

JASON WILSON



*King Alpha's Song
in a Strange Land*

THE ROOTS AND ROUTES
OF CANADIAN REGGAE



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto



Contents

- List of Illustrations / ix
- Preface and Acknowledgments / xi
- Introduction: King Alpha's Song / 3
- 1 Hybridity and Jamaican Music / 18
- 2 Music of the Black Atlantic / 43
- 3 Jamaica to Toronto / 60
- 4 Place and Meaning in Toronto's Reggae Text / 96
- 5 The Bridge Builders / 140
- 6 Blackness and Whiteness / 189
- 7 In Search of the Canadian Sound / 208
- 8 A Strange Land / 238
- Notes / 249
- Bibliography / 312
- Index / 335

INTRODUCTION

King Alpha's Song

In the summer of 1937, Marcus Garvey returned to Toronto to attend the annual conference of his own United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The UNIA had purchased a building for its use in Toronto at 355 College Street a year earlier.¹ Garvey had arguably been, at least for a time, the most important black man in the world. Now, the Jamaican-born, Pan-Africanist leader was beleaguered after having served five years in prison on charges that had been trumped up by the US government. In failing health and with the zenith of his career (his part in the Harlem Renaissance) well behind him, Garvey valiantly tried to push his UNIA initiative forward in the Great White North and elsewhere.² After three intensive weeks in Toronto, Garvey travelled east. His last Canadian stop was at Menelik Hall in Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia. There, Garvey delivered a speech that would have wide-reaching ramifications: “We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind.”³

Four decades later, another Jamaican, born only thirty-five kilometres south of where Garvey had come into the world, took inspiration from these words – delivered in Canada – and worked them into something of his own: “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, / None but ourselves can free our minds.”⁴ “Redemption Song” remains perhaps the most sacrosanct number in Bob Marley’s formidable canon. This connection, tangential as it may appear, anticipates the important role that Canada would play in reggae’s global story. It also illustrates how a single text can be reimagined and made into something new, for a different time and place.

Three years after his Canadian speech and just one month before the Battle of Britain began, Garvey died in London, England, on July 10, 1940. “Redemption Song” – the final song of Marley’s last studio album – was the last song he ever performed live: the King of Reggae died in a Miami hospital on May 11, 1981. The building that Garvey’s UNIA bought has long since disappeared, but for nearly twenty years, Thymeless Reggae Bar was the occupant at 355 College Street.

During the period between Garvey and Marley’s death, Canadian immigration laws experienced a transformation. By 1972, Canada’s doors had been pushed open to accept black Jamaicans. Migrants, including popular artists such as Jackie Mittoo and Leroy Sibbles, brought their rich Jamaican music with them to Toronto, and reggae helped facilitate a cultural dialogue between Jamaican migrants and their Canadian host society during the 1970s and 1980s. The discourses and musical exchanges taking place along the city’s ethnic frontier reveal a variety of social issues that were crucial to both sides at this time, including racism, the immigration and acculturation process, notions of both whiteness and blackness, and the host’s patent curiosity about Jamaican music and culture. All these matters informed the evolution of an indigenous and multi-racial Toronto reggae scene. Through reggae, migrants were at once able to enact their Jamaican ethnicity and access, at least in some measure, the dominant society. Music, for some Jamaican migrants, was part of a successful acculturation strategy. At the same time, a significant number of Toronto’s non-Jamaican and mostly white youth were, for a variety of reasons, drawn to the Jamaican music of their migrant friends. Reggae soon became an expected part of the city’s musical vernacular.

Reggae is a hybrid. It is also a transnational popular music form. For over forty years, reggae’s transoceanic sound has relayed back and forth across the black Atlantic with Jamaican migrants, labourers, domestics and, of course, musicians. It has articulated a Caribbean diasporic consciousness while transcending it, emerging as something new in urban outposts such as London, Birmingham, and Toronto. It has, like ska before it, united sometimes seemingly strange bedfellows: punk rockers, new wavers, rude boys, and Rastafarians have all been brought together by this Jamaican music that has echoed down urban streetscapes, boomed across multiracial neighbourhoods, cut through working-class spaces

of labour, enveloped the schoolyard, and claimed many nightclubs. Crucially, reggae brought black and white youth together in Toronto in a sometimes highly politicized, oppositional movement that rebelled against the status quo of the late 1970s and 1980s.⁵ Since then, Jamaican reggae has leaped from the status of folk music or underground music to an international billion-dollar industry with a global infrastructure, millions of fans, and thousands of artists of various ethnicities throughout the world. In terms of international popularity – and when compared to countries of similar size and population – Jamaica’s musical output is matchless.

Reggae was not constrained to one place. Scholars have used the conceptual and interconnected frameworks of motion, encounter, and identity to assess how cultural expressions (for our purposes, music) have been advanced and altered through communication routes that transcend national borders.⁶ Indeed, some scholars have proven how the local is inextricably linked to the transnational or the global through systems of production and consumption and also through systems of thought and meaning.⁷

More recently, though, other scholars have demonstrated how an emphasis on globalization has perhaps overshadowed the uniqueness of the local.⁸ The local remains, as various academics argue, crucial to studying memory making, remembering, and commemoration through the course of historical inquiry.⁹ The local, however, gets complicated when its collective property is transported from one place to another. While retaining an essence, the old is, necessarily, rerooted in the new and, once there, experiences a transnational transformation. This was certainly the case for Jamaican migrants and their music. Reggae transformed space to place in many parts of Toronto. The city – as place – was crucial to the cultural and musical blending that ensued between migrant and host, and it gave meaning to the resultant reggae music made there.¹⁰

Meaning, then, conjoined as it may be to broader patterns linking people and processes across nation-states, remains grounded in and constantly modified by the local. In other words, the roots of a riddim delivered in Kingston 12 may very well bubble through the black diaspora, yet when it was broadcast to, consumed by, and reinterpreted through the “other” on the ethnic frontlines of a city such as Toronto, it

imbibed new connotations and therefore varied – sometimes slightly, sometimes vastly – from the initial intention of the original musical and lyrical text.¹¹ And that is, of course, how music has always behaved.

The popular music that developed in Jamaica in the late 1950s and 1960s evolved in concert with various processes in that country, not least of which was the significant increase in labour migration, chiefly to the United Kingdom and, later, Canada.¹² Mento, ska, rocksteady, and reggae came to Canada through the transnational flow of labour migration and musical ideas.¹³ Toronto in particular served as an urban flashpoint for these processes.¹⁴ There, Jamaican music would provide a much-needed soundtrack for those migrants who had left their island in the sun.

The migrants broadcast reggae on to the streets of Toronto. While there were separate immigrant enclaves, their borders were porous enough to allow the drum and bass line to penetrate Toronto's mainstream youth culture. There were a few pockets of Jamaican migrants in the city's east end and Scarborough. Jamaicans also boasted significant numbers in Malton, near Lester B. Pearson International Airport. Perhaps most famous, though, were the main Jamaican enclaves of the Jane-Finch Corridor (which more broadly extended east to Keele Street and south to Sheppard Avenue), the "Black Bottom" (running south from Eglinton on Bathurst) and, by extension, Eglinton Avenue West, which is now known to most as Little Jamaica.

Few of the musical migrants who moved into these communities laboured under the assumption that they would make their living exclusively through music. Most didn't. Yet the names of those reggae musicians who at one time or another possessed a Toronto address reads like a who's who of reggae. Indeed, some of the genre's true pioneers at one time or another called Toronto home. Additionally, indigenously produced reggae music grew to a formidable quality that was recognized both in Canada and in the country of reggae's birth. As a reggae outpost, Toronto had the West Indian Federation Club, Club Jamaica, and, later, the city's central nerve for reggae – the Bamboo Club on Queen Street West. These clubs roughly paralleled London's Flamingo, the Sunset Club, the 59, and A-Train.¹⁵ And just as it had done in Britain, Jamaican music in downtown Toronto brought young people from all walks of life together.



King Alpha's Song in a Strange Land is not a study of migrants. It is a study of the process of migration of one group (Jamaicans) and the migration of music (reggae) as seen from both the migrant and the host's perspective. It is, therefore, as much about black Jamaicans as it is about white Torontonians.

There is a danger in only following the migrant's path from origin to destination (and, if it applies, back again). A strict teleological reading of the migration process can produce inelastic, essentialized notions about groupness and, in our case, blackness and whiteness. It can also obscure exceptions in the various groups in question, including both the migrants and the host. Certainly, there were exceptions – abolitionists, internationalists, antimodernists, activists, artists, authors, and, yes, musicians, too – who provide untidy realities that trouble some critical race theories.

Jamaicans were not a homogeneous group. No migrant community is. In Barbara Lorenzkowski's *Sounds of Ethnicity: Listening to German North America, 1850–1914*, the author cleverly chooses to view German ethnicity as something that is practised, something that happens, instead of viewing it as a strict set of inflexible norms and monolithic ideals.¹⁶ In this way, ethnicity as practice allows room for a multiplicity of lived experiences.¹⁷ Reggae in Toronto gave the Jamaican a way to enact her or his Jamaicanness that was not only culturally satisfying for the migrant but also attractive to some non-Jamaicans.

In the interest of being transparent, I am not Jamaican. I have, however, been a Canadian reggae artist for over thirty-five years. As such, and by virtue of growing up where I did, in North York, Ontario, I have lived among Jamaicans all my life. I have also enjoyed some successes in the reggae world and have had the privilege of playing and recording with some of the genre's true greats. I have had as much fun playing with the not-so-famous too. Still, I will leave the question of whether I possess an insider's perspective up to the reader (but please read the preface).¹⁸

Whatever you decide, reggae is part of my culture and has been a fixture of my personal day-to-day environment since I was a child. Perhaps the impetus for this book came from being asked many times,

by the media and others, “What’s a white guy like you doing playing reggae?” The most remarkable aspect about this question is that I have rarely been asked it by Jamaicans and never, at least in my memory, by Jamaican musicians, whether in Canada, Britain, or in Jamaica itself. My stock answer is this: though I may be a Scottish Canadian, reggae chose me, and I have sincerely dedicated much of my life to the promotion, proliferation, and performance of Canadian reggae. It has been immensely satisfying.

The CBC’s Peter Mansbridge once said I wore multiculturalism “like a comfortable sweater.”¹⁹ I believe that mine is more a case of interculturalism, for, in truth, the government brochure version of multiculturalism is a misleading representation that cannot be effectively legislated. It is also incongruous with the realities of many of the people I consulted to write this book. Real cultural interaction, or interculturalism, occurs in a place where cultures in fact collide before meaningful dialogue commences.²⁰ Rumours, good and bad, lie in the shadows cast by official multiculturalism. Superficial rumours suggest that all Jamaicans would have great rhythm, love ackee and salt fish, hate winter, be quick to anger, and play threatening, bass-booming reggae. It was therefore surprising for me to find Eli, who could not possibly hope to find “beat one” if his life depended on it; Lincoln, who was allergic to ackee; Robbie, who tired quickly of summer and couldn’t wait for hockey season; Charles, a gentle giant who possessed the patience of a Buddha; and Mr. and Mrs. Harvey, who for years hoped that I would grow out of this “reggae thing” and concentrate on classical piano. These realities demonstrated the variance in what was supposedly a homogeneous group. Happily, the “narrowness of ethnicity,” as cultural critic Neil Bissoondath has called it, is often trumped by the wildly different tastes of the various individuals who happen to be born in a particular place.

When a popular Toronto radio show asked me to put a band together for one of their live broadcasts, the producer asked me what the makeup of the band was. I began to explain that I was going to bring a bassist, a tenor saxophonist, a drummer, and so forth. I was interrupted, and she explained that she really wanted to know what the band members’ cultural background was: what was the ethnic makeup of the band? This barometer

of ethnicity is, sadly, the true test for prescribed Canadian multiculturalism, and it will always undermine musical or artistic considerations. It didn't matter what my band might sound like; it was more important that they suited the prescription of what a reggae band should look like (the irony of it being a radio show notwithstanding). Needless to say, the producer was delighted to hear that I had a Sri Lankan, a Trinidadian, a Jamaican, and a St. Lucian in my mix, which I presume, for her at least, nicely offset my Scottishness. With all CRTC requirements apparently satisfied, and on the strength of our multiple hues, we had the gig.



The zenith in Jamaican migration to Canada came in the 1970s, and while some work has been done on this diaspora in various countries, few scholars have concentrated on the Jamaican experience in Canada, and fewer still (if any) have appraised the host society's response in depth. Furthermore, most historians of immigration have focused on the immigrants' adaptation to the host society in both economic and material terms and have not specifically viewed this process through a musical lens.

The transnational and organic nature of reggae music served as a conduit between migrant and host, a fact that bears some consideration. Through traditional sources such as mainstream and community newspapers, music trade magazines, government documents, Canadian-produced reggae music, and oral evidence I explore the cultural dialogue and diffusion that occurred between Jamaicans and non-Jamaicans in Toronto. I use the music of Canada's golden age of reggae (1979–90) as a prism through which various inquiries of a more theoretical kind can shine. Through this prism, one can witness how the reggae text, its performers, and audiences have changed over time and adjusted to fit the Canadian context.

Though this book at times harkens back to various periods (early twentieth-century Jamaica, post-Second World War Canada, and Thatcher's Britain, to name a few), it opens in 1973, the year that saw the arrival of Jamaican reggae legend Leroy Sibbles in Toronto's northwest neighbourhood, the Jane-Finch Corridor. This was also the year that reggae exploded on the international scene with the unexpected cult

success of the Jamaican film *The Harder They Come*. The story closes in 1990, when the multiracial Toronto reggae act the Sattalites won the Juno Award for Best Reggae Recording at the tail end of Canada's golden age of reggae.

To tell this story, I interviewed over twenty Jamaicans and over twenty non-Jamaicans who were willing to share their experiences.²¹ Each group had the possibility of providing both *emic* and *etic* accounts.²² Through them, we get the opportunity, as the poet Burns wrote, "to see ourselves as others see us!"²³ We get the immediate benefit of hearing the actual lived experience of the migrant, according to him or her, while viewing the same experience from the perspective of the host who witnessed the process.

These perspectives, however, can only ever be imperfect. Recollections are important not only for what is remembered but also for what is not. The workings of memory are not infallible. People's stories change over time, certain aspects of a particular experience can be misremembered, and many folks often fall back on clumsy, weather-beaten tropes to simplify their thinking of a previous time.

The perspectives included here, however, are perhaps among the sharpest available. Everyone I interviewed had some reasonable link to the Canadian reggae scene. Over twenty-five of them were musicians, and the others were involved directly with the music industry and include reggae concert and festival promoters, radio DJs, authors, journalists, publicists, a photographer, and one record-company employee. All the Jamaican interviewees immigrated to Canada between 1964 and 1989 (seventeen before 1980), and all the respondents, Jamaican and non-Jamaican, were at least in their teenage years during Canada's golden age of reggae and were in some way active in it.²⁴

In addition to these interviews, I conducted a few with first-generation Canadians of Jamaican heritage to craft a more nuanced account of how the acculturation process differed among Jamaicans over time. For further musical context, I also undertook a few interviews with legendary reggae artists, including Jamaican guitar virtuoso Ernest Ranglin; British reggae icons UB40's Ali Campbell, Astro, and Michael Virtue; and former Aswad frontman Brinsley Forde.²⁵ Because the folk traditions of the British Isles

are linked with Jamaican folk musics, I also interviewed the late English fiddle legend and folk historian David Swarbrick.²⁶



The title for this book, *King Alpha's Song in a Strange Land*, was inspired by the Melodians' classic 1970 reggae cut "By the Rivers of Babylon," which articulates the cyclical nature of Jamaica's people in motion.²⁷ Its structure is loosely chronological and focuses on three geographical centres: Toronto, Jamaica, and the United Kingdom. Migration has been an inescapable element of Jamaican history, and Jamaican music reveals the transoceanic musical dialogue that was occurring between Britain and Jamaica, Jamaica and Canada, and Canada and Britain. From the late seventeenth century onward, African folk traditions intersected with European ones in Jamaica's cultural economy. The resultant creolized Jamaican folk musical tradition was continuously updated by outside influences (especially British and later American popular and folk musics) and ultimately played, by the second half of the twentieth century, a significant role in the emerging Jamaican exports of mento, ska, rocksteady, and reggae.

These exports were brought to Toronto by Jamaican migrants and had a profound effect on the non-Jamaican youth subculture of that city in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet by the time it reached Toronto, the non-Jamaican host was already familiar, if subconsciously, with some of reggae's catholic musical signifiers. By putting Jamaican reggae under the microscope, it's possible to find DNA that can in some measure explain why nondiasporic musicians and enthusiasts embraced Jamaican reggae music to the extent they did within the urban centres of Britain and, of course, Toronto.

Immigration to Canada was not an easy process for most Jamaicans. The official policies of the Canadian government were often calibrated to popular and pervasive attitudes about race and culture in the country, and only when economic or labour needs called for it did Canada open up its doors to Jamaican workers, including the many migrant musicians of Toronto's Jamaican music scene. Still, these migrant musicians or musical enthusiasts believe that they had an advantage over other migrants in the acculturation process because of their association with music. Many

feel that they were able to draw strength from the sense of community that music and musicians could provide and were able to use music to build bridges into the city's mainstream culture.

After the migrants arrived, a robust cultural dialogue occurred between Jamaican migrants and non-Jamaicans along Toronto's ethnic frontlines. In time, Canadian reggae texts were crafted in those places that bridged migrant with host. These texts concurrently reinforced and resisted metanarratives of Canadian multiculturalism and, indeed, the Jamaican musical art form itself. Ultimately, Toronto's reggae protagonists, fans, and critics cast their own varied meanings on reggae.

Toronto's Jamaicans personally introduced reggae to non-Jamaicans through various means, including lending albums and singles to classmates in school, attending reggae concerts or dances with them, or simply sharing marijuana. At the same time, many non-Jamaicans were highly influenced by British musical trends that were often responding to the United Kingdom's own Jamaican population. Punk music, the second wave of ska (or the two-tone movement), and the popularity of English reggae bands such as Aswad, Steel Pulse, and UB40 were trends that had great currency in Toronto's youth culture in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Indeed, given the strong bonds between the three countries, reggae as a genre in Canada was constantly being updated by musical trade winds that blew north from Jamaica and west from Britain.

Some non-Jamaicans were also profoundly affected by the international rise of Bob Marley and his music. Through him, a few non-Jamaicans turned Rasta. Others were attracted to his endorsement (and other reggae musicians' endorsement) of marijuana, a fact that blended with the recreational drug culture found in other popular musics of the day. For some, these various bridge-building activities in leisure and private spaces along the frontline opened up the possibility of more meaningful and long-lasting relationships between migrant and host.

There were also, of course, the gatekeepers who instead chose to draw their bridges skyward when they felt that their notion of reggae had been compromised. Indeed, some gatekeepers viewed participation in musical bridge-building operations as an act of disloyalty to the Jamaican group and any resultant sound as an offence to an imagined "authentic" Jamaican text. Interestingly, many of the gatekeepers were from the dominant host

society: journalists and ethnomusicologists who had a limited idea of what Canadian reggae should sound and look like.

And what of the Canadian sound? More often than not, Canadian reggae artists felt compelled to chase an authentic Jamaican sound. These acts continued to look south to the island for inspiration and validation. Nevertheless, some brave migrant acts such as Messenjah, Lillian Allen, and Truths and Rights and some multiracial acts such as 20th Century Rebels and the Sattalites sought to articulate a Canadian-centric experience within their songs and found some success, at least artistically, in doing so. The Sattalites in particular were successful in conveying a multiracial expression that simultaneously reflected the experiences of those on stage and those in the audience.



While the Jamaican migrant may have brought the main ingredients for the reggae music made in Toronto, the non-Jamaican host certainly added to the broth, creating something uniquely Canadian. Who then owns the Canadian reggae text? Part of the trouble with quests for ownership of the authentic reggae text is evinced in its audience. Bob Marley's live audiences were largely white. Burning Spear – many people's idea of the defender of Rasta reggae's truest text – has made most of his money in Europe and North America, playing to audiences that boast sizeable white contingents.²⁸ Today, as was the case by the mid-1970s, reggae artists, especially Jamaican ones, make most of their living on fees and royalties emanating from outside of Jamaica. As Leroy Sibbles observed as early as 1982: "Nothing's happening in Jamaica. They've even stopped selling the cheaper disco 45s in Jamaica because nobody's buying them. Most people who do recording down in Jamaica don't bother to release the songs down there. They export them. All the reggae records are being sold abroad."²⁹ In terms of a music industry, then, Jamaican artists have relied on a global audience, particularly in Europe and North America, to fuel the reggae machine.

A significant number of reggae texts have been crafted by non-Rasta Jamaicans, but dreadlocks; the smoking of marijuana; the sartorial requisites of *ites* (red, gold, and green); and devotion to Haile Selassie (at least publicly) have cumulatively assembled the normative iconography of

reggae. It hardly needs stating that fleshing out the important linkages between Rasta, the drum, poverty, slavery, oppression, and its oppositional responses found in the texts of ska, rocksteady, and reggae is a valid and worthwhile endeavour.³⁰ But it's not what I'm doing here. This book is, at least in part, a response to the standard austere and teleological narrative of Jamaican music that jettisons its hybridity and folk roots. The irresistible image of Bob Marley may have given reggae its face and put the genre on the world stage, but that face limited what reggae could and certainly did mean to a great many of its faithful practitioners, including those in Canada.³¹

Jamaican musicians are diverse. Rastafarians make up less than 1 percent of Jamaica's population, and while they are disproportionately represented in reggae music, many non-Rasta Jamaicans have been pivotal to the development of the genre.³² Carlene Davis, an Afro-Jamaican reggae and gospel artist who spent a few years in Canada, provides one apt example of such diversity. As a Christian woman, Davis troubles some people's perception of what a reggae artist should look or sound like.³³ Yet no one in Jamaica would deny that she is a bona fide reggae star who has always been comfortable expressing and stretching her elastic reading of the Jamaican musical art form: "I can't help where I've been. I started out singing folk music in England and I've done pop and country and a whole bunch of things since. Whatever I've heard is going to come out, it just flows naturally."³⁴ Interestingly, Davis believes she enjoyed more artistic freedom when she returned to Jamaica after her time in Toronto: "In Canada, it seemed as if I would have to project myself totally as a reggae artist if I wanted to make it. I couldn't sidetrack, I'd have to be pure. Here [in Jamaica] there's room to spread out – the Jamaican audiences will listen to anything. I love reggae, but here I don't have to stick exclusively to it."³⁵ Though existing ideas about what reggae should look and sound like outside of Jamaica pervaded Canada's music intelligentsia, Jamaicans in Jamaica were far less exclusionary. Feeling artistically pigeon-holed, Davis returned to live in Jamaica in 1981 and missed the better part of Reggae Canadiana's golden age.³⁶

There are other important examples that complicate the reggae stereotype. Hopeton Lewis, whose 1966 hit "Take It Easy" is considered by most

to be the first rocksteady song ever, was a Christian.³⁷ Jimmy Cliff, whose soundtrack to *The Harder They Come* introduced reggae to the world, is Muslim. So, too, was Prince Buster, the man who delivered ska to England. Bob Marley was, indeed, a Rasta, but his father was a white Englishman. And UB40, though continuously maligned by journalists in official reggae histories (if included at all), is the world's most commercially successful reggae band, after Marley and his Wailers. In addition to being multi-racial, the band is an assemblage of Rastas, agnostics, and atheists. In many of these authenticities, one's skin colour and faith system (or lack thereof) is irrelevant.

When compared to blues and jazz, however, reggae scholarship has some catching up to do.³⁸ Unlike UB40's lot in the body of reggae literature, Bill Evans – one of the most influential post-Second World War jazz pianists – does not merit an asterisk beside his name in jazz histories to denote “white pianist.”³⁹ Moreover, few ethnomusicologists would question the various authenticities of jazz played by musicians who may not even be from the United States.⁴⁰ Indeed, Jamaicans such as Joe Harriott, Monty Alexander, and Ernest Ranglin have made significant contributions to the proliferation of “American” jazz. Yet the fruits of reggae roots (and routes) – when presented by many non-Rastas, non-Jamaicans, and even by nonblacks around the world – have been held, by some, under deep suspicion.

Compounding the problem for reggae is that its attendant scholarship is quite small and has not yet had the chance to mature like the bodies of literature associated with jazz, folk, blues, and even rock and roll. Unlike the literature on these genres, there have been no major pitched battles between competing academics on questions of authenticity, race, and commercial exploitation. And so the discourse on authenticity persists in the small, nascent body of reggae literature. In *Dangerous Crossroads*, for example, George Lipsitz, an American studies professor at the University of California, suggests that the British reggae band Musical Youth's representation of reggae was disconnected from the genre's organic roots. Lipsitz argues that this is indicative of the record industry's commercial remodelling of the reggae text. Lipsitz seems unwilling to consider that the idea for Musical Youth (who were the first black group to appear on

MTV) and their hit song “Pass the Dutchie” (which sold over 4 million copies) were the product of existing Jamaican texts and had been conceived entirely by Jamaicans.⁴¹ Simply put, scholars need to accept the multiplicity of new traditions and authenticities in the reggae text.⁴²



In 2008, a Global Reggae Conference was held at the University of the West Indies’ Jamaican campus to consider scholarly contributions to the literature on reggae.⁴³ In her opening plenary, award-winning Jamaican cultural historian Erna Brodber observed that the reggae music of the 1970s had created a black space.⁴⁴ For Brodber, reggae was

an incubator for a kind of knowledge that needed to work its way out of the ground and into the minds of the young descendants of Africans enslaved in Jamaica. Not just chatter among the platters; the early reggae allowed meditation while you danced and even if you did not want to be black, you could at least understand why others would want to be. Reggae made converts, but it also produced an environment that was sympathetic to those who wanted to be more than listeners to the works of the “singers and players,” the only professionals mentioned by the Psalms as being there.⁴⁵

This is so. Moreover, reggae is synonymous with the struggles and triumphs of black Jamaicans throughout the diaspora, including those in Toronto. Most reggae, and certainly most of the best reggae, has been written, recorded, and performed by black Jamaicans (while it need not be restated, I ask you to keep this declaration in mind as you read this book).

This book, however, explores plurality in the lived reality of the reggae experience. I’m interested in, as Brodber alluded to, the converts that reggae made. With its massive population of expatriate Jamaicans and its importance to the global reggae scene, Toronto offers not only a place to show how Jamaican music claimed a foothold on the streets of a non-Jamaican city, infiltrating its mainstream, but also a space to test the absolute that reggae should be the exclusive preserve of black Jamaicans and Rastafarians. In this respect, Canadian reggae is a success story. The

Canadian reggae experience serves as an example of how interculturalism brought migrant and host (and other migrants, for that matter) together in Canada. Interculturalism, however, is largely unrecognizable from the cliché governmental prescriptions and portrayals of multiculturalism, which do not resonate with migrants.

Alas, Canadian reggae is also a story of failure. The mainstream music industry's lack of commitment to reggae, residual public attitudes towards race and ethnic music in general, and a lack of cohesion in Canada's reggae community itself helped chase Leroy Sibbles (among others) back to Jamaica, preventing Canada from competing with other international reggae markets such as the United Kingdom. Despite being stacked with talent and a huge West Indian population, Canadian reggae stagnated after its golden age, and it never came close to approximating its far more successful British cousin.

© UBC Press 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: King Alpha's song in a strange land : the roots and routes of Canadian reggae /
Jason Wilson

Names: Wilson, Jason

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190240342 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190236426 |
ISBN 9780774862271 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774862301 (EPUB) |
ISBN 9780774862295 (PDF) | ISBN 9780774862318 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Reggae music – Ontario – Toronto. | LCSH: Reggae music – Canada. |
LCSH: Jamaicans – Canada.

Classification: LCC ML3532 W749 2020 | DDC 782.4216460971354—dc23

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

A reasonable attempt has been made to secure permission to reproduce all material used. If there are errors or omissions they are wholly unintentional and the publisher would be grateful to learn of them.

Set in Caslon and Minion by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Lesley Erickson

Proofreader: Sarah Wight

Cover designer: Martyn Schmoll

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca