggests, it was because reggae was expressive of such powerful desires, and produced such intensities of feeling, that it was so susceptible to conveying ideas and suggesting certain attitudes. For reggae did not produce ready-made forms of political consciousness, but worked through the pleasures of its consumption to propagate values, sensibilities and fundamental perspectives on life. Reggae's ability to chronicle the feelings and life experiences of these young whites, to 'tell stories' and impart 'wisdom', was particularly evident in their identification with the music of Bob Marley.

I argued in Chapters 3 and 4 that Bob Marley was of central importance to the popularisation of reggae amongst whites in Britain (see 3.2, and 4.2). The repercussions of this process were everywhere apparent in the forms of engagement with reggae, both amongst those interviewed and amongst white youth in Birmingham generally. For thousands of young whites, Marley simply *was* reggae, and as the music's chief ambassador, was more responsible than any other single artist for generating a wider interest in Jamaican popular culture and music.

While not all those to whom I spoke regarded Marley's music as a key element in their initial attraction to reggae, most considered him to be a figure of immense importance. The consequences and effects of Marley's projection as 'Rasta rebel' and 'black superstar' by the entertainment industry were clearly visible in the kinds of status accorded him by

the respondents and his symbolic importance in the minds of many. In some cases he was regarded as an ideologue of heroic proportions, particularly after his death:

> That man was dread, 'cos it's just the truth he's talking and he's showing you facts as well. I check him as a prophet. It's like he had to die . . . 'cos in a way he came for that purpose to show that Rasta is worldwide [Jumbo].

This close affinity with Marley expressed by some was so intimate as to be almost mystical in places. This was particularly apparent in the case of Michael, who told me that, 'Any time I want to see Bob Marley I just close my eyes and I can see him there in the flesh, singing any song I want him to.'

The intimacy of affiliation expressed here gives some indication of Marley's position as a 'hero figure' in the popular consciousness of white youth, and suggests how the mass-marketed iconography of 'Bob Marley – Reggae Superstar' could become meaningful in the most intimate spheres of their domestic and personal lives.

Like many young white affiliates of reggae, a number of the respondents had acquired a considerable knowledge of Marley's lyrics, a knowledge gleaned from the close scrutiny of lyrics printed on album covers and from hours of listening in the privacy of their bedrooms or living rooms. The degree of familiarity with his music shown by some was a clear demonstration that his songs, while developing primarily from the black experience, were also open to a number of other interpretations and readings. For, time and time again, Marley was held up as a purveyor of universal and non-race-specific messages, an artist who 'spoke for everybody', black and white.

The themes and metaphors employed in much of Bob Marley's music carried a certain looseness of meaning which permitted universal and class-based readings to be wrung from them. Thus the calculated ambiguities of songs about Jamaican politics and African liberation could be made relevant to young whites in Britain in a different way. The terms of address used in such songs, through the pronouns of

'I', 'we', 'they' and 'you', could be made applicable to different situations and different senses of identity. Through these terms, many were able to apply reggae lyrics to their own life-situations. As Paul pointed out, 'A lot of white people relate to Bob Marley, and I can see why you know, 'cos a lot of the things he sings about I've been through myself.' In a similar way, Colin was able to apply the theme of 'sufferation' found in many of Marley's songs, to his own particular experience of school:

> I could relate very strongly to 'sufferation' and sufferers' music even though I wasn't black . . . you know, 'stop pushing me Mr Boss Man', loads of them songs . . . And the ones about freedom too. Cos I hated school, I felt *I* was captive by school, and by people in authority.

This kind of class-based interpretation of Marley's music was invariably made possible by the selective appropriation of key lines from particular songs, and by the use of those portions of lyrics most readily intelligible or appropriate to the life-situations of those concerned. For example, songs such as 'Get Up, Stand Up', 'Babylon System' and 'Them Belly Full (But We Hungry)', or key lines like 'brainwash education to make us the fools', 'how many rivers do we have to cross, before we get to meet the boss?' or 'they don't want to see us unite, all they want us to do is keep on fussing and fighting' were each open to class-based, general and non-exclusive interpretations. The relative ambiguity of their meanings rendered them capable of 'holding' experiences which were not necessarily reducible to those of being black. If this was true of Bob Marley's music, it was no less true of reggae as a whole. For the lyrics of many reggae songs could, within certain limits, be inflected with meanings that accorded with different needs and experiences. The commonplace discourse of 'unity' for example, with its call for blacks to unite amongst themselves, or protests against racial inequality in general, could be taken from a white perspective to mean 'black and *white* unite'. In this way, the abundance of specifically anti-racist songs in reggae music could be made

meaningful to situations of interaction between black and white youth.

In a deeper sense, the music itself could also provide a common language through which black and white youth could share their joint or parallel experiences. For more than any other form, it was music that was seen to have the capacity to draw people together, and 'unite' them in their feelings. Thus, as Jo-Jo boldly proclaimed, 'music is the greatest inspiration that comes from the people, and we just cannot survive without music . . . so we use that music to relate to one another's thoughts'. Joanne provided further evidence of this, while reminiscing about the youth clubs and parties she had frequented in her earlier youth. She recalled those occasions when black and white would display equal enthusiasm for 'unity' lyrics:

> You went along to listen to the music and you thought it had some meaning . . . It'd say something about 'black and white people must unite' and everyone'd be really chanting it at the top of their voice, really meaning it like.

While the multi-accentuality of many reggae songs enabled different readings to be extracted from them, others were more varied in their degree of 'openness'. The use of patois sayings, Rasta metaphors and religious symbolisms often made the immediate comprehension of intended lyrical meanings difficult. Those songs which addressed specifically black cultural, historical and political themes, moreover, could occasionally make the listening process a problem for whites. As a way of gauging their political understanding of reggae lyrics, I asked some how they felt about songs which dealt with such themes. Some, like Pete, were typically ambivalent in their responses:

> I don't listen to records like that, I just don't bother for them . . . they sound prejudiced to me . . . I suppose they're not in a way, some of them, 'cos they're telling you, like, how they suffered and all that . . . But it can still make you feel bad.

Most, however, expressed a strong empathy for reggae songs dealing with issues of racial oppression, and a number had gained a considerable knowledge of, and respect for, such issues through their critical engagement with the music. This much was evident from the responses I received when I asked a number of others whether they agreed with Pete's view that lyrics aimed specifically at black people were 'prejudiced against whites':

> Nah man! that's stupid. How can they be prejudiced! They show the history man . . . what's happened, and all the tribulations that black people's been through, nah man, I like them kinda lyrics. I'm dealing with it on a different level from people that say that.
>
> (Colin)

> I can understand what they're saying to a black person. Like if it's a friend of mine, I can see how it might be a solution to a problem that he might be going through.
>
> (Jumbo)

> Looking at it from their eyes I suppose we was really a wicked set of people to come and steal their land, rape their women, take what we wanted from their country and do what we did. So I don't blame them for looking at everything like that.
>
> (Joe)

> I like them records, I understand them, 'cos it's from a black man's point of view. It's not a scheme to fight down white people or whatever, its just something that happened.
>
> (Shorty)

The sensitivity shown here to the more racially exclusive codes in reggae was ultimately dependent on the cultural knowledges that could be brought to bear on their interpretation, knowledges invariably gleaned from personal contact with the black community and direct involvement in its musical and leisure institutions. In this way, personal engagement with reggae could become something of an educative process, involving a learning about the music's

own political traditions and about the historical conditions and social pressures out of which it was produced (see, for example, Jumbo's earlier point that Bob Marley showed him 'facts'). It was invariably through the act of consumption itself, through listening critically to the music in specific locations, whether a blues party, live gig or more 'private', domestic, contexts, that such an awareness was acquired.

Reggae, however, as noted earlier, was not exclusively concerned with questions of racism and black identity (see 1.4). The diversity of themes addressed in its lyrics could become meaningful to young whites in a number of different ways, not least through their celebration of leisure, sexuality and personal relationships (still the most common themes in the music). Reggae was perhaps most obviously relevant, though, in a more general, class-based manner, as a form of 'reality' or 'rebel' music. Thus, many of the Rasta-informed discourses which pervaded roots music were available to white youth as accounts of their own lives; discourses evident in titles such as 'Babylon', 'Truths and Rights', 'Police and Thieves', 'Hard Time Pressure', 'Equal Rights', 'Tribulation', 'Revolution' and 'Poor and Humble'. Notions of 'freedom' and 'justice', and songs which addressed the pressures and contradictions of everyday life, provided broad fields of meaning through which young whites could interpret their own life-situations and predicaments. Lyrics concerned with specific issues, moreover, such as work/unemployment ('No vacancy'), capitalist/state authority ('Bobby Babylon') or the law ('To be poor is a crime') could supply tools of critical analysis to make sense of their various experiences of worklessness or police harassment. Some like Jo-Jo, were attracted to what they felt were the 'sound arguments' expressed in many reggae lyrics, and the practical 'common sense' which they offered through their metaphors and proverbial sayings:

> I like the common sense of the lyrics, man. They've got a logic to them, on all kinda subjects . . . It's just like simple ideas, simple morals, like 'the cow never know the use of its tail, till the butcher cut it off'. You know, don't take things for granted man, don't be greedy.

This ability to interpret the symbolisms of reggae lyrics was not acquired overnight, but was most often the result of a long period of close engagement with the music. While the levels of critical awareness conveyed here suggested especially intimate forms of affiliation to reggae, they do demonstrate white youth's capacity to identify with the music in all its characteristic forms, and to make a variety of not only general and class-based readings of its discourses, but anti-racist and cross-racial readings of black experience too. The discovery and recognition of these broader meanings was itself part of a transformation process from youthful/adolescent forms of affiliation to more informed, reflective modes of appreciation. It was often this very recognition, that there was more to reggae than the pleasures and frustrations of youth, and that its historical and political traditions were not defined so specifically by age, that enabled young whites to 'grow up' with the music, and carry through their allegiances into their adulthood.

6.3 'Jah no partial'

I showed earlier that it was through reggae, and Bob Marley's music in particular, that many of the symbols, discourses and themes of Rastafari were popularised and most widely disseminated amongst white youth. The effects and reverberations of these processes were once again clearly evident amongst the respondents, for many of whom it was through reggae that the movement was initially brought to their attention.

Given reggae's saturation with the themes and discourses of Rastafari, some form of critical engagement with the movement's political culture and philosophy was almost inevitable. As a result of their social interaction with young blacks, and their presence in the black community's cultural and leisure spaces, many had come into direct contact with Rastafari. Hence, as John explained, the movement was to some extent already 'available' to young whites, like himself, who had not only developed a strong liking for reggae, but

who were also strategically placed through their schooling experiences and leisure activities:

> It was gonna click eventually, from being at dances and seeing certain man and man [Rastas] . . . and from seeing the colours [red, gold and green] on album sleeves and seeing guys at school. It was all there in front of me right from the start, if I wanted to pursue it . . . It's just how long it took me to tune in.

While some young whites did 'tune in' immediately on the stylistic trappings of Rastafari, many simply emulated the aesthetics of 'dread' and had all but the most superficial and fleeting encounters with the movement. A small but significant minority of those in the study, however, maintained a more intimate involvement into their late teens. The forms of allegiance and visual identification with Rasta displayed by these young whites were altogether more selfconscious and thought-through than those of the earlier 'adolescent' phase mentioned above.

In the cultivation of these more sustained forms of affiliation, reggae, once again, was an important point of departure. Many stated that it was 'the music' that had provoked their initial interest in the movement, with some like Michael claiming Bob Marley as a major source of inspiration. 'He has played the most influence in my life' Michael confessed '. . . and it's through his music that I came into Rasta.' Like many others, Michael frequently used key lyrics from Marley's songs to justify his affiliation to the movement. One of the lines he was fond of quoting was taken from the song 'War', a song based on a speech by Haile Selassie which in its original context was a militant commitment to the anti-racist/imperialist struggle and to the liberation of Africa. However, through a selective interpretation of one particular line, Michael was able to use the song in a way that supported the basis of his identification with Rastafari:

> The first time I listened to Bob Marley and the Wailers, I couldn't understand a word of it. The only bit I understood

> was a part of one song when he said 'until the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes, there will be war' and my friend said 'look, he's showing you there that anybody can be dread'.

The same line of the same song was quoted by at least three others, quite independently of each other. In some cases, the original line was abbreviated to '. . . the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes', or even in one case to 'the colour of a man's skin is of significance to all but a fool'! By this intricate semantic reworking, anti-racist lyrics in reggae songs could be taken as concrete evidence that 'anybody could be dread'.

While an elementary knowledge of the fundamental tenets and principles of Rastafari could be gleaned from listening to certain records, or reading books on the movement, it was invariably through interaction with black affiliates that a deeper understanding was acquired. Here, white involvement depended critically on the support and tolerance of sympathetic black Rastas. Most spoke of one key friend or mentor who had instructed and encouraged them. Michael, for example, acknowledged his debt to an older, Rasta friend who, he confessed, had taught him a great deal:

> The first dreadlock I ever met was Dexter. He was very influential. He showed me a whole heap of things. That dread, you could just sit in a room with him all day and listen to everything what he's saying. He really knew what he was dealing with . . . Every move he made was perfect, no lie, he strived for perfection. And I looked at that man and I said, that is what I want to be, that is my idea of a Rastaman. The things that he said are still in my mind, I'll never forget them.

Michael's admiration for Dexter as the 'ideal Rasta' suggests the importance of older, black 'role models' in inspiring young whites to take up the movement. This striving 'to be like' someone else, with its implicit sense of 'hero-worshipping', was by no means unique to young male affiliates. Some of the young women who had become

involved in Rastafari expressed similar desires to follow the examples set by their black female friends. Pat, for example, told me that her Rastawoman friend, Juliette, had served as a guide and confidante to her during her initial stages of engagement with the movement:

> I got interested in it 'cos she was doing it, and it was like, I looked at Juliette, right, and the way she does things, she seems to be doing them properly. She's a lot of help to me though, if I've got a problem concerning black people, if I want to know something, she'll try and explain it to me.

It was quite common for female affiliates of Rastafari to become involved also through dating black boyfriends who were already, or subsequently became, Rastas. Anne, for example, had been living with her black boyfriend since she was seventeen and had taken up Rasta as a result of his personal engagement with the movement:

> He started to grow locks, and when he came out of prison, to me, he was a changed person. And it was like I could see it was really positive, and being with him, he was a really positive person, he was really into it, not 99 per cent, more 110 per cent with him you know. I suppose just living with him, and him showing me just influenced me greatly, because I believe that actions speak louder than words and his actions and way of life proved a lot to me. I started to check for what he was dealing with and he was reading a whole heap of books at the time, but I'm not really into reading so we'd usually sit down and talk and he'd show me. And then I started to wear a wrap [headcovering worn by Rastawomen].

Similarly, in Jane's case, her boyfriend had had a major influence on her deepening involvement in the movement:

> He came into it before me, but that's what spurred me on a bit, 'cos he was a Rasta and I knew him like I know myself . . . He was the first guy I really went out with and he's learnt me a lot . . . You have to go out with someone,

> if you're white, before you really get to know about it. You don't know nothing till you get into it like I have.

The experiences of both Jane and Anne suggest especially close forms of involvement with Rastafari that had evolved through personal relationships and through the course of 'everyday living'. The level of personal and emotional commitment to the movement displayed in such cases was often considerable, and one that was generated out of intimate and sustained social contact with black people.

Many young white affiliates of Rasta in the Birmingham area, including one of those in the study, had become involved in the movement through the more organised sects of Rastafari, such as the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Twelve Tribes, with its more theologically inclined doctrines and its connections with Bob Marley, was well known for attracting considerable numbers of white people, both locally and nationally. The sense of membership and security offered by Twelve Tribes, the tangibility of its rules and rites, and its reverence of Haile Selassie and Prophet Gad (the organisation's founder) provided some young whites with an accessible way of relating to Rasta. The organisation's lack of emphasis on the need to grow locks and abstain from meat as signs of commitment, moreover, enabled whites to join or simply attend functions without undue contradiction.

In the same way that the key tenets and principles of Rastafari were subject to different interpretation amongst blacks, so too were they open to modification and selective appropriation by whites. While at first glance it might have appeared inconceivable that whites could identify with a pan-Africanist political philosophy, it was entirely possible for the movement's main themes and discourses to be interpreted in a way that was appropriate to their own experiences. The more external codes of commitment, such as vegetarianism or reading of the Bible, were perhaps the most accessible points of intervention for whites, and were readily open to appropriation wihtout contradiction. While the racially exclusive discourses of Rastafari presented more of an obstacle to unproblematic white appropriation, it was

still possible for them to be interpreted in non-specific and universal ways. Rastafari's insistence that 'Jah no partial' and that 'Rasta is no colour' could provide the more committed affiliates with inclusive discourses with which to justify the basis of their affiliation to the movement. On specific questions, such as the growing of hair, it could be argued that locks were simply a sign of 'natural living'. Hence Michael argued that it was simply 'natural' to grow locks, while John concerned himself with the moral principle behind the growing of hair. Thus, for John, locks were not only an expression of blackness, but, more fundamentally, a sign of 'righteous living' open to adoption by black or white, 'It don't matter whether it look like a black man's hair or not, as long as you're dealing with the same thing . . . righteousness . . . it locks, no matter what nobody else want to say.'

Similar kinds of general, non-exclusive reasonings were put forward around the theme of repatriation. On the face of it, the question of repatriation to Africa appeared to be a thorny issue. The notion of a white person wishing to go 'back to Africa' might seem rather absurd. However, where repatriation was considered to be a viable and feasible goal, great significance was attached to Africa as the 'birthplace of humanity'. Africa was seen as 'the place where we all come from' (Ruth) or the place 'where life began' (Michael). John used historical evidence to support this argument:

> We're all coming from the same place. *This* civilisation come from Africa via Rome which was via Greece which was via Egypt . . . and where's bloomin' Egypt? . . . Argument finish and done! And the people are coming the same way as the civilisation, everybody's moving away from Africa.

Some, like Colin, saw 'Africa' in symbolic terms as a representation of *all* nations and peoples (i.e. 'the whole world is Africa') and understood repatriation as a spiritual movement towards a universal 'Zion' or Utopia involving all humanity. Africa or 'Zion', however, was not simply some

mystic vision, but an actual social and political state of affairs. It offered a sense of hope in a better future, and symbolised a goal of universal 'freedom' and 'equality'.

For most white affiliates, though, Rastafari was simply a 'righteous' way of living, and a source of spiritual and philosophical guidance in their everyday lives. The young women in particular tended to shun the more doctrinal reasonings of Rasta philosophy, in favour of a more practical and flexible appropriation of its elements as a whole 'way of life' and an alternative form of social reproduction. Thus, those living with black partners saw their commitment as a long-term one, a commitment which, in Jane's case, was given expression through the process of raising a family:

> For me, it's just everybody living, like some people put Rasta in the same category as mods or punks, but its not . . . its not a fashion . . . people *believe* in Rasta and, for me, it's a way of life. I take it seriously, 'cos I've got kids and they're gonna grow up.

While as a political philosophy, Rastafari was recognised by most as a force for radical change, some people like Ruth were more sceptical about its ability to address the situation of women. While Ruth 'checked for liberation for everybody', she was also conscious of the contradictions within Rasta philosophy regarding gender issues, and remained highly critical of the more masculinist currents in the movement. Thus, for her, God was a 'Western concept', represented by a 'white *man* in the sky':

> I can't really check for Selassie. A man? . . . God? . . . No! No way . . . I can see corruption within the Bible too, the Bible has been written and rewritten by white men, so there's all their prejudices and biases in it.

These arguments of Ruth's clearly owed something to the interventions made in Rastafari by black women, interventions which had in turn been shaped in dialogue with black Rastamen. Most of the other female affiliates displayed a similar awareness of the debates within the movement over

theological and dress restrictions on women. Anne, for example, felt that Rasta women should 'dress how they feel' and not how they were expected to dress by men. Jane was similarly critical of suggestions that women should be subordinate to male Rastas within the movement:

> I feel that I'm equal to a man and I can walk anywhere with my man. I don't like to put myself in a second place. I don't believe a woman should restrict herself 'cos I think women have got a lot more potential. They're stronger than men, 'cos everything is from within.

Ruth, for her part, had taken these discourses a stage further by appropriating certain oppositional forms of Rastafari and black culture as a way of registering her independence and autonomy from men in general. 'I stopped dealing with men for a time, completely' she admitted '. . . because all they were bringing me was problems.' Ruth's position was unique amongst the young women to whom I spoke in that she clearly drew on both black male and black female styles of dress and appearance to break down gender stereotypes. She was also deeply interested in sound-system culture and played bass guitar in a local, all-female, reggae band. Ruth was particularly eager to confront the taboos which restricted women, both black and white, in these male-dominated spheres. For her, then, the Rasta discourses of 'tribulation' and 'pressure' were equally relevant, but in a rather different way, to her oppression as a white women in a male-dominated society:

> *I* get a lot of pressure! *I* get hassle just for what I am. I'm a woman for one thing, which gives me hassle. I can't walk on the street at night. Because if I walk on the street at night and anything happens to me, I'll be told it's my own fault. This is a man's world! And if you check it further, it's a white man's world. Women don't have any say, white women don't have any say.

The implicit comparison underlying this response between the experience of being black and that of being a woman (i.e.

'*I* get pressure' as well as black people) is a clue to the way in which Rasta discourses could serve as a springboard from which to address distinct but related forms of oppression. This became particularly clear in the appropriation of Rasta-informed notions of 'naturality' by white female affiliates, appropriations which, once again, paralleled the interventions made by black Rastawomen concerning black femininity and standards of beauty. For Jane, and Ruth especially, Rasta aesthetics, through their opposition to glamourised images of women as sex objects, had acquired a particular resonance to their own experiences as white women. Jane rejected cosmetics, on this basis, as a form of 'vanity' and false appearance; 'to me it's just vanity' she argued, 'and I don't deal with vanity. I just know better than that, you know . . . you can't judge a book by its cover'. Ruth had arrived at a similar position after what she felt was years of being 'groomed' into a particular image of femininity by 'authority' figures like teachers, and by her parents. Ruth explained her reasons for growing her hair in reference to these earlier experiences:

> What happened was, when I were little, my mum used to brush my hair every morning, 'cos I had really long hair and she'd go 'swish' and I'd go 'Aah, Aah', and she'd put plaits in it and tie things on it and I hated that. So when I got to about 14 I stopped combing it and it was all really wild, and one day I just found out that I'd got locks underneath at the back, and about five on each side and a few on top.
>
> **SJ** What was it about locks that appealed to you?
>
> **Ruth** I don't know . . . there was something about them. It's like there's a strength in them that draws me.
>
> **SJ** Why do you grow your hair now?
>
> **Ruth** Because its natural . . . The system is there to say, yes, smooth shiny hair is the thing, you know . . . so like, it's kind of a rebellion on the system's concept of beauty

which they jam down your throat and which, as a woman, I feel very aware of because of the 'hair-care', or rather hair-*mashing* [destroying] products, you know, aimed at women.

Ruth's experience clearly shows how the Rasta discourse of 'naturality' could be used by some young white women in a gender-specific mode to resist dominant notions of feminine glamour and commodified beauty. Her adoption of Rasta aesthetics as a vehicle of opposition suggested the possibilities of distinctly feminist appropriations of black culture, appropriations through which young white women could contest their subordination and express alternative conceptions of femininity and womanhood.

While Rasta discourses were capable of being used to address gender-based forms of oppression, themes such as 'tribulation', 'equal rights' and 'Babylon' could also provide political analyses of class-based and universal forms of capitalist oppression in a manner similar to the lyrics and discourses of reggae. The same egalitarian and anti-racist/imperialist principles which pervaded reggae were available to young whites, through their encounters with Rastafari, as accounts of their own lives and experiences. For Rastafari was a general method of analysis which could be applied to any number of political issues, such as those of work, the law, nuclear weapons, food and the ecology. Its critique of the systematic nature of capitalist and state oppression ('Babylon system') could act as a powerful politicising agent when applied to white youth's own experiences of class and age-related forms of domination. John showed how the discourses of Rasta could be interwoven into a total world-view, by connecting its critique of 'Babylon Destruction' with its conceptions of ecology, conservation and the natural world:

It's natural living, it questions things like make-up and food and the environment, and the way it's being wrecked. It's saying, you know, we're men and women who live off the land, and because the land keeps us alive, if you kill the land, you kill yourself. And that's the moral of Babylon.

> Babylon was a system and a civilisation which went beyond its means. It created its own downfall.

The levels of understanding and political awareness displayed in responses such as these were unusually sophisticated and somewhat untypical of youthful white responses generally to forms like Rastafari. As such they represented something of a 'limit case' at one end of a continuum of white involvement in black culture. Despite their exceptional nature, however, these unique forms of consciousness show how some white youth were able to draw real political inspiration and insight from the practices and ideals of Rastafari.

The cultural responses and identities generated by young whites' engagement with forms like reggae and Rastafari, and by their relationships with young blacks, were not without their attendant problems and difficulties. For while the processes of appropriation described above were forged out of varying degrees of social interaction with young blacks, and sustained by a considerable measure of black complicity, they were also subject to quite definite constraints, not only from blacks but also from whites. Through their identification with black culture, and their friendships with black people, many of the young whites to whom I spoke found themselves in a highly contradictory social position which could have a number of potential political side-effects. The nature of those contradictions and the way in which they were lived out and negotiated by those concerned is the subject of Chapter 7.

7 Living a Contradiction

Young whites' appropriation of black cultural forms and their accompanying social encounters with young blacks, did not take place in a vacuum. They were underpinned every step of the way by the wider political realities of racism, and by the effects of certain fundamental contradictions embedded in the power relations of race and class. In regional terms these realities appear to have been more pertinent in Birmingham than in most areas of urban Britain. As I mentioned earlier, the politics of race have long had a high profile in the area, visible not only in the mobilisations of the white community, but also in the local black community's own graphic struggles against organised racism, the police and the local state.

The adoption of black forms by those in the study occurred within this local historical context as much as it did within the wider history of black struggles in British society as a whole. The pervasiveness of racism, and the structural relationship between black and white working-class communities, made the actions and behaviour of these young whites latent with contradictions. For racism was an unavoidable fact which hung over these processes like a dark cloud, the tensions it engendered inscribed into the most intimate forms of social interaction between young blacks and whites. Racism remained to proscribe mixed friendships and complicate white appropriation at every turn, subjecting them to a whole complex of wider pressures which imposed limits on the extent and forms of white involvement, pressures from both the black and white communities.

7.1 The limits of white appropriation

We saw above how the complicity of young blacks was

crucial in sustaining adolescent white involvement in black culture. In the more intimate social contexts, moreover, young whites' appropriation of black forms could also actually assist the formation of mixed friendships. However, while white appropriation might have been tolerable and even actively encouraged within such friendships, outside their confines it could become a highly sensitive issue.

Since white youth's appropriation of forms like reggae and Rastafari invariably followed, or paralleled black youth's own political engagement with them, such complicity could not be taken for granted. The foundations on which it rested became increasingly tenuous with each progressive step in awareness made by young blacks as they reached their mid-teens, politicised by their own experiences of racism. It was at the intersection between individual friendships and wider, group allegiances that these contradictions manifested themselves most clearly. The dialectic between similar class positions and perceived racial divisions was played out incessantly in a dialogue of response and counter-response that continually fluctuated between inclusion and exclusion, similarity and difference, acceptance and rejection.

Given the wider realities of racism, it was perhaps hardly surprising that white attempts at claiming an area of oppositional black cultural space should be met by considerable black suspicion and disapproval. That disapproval could be brought to the fore in a number of ways, and in a variety of contexts. It invariably took the form of a symbolic 'policing' of white encroachment on black cultural territory, and was most frequently activated by particularly flamboyant appropriations of prestigious black styles and forms (such as Rasta colours or headgear). White appropriation of such politically loaded items was liable to be seen as a form of cultural expropriation by young blacks, and could accordingly become the object of considerable hostility.

All those young whites who had, at some stage, adopted black styles of dress or appearance, were able to recount incidents in which they had met with varying degrees of black hostility. Such hostility invariably took the form of verbal castigations directed at the legitimacy of the

appropriation in question, and was most commonly expressed in statements to the effect of 'stop acting black' or 'you can't be Rasta'. Comments such as these were motivated by the need to defend black culture from outside incursions and were informed by political traditions which insisted on the specificity of racial oppression. Others, however, opposed white appropriation because of its implicit reinforcement, through reflection, of stereotyped images of 'blackness' and 'black culture' that were felt to be constricting, not least because they reduced such forms to essentially stylistic items. Hostility most frequently took the form of 'cussing', 'bad looks' or simply 'bad vibes'. As Paul pointed out, such confrontations seldom erupted into violence: 'Most times they don't hit you with physical violence;' he explained 'they hit you with words . . . Words you can feel more than violence.' Young blacks would occasionally home in on particular cultural items of dress or style and confront the person concerned by demanding to know what they were 'going on with'. Joe, for example, told me of one incident in which he had been accosted in the Bull Ring (an important meeting place for young blacks) for wearing a red, gold and green badge:

> What they were basically coming off with, was that it was a badge that I shouldn't be wearing 'cos I was white . . . so the badge wasn't mine. But all I could say was 'but I bought it', I just missed their point totally.

Joe was well aware that his response, at the time, showed a certain naivety on his part about the political implications of appropriating black styles (in this case Rasta colours) – a naivety that was common amongst those passing through the earlier adolescent phase of identification. Young white women who displayed their affiliation to black culture by adopting black styles of dress were no less exempt from hostile reactions. Anne remarked that she had received some 'very bad vibes' from black Rastawomen for wearing a wrap. Others similarly opened themselves to criticism from their black peers if their use of black speech patterns was considered to be inept or insensitive. Maureen confirmed that white girls

who made a selfconscious display of their affiliation were liable to be severely reproached by black girls, 'If they found out you were into reggae and you went around with black kids they either liked you or they hated you. They could get really nasty with some girls, especially when they tried to talk like them.'

As Maureen suggests, white youth's use of patois was an especially senstitive issue, and one capable of provoking the most hostile reactions. As a language of solidarity and resistance amongst young blacks, and perhaps the single most important boundary sign of the black community, patois was invested with considerable meaning (see 2.2). Its use by some young whites as a source of amusement therefore (through caricatured 'funny voices' for example) could be interpreted as a derisive parody of black culture and therefore a form of racist abuse. While under certain conditions, the use of creole by young white people could assist the formation of interracial friendships, attempts by young whites to extend their usage of creole beyond the friendship base could be fraught with difficulties. Paul, for example, admitted to having 'toned down' his use of patois, since his mid-teens, because of its potential to provoke black hostility in certain situations. 'I don't chat it as much as I used to' he confessed ''cos I know some people don't like it.' Paul's criteria for using patois depended on the extent of his prior familiarity, and strength of friendship:

> When I don't know people that well I just drop it, till I get in there and get to know some of them, then I'll talk . . . Anyhow I get in a situation when some are talking and some ain't, I just listen for a while and suss it out. Its gotta be the right atmosphere.

Learning these informal 'rules' necessarily involved a greater sensitisation to the broader social implications of using patois. Knowing when, and when not, to speak it required a certain understanding of the social contexts in which its use was, or was not acceptable. Failure to appreciate the possible interpretations of using patois could have serious consequences, and some of those to whom I spoke had been

roundly condemned by their black peers for using patois in the wrong context, or at the wrong time.

Problems of a similar kind could be encountered by white youth in various black cultural and leisure contexts. Given that these spaces were bound up with a particular kind of territorialisation of identity for the community, and charged with cultural and political meaning, the mere presence of whites could in itself be a sensitive issue and one subject to occasional proscription. One of the sites where these contradictions could be first encountered was in the context of the record shop. Reggae record shops, with their predominantly black custom, automatically posed an obstacle to the unimpeded purchase of music by white consumers. As John pointed out, for a white person unfamiliar with its environment, the process of entering a reggae shop for the first time could be an uncomfortable experience:

> The first couple of times I went down there, I felt really uneasy, 'cos when I went in there, for at least the first year or so I never seen anybody white go in there. You'd get the odd white person walking past and sort of turning their heads, like, as if to say, 'mmm that sounds alright' . . . but not having the nerve to walk into a shop full of black people . . . which is often half the hang up.

The same contradiction could arise in the process of attending a blues or sound-system dance. For many of these young whites, this was the first major threshold crossed in their engagement with the black community, and a step that was undertaken with some degree of apprehension. As Shorty's first impressions of the blues suggest, this transition could involve its own peculiar problems and pressures:

> By the time I got there the blues was ram [packed], and everything was really dark and hot . . . like all the windows were steamed up. And, going in, all I can remember is this reddish light, but I just had to black everything out, 'cos if I'd have took it in, I'd have just died on the spot. I can't remember seeing anybody white in there, there *was* quite possibly, but I didn't really think about it . . . I just

> didn't look! When you're in that situation you don't look, you just walk and pray you dont' bump into anybody! . . . And I just found a space on the wall, and stayed there, you know, looking at the ceiling like . . . and then these guys rushed me for some cigarettes . . . and asking me if I wanted to buy a draw . . . and I was only young you know! I was just going 'yes' and 'no', I couldn't understand a lot of them.

This sense of apprehension experienced on first entering the black community's leisure spaces was commonplace amongst the respondents. For most, however, the strength of their attraction to the music and the exhilarating atmosphere of the blues served to counteract many of these initial reservations. Thus while Anne confessed to being 'scared' by the blues, and to finding it 'a bit frightening and intense at first', her enjoyment of the music was sufficient to overcome her fears. Ruth, similarly, had viewed the prospect of attending a blues with considerable awe and trepidation. Once again, however, it was her ardent enthusiasm for the music which dispelled any prior qualms she might have had:

> I wouldn't go to the blues for ages. I was really scared to go . . . 'Cos I'd heard about dread things that happened down there . . . Anyway, one day we actually got down to the blues . . . and I couldn't believe it! I couldn't believe the blues! It was just speakers everywhere and music like . . . Wow! . . . I'd never heard anything like it.

These impressionable first encounters with the black community's music and leisure institutions capture something of the typical fears and ambivalent feelings of uninitiated whites in predominantly black-inhabited spaces. From some of these responses it was clear that there was an element of risk and uncertainty involved in the process of actually frequenting such spaces. Indeed, for some, part of the very attraction of blues and sound-system dances was bound up with the sense of excitement and implicit danger which they seemed to offer.

Nearly all the young women interviewed had been

introduced to their first blues by black boyfriends. Traditionally, the power relations of race and gender enabled young white women to move in and out of the black community's leisure institutions with greater ease than white men. However, in many parts of the city a more even balance between white male and female participants was increasingly to be found. There were, nevertheless, certain spaces where only a few whites, either male or female, were present. The larger, dance-hall-orientated sound-system events, and concerts by reggae artists held in black clubs, for example, were invariably attended by an almost exclusively black audience.

The process of actually consuming reggae itself, particularly in the context of a blues or sound-system dance, could also produce its own kinds of contradictions for whites. In such spaces, the contradictions of identifying with political discourses directly related to the experience of blackness, could be even more acutely felt. Shorty, for example, explained how he had felt particularly awkward when a record with a potentially more exclusive message came on in the blues. This was a popular roots tune about the dangers of 'informers' infiltrating the black community:

> It can make you feel bad . . . especially if you're the only white person in there . . . like there was this blues in Balsall Heath not so long ago, and it was Alloy I think [Duke Alloy, a local sound system], and they played 'Informer', you know . . . 'informer inna de area' [sings] and I always thought they looked at me when they played that record. 'Cos everytime I turned around they'd be looking at me man, thinking I'm an informer like.

John recounted a similar experience at a sound-system dance he had attended:

> They played this Linton Kwesi Johnson record down Jenkins Street [community centre in the Small Heath district of Birmingham], you know, the one that goes 'we're gonna smash their brains in . . .' and I just didn't know where to put myself . . . I nearly died . . . I just said

> . . . No! Finish this record! Can't cope with this. Certain records like that I used to really struggle with at first, like 'Whip them Jah' and that Trinity one that goes 'White man come and him lick them with a whip' . . . 'Cos you'd be standing in a dance and everybody else in the room's responding to that record and it kinda separates you off from them, 'cost in one way it can be looked at as being said against you.

Both these examples point to some of the difficulties of identifying with reggae's more exclusive discourses in certain contexts, discourses which could have a limited ability to reflect the experiences of whites. The process of engaging with these contradictions, however, was far from being limited to the 'live' context of a blues or sound-system dance. These problems could be encountered with equal effectivity in a more personal and 'private' listening context. In the blues or dance hall, though, the boundaries of the political culture, of which reggae was such an integral part, were all the more tightly drawn. The sound system was an institution of such cultural and political significance within the black community that, for many blacks, white involvement was considered to be a threat to its autonomy and integrity. The flaunting of black style in such culturally-charged contexts could be especially fraught with contradictions for those unattuned to the potential consequences of their actions. In one particular incident I witnessed at a sound-system dance in Balsall Heath in 1981, John, in particular, came face to face with this very problem.

The dance featured Jah Shaka, one of Britain's most popular and 'militant' sound systems at the time. Shaka was well known for playing 'steppers' dance music and regularly attracted large crowds of young blacks. At such dances, the sound's more loyal followers, together with fans of 'steppers', would control a space in the middle of the dance-floor to engage in highly animated and energetic dancing. As I noted earlier, John had acquired a particular enthusiasm for 'steppers' dancing from his youth-club days. It came as no surprise, therefore, when John moved into the centre space and began dancing. John's visible appropriation of black

styles of dress and appearance, together with his presence in an especially significant and coveted area of the dance floor, signalled a degree of white encroachment and appropriation that was politically untenable to the black people around him. Whereas in the more 'fluid' youth club context, the conditions of black–white interaction permitted a certain amount of white experimentation with black dance forms, in the more exclusively black context of the sound-system dance, such practices had a greater likelihood of provoking hostility. This was confirmed when, shortly after John had moved into the centre space, two other black dancers came alongside him and jostled him off the floor.

By pushing up against the threshold of 'acceptable' levels of white involvement, John's experience here highlights, in a particularly graphic way, some of the very real boundaries which constrained and limited young whites' inhabitation of black cultural forms. As far as John was concerned, it was only some weeks after this incident, thanks to feedback from black friends also present at the dance, that he had begun to understand what had transpired:

> I could feel people around me didn't like what I was doing, that was made obvious from those two guys ringing me up and cramping me . . . But at the time I was just inspired to dance and I couldn't see what was wrong with that. But looking back on it now I can see that I was out of order and that I made myself bloody vulnerable, because I was white . . . I was invading areas which those guys didn't want me to invade.

The problems and barriers encountered by young whites in the course of their engagement with the black community, raised a variety of personal dilemmas for them. They could have a number of different potential counter effects, one of which was to instigate a period of self-doubt and questioning. Amongst some, this resulted in a relinquishing of the more flamboyant aspects of black style. Shorty, for example, recounted one particular incident which, he informed me, had 'brought him to reality' and induced something of an awakening process on his part:

One of the earliest times it hit me was when I was ice skating in town . . . I was only about 14 and this [black] guy turned round, like, and he could see I had my trousers up my legs and the way I was walking and going on like, and he sprayed me, so I sprayed him back, and he sort of turned on me and I said something stupid like 'But you're my bredren' or whatever, and this guy just looked at me. And that really sort of knocked me down, like, even though it wasn't really hassle. It kind of just opened my eyes. There was me thinking we were on a oneness [equal] or something, but we wasn't . . . 'Cos you can say that black and white people are on a oneness but they're not really . . . and then come 16, 17, it just started to hit me you know. I just thought well, you're not this, you're not that and you can't do this no more . . . like I mean I started thinking that clothes didn't mean so much.

Incidents such as these could have the effect of sensitising young whites to some of the possible implications of their appropriating black forms. As Shorty's experience suggests, the youthful idealism formed around close mixed-friendships, that black and white people were on a 'oneness', could be rudely shattered by hostile responses from other young blacks.

Insensitive or flamboyant appropriations of black culture, however, could be restricted with equal effectiveness by close, individual black friendships as much as by collective group closure. Developing an awareness of the possible interpretations that might be placed by black people in general on white actions was a key part of this process. In John's case it was the criticism and reproaches from close black friends, in addition to the experience of general black hostility, which brought home the implications of his actions. By recognising the embarrassment caused to his black friends by his earlier antics, and the awkward situations he had put them in, particularly during the dancing incident, John had been forced to reconsider his position seriously:

All the pressures and hassles just did me in . . . they really cut me up . . . I was too young to understand the

> implications of what I was doing. I was a bit unaware and insensitive on certain levels. It got to the stage where I couldn't justify my presence within certain circles. I thought what I was doing was right, and then something came along which showed me I was *all* wrong. So I had to sit down and rethink the way I operated, 'cos you can get to a stage where you just ignore everything, but if you don't consider [black] people, they'll thump you down if you get out of order . . . and I was, 'cos I appeared to be taking something away from black people that was theirs, and it could have been seen as kind of arrogant to do what I did . . . 'Cos if you take in the whole situation, there's still that dividing line between black and white, and I'm kind of caught in the middle . . . I'm caught in my own contradiction.

These 'lived contradictions' between individual friendships and collective racial identities became increasingly apparent as young blacks and whites entered their mid- and late teens. The difference between black and white youthful experiences, and the fact that young whites did not 'go through' the same pressures as their black peers, remained an anomaly even in the closest of relationships. The disparity between such relationships and the wider realities of racism were played out and reproduced incessantly within everyday interaction, Ian, for example, explained that his friendship with his Rasta 'spar', Roy, required constant reaffirmation in order not to be undermined by such contradictions:

> Because he sticks by me, I get more confident, but I know there's always that bit of doubt in his mind and I'm constantly having to prove myself to him . . . 'cos, like, from his point of view, I'm bound even less than a black guy, 'cos its easy for me to opt out, chop off and go and get my Ford Cortina, 2.5 kids and bank accountant's job tomorrow. Whereas no matter whether he chops off, he's still black same way . . . It'll only be years of experience that'll take away that doubt.

For black people, as Roy's 'doubt' indicates, white

affiliation to black culture or to Rastafari could neither guarantee anti-racism nor warrant uncritical 'acceptance'. For Ian, conversely, and for others like him, there was no final resolution of their contradictory positions. Even though their involvement might have been called into question less frequently, there was no point at which their appropriations and identities ceased to be the objects of critical assessment. Some mixed friendships, as a result, existed in something of a state of flux. The often contradictory responses of young blacks themselves to the behaviour and practices of their white peers caused the prominence of racial boundaries to be continually brought in and out of play. For the very practices that were condemned by some young blacks in group contexts continued to be endorsed by others in more intimate situations. The result was that a situation of considerable inconsistency, and occasional confusion, reigned amongst some young whites who were to be observed continually lapsing in and out of an involvement in black culture, adopting black styles, dropping them and taking them up again.

It was at this point, as a result of these experienced pressures and personal dilemmas, that some young whites 'backed out of the scene' and revoked their affiliations entirely. Others took up a more peripheral position, withdrawing from the more intimate and proscribed areas of involvement. While it was rare for young whites to relinquish their affiliation to reggae, for those unwilling to 'risk' buying their music from the more contradictory domain of the reggae record shop, the high-street and 'independent' record stores could become a more accessible alternative. Others taped their music from the radio or, in one instance, commandeered their black friends to buy their records for them. Some also began consciously to avoid particular leisure venues because of previous 'bad experiences' or apprehensions of inhospitable responses. For Jumbo, attending dances organised by the more nationalistic Rasta groups was an unthinkable proposition:

> If I go to one of them dances, and its pure Blackheart man, war is gonna start in that place and it's probably me

what's gonna get chop up anyway, so the best way to avoid that actually happening is not to be there in the first place.

Groundless or otherwise, such fears kept many young whites away from the larger sound-system events and functions. Those that did attend such dances restricted themselves to functions organised by groups like the Twelve Tribes which were generally felt to be 'safer' and less 'intense' in atmosphere.

One of the most immediate and common responses of young whites to the reproaches of their black peers, as we saw earlier, was to modify the more overt signs of their identification, such as using patois and choice of dress styles, in favour of more subtle registers of affiliation. This was invariably part of a general process of self-realisation, by which many of the respondents came to regard the persistent use of patois as 'false' and 'immature', and characteristic of the earlier, 'naive' phase of identification. By their late teens, most of the respondents had accordingly begun to restrict their use of patois to the 'odd phrase, here and there' in specific contexts. Some, like Michelle, strongly condemned younger whites for displaying their affiliation through flamboyant and selfconscious uses of black speech patterns, 'I think it sounds terrible I do. It always makes me think they're trying to prove they're someone that they're not . . . and I don't have to prove that I go out with black people'

Through their sensitisation to the symbolic and political significance of black cultural forms some were able to maintain their affiliations and friendships into their late teens without feeling the need to express them in an overt manner. The implicit understanding of the limits to white appropriation and the reasons for those limits, was invariably one of the most important conditions for the continuation and strengthening of mixed friendships. Learning to separate stylistic appropriations from social and cultural affinities with black people and black culture was a key part of this process. For some young whites, particularly those from inner-city backgrounds, this lesson was learnt at an early stage. Jo-Jo, for example, was sharply critical of those young

whites who attempted to project a complete black stylistic identity. Like many black youth, he felt that those who identified with black culture to this extent had lost something of their integrity as individuals:

> I used to see these white guys standing in the corner at the blues you know, with the big Rasta hats on, man, and I'd say to myself 'f***ing idiots' you know what I mean . . . I know what they're trying to put across, that's why they're in the same room as me. They're there because they're getting the same thing out of it as me, enjoyment! They feel as if they can express themselves. But I don't see why I have to stick on a hat man, and go out and prove to people that I feel love, and I believe in God. 'Cos you're letting them judge you by your cover, and they will never really know you as a white guy, as a person . . . you know, I'm putting on an identity that does not fit me.

A handful of the more committed affiliates of Rastafari maintained their allegiance to the movement in a transformed and adapted mode, by evolving their own 'answers' to the movement's more racially exclusive discourses. Some responded to those discourses by extracting their own meanings from the abundance of non-race-specific and anti-racist themes which already pervaded much Rasta philosophy and reggae lyricism. Both John and Shorty, for example, showed how they were able to negotiate their earlier 'difficulties' of identifying with the more 'militant' and exclusive themes of some reggae records by drawing out other readings latent in their lyrics:

> In time I've been able to interpret those records and say to myself they weren't made directly at me, they were made at the people that were oppressing 'and now its our turn to lick the slave-owner back', which I could quite agree with. I'd made up my mind that the guy was justified in what he was saying.
>
> (John)

> It's like if someone come up to me and said, like, 'Africa

for the Africans, and you're not an African so bat out [get lost]', I could always find something in the song to argue them down, like 'they don't want to see us live together' or 'stop the fussing and fighting' . . . you know, there's always another side to it.

(Shorty)

Perhaps the most common forms of response to questions of 'race' and black autonomy were statements of belief in the divisiveness of racial politics and the insignificance of 'colour'. By refusing to recognise the status of 'race' as an objective category, the question of 'colour' became simply a physical distraction and an irrelevancy of skin pigmentation. Thus, Anne argued that a person's skin colour was of no relevance to their 'right' to identify with Rastafari, on the basis that you 'can't judge a book by its cover':

Rasta's for black and white. They can't say to me I shouldn't be dealing with it 'cos I'm white, because of the colour of my skin, 'cos that's all they're checking, my outward appearance, nothing else . . . like a book.

Some, like Michael, used more sophisticated forms of Rasta reasoning to justify their continued affiliation to the movement. By appealing to 'higher' morals of 'good' and 'evil' and 'right' and 'wrong', he was able to transcend the category of 'race' and, with it, his identity as a white person:

If people ask me 'am I a white Rasta?', I'll say 'no' 'cos you're contradicting yourself by saying *white* Rasta, because Rasta is no colour, Rasta is like water, clear! . . . God has no partiality. God has no respect of person. A black man or a white man isn't better than anybody else. The only thing that makes one person better than another is whether they're living right or not, not what colour they are . . . My skin's white, but that's just my physical form, inside I don't consider myself white. The only thing that makes me aware of my colour is when I look in the mirror, or when people tell me, and I realise I'm a material thing, otherwise I try and live spiritual.

It was not entirely clear from this argument whether Michael, by denying his 'whiteness' was also attempting to deny the existence of racism and his complicity in it. For Michael also said that he had experienced discrimination for being a Rasta and having locks, and therefore knew something of what it was like to be black. In an attempt to draw a response on this question, I put it to Michael that he could not experience racism as a white person, nor know what it was like to be black. Michael angrily replied that I was 'speaking shit', arguing that:

> From when you grow dreadlocks, you will feel the pressure whether you're black or white, you will feel like a black person. You will feel the pressure they might feel. You might not get the full brunt of it, but you can understand how they feel, 'cos you'll get it from black people as well as white.

Michael's response is particularly revealing about the ways in which some young whites attempted to construct shared or equivalent situations of oppression with blacks by applying Rasta discourses of 'sufferation' and 'tribulation' to their own experiences. Others attempted to forge an identity with black people by drawing attention to parallel forms of ethnicity, such as Irishness, or by pointing to 'equivalent' modes of oppression based on class or gender. Ruth, for example, vehemently argued that *she* went through 'pressure' as well as black people, simply through being a woman (see her earlier response, '*I* get a lot of pressure, *I* get hassle'). The cost of making such parallels, however, and one clearly evident in Michael's response, was a continual tendency to deny or play down the salience of racism. Amongst some respondents this took the form of a denial of the legitimacy of black militancy, or as in Jumbo's case, a denial of the historical connection between the racism of the past and that of the present:

> Some of them man there, they go back to the times of slavery and that hate is still inside them. You can see it from their point of view, but it's wrong to carry it on, 'cos,

it weren't this person's fault, or yours or mine, that it happened.

Paul similarly attempted to absolve his complicity in racism by diminishing its contemporary scale and significance. 'Prejudice is from a bygone age, it stems back from the period of slavery . . . The people that was there in slavery and the whites back there are no longer the people that are in it today.'

This unwillingness or inability to recognise the full implications of racism and to acknowledge the political basis of black autonomy was particularly apparent in responses to the more 'militant' black political organisations. Here, the anti-racist discourses of 'equal rights' and 'love and unity' inherent in much Rasta philosophy and reggae lyricism, could be inverted and read by whites as calls for blacks not to be nationalistic or 'separatist'. Ruth, for example, dismissed the more nationalistic and racially exclusive elements of Rastafari as forms of 'reverse prejudice' and 'segregation', 'Revenge is not what we're dealing with. If they judge white people by the colour of their skin then they're as bad as the original people that did it in the first place.'

Such responses to the question of black autonomy were frequently focused on particular Rasta organisations like the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF) or 'Feds' as they were popularly known. The EWF were widely considered to be the most militant and nationalistic wing of the Rasta movement with their emphasis on black self-determination, echoed in the maxim 'Africa for the Africans'. Shorty's view of the EWF was typical of white responses to militant black organisations in general, namely that they were 'racist' in reverse:

> They got a point, but I class them as a foolish organisation . . . 'cos some of the deeper ones are a bit like the National Front, maybe not as bad. I don't think they'd wanna shoot all white people, really . . . I was speaking to one the other week and, like, there's a lot of difference in there, 'cos one might say 'if you're white and God thinks you're righteous then you could reach' [i.e. reach Zion]. Whereas a next

> Federation man might say 'No! you're white! You can't come!'.

Shorty's attempt to equate the EWF with the National Front was tempered by his own personal acquaintance with members of the organisation. For, despite political differences, he pointed out that he was still able to 'reason' with certain 'Feds' and with other militant Rastas who were often curious to know what he was 'dealing with'. Joe also, while criticising the EWF for being 'separatist' and 'fighting down colour', respected them for being 'organised' and having a strong argument. Indeed many of those to whom I spoke, while disagreeing with the political positions adopted by more militant black organisations, were able to acknowledge the relevance of their politics within the black community. Pat, for her part, felt that the activities of such organisations were not comparable with those of white racist and fascist organisations:

> You can't really moan about them, white people got the National Front and the Ku Klux Klan, and black people suffered them. I mean they're not really doing much to us . . . black people don't come up to white people and say they're gonna stab you and hang you.

The attitudes of these young whites to the vexed questions of race and black politics were typically surrounded in ambivalence. For behind them there often lay a self-defensive attempt to deflect and evade the obstacles posed to white engagement in black culture. While such reasonings could be invoked in verbal exchanges with young blacks, they were ultimately unable to resolve the fundamental contradictions that stemmed from racism. The realities of 'race' remained as persistent impediments and awkward 'problems' to those unwilling to accept the limitations on their involvement imposed by blacks. And yet somehow, in these often bizarre metaphysical ramblings and clumsy negotiations of racism, there was a sincere and genuine attempt to cut through the material world of appearances and the ideologies of 'ism and schism' of which race was a part, to a higher 'spiritual' plane

of existence. While somewhat untypical in their intensity of involvement, the responses and identities of these young white affiliates of Rastafari represent a particularly heightened and illuminating set of responses to the issue of race, and a serious attempt to relate to the movement that amounted to more than self-defensive posturing.

The contradictory subjectivities generated by these especially close forms of engagement with Rastafari culture were highly characteristic of the responses produced by white involvement with black culture as a whole. The distinctive social identities inhabited by those with strong cross-racial friendships and affiliations tended to generate a particularly acute awareness of the boundaries and dynamics of 'race'. For most, that awareness was often quite painfully acquired. For it was through personal experience of the contradictions involved in engaging with black forms and interacting with black people, in specific sites and locations, that many came to understand the social implications of white appropriation and the racism that constrained that appropriation. These young whites, as a result, found themselves 'caught in the middle' in the no-man's-land between 'black' and 'white' collectivities. For those with close black friends who had become involved in the black community this was a commonly experienced dilemma. John, as we saw earlier, was perhaps more aware than most of the contradictions of his position. As John explained further, however, it was a position that was rendered contradictory not only by the responses of blacks, but also by those of other whites too:

> You're caught between everybody 'cos you're constantly getting the hassle from the black people that disagree with what you're doing and you're constantly getting it from the white people . . . At first you get it mainly from other black people who are outside your friends, but from when you've been around for a while, you start getting it from white people, 'cos they start to notice that you're a bit odd, and you get put into situations where the ones that are racist associate you off with black people.

7.2 'Race traitors'

The reactions of other whites to the respondents' cross-racial affiliations played a crucial role in shaping their development and outcome. Such reactions were transmitted most immediately through peer groups and kinship networks in the local white community and could range from active endorsement and support to the most bitter opposition.

In the inner-city context, with its multiracial demography, its greater preponderance of mixed relationships, and its general absence of overt, collective forms of racism, support for cross-racial friendships and allegiances tended to be stronger and more widespread. However, while the parents of those from inner-city areas often had their own contacts and relationships with the black community, and were mostly unopposed to their children mixing with young blacks, most of those from white working-class areas viewed their sons' and daughters' activities, at the very least, with mild scepticism and disapproval. In these latter cases the consequences of associating with young blacks could be very serious.

Most of those from outer-ring backgrounds had vivid stories to recount of family conflicts over their relationships with young blacks. These conflicts were invariably more severe for young women and tended to be focused on the question of interracial dating. Such was the strength of feeling aroused by this one issue that for some, like Maureen, having a black boyfriend became a covert act to be kept secret at all costs. In at least three cases, it had been the cause of bitter conflict and had led to deep family divisions. Jane's family, for example, had been split down the middle, with her mother and sisters on one side, all of whom had their own relationships with black people, and her father and brothers in vehement opposition. Jane told me that her father had completely disowned her; 'He doesn't have anything to do with me any more' she explained '. . . he thinks I'm mad, completely mad.' Mixed dating between white women and black men, the age-old litmus test of racism, seemed to provoke the most intense and violent responses. Anne, for example, had been on the receiving end of a particularly

brutal patriarchal reaction when 'discovered' to have been dating black boys:

> I had a big cultural clash with my family when they found out I was going out with black guys. I left home 'cos I wanted my own independence . . . My dad was really prejudiced then . . . it was a really heavy time, 'cos I was only 17 and they made me make a choice between my man and my family. And I chose my man, so my brothers beat the hell out of me, and burnt all my records . . . They were very influenced by my father at the time . . . they made me leave home in the clothes I stood up in.

Maureen was also forced to make a similar decision about her allegiances when her mother found out about her black boyfriend:

> There was a big argument and she started laying the law down . . . she said 'choose between the niggers or the whites'. So I turned round and said 'well I'll have the niggers then' and she kicked me out, and I went to live with Carl's [her boyfriend's] family.

While some of these family divisions had healed with time (it took Anne's father several years before he spoke to her again), others remained irreconcilable. Tensions and frictions continued to simmer beneath the surface of family relations. Relatives and family friends kept their distance or remained implicitly hostile. As Maureen pointed out, 'Even our brother's still funny about it; he goes "can't you find somebody *white* to go out with", you know, "can't you find something better" and you think, well what's better than that!'

Many of those from outer-ring areas who continued to associate with other young whites had experienced varying degrees of disapproval and hostility from their peers as a result of their friendships with young blacks. Some of those responses took the form of a 'two-faced' attitude towards their black friends. Lisa and Maureen were particularly critical of the way some of their white peers would grant a

'nominal acceptance' to their boyfriends while maintaining a racist attitude towards blacks in general. As Lisa complained:

> What gets me is when they say 'Oh Carl's different' or 'Keith's different' you know . . . Ever such a lot of people who say they're not prejudiced, are, underneath. You wouldn't believe how two-faced some of them are . . . There's always something there when it boils down to it.

This double standard of 'accepting' black people on the surface while preserving racist attitudes at a deeper level is a familiar white response around race. By maintaining a 'colour-blindness' at the level of social contact, the contradictions of personal interaction could be evaded by accepting individual blacks as 'one of us' or 'not really black'. Maureen suggested that this kind of 'covert prejudice' was especially prevalent amongst white men in their attitudes to mixed dating between white women and black men. Lisa and Maureen cited a number of incidents in which young white men who had claimed not to be 'prejudiced' had revealed their racist attitudes when discussing this subject. Maureen, for example, told of a white ex-boyfriend who had objected to her dating black boys, even though he himself mixed with young blacks:

> Even this kid I went out with, now he's gone round with black kids and everything, and he's gone out with black girls too, and he used to say 'don't go out with black kids, bab, they're no good like', you know, 'you're too good' and 'they'll only ruin you'. And he said 'you tell me if ever a black kid beats you up or touches you and I'll kill 'em'.

As Maureen's experience suggests, the specifically racist forms of patriarchal control that operated in the 'private' context of the family could also be reinforced by white males in more 'public' contexts. White male antagonism to interracial dating, while closely bound up with questions of masculinity and sexual competition, was also part of a more general rivalry over cultural space, of which black encroachment on potential sexual partners was seen as just

one symptom. While the edge of that competition had been blunted and counterbalanced in some areas by the noticeable increase in white boys dating black girls, such relationships, as Maureen's experience makes plain, offered no assurances of undermining the double standards of gender-specific racism.

From a whole number of incidents recounted by the respondents, it was obvious that young whites in general, both boys and girls, could occasionally become the objects of a 'deflected' form of racism as a result of their relationships with black people. Conspicuous displays of affiliation to black culture could make them particularly vulnerable to hostile reactions from other whites. Such reactions were more prevalent in the outer-ring areas, and were most often mediated through male, and usually older, peer groups. Where group allegiances were thought to be in doubt, the borderlines of 'race' could be vigorously reinforced through such peer-group pressure. Pete, for example, had suffered particularly in this manner at school (a predominantly white secondary school in the suburbs of south Birmingham) and told of the abuse he had received both from his teachers and his older white peers:

> These older kids used to beat me up, man, and call me 'nigger, nigger', 'you black bastard' and all this . . . Even the teachers used to say things like 'where's your tea cosy today Peter? It was a good school like, if you were into the whites . . . if you weren't, forget it!

Jo-Jo told of a similar experience at a detention centre, where one of the wardens regularly taunted him as a 'white nigger' for associating with the young black detainees:

> I used to stay with two black kids called Gladstone and Wallace and one time this 'screw' came up to me and said 'you know something, you ought to have been a f***ing nigger, in fact I am going to call you a "white nigger", from now on. . . .' I just laughed at him, man.

The experiences of Peter and Jo-Jo both serve to

demonstrate how, in certain circumstances, racist social constructions could be applied to young whites themselves on the basis of being 'race traitors' or 'as good as black'. It was in these situations that the discourses of 'tribulation' and 'pressure' could take on a vivid reality for those on the receiving end of such abuse and the notion of suffering for one's principles and affiliations could become grounded in concrete experiences.

Being identified or known as someone who associated with black people could have especially serious implications for young white women, who risked being the object of particularly vitriolic, gender-specific forms of public racist condemnation. All the young white women to whom I spoke, without exception, had experienced varying degrees of such hostility, ranging from 'bad looks' and innuendos to outright confrontation. Those women who displayed some sign of affiliation to black culture or to Rastafari, whether a wrap or a particular dress style, were immediately vulnerable to this kind of abuse. Pat, for example, felt that it was white boys in particular that were liable to 'cause trouble':

> I get it from white boys mainly. I don't get it from white girls. But then you get some white boys who are nice . . . But I've had a whole heap of trouble from boys round here, calling me 'wog lover' and all this . . . and, like, when you get on the bus, they look on you as if you're dirty or something.

The most serious cases of harassment were experienced at the hands of local white racists and nationalist right-wing groups. The threat of such harassment was often greater for those, like Lisa and Maureen, who went out with black boys yet lived in mainly white areas. Maureen told of one particular incident in which they had been openly confronted by a group of white men while on their way home from a youth club in south Birmingham:

> We were waiting in Cotteridge for a bus and there was all these National Front about. And these two white guys come up and asked us 'Do you go out with black kids?'

and 'Do you go to bed with them?' and me being really cocky, I said 'so what if we do, it's none of your f***ing business', and then they started calling us names like 'wog-lovers' and 'sluts' and 'slags' and all this. And they was going 'you're just wogs' meat, you disgrace us, you shouldn't even be alive' and 'you're wogs', and I was really arguing on them. I was really going mad I was. And fortunately for us, there was a police car there which was probably the only reason they didn't beat us up. But it's still as bad now.

Lisa and Maureen's experiences were connected to a whole series of events which took place around certain south Birmingham youth clubs in the late 1970s (see 5.3). The Bournville club in particular, with its large black clientele, became the object of a racist 'moral panic' amongst local white residents who campaigned to have it closed down. Local fascist organisations from surrounding white working-class areas were said to have regularly harassed and intimidated members of the club and those of similar venues in the South Birmingham area. (One particular youth club which was reputedly besieged by a group of white racists, needed special transport to be laid on to ferry its black members safely out of the area.) The Bournville club in particular became a focus of racist activity with black patrons being attacked in surrounding areas while returning home from the club in their ones and twos. Young white women who frequented the club also became the targets of a political campaign in which leaflets were distributed in the vicinity of the club by right-wing groups, and threatening letters were sent to the houses of those who were known or suspected to be dating black men.

In the context of such activity, young women who continued to frequent white working-class leisure venues risked social ostracism if they were discovered to have black boyfriends. Maureen told of an incident at a pub on the outskirts of the city, where she and Lisa were once again confronted by two white men:

We're just in the middle of everyone 'cos we go about with white kids too . . . like we go down this pub disco, and it's

> mainly white people up there. And these white kids come up and started an argument, they said 'we've been told not to dance with you two, 'cos you go out with wogs and you're trouble' and they were really threatening us, we couldn't believe it, they were almost attacking us in the pub.

The pressures of 'being in the middle of everyone' could be particularly acute for those from white working-class areas who had a small number of black friends, moved within both inner-city and outer-ring circles, but whose immediate peers were mostly white. The risks of undertaking mixed relationships, together with intense peer-group and family pressure, could lead some to retreat from involvement in the black community and veer away from black friends. As young whites entered their mid-teens, the pull of group allegiances and wider collective affiliations increasingly began to exert themselves on friendship choices, leisure activities and music tastes.

The combined effects of both black and white counter-reactions on the experience of those concerned, however, did not result in any one particular set of responses. For while a withdrawal or lessening of involvement was one option, these same pressures and experienced contradictions also had the potential to strengthen and transform, as much as to weaken, white affiliation. The process of engaging with the problems and obstacles posed to that affiliation by both blacks and other whites could be one of the most effective ways in which social facts about racism were learnt and a grasp of its wider implications acquired. In the immediate post-school period, the outcome of these processes hung very much in the balance, and was heavily dependent on a whole number of wider contingencies and determinants. In the final chapter I want to examine some of these more 'external' factors and conditions, and assess what impact they had on the balance of cultural and political relations between black and white youth, and on the meaning of race within those relations.

8 'Level Vibes': Shared Experience and the Politics of Race

In this penultimate chapter, I want to put the cultural and political processes described above into a wider structural context, by looking at just some of the conditions which have shaped them in the current context; conditions, for example, of unemployment and various forms of institutional domination and state control. How did these wider determinants affect the processes of white appropriation and the political relationship between black and white youth? What political possibilities did they open up, and what did they mean in terms of the actual experiences and predicaments of young whites themselves?

8.1 Living in the dole age

I mentioned earlier that schooling was the institutional sphere with the most sustained and extensive impact on the lives of young black and white people and was, furthermore, one of the principal sites in which they first came into contact with one another on a regular basis. As we saw earlier, the oppositional borrowing of black cultural forms was particularly evident in the school context. As a paramount reality, shaping the lives of both young blacks and whites, the schooling process could function as something of a levelling experience, the sharing of which provided a concrete motive for whites to draw on the cultural strategies of their black peers. In inner-city secondary schools like the one attended by Jo-Jo, with high proportions of black pupils, mixed peer

groups could be formed out of a shared opposition to teacher authority:

> I used to hang out with these black guys, you know, [names them individually] and we used to go to the toilets and get blocked up [smoke marijuana] and listen to music. 'Cos the teachers weren't interested in us, man. As far as they were concerned, we were the wolves, we were all in the same class 'cos we were bad.

While white involvement in the kind of, predominantly black, peer group which Jo-Jo is describing here was most prominent in inner-city schools, evidence of mixed groups of black and white youth in defiance of school authority existed even in outer-ring schools with relatively small numbers of black pupils. In an important sense, the local education authority's modification of catchment areas and its policies of developing comprehensive education have played a major role in bringing black and white pupils, from disparate areas and backgrounds, together within the same institutional spheres. A good example of how such policies could compel interaction between young people from different communities was provided in the case of Shorty. Having been expelled, as we saw earlier, from his first secondary school in the suburbs, Shorty had been transferred to a special school where the majority of the pupils in his class were black:

> They sent me to this centre for expelled kids and that. And that was like the final touch 'cos there was only two white kids and nine black kids, and six of them had natty [locks] like and this was when it really started setting in. Like they used to smoke weed in this school . . . weed! . . . when the teacher went out for dinner, they used to lock the door from the inside and the teachers would be shouting from the other side but you'd just pretend you couldn't hear, turn the music up and just smoke weed in there.

Shorty's case graphically demonstrates, once again, how within the context of mixed peer-groups, the oppositional symbols of black youth culture could exert a powerful

attraction on young whites. In this instance they were the 'illicit' practices of smoking ganja and listening to reggae in school time which acted as signs of resistance to school authority.

These examples add yet another dimension to Willis's work on the working-class experience of schooling. They point to the existence of racially mixed counter-school cultures in which black forms played a hegemonic role and acted as paradigms of resistance for young whites. School, then, was a site not only of racial division and antagonism but a context in which more positive forms of interaction and cultural mediation also took place. Moreover, the shared reality of what were seen and felt to be increasingly 'irrelevant' and valueless forms of schooling, could provide a common denominator of experience amongst black and white pupils.

This shared experience of institutional contexts extended well beyond the boundaries of compulsory schooling into other spheres of control and regulation aimed specifically at the young. The expansion of various youth agencies such as custodial centres, secure units and residential homes, and the strengthening of existing 'law and order' institutions, such as detention centres, provided further spaces in which young black and white people faced similar forms of institutional domination. Such contexts, similarly, could be sites of collaborative as much as antagonistic relations between black and white youth. A graphic example of this was furnished by two of the respondents, Jo-Jo and Jumbo, both of whom had had spells in detention centres. While racial boundaries could be even more sharply drawn 'inside', the shared experience of custody could nevertheless provide a context for the formation of mixed friendships and 'alliances' between young blacks and whites. Jo-Jo, for example, had struck up a 'partnership' with one of the black 'leaders' at his detention centre, although in this case the friendship was facilitated by prior adolescent allegiances:

> They give you a lot of stick inside, f***ing bastards, but as soon as I went in, this kid who I was brought up with, Mendes, he was in there too, man, and he was like the daddy of the place, he was solid muscle, this black kid.

> And we was brought up together, played together, smoked draw in school together, same girls and everything, man . . . and we used to look after one another inside. You had to, if you wanted to survive.

While the sharing of institutional contexts like schools and detention centres played a major role in shaping black – white interaction, it was in the immediate post-school period that some of the most significant shifts in the balance of relations between black and white youth had occurred.

The escalating levels of unemployment which hit Birmingham between 1980 and 1984, after the collapse of its manufacturing base, had a particularly severe impact on the young. While the unemployment rate in the region as a whole almost doubled in that period from 10.3 per cent to 19.4 per cent, amongst 16–18-year-olds it had reached something nearer 50 per cent by 1984–5 and in certain inner-city areas it was three times the national average (CBI, 1984). While unemployment levels were, on the whole, much higher for young blacks than for young whites, in certain parts of the city they showed signs of being more evenly distributed. It was clear also that the predicament faced by sections of working-class youth – both black and white – in the outer-ring, was little better than their inner-city counterparts. Official preoccupation with the problems of the inner-city has tended to eclipse the rising unemployment, together with the steady but serious decline of housing and living conditions in these areas (parts of which, since the early 1970s, have become Birmingham's new slums). The experiences of young people living in these areas, particularly in the large council estates of south and east Birmingham, were set against a background of decay and neglect often equal to that of the inner city. Large numbers of young whites from both areas suffered the same lack of options, the same impoverishment, boredom and powerlessness as a result of being on the dole.

Few of the respondents had been in regular employment since leaving school. Some had taken various temporary or part-time jobs only to relinquish them because of poor pay, bad working conditions or slender prospects for advancement. These were often 'youth' jobs in the distribution and service

sectors, such as Ian's at Asda and Shorty's at Macdonalds (both big employers of part-time youth labour). In Shorty's case, he had left his job at Macdonalds because the regimented and hierarchical work system was too reminiscent of school. 'It was just like school again' he complained. 'It was really disciplined and I just couldn't accept it.' While Mark wanted a job that would grant him the financial independence to 'do the things he wanted to do', he saw the disciplined and poorly rewarded nature of the work that was available to him as being too great a price to pay for such independence. Jane had given up her job as a shop assistant in Birmingham city centre for similar reasons:

> It was dead boring. I just felt like a machine . . . you know. You gotta get up at a certain time, you gotta go to bed at a certain time, then you gotta get up to go to work again. Your whole life is just set round that one job.

While Jane admitted that 'she didn't like claiming off the dole', like Mark, she saw it as a preferable alternative to routinised wage labour. For Jane, like many young women, having children and committing themselves to raising families, could become an alternative and more fulfilling full-time 'job' which assured at least some form of regular income from the state.

With the state's expanded and increasingly direct political orchestration of the school – work transition, training schemes had become another institutional sphere through which young blacks and whites were both channelled in the post-school period. Four of those interviewed had been on schemes of one sort or another. There was, however, a common sense of dissatisfaction with the quality of 'training' and levels of income offered on such schemes, and their inability to lead to permanent jobs.

Ian had outrightly refused to participate in any form of training scheme, believing them to be no different from the part time 'cheap labour' he had undertaken at Asda. While the majority wanted well-paid and rewarding jobs to fulfil their basic ambitions there were a few who had turned their back on such goals and had rejected waged labour in general.

In Colin's case, for example, there was a clear link between this rejection and the forms of politicisation generated by his engagement with Rastafari. Colin had worked as a shop assistant for three years, after leaving school at 15. His growing dissatisfaction with the job had coincided with his deepening involvement with Rasta. Colin told me that he had finally left the job on his eighteenth birthday, and had since abandoned any idea of working permanently, with the following proviso:

> If I ain't being paid a decent wage for a job, I ain't doing it. And all the kind of jobs that's going don't offer a decent enough wage for the kind of work that's being done.

Colin's attitude to waged labour was quite typical of others who had spent especially long periods on the dole, and was an indication of how the transition into the labour market was being subverted and refused by white youth in ways similar to black youth. For cases like these pointed to a similar rejection of wage discipline in the forms that it was offered, and a similar questioning of the sense of investment in waged work as it declined both qualitatively and quantitatively. Indeed, for many young whites it appeared that the experiences and cultural knowledges of their young black friends were shedding new light for them on the ambivalence of their own relation to work.

It was in the shared predicament of unemployment, however, that this intersection of cultural responses had become most visible. The rise in mass structural unemployment amongst the young had had a number of important implications for the post-school experience of both black and white youth. As Ian pointed out:

> Because of the dole, right, you've got a lot of black and white youth going around together that would have probably, after school, split apart more easily and gone their separate ways . . . And the whites would have gone up their ladders, you know. But that's not happening now. As the opportunities get less and less for white youth as well, the dole's becoming more important . . . It's like, I'm

> reminded from time to time that I can opt out if I want 'cos I'm white. But as the numbers of unemployed increases, that question comes up less and less.

While as Ian points out, white youth, in theory, had greater access to 'escape routes', the levelling experience of the dole, in practice, could decrease the likelihood of mixed friendships disintegrating in the post-school period. For many of the young whites here, unemployment was the major common denominator linking their life situations with those of their black peers. As John observed, the common experience of the dole could act to cement friendships in situations where young blacks and whites were living together and sharing the same leisure spaces:

> It means you gotta support each other. Like say when no one can afford to buy a draw [marijuana] so everybody helps, everybody chips in, and it encourages a bond of friendship, because the only way to survive is to help each other.

While for black youth a repertoire of cultural forms and strategies already existed for the negotiation and survival of wagelessness, increasing levels of unemployment amongst young whites, and the growing disjuncture between the cultural goals of consumption and the means of achieving such goals, were beginning to pose a number of political questions with which blacks had long been faced; questions of economic survival, independence from state control and the use and meaning of leisure. The imperatives of day-to-day survival and the negotiation of poverty were problems that increasingly confronted large sections of unemployed white youth who did not have access to the more traditional 'youth' economy of part-time work. For some young whites, survival strategies developed within the black community, and black cultural forms generally had become meaningful ways in which non-work and dependency could be mediated and some sense of cultural and political autonomy preserved. Such strategies ranged from an active participation in the community's cultural and leisure institutions, to an

involvement in various forms of 'hustling' and independently won incomes.

For those young whites facing a similar lack of finances and leisure options as their black peers, the black community's musical institutions had become alternative sources of cultural and leisure activity. As Ian remarked:

> When you've been there a year on the dole, and all your friends are still there, everything starts to slot into place, you know what I mean . . . Because if you're on the dole, you can't really afford to go to the night clubs up town. And, like, goin' blues is one of the few things you can.

For young whites like Ian, the lack of regulations involved in sound-system-based events and their unique forms of leisure organisation proved particularly attractive and relevant to their predicament of worklessness. The sound system itself could function as a survival strategy in similar ways as it did for blacks (see 2.2, 2.3). Evidence of this existed not only in the growing levels of white participation in sound systems, especially in the outer-ring areas, but in the emergence of a handful of mixed, and even all-white, sounds. (More than half of those interviewed had at some stage been involved in supporting particular sounds or building their own 'sets'.)

Involvement in the local music industry, through selling tapes and records, building hi-fi and sound-system equipment, or music-making itself, was another way of negotiating the boredom of the dole and, for some, an important source of material income. The shared experience of unemployment supplied a firm basis for many of the mixed reggae and rock bands that existed in the Birmingham area. The early history of UB40 was typical of many such bands. Formed out of their shared enthusiasms for Jamaican music, its members came together, in Robin Campbell's words, 'to make reggae music and get off the dole'. The democratisation of music-making that occurred in the wake of hip-hop, due partly to the increased availability of relatively cheap electronic instruments, also saw a growing involvement of young whites in the recording of local reggae, using DIY front-room studios and custom-built facilities.

For the unemployed especially, reggae music itself and the cultural practices surrounding it, could serve as important sources of psychic strength through which to negotiate and survive the disorientation of worklessness. More than this, they could provide wageless white youth with a key weapon in their struggle against the state's attempt to regulate the structures and the rhythms of their everyday lives. For reggae supplied them with an alternative set of rhythms and sensibilities by which to live their lives and resist the dispiriting effects of capitalist domination.

The crisis of consumption induced by the impoverishing effects of unemployment could be negotiated in a whole variety of ways. Home-taping of music, for example, was a strategy directly tailored to recession conditions. With many unable to afford records on a regular basis, cassette tapes had replaced them as the principal currency of consumption, exchanging hands back and forth between young blacks and whites. Some had collected large stores of tapes in this way; tapes of friend's records, tapes of live sound-system dances, tapes of radio programmes and tapes of tapes.

Economic imperatives had, for some, necessitated an involvement in various 'hustling' and survival 'runnings'. In Shorty's case this was simply a matter of economic expediency:

> The dole's a waste of time . . . they try and make you live off a cut and dry situation. It's like hand to mouth, you know, a loaf of bread a week. And that's f***ed up. How can you do that from year to year . . . So you need to do some runnings to survive.

'Hustling' embraced a whole range of economic and cultural practices premissed on 'street knowledge', initiative and expediency. It amounted to a form of economic self-management, a way of 'getting by' through odd jobs, bartering, various forms of primary production (clothes, art and craftwork, etc.) and other semi-legal incomes generated inside the community but outside the wage relation. Hustling activities, however, were by no means restricted to the vicinity of the black community, but were extended deep into white working-class areas, often by whites themselves,

providing a link between the inner city and the outer ring (the most obvious example being the distribution of ganja). Included in this underground economy were various forms of petty crime, ranging from small-time 'nicking' and fiddling to the more 'organised' activities, such as car thefts, shop-lifting sprees and dealing in stolen goods (invariably traditional youth consumer products like clothes, records, hi-fi equipment and so forth).

For many, the predicament of wagelessness was only one of a whole combination of circumstances that could include lack of regular accommodation, lack of transport and inadequate state assistance. In certain parts of the city, such circumstances were showing signs of impinging on young people with a greater degree of uniformity. In inner-city areas, especially, both black and white inhabitants were increasingly to be found sharing the brunt of crisis conditions and expenditure cuts in the form of deteriorating council housing, declining public services and lack of leisure facilities.

It was here, in this common experience of privation and survival, that working-class loyalties could merge into an ideology of 'community' that included both black and white inhabitants. Some, like Jo-Jo, understood such a notion of 'community' in terms of a set of basic values of everyday life, values of cooperation, mutuality and reciprocity. Thus, echoing John's point about the shared experience of the dole, Jo-Jo voiced his own communalist philosophy around these values, 'People rely on one another in Balsall Heath, people survive with one another. Its a community! . . . you know . . . you do good, you get good; you get good, you do good!' The strong symbiotic ties and traditions of black – white collaboration that existed in some inner-city areas could be called upon to challenge dominant notions of racial antipathy and conflict. This could take the form of a counter-mythology of 'community' which drew on precedent examples of cooperation or non-racial conflicts. Thus, as Jo-Jo proclaimed, 'I've only ever seen two fights in Balsall Heath, and one of those was between two white guys, and the other was between two black guys.'

While these strong community ties could be used to challenge racist interpretations of everyday social experience,

they could also be mobilised to express shared opposition to 'outsiders' in the form of middle-class professionals or representatives of local state institutions. Here, the shared experience of similar struggles and concrete grievances against discernible state institutions such as housing authorities, social services and the DHSS had served to generalise social disaffection amongst both black and white. Nowhere, however, had the intersection of these grievances become more noticeable than in common perceptions and experiences of the police.

Increasingly deployed as agents of control and surveillance over the everyday activities of the young, for many black and white youth the police have become the most visible representatives of state control and social authority. Law and order discourses of 'criminal' and 'rebellious' youth were sufficiently widespread to make all young people suspect. The young unemployed's colonisation of shopping precincts, parks, public transport and the street had become a source of increasing conflict with the police, their official controllers. With young people's mobility, and their use of public space subject to ever greater surveillance and restriction, white youth, as well as black, were finding themselves increasingly drawn into conflict with the law. Many of the respondents, like Jumbo for example, had their own personal experiences of the police to recount:

> I've had a whole heap of pressure off policemen round here. I can't walk the streets after 11 o'clock . . . they've grabbed me up, flung me in the car, threatened me . . . For what? Because they caught me with a draw [marijuana] one time, so they spot me as some kind of drugs man. They make out herbs is some big drug . . . They're idiots, man. They don't know what they're talking about.

The depth of anti-police feeling amongst the young was particularly marked in the inner city where instances of police malpractice were common knowledge and central to the political concerns of all young people. Areas such as Balsall Heath were already marked by a long history of police intervention into local community and family life

(Lambert, 1970). Relations between the police and the area's inhabitants had accordingly always been sensitive. Amongst large sections of the young, however, perceptions of the police as a common source of oppression and an unwanted intrusion into the community had become increasingly apparent. Jo-Jo was perhaps more aware than most of the long traditions of resistance and common mistrust of police in working-class, inner-city communities like Balsall Heath:

> There's one race I hate and all black people hate and that's the police . . . that's what we *all* have in common in Balsall Heath. I can meet a black kid and I don't have to ask if he doesn't like police, I *know* he doesn't like police. No one likes police in Balsall Heath, police are not needed in Balsall Heath. When does anything bad ever happen? All the young generation of Balsall Heath is saying is just 'leave us alone', man. You give our mums and dads all this stick, you're not giving it to us . . . 'cos I tell you something, we won't take it! . . . You know, we smashed Liverpool, we smashed Birmingham, Manchester, London . . . it can be done again, we don't mind, 'cos we're only unemployed, so we got nothing to lose.

What is being suggested here by Jo-Jo is the possibility of 'race' being rearticulated around an inclusive notion of 'community' which could provide the basis for collective forms of consciousness and action by black and white inhabitants alike. Jo-Jo's defiant exhortation also intimates that the riots which reverberated throughout Britain both in 1980–1 and 1985 were, in one sense, the result of a long history of mispolicing in inner-city and working-class areas. While fed and sustained by well-established traditions of black struggle, the fact that substantial numbers of white youth joined in the rebellions was a measure of how police coercion had spread – of its own volition as much as through the dictates of government policy – to the white working class of such areas. Field and Southgate's study of the Handsworth disturbances of 1981 showed that approximately one in five of those involved were Asian, one in three West Indian and one in two white, while in the 1985 riots 108 out

of the 362 people arrested were white (Field and Southgate, 1982, p. 43; Hansard, 23 October 1985, p. 382). (Equivalent figures for Merseyside revealed an even higher level of white participation, preliminary statistics of court cases showing that 108 out of 125 defendants were white [Kettle and Hodges, 1982, p. 180].)

Those to whom I talked who had witnessed or been involved in the riots spoke of their strongly celebratory atmosphere. The sense of temporary victory over the police, and the winning of street control from them, suggested something of the strong feelings of community and shared participation activated by the riots. In a different sense, the combativity of black youth in inner-city areas also provided an impetus to white youth living in areas of often negligible black settlement who, in 1981, took to the streets in nearly every major urban area of Britain. In the media's rush to portray the 1981 disturbances as 'black riots', the scale of white participation was grossly underestimated (Home Office statistics later revealed that out of the 3074 people arrested during the riots as a whole, 2400 were white) (Cashmore, 1984, p. 83). A further indication of the symbolic drawing-power of the riots was provided by the events that followed the 1985 Handsworth disturbances. While only a small number of local whites were involved in the initial protests, the ensuing two days saw groups of young whites flocking into the area from all over Birmingham after extensive media coverage. More than simply 'copycat' antics, however, this magnetic attraction of young whites to 'riot areas' revealed something of the signifying power of urban disorder amongst the young. For white youth too, 'rioting' and 'looting' could acquire a symbolic importance as defiant gestures against authority, motivated as much by the desire for excitement, and relief from the monotony of the dole, as for material gain.

The riots of 1980–1 in particular represented something of a watershed in the history of the political relationship between black and white youth in Britain, pre-empting as much as precipitating a shared sense of purpose born out of common predicaments. The growing resonance of experience between different sections of the powerless that they highlighted was a

clear indication of the potential of state institutions to mould group identities and draw people into concrete settings from which collective forms of protest could erupt. For more than any other social or political event, the riots were a spontaneous and visible demonstration that shared local experience premissed on factors of age, unemployment and institutional domination was a reality in certain areas of urban Britain where the brunt of the crisis was being borne by both black and white alike.

8.2 'Stop this fussing and fighting'

The patterns of shared experience and cross-racial affiliation described over the preceding chapters provided no guarantee of generating 'anti-racist' political responses amongst white youth. For, far from being banished by such processes, racism stubbornly continued to hold sway over large sections of young white people, both in the outer ring and, to a lesser extent, in the inner city. The tensions in some of the responses above show how it was possible for racist attitudes and perceptions to be fuelled through social contact, as much as through distance from black people. It was thus entirely feasible for young whites to maintain certain common-sense racist ideas, while continuing to associate with young blacks and appropriate black culture. (The most bizarre example of this was furnished by a young white friend of one of the respondents who was an ardent reggae fan and mixed with young blacks, yet was also a member of the National Front.) Powerful feelings of attraction to black culture could easily coexist with perceptions of that culture as threatening and with resentment and fear of black people. In this sense, one consequence of black proscription of white involvement could be to open the way to more reactive responses. Withdrawal of such involvement could result in racist positions being taken up in counter-response to assertions of black autonomy.

It was at the dividing-point between black and white youth after they had left school that the formation of responses premissed on more generalised feelings of racial

hostility became most apparent. Such outcomes were even more likely in the outer ring, where the levels of cross-racial interaction and white exposure to black culture were much lower, and where collective racial antipathy was still massively present. Here, and on the fringes of the inner city, white youth's own experiences of powerlessness, miseducation, the law and the dole queue were equally capable of generating greater rivalry with black youth. Similar predicaments could be offset by divergent cultural responses and by racist counter-definitions of experience articulated – amongst young men for example – through aggressive and particularly masculinist assertions of white working-class identity. Here, the premium placed on notions of masculinity, loyalty and group pride in male peer-groups could make it easier for racist ideas and practices to attach themselves to the values of ritual insult and territorial chauvinism found in white, male, working-class culture generally. The concern with the boundaries of class, expressed in the language of territoriality, and 'us and them', could easily appear in explicitly nationalistic and racist terms where the black working-class were seen to possess rival credentials.

White involvement in black culture also offered no assurance of generating positive forms of identification with *all* black people. Racism could be displaced or expressed in other forms, particularly against the Asian community. The familiarity of young whites with key aspects of Afro-Caribbean culture, because of their greater commercial accessibility, and their perceived similarities with white working-class culture, could serve to highlight common-sense perceptions of Asian culture as 'different' and 'alien'. The balance of relations between white and Asian youth were nevertheless highly specific to different locales of the city, and dependent crucially on the relationship between Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities. In outer-ring areas where the vast majority of young whites had little contact with Asian youth apart from school-based friendships, anti-Asian hostility was at its most acute, and white perceptions of Asians as 'different', culturally, linguistically and religiously, were commonplace. The relative distance between Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities in the outer ring, moreover, with its

smaller, more fragmented black population, together with the lack of a visible Asian 'youth culture' in such areas, enabled young whites to appropriate and identify with Afro-Caribbean forms while maintaining racist attitudes towards Asians. Such attitudes could coalesce around a shared resentment of Asian entrepreneurial and professional success amongst both Afro-Caribbean and white youth, a situation which relied on the anti-Asian feeling expressed by some Afro-Caribbean youth.

The situation in the outer ring contrasted somewhat with that in the inner city where a slightly different balance of relationships between white, Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities existed. Those young whites who had grown up in inner-city areas like Balsall Heath had invariably done so in close proximity to the Asian community. Many had made their own friendships with Asian youth in both school and neighbourhood contexts, and it was not unusual to find mixed peer-groups composed of Asian, Afro-Caribbean and white youth. The close Asian – white interaction characteristic of some inner-city areas could seriously undermine the culturally specific racial imagery that pervaded the responses of outer-ring white youth. For in contexts where white, Asian and Afro-Caribbean youth shared the same leisure practices and music tastes, the stereotyped notion that Asian youth 'kept to themselves' could be rendered palpably false. The wider surface of Afro-Caribbean/Asian contact in the inner city, moreover, resulted in cross-cultural influences between Asian and Afro-Caribbean youth similar to those between Afro-Caribbean and white youth. Examples of such influences existed in abundance, not only in specifically Asian appropriations of reggae, patois and Rasta culture, but also, more recently, in the mass participation of young Asians in funk and hip-hop culture.

The resonance of Afro-Caribbean culture for young Asians was perhaps not surprising given the political interests shared by the different sections of the black community – interests which were premissed on the common experience of racism and which had borne fruit in a number of tactical alliances produced by local circumstances. The 'unity' that existed between Asian and Afro-Caribbean youth in certain parts of

the city could place those young whites who identified with reggae and Rastafari, and yet remained hostile towards Asians, in a highly contradictory position; first by exposing their racism, and second, by rendering the appropriation of black forms less attractive. In situations where Asian and Afro-Caribbean youth relied on common definitions of themselves as 'black', the affiliation of young whites to Afro-Caribbean culture could be put in doubt, and the coherence of racist responses seriously challenged. The growing self-confidence and militancy of Asian youth, moreover, and the evolution of their own specifically youthful cultural forms and traditions, has weakened common-sense notions of Asian 'passivity'. Asian youth's ability and willingness to defend themselves against verbal and physical attack has precipitated a respect and mutual tolerance from some young whites. For the 'bottom line' in many inner-city areas was that the balance of power at street level was ultimately in favour of young blacks. The sheer numerical strength of Asian and Afro-Caribbean youth meant that overt displays of racism were simply dangerous, and risked being the object of serious reprisal. This state of affairs tended to produce a 'live and let live' attitude amongst the more isolated sections of the local white community, and prevented racism from becoming fully activated at a collective social level.

The unevenness of attitudes towards different sections of the black community was symptomatic of the deeply contradictory nature of white responses about race. In struggling to resolve the contradictions that resulted from their friendships and cultural – musical allegiances, young whites constantly had to battle not only against the weight of peer-group pressure and racist common sense, but also against other, more general, ideological influences. National media discourses and representations of race, for example, were continually available as sources of racist stereotypes, assumptions and 'opinions'. They provided a framework of 'knowledge' through which the perceived problems that arose out of everyday interaction with black people could be selectively interpreted and explained.

The processes which reproduced and confirmed racist ideas, then, existed in a constant state of tension with local

patterns of shared experience, social interaction and cross-cultural affiliation. Class continuities and racial divisions amongst the young were continually being reproduced, negotiated, and contested against a backdrop of new, specifically youthful, forms of popular racism. At the simplest level, however, these processes could act as a basic ideological and cultural blockage to the mass success of right-wing nationalist politics amongst the young. For, in certain parts of the city, white youth's everyday experience of state authority, police harassment and life on the dole simply did not square up with the more authoritarian nationalist doctrines of 'law and order'. The concrete allegiances and musical enthusiasms of young whites, moreover, could serve to highlight the ambivalence of their commitment to the ideas of 'race' and 'nation'. The shared experience of concrete social grievances against local state institutions provided a base-line of common predicaments which could place a severe strain on the coherence of racist explanations.

We saw earlier how the experienced contradictions and forms of critical engagement with black culture could potentially give rise to certain insights into racism, through an understanding of its implications for white appropriation and its significance for the black community. For those in the study, this awareness was acquired through a number of different experiences, the most potent of which were direct encounters with the racism perpetrated against their black peers. Through their personal relationships, some had been drawn into situations in which they had gained first-hand experience of such racism in action. In John's case this had occurred while attempting to enter a city centre disco with a group of black friends who were refused entry:

> From when you move with black people it becomes obvious . . . they'd go through tribulation and you'd be alright, and you'd wonder why they always got the bum end of things . . . Like going to clubs in town, you try getting into a club without a shirt and tie on. Not me, I could waltz past, but I wasn't going in no club that operated like that.

In a similar and perhaps more serious manner, some had

directly witnessed incidents of racial harassment and intimidation. Ian, for example, told of how he had seen a black boy being attacked by a gang of young whites, while waiting at a bus stop for his (white) girlfriend:

> That really opened up my eyes a lot that did. Them's the times that made you really stop and think about racism and things like that . . . and after that I started to see what George and that lot [his black friends] meant when they talked about the National Front.

From the vivid accounts of such incidents, and similar events which had occurred around the south Birmingham youth club scene in the late 1970s, it was clear that they had made a considerable impact on the political outlook of those concerned. It was through these specifically local experiences of racial violence, together with personal observations of the day-to-day abuse and harassment suffered by black friends, that many had become deeply opposed to organised racism and nationalist right-wing politics. Others connected their own experiences of police harassment and the law with the more institutionalised forms of racism. Jumbo, for example, had seen at first hand the 'pressure' undergone by some of his fellow black detainees 'inside', during his spell at detention centre:

> If you think its bad outside, right, I'll tell you, inside . . . it's ten times worse. You can see why the Rastamen inside don't like white people when they come out, the kind of pressure they go through from the screws.

Through their sheer proximity to the black community some had acquired a personal knowledge, premissed on direct experience, of the repressive mechanics of institutional racism. Countless stories were narrated of black friends mistreated by local state agencies and by the police. Jane told how her Rasta boyfriend had been assaulted by two police officers in her presence, and then arrested and forcibly detained in a mental institution:

From when they see Rastas they think you're mad . . . if they see you on the street they lock you up, put you in a mental hospital and pump you full of drugs and injections . . . That's what they can do to you, 'cos that's what they did to Jimmy . . . And if that's the kind of system we're living in, if that's the way the country is run, then I don't wanna live in that system with those kinds of people.

Episodes such as these could give vivid insights into the repressive and sometimes brutal manner in which the state dealt with black people. It was through these encounters with the racism perceived and experienced by their peers, that some of the respondents had gained an understanding of its effects on those around them.

While these experiences were amongst the most powerful ways in which some young whites were sensitised to racism, for many of the respondents it was the reactions of other whites which drove home its meaning to them. For it was the transmission of racist ideas and practices through the networks of family and peer group that made up the most common social experience of racism for those concerned. We saw earlier that it was within contexts of white-to-white interaction that some of the most pertinent observations of racism were made. It was consequently here that some of the social facts and ideas learnt from contacts with the black community could be brought to bear to disrupt and call into question some of the assumed constituencies and 'common knowledges' on which white-to-white racial discourses often rested.

For those from outer-ring, white working-class backgrounds, it was in the context of family life that racism was most keenly experienced and contested. Through their experiences, many had come to understand the crucial role of the family generally in the socialisation of racist attitudes through language and example. Lizzy, for example, had become particularly aware of the influence of her parents, and those of her peers, in 'handing down' racism:

It's like they really try and get you as prejudiced as they can, they used to rub it into you, you know, . . . like

> someone like Rachel [white friend] it was just all drummed into her head. She'd never even actually talked to black people or anything, it was just passed down from her mum and dad.

In some cases this kind of parental racism could occasionally backfire by pushing those concerned into a closer identification and involvement with black people. For Lisa and Maureen it was clear that their relationships with black boys contained an element of deliberate transgression of parental values and patriarchal control. For Maureen, as we saw earlier, dating black boys had become an act of defiance against an upbringing saturated in parental racism:

> I used to hear our dad all the time . . . like he'd go 'bleeding' wogs, someone wants to put a bomb under them' and all this. It was like you were brought up so much not to like them, that you just did the opposite to what everybody told you to do . . . you know 'Don't do this' and 'I won't allow it' . . . so you just went and did it anyway.

In these contexts, dating black boys could become a way in which some young white women registered their sexual autonomy and independence by deliberately subverting the patriarchal restrictions which placed such relationships 'out of bounds'. While the consequence of such actions, as we saw earlier, tended to be more serious for young white women, young men were no less exempt from family conflicts over their allegiances. John, for example, had had an ongoing battle with his father over his racist views. We saw earlier how John had acquired an intimate experience of black family life as a result of his friendship with his black classmate, Clive. By drawing on that experience John was able to contradict his father's racism:

> When my dad should have been influencing me, like most dads influence their boys, I'd already got out, gone to school, met Clive and met his family [see 5.1] . . . As my friendship got stronger with Clive I became aware of what

> my dad's comments meant when he referred to certain people . . . all this 'coon' and 'wog' business and 'they're all the same'. And I'd think, well, Clive don't do that, Clive's family don't do that. Clive's mum did *not* come out of a monkey tree, she didn't come over on the last banana boat, any of that crap! You name a comment, I disagreed, 'cos I knew better, 'cos I was friends with Clive and I knew his family.

In this way, close relationships with black people could produce a disjuncture between concrete experience and common-sense perceptions, a disjuncture that could disrupt the 'logic' of racist reasoning. By prising open the gap between actual social experience and the idealisation of that experience in racist stereotypes, they served to undermine the insinuation of racist common sense.

These various social encounters could provide some young whites with a platform from which to challenge the more diffuse forms of racism in society at large. It was outside the family context that many of these young whites connected their own personal knowledge of racism with the more public and institutional forms which they recognised in the wider society. In John's case, for example, his opposition to the views endorsed by his father had spilled over into a more informed rejection of racism:

> I quickly came to the conclusion, from what my dad and all his friends were saying, that that part of society was a load of crap! And as you became more aware of it from school and from other sources like TV, it got to the point where you had to make a choice of either going along with that, or not . . . and I felt better relating to what Clive's family was dealing with rather than what my dad was dealing with . . .

The cultural knowledges of race acquired by some young whites through their personal engagement with the black community provided them with 'alternative' explanations of social and political events to the prevailing discourses. This was particularly apparent in responses to the media, where

those knowledges were used to deconstruct the racist ideologies propagated through channels such as television and newspapers. Thus, some complained about biased and unfair news coverage of race issues, and superimposed their own oppositional interpretations on the dominant discourses. Others displayed a sharp critical awareness of the representation of black people in the media, particularly in television output. Lisa, for example, complained about a particular documentary programme on Jamaica for its racist portrayal of black people:

> It looked as though they were all looped, they just made everybody look looped, and people watching that'd probably think 'my God', you know, 'they're like that round 'ere' . . . you know, they'd probably think the whole of Jamaica's like that . . . And the fact they was all really dark, so they'd probably think all black people over in Jamaica are really dark, if they just watch that programme. I mean telly's a real great influence really isn't it? . . . about black people?

This ability to grasp the subtle inflexions of racism was only learned over a considerable length of time through a variety of interactions with both blacks and whites. Not all the young whites to whom I spoke, by any means, had developed such an incisive awareness of racism and the mechanics of its reproduction. Few, however, had failed to be politicised in at least some way by their allegiances, and by the consequences of those allegiances. While that politicisation could take many forms, it was not generally to be found in a selfconscious or abstract 'anti-racist' stance, or in an adherence to any fixed political programme or theory. The most pertinent and effective repudiations of racism, rather, lay embedded in the situated interaction and forms of negotiation evolved by young people themselves. For such was the intimacy of that interaction for some, that the relevance of racial stereotypes and divisions could be mitigated in the course of everyday social exchange and experience. This was reflected as much in the various reasonings of 'unity', 'harmony' and 'equality' articulated by

the more committed affiliates of Rastafari. In the attempt to reduce 'race' to an irrelevance of skin-pigmentation, and to consign it to the realm of appearances and oppressive ideologies, was an implicit condemnation of racism more potent than any consciously learned political creed or posture. Declarations that 'colour doesn't matter' and 'it's what's in the heart that counts' and 'you can't judge a book by its cover' rested on the sincere belief that the question of racial difference was, or at least should have been, of no significance to personal relations between black and white.

These arguments might have been less convincing if it were not for the fact that black youth, too, used similar reasonings in their interaction with young whites. Moreover, many of the young whites who had maintained their involvement in the black community into their late teens and early twenties, had considerable personal investment in such beliefs. Those who had mixed race children (three of the men and four of the women) were, in a very real sense, physically creating and committing themselves to a concrete future by laying the foundations for new mixed-kinship networks, identities and cross-racial ties. Pat, for example, pointed to her own offspring as 'living proof' of the triviality of racial difference and believed passionately in the capacity of black and white to coexist, arguing that 'if black and white people's gonna keep to themselves, there's gonna be nothing'.

Sentiments such as these were echoed over and over again by these young whites around the question of race. For if there was one fundamental philosophical ethic which guided them in their everyday lives, it was that, in the end, there were 'no' races, only 'people'. While evoked in different forms and voiced in many different ways, whether in proclamations that 'there's only one race' and 'we're all one nation', or, for example, in John's claim that 'people are people' or Jo-Jo's that 'people are my occupation', all these humanistic maxims were motivated by the same basic rationale, namely to deprive 'race' of its significance in day-to-day interaction with black people in particular and 'people' in general. These well-worn, philanthropic clichés might have been otherwise easy to dismiss if they did not have such a solid foundation in everyday lived experience. For all their

apparent piousness and naivety, such ideals were passionately upheld by people who had a real, personal stake in making them a reality. At the heart of them lay a genuine core of opposition to the socially debilitating effects of racism, as they manifested themselves in personal relations with black people. These responses must be considered on their own terms, not as vacuous slogans and hollow sentiments, but as practical attempts to negotiate the oppressive categories that were seen to haunt and dehumanise social relationships between 'black' and 'white' people. For they expressed the sincere hopes of some that 'race' might recede as a source of social fragmentation, and that a genuinely 'multiracial' society might become a feasible reality rather than a Utopian dream.

Part III

Conclusion

9 Looking for a New 'England'

In these final pages I want to return to the questions posed at the beginning of this book and try to give some kind of answer to Powell's rhetorical enquiry as to what sort of nation England might become in the future, or is in the process of becoming now. For, in the light of the profound transformations described over the preceding pages, we are now in a better position to address these questions, if from a rather different standpoint and with a different conception of what their long-term consequences might be.

In order to grasp the scope of these transformations, the historical range of this book has necessarily been far-reaching. For the agents of these changes, as we have seen, have their origins in non-European forms and traditions, whose legacies remain to this day in contemporary forms of black British culture. The social and political movements which have been built around these traditions have injected a new political pulse and vision into the heart of urban Britain. We have seen how it has been within the sphere of 'youth culture' that the often extraordinary encounter between the expressive cultures of these movements and those of young white Britons has been most graphically played out. Black music generally and Jamaican music in particular have functioned as transmitters of oppositional values and liberating pleasures to different generations of whites for nearly three decades. They have consistently supplied white youth with the raw material for their own distinctive forms of cultural expression. Through the political discourses of Rastafari, reggae has provided young whites with a collective language and symbolism of rebellion that has proved resonant to their own predicaments and to their experiences of distinct, but related, forms of oppression.

It is through its characteristic merging of musical forms and political sensibilities that reggae has perhaps had its most significant impact on white youth. Through its ability to combine the pleasures of consumption with elements of protest and political education, and to fuse 'politics' with 'pleasure' and 'entertainment', it has profoundly influenced white youths' uses of their own leisure. For the reggae tradition has acted as a catalyst and inspiration to a whole generation of young whites, providing them with a vehicle through which to signify their own struggles for cultural and political power, and to express oppositional meanings, whether in relation to the dominant culture or to mainstream rock and pop cultures. Reggae has fuelled those struggles by pointing to new forms of political consciousness and highlighting white youths' own resistance to reified forms of entertainment which attempt to confine their leisure to a particular organisation of taste, pleasure and orderly consumption. Time and time again, it has been through the pleasures of musical celebration and consumption that people have found the spiritual and political strength to change and survive. It is here, in the political character of its musical institutions, in its creation of autonomous leisure spaces and its signification of the 'cultural', that the black community's struggles have most clearly prefigured and influenced those adopted by white youth.

These processes, as we have seen, have been underpinned and partly facilitated by a growing convergence of experience between black and white youth in certain – particularly inner-city – areas of urban Britain. Premissed on the shared local experience of unemployment and on parallel predicaments and sources of oppression, the impact of the recession has lent a common purpose and coherence to the struggles of the young in these areas. The extent of these processes has been such that in some areas, the culture and politics of young people exhibits a seamless and organic fusion of black and white sensibilities. For many, the political culture of Afro-Caribbean youth has become *the* dominant culture carrying a magnetic political and cultural attraction for large numbers of youth, white and Asian alike. As we saw in Part II, the power of that culture, through its music,

language, style and political traditions, has also been sufficient to make it relevant to white youth in suburban areas of often negligible black settlement, and in contexts from which blacks are largely absent.

The results of these various cross-racial affiliations, together with the mass availability of reggae and the popularisation of many of its attendant institutions, have produced a whole succession of whites who have been thoroughly exposed to Afro-Caribbean culture. The extent of this by now well-established relationship is such that it is no longer conceivable within age-specific terms. For there are now whites of entirely different generations and backgrounds for whom the consequences of their affiliations have remained resonant in their 'adult' lives. The particular generation with which this book has been mainly concerned, can no longer be described as being in their 'youth' even by the most flexible definitions of the term. The young whites who were the subject of the case study, like many others of their generation, have already 'grown up' and carried through their knowledges and youthful experiences into their adulthood, passing them on to others including their own families and offspring.

The dimensions of these processes raise a question-mark over the capacity of narrow analytical models premissed on 'youth' or 'subcultures' to grasp their full scope and significance. For it might be that we need to pay more attention to the longer-term implications of enthusiasms and allegiances, formed in the crucible of 'youth', for future, 'adult' society.

These processes may prove to be of crucial importance with regard to the long-term politics of race and racism in British society. First, they affirm that the presence of the black community is much more entrenched than is commonly represented. Its traditions have become established as permanent, organic features of the political and cultural landscape in Britain. The processes described in this book are an important counterweight to the prevailing common-sense assumptions and dominant understandings of race which both pervade the media and the political arena, and inform policy on youth and race issues. For not only do they undermine representations of black people in contemporary

British politics as being 'alien' or external to the 'British way of life', but also acknowledge them, not as 'problems' or 'victims', but as political and historical actors in their own right. The kinds of cross-racial allegiances outlined in Part II especially, are a negation of racist ideologies which explain social relations in terms of the polarity of political interests between different 'racial' groups. For those relations cannot be explained by reference to the fixed cultural attributes of different 'ethnic minorities'. The myth of racist social constructions which see cultural forms as biologically inherent is exploded when those forms themselves become meaningful and relevant to whites. The positive mass attractions to black culture and music displayed by whites are a powerful challenge to absolutist or reductionist definitions of 'race', whether in their liberal or conservative guises. The fact that they have increasingly become an option for large numbers of young white people, moreover, makes a mockery of policies for the mass expulsion of blacks as a tenable political solution to the 'race problem'.

The mass impact of black culture and music on white youth has occurred beyond any simplistic notion of 'race relations'. Its effects have been so extensive as to force an awareness of race on the most mainstream of young people. Here, reggae's mass intervention into the heart of mainstream rock and pop cultures, and the forms of popular white identification that it has generated, may have extensive implications for long-term struggles against racism. For the Left, these processes point to the necessity of rethinking and overhauling some of the assumptions which inform its stances on race issues. The mere presence of black people has itself been sufficient to question any unitary or racially exclusive definitions of 'working-class culture'. For these processes point to a fundamental transformation of that culture, which in some areas has been accompanied by a remodelling of whole sections of urban, white working-class communities. The mass impact of Afro-Caribbean forms beyond the confines of the black community has irrevocably altered the shape and meaning of class politics in Britain. The specifically cultural terms in which the Afro-Caribbean community has

struggled and remade itself stand to defy narrow Eurocentric definitions of the 'political'. The scope of their impact on society at large challenges some of the Left's attitudes to black struggles as 'minimalist' and 'separatist', requiring a new perspective to be taken on British culture as a whole, one that is inclusive of the expressive cultures and political traditions of black people.

The political premisses on which existing initiatives in the sphere of 'race relations' are based need to be seriously thought through and reconsidered. Multicultural initiatives, for example, which rely on the process of 'learning about other people's cultures' in the captive context of the classroom may not be the most effective way of challenging racist attitudes and behaviour amongst young people. Indeed, by dwelling on sterile and reductionist definitions of 'culture', they may even fuel that racism. Abstract liberal notions of racial benevolence and 'understanding', predicated on a 'host – immigrant' framework, or on notions of guilt or compensation for black disadvantage, might have little purchase amongst powerless young whites. The imposition from above of generalised and consciously-learned creeds outside the immediate social experience of those concerned will risk being devoid of relevance to young people and limited in their effectiveness.

Rather than dismiss racist youth as ideologically 'wrong' and politically irredeemable, we need to make sense of their experience in a more constructive way. Racist 'common sense' is not the natural condition of white working-class life, and we must be wary of equating such common sense with a form of 'false consciousness'. Perhaps a more contradictory interpretation of 'common sense' is required here, one which looks at the elements of practical 'good sense' in the white working-class consciousness of race and class. For if this book has shown anything, it is that such consciousness is deeply contradictory. This much was confirmed by the dynamic tension between class continuities and racial divisions, between 'race' as imaginary and racism as real, that underpinned the responses of all those in the case study. Perhaps more than any other feature, those responses are a

clear demonstration that race and class forms of consciousness are inseparable aspects of the same dynamic process for both blacks and whites.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn here for any popular anti-racist politics is that young people are already actively involved in producing their own anti-racist solutions, regardless of political initiatives from above. For in the identities, cultural forms and social arrangements evolved by the young themselves out of their engagement with the black community lies an implicit rebuttal of racism and nationalism more potent than any multiculturalist ideology, or stilted local government initiatives. It may not be possible, or even desirable, to structure the kinds of dynamic processes described over the course of this book into policy initiatives within institutional contexts. If contradictions arise in those contexts, however, they should not be suppressed but worked through and opened up in ways which implicate whites and apprehend their racism at the level of personal experience. Popular anti-racist initiatives amongst the young will have to take their lead from the organically grown strategies of the young themselves and acknowledge their own local experience of black culture and music. Such interventions could certainly be made more effective if based on the nucleus of shared experience, and the strong elements of opposition to racism and nationalism, that already exist amongst large numbers of young whites. Practical initiatives here could build on the processes already in motion by harnessing the spontaneous enthusiasms and positive feelings expressed by young whites towards black culture. If anti-racist interventions are to succeed, it is crucial that they begin on this terrain, by understanding what the politics of race mean for young people themselves in terms of their own experiences and backgrounds, their own 'whiteness' and 'Englishness'.

In concentrating throughout this book on the more positive dimensions to black–white relations, I am not suggesting that the solution to racism lies simply in more social interaction between black and white people. Neither do I wish to endorse the view that Britain is a 'harmonious', multicultural, plural society. Real tensions and contradictions

do exist along the boundaries of 'race', presenting real problems for those who are obliged to live them. Racism remains to proscribe white participation in black culture, continually threatening to undermine mixed-friendship patterns premissed on shared experience. The hostility displayed by many young whites towards the Asian community, the persistence of racial attacks against black people in general and the continued influence of right-wing nationalist groups amongst sections of the young, all stand as serious qualifications to the anti-racist potential of responses built solely around engagement with Afro-Caribbean culture. In focusing on these specific forms of engagement, I am not proposing that they be seen as *a priori* conditions of anti-racist stances. Besides offering no assurances of producing such stances, these cross-cultural processes have only a limited capacity to challenge the wider political and ideological structures of racism in the society overall. Challenges to racist actions and sentiments at the interpersonal level will ultimately be limited in their effectiveness if racism in its more diffuse and institutionalised forms is not also confronted with equal vigour.

If nothing else, the movements and identities described in this book have helped to break down any monolithic notions of racism by showing that young whites are not uniformly 'racist' to the same degree or in the same ways. For in the very fact that racisms are historically specific and socially constructed lies the possibility that racial fragmentation might not be an eternal reality. For racism is not a 'natural' or permanent feature of all societies. The forms of response outlined in Part II would suggest that its hold over young people is not immutable and constant, but negotiable and, occasionally, highly tenuous. They show that white youth's commitment to nationalist and racist ideas is a good deal more contradictory and precarious than is often assumed. Young whites have a variety of orientations towards racism at their disposal. There is no one stereotypical racist identity to which they subscribe. Different forms of racism are inhabited at different times, by different individuals and in different contexts. Effective anti-racist interventions will need to address and challenge such forms in precisely the manner in

which they appear, in specific social contexts, in distinctive combinations and in response to different interactive situations and experiences. The uneven balance of relations between black and white youth, from region to region, and from area to area, is a clear demonstration of racism's potential to take root and flourish in some contexts while not in others.

There can, therefore, be no general theory of anti-racist politics while its reproductive capacity remains so heavily mediated by a myriad of local factors and conditions. It is precisely these local factors that would have to be taken into account in any future popular anti-racist initiatives. We still need to know a good deal more about the kinds of interactive features and social relations that subvert or interrupt the flow of racism. Any future studies of black and white youth will need to include some kind of situated approach if they are to capture the complexity of local circumstances and experiences which clearly play such an important role in shaping cross-racial interactions.

The cultural and political dialectic described in this book will no doubt continue to evolve amongst subsequent generations of black and white young people. The specific cultural spheres in which that dialectic is played out will also inevitably change, as indeed they have done in the time since this project was begun. For example, it is clear that some of the cultural relations between black and white youth initiated in the period 1976–81 have been reproduced in new forms around the convergence between soul and reggae cultures.

New relationships will undoubtedly emerge and flourish around new cultural forms and in response to shifting structural and political conditions. Exactly where these relationships might lead will depend as much on the changing experiences of young white Britons as on the evolution of new forms of black British culture and their capacity to address such experiences.

The cross-racial movements described in this book have opened up new spaces for political dialogue and unprecedented opportunities for concrete alliances. The relationships between black and white youth that have evolved over the past two decades suggest something fundamental about the resonance

of disparate cultural and political struggles for one another in post-industrial Britain. The syncretic cultural forms generated at the juncture between these struggles are just some examples of the new kinds of connections and bridges being built between social movements outside the sphere of formal politics. They shed light also on the potential and actual connections which might be made between other types of cross-cultural social movements and struggles.

From these movements are emerging new expressive forms and voices. In the present context it is vital that they are acknowledged and heeded with an open mind if the politics of academic research are to have any credibility. For these are the voices, not of abstract 'subjects' responding to deep, structural contradictions, but of selfconscious, feeling individuals with their own lived experiences and wealth of insights. Those experiences need to be shared with sympathy, patience, and a genuine intimacy between researcher and researched for real results to be achieved.

By way of a conclusion, therefore, I want to close this book with one such voice. It is perhaps only fitting that the last word be given to Jo-Jo since his own personal testimony offers an especially inspired and optimistic vision of what the future might hold. The sense of local pride and rootedness expressed here by Jo-Jo in his 'all nations' concept of community evokes some of the concrete political possibilities held out by the movements described in this book. In Jo-Jo's case, at least, these possibilities had been sufficiently real to undercut and question the very meaning of 'nationality' and 'race'. For in his own, eloquent conclusion is captured both the reality of the new 'England' that is already emerging, as well as the hope that such an England might itself not be 'recognisable as the same nation it has been', or perhaps, one day, 'as a nation at all':

> Its like, I love this place . . . there's no place like home . . . Balsall Heath is the centre of the melting-pot, man, 'cos all I ever see when I go out is half-Arab, half-Pakistani, half-Jamaican, half-Scottish, half-Irish, I know 'cos I am! [half-Scottish–Irish] . . . Who am I? . . . Tell me? Who do I belong to? They criticise me, the good old England. Alright

then, where do I belong? . . . you know, I was brought up with blacks, Pakistanis, Africans, Asians, everything, you name it . . . Who do I belong to? I'm just a broad person. The earth is mine. You know, 'we was not born in England, we was not born in Jamaica' . . . we was born *here*, man! It's our right! That's the way I see it . . . That's the way I deal with it.

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Index

African music 7–12, 13
African retentions 3–4, 6–7, 9–11, 13, 16–17, 28, 29
Afro-American music xx–xxiii, 55; and Jamaican music 17, 18–20, 33
Anti-Nazi League (ANL) 99
Anderson, Charlie 109–10
Asian youth 217–19

Balsall Heath xii–xiv, 127–9, 134, 139, 140, 212, 213–14
Barnard, Steve 82
bass (in reggae) 20, 22, 24, 31, 155–6
BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) 59, 60, 66; and Radio One 80–2; and local radio 82–3
Beat, The 105, 106, 108, 109, 141
Bible 14–15, 26–7
Big Youth 28
Birmingham xv, 126; inner-city xii–xiv, 127–30, 134, 139; outer-ring xi–xii, 130–1, 134–5, 138; clubs 136–7
Black, Pauline 107–8
black and white youth 87–94, 101–2, 105, 106; and schooling 130–1, 149–50, 203–5; and friendship patterns 130–2, 152, 168–70, 186–8, 198–9; and football 132; and masculinity 150–2; mixed dating 135–6, 196–9; in custody 199–200, 205–6, 221; and racism 197–202, 216–21; unemployment 206–12; survival strategies 209–12; and police 213–15, 221–2; and riots 214–16
Black Echoes 80
Black Music 79–80
Blackwell, Chris 37, 42, 58, 59, 61–4
Bluebeat Records 57
blues parties 34–6, 137–9; and white youth 156–9, 181–3
Bournville youth club 134–5, 201
Bovell, Dennis 52
Branson, Richard 69
British Movement 101–2
Bulldog 101–3
Burnin' 42, 65
burru 10, 11, 17

Cabral, Amilcar 5
calypso 16
Campbell, Michael 83
Campbell, Robin 111–12
Catch a Fire 42, 63–5, 66, 75–6
Capital Radio 83–4
Chinnery, Derek 81–2
Christianity (and the black church) 12–15, 55
Clash, The 96
Cliff, Jimmy 61
Cockney Translation 54, 56
Collins, Dave and Ansell 91
creolisation 4; and language 6–7; and music 8–9, 15
Culture Club 114–15
Culture Rock 85
Culture, Smiley 54, 56, 115

Daily Mail xvii
Dekker, Desmond 90

DJing 28–30, 47, 52, 53; and white youth 148–9
Double Barrel 91
Dread Broadcasting Corporation (DBC) 85
drumming (in Jamaican music) 10–12, 13, 17
Drummond, Keith 50
dub 21, 24–6, 30, 96, 108
Dunbar, Sly 24

EMI 57, 72
Ethiopianism 14–15
Ethiopian World Federation 193–4

fast-style DJing 53–4, 56
Front Line (record label) 70

Garveyism 14–15
Gayle, Carl 39, 66–7, 75, 79–80
Ghost Town 110
Gillett, Charlie 59
Gilroy, Paul xvii–xviii, 27, 42, 46, 55, 93
Golding, Linval 106
griots 10
Gutzmore, Cecil 45

Haile Selassie 15, 46, 167, 170, 172
Harder They Come, The 42, 61
Hebdige, Dick xxiv, 92, 105
Hewitt, Roger xxvi, 146–7
Hinds, D. 34
hip-hop 55–6, 139
Howe, Darcus 34–5

IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority) 82
Island Records 37–8, 42, 57–9, 61–9, 72–3, 94; and rock music 59, 62–4, 65, 69, 76; and film 42, 61, 69; and the rock press 75–6; and the 'Legend' campaign; *see also* Marley, Blackwell

Kong, Lesley 59
kumina 10, 11, 13

Labour of Love 112
language (Jamaican creole) 6–7, 54, 41; and music 11, 54; and education 41; and Rastafari 47–8; *see also* patois
Lover's Rock 50–2, 156

McGlashen, Colin 91–2
Marley, Bob 66–9; and white youth 93–5, 98, 101, 106, 141, 160–2, 167; *see also* Island Records, Wailers
maroons 5
MCing 53–4, 56
Melodisc 57
Melody Maker 75–6, 78
mento 16, 18
Miss P. 85, 86
mods 88
Musical Youth 112–14, 148
music press 75; and reggae 75–80
myalism 9, 10
My Boy Lollipop 58, 89

National Front 10, 102, 200, 221
nationalism xvii–xviii; and white youth 98, 100–4, 110, 200–1, 216, 220–1
Natty Dread 65, 66–7
New Musical Express 77–8
night clubs, discos 33, 44; and black and white youth 87–9, 136–7, 158
Nketia, J. H. K. 11
Notting Hill 35; 1958 riots 36; 1976 Carnival 45–6, 96

obeah 9, 10
'oi' music 103–4
oral traditions 7, 27, 29, 47–8

Pass the Dutchie 112–13
patois 41, 47, 54; and white youth 146–50, 180; *see also* language, DJing

Phillips, M. 34
pirate radio 80, 84–5
police; and black cultural institutions 35–6, 44–5: and black youth 40, 44–5; and white youth 213–15
Powell, Enoch xvi
Prince Buster 88
punk 95–8, 100, 104, 105, 140
Punky Reggae Party 94

quadrille 15–16

racism; and nationalism xvi–xviii; and riots xvi–xvii; and black leisure institutions 33, 35–6, 43, 44: and the music industry 38, 60–1, 115: and broadcasting 80–2; and white youth 92–3, 98–104, 109–11, 177–8, 199–202, 216–22, 225, 235–8; and families 196–9, 222–4
radio 80–6; *see also* BBC, pirate radio
rapping 29
Rastafari; in Jamaica 14–15, 17, 23, 27; in Britain 40, 41–3, 46–9; and women 48–9, 55, 173–5; and white youth 93, 95–6, 101, 114, 144–5, 166–76, 179, 190–5
Rastaman Vibration 67
recording industry; Jamaican 20–1, 23, 31, 37, 42, 52–3, 62–3, 66; British (reggae) 37–8, 52–3; multinationals 72–4; 'crossover' records 73–4
record shops 37; and reggae 38; and white youth 71, 158, 181, 188
reggae 24–32, 42–3, 50–5; lyricism 26–8, 162–6: and dance 51, 88, 156–7: and pop 59–60, 78, 90–1, 104–5, 111–17; and white youth 89–92, 94–100, 115–18, 152–66, 210–11; *see also* dub, DJing, sound systems
revival 12–13
rhythm 8, 12, 19–20, 24, 154–5
rhythm and blues xxi–xxii, 87–8; and Jamaican music 18–20
riots (1981–5) xvi–xvii, 214–16
riddims 26
Rock Against Communism (RAC) 101, 103
Rock Against Racism (RAR) 98–101, 140
rockers 24
rocksteady 22–3
rock 'n' roll xxi–xxii
Rodigan, David 83–4, 86, 88–9
rudies 89; and white youth 89, 107, 141

Scientist sound system xi–xii, 122
Selector 106, 107
Sex Pistols 96, 100
Shaka, Jah 43, 184
shebeens 34–6; *see also* blues parties, sound systems
Signing Off 111
ska 19–20, 21–2, 28; and white youth 88
skinheads 89–93
Smash Hits 78
sociology; and race xviii–xix; and Afro-Caribbean culture xxvi–xxvii
soul music 55–6, 238, 139
sound systems 29–31; in Jamaica 18–20, 21, 28; in Britain 34–5, 37, 39, 43–5, 51–2; in Birmingham 138–9; and white youth 183–5, 210
Specials, The 103, 106, 108, 110
Stand Down Margaret 108
subculture xxiv–xxv, xxvii, 46, 49

Temporary Hoarding 98
Third World Records 38
Thompson, Carroll 51
Top of the Pops 116
Tosh, Peter 71

Trojan Records 37, 88, 59–60, 69, 90–1
Twelve Tribes of Israel 170
two-tone 104–11

UB40 105, 111–12, 140–1, 210
U-Roy 28

versions 26, 31
Virgin Records 69–71, 73, 74, 94

Wailers, The 42, 61–9; *see also* Marley, Island Records
Wallace, Leroy 24
War 167–8
Ward, R. 127
Williams, Richard 75–6
Willis, Paul xxvi
work songs 8
Worsthorne, Peregrine xvii

Young, Gifted and Black 92
Young National Front 101, 104
youth clubs 44–5, 91–2, 133–6, 201