

# Half the Story Has Never Been Told: Popular Jamaican Music as Antisubordination Praxis

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In Jamaica, there is an old Rastafarian adage: "The half has never been told." This saying was later immortalized in Bob Marley and the Wailers' *Get Up, Stand Up*. "Half the story has never been told."<sup>1</sup> In the context of Rastafarianism, the "half that has never been told" refers to the uncorrupted history of the African peoples, as opposed to more dominant and accepted European accounts, which, according to Rastafarians, have deliberately obscured the truth.

In the context of this Essay, the "half that has never been told" refers to the oral history of the Jamaican people contained in the vast body of their popular music. Unlike most standard versions of Jamaican history, which for the most part have been written by scholars who originate from the upper and middle classes, the history embodied in popular music has emanated from the lower class. As the legendary Toots Hibbert observed with regard to reggae:<sup>2</sup>

Reggae means comin' from the people, y'know? Like a everyday thing. Like from the ghetto. From *majority*. Everyday thing that people use like food, we just put music to it and make a dance

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<sup>1</sup> THE WAILERS, *Get Up, Stand Up, on BURNIN'* (Island Records Ltd. 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Although reggae and Jamaican music are synonymous terms outside of Jamaica, reggae is but one period of the island's popular music. Other notable periods include ska, rocksteady and dancehall.

out of it. Reggae mean *regular* people who are suffering, and don't have what they want.<sup>3</sup>

Because of these lower class origins, popular Jamaican music has been devalued and underrepresented by scholars that privilege the knowledge and views of the establishment over those of the masses. As a result, traditional scholarship leaves us with only half the story. By focusing on the knowledge and views contained in popular music, this Essay will reveal parts of the other, more authentic, half of the story — the half that has never been told. In doing so, this Essay will illustrate some of the ways in which popular Jamaican music serves as a powerful form of antisubordination praxis.

Jamaica is a small island in the Caribbean with a population of approximately 2.5 million. Before becoming an independent nation in 1962, Jamaica had been a colony of the British Empire. For much of the colonial era, Jamaica was little more than a giant sugar plantation, which had been worked by hundreds of thousands of African slaves and their descendants. As a result, roughly eighty percent of all Jamaicans are black, while an additional fifteen percent are mixed, or brown Jamaicans, and also of African descent. The remaining five percent of the population is comprised of Europeans, Chinese, East Indians, and Arabs.

Despite the national motto, "Out of Many, One People,"<sup>4</sup> Jamaican society is sharply divided. These divisions are not based on race alone, for class differences intensely stratify society. In Jamaica, the issue of race/color is not viewed strictly in terms of black and white, as historically had been the case in the United States. For this reason, many Jamaicans, who identify themselves as white, emigrate to the United States only to find out that they are black. With regard to class, Jamaica is like many developing countries in the sense that there is a tremendous gap in the standard of living between the upper and middle class minorities and the lower class majority. Therefore, in the eyes of most Jamaicans, not to

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<sup>3</sup> STEPHEN DAVIS & PETER SIMON, *REGGAE BLOODLINES: IN SEARCH OF THE MUSIC OF JAMAICA* 17 (1977).

<sup>4</sup> As one historian noted, the national motto is supposed to be "a constant reminder of the fact that the Jamaican nation is composed of people of many races who have long lived and worked together in harmony." CLINTON V. BLACK, *HISTORY OF JAMAICA* 168 (1983); cf. C.L.R. JAMES, *PARTY POLITICS IN THE WEST INDIES* 140 (1962) (asserting that racial harmony is one of "greatest lies" of West Indian society).

mention most musicians, society is divided into two distinct groups: the rich and the poor.

Although race and class are two separate and distinct issues, the reality in Jamaica is that they almost invariably coincide. In general, the lighter a person's skin color, the more likely it is for that person to be a member of the upper or middle class. By the same token, "black" and "poor" are generally synonymous labels, particularly when used by Jamaican musicians. The remainder of this Essay will focus on some of the contexts in which popular music serves as antisubordination praxis.

The first context deals with popular resistance to the so-called "Babylon System," a Rastafarian term which is derived from the Old Testament story of the Babylonian captivity. In the context of Rastafarianism, Babylon refers to Jamaica, or life under a corrupt and oppressive establishment, while the Babylon System refers to the organs of this establishment, namely the government, the church, the rich elite, and the police force.

Because many may be unfamiliar with Rastafarianism and because it is such a powerful force in Jamaican society and music, it is important to briefly discuss the nature and origins of Rastafarianism. Rastafarianism can be viewed as both a religion and a social movement that originated in Jamaica during the 1930s. After the Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey was deported back to the island from the United States, he spent much of his time promoting the United Negro Improvement Association (which Garvey founded in Jamaica in 1914), as well as his ideas about Black Nationalism. In one of his speeches, Garvey said: "Look to Africa, [where] a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near."<sup>5</sup> To Garvey's followers, these words were a prophesy. Thus, when Ras Tafari, who later became known as Haile Selassie I, was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia on November 2, 1930, Rastafarianism was born as some believed Garvey's prophesy had been fulfilled.

It is interesting to note that the popularity of Rastafarian ideals and beliefs among popular musicians during the 1960s tremendously enhanced the ability of Rastafarianism to shape the mass cultural identity and consciousness of the Jamaican people. Indeed, popular music became the primary vehicle for spreading

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<sup>5</sup> ROY AUGIER ET AL., *THE RASTAFARI MOVEMENT IN KINGSTON, JAMAICA* 2 (1960).

Rastafarian teachings and beliefs throughout Jamaica and the world.

Although Rastafarianism has never had an official or monolithic doctrine, two generalizations can be made. First, Rastafarians oppose all forms of injustice and oppression, whether imposed by whites or blacks. Second, Rastafarians believe that their redemption will come either in the form of repatriation back to Africa or the fall of the Babylon System. I will now focus on two recent protest songs that illustrate the critique of the Babylon System.

The first song is entitled *Fed Up*<sup>6</sup> by Rodney Price, a musician popularly known as Bounty Killer. Rodney Price begins the song with the following lines:

Well, dis one is reaching out to all di leaders —  
and di media  
Dis is Rodney Price, a.k.a. Bounty Killer—  
Di leader for Poor People Government  
Well poor fed up, to how your system set up. . .<sup>7</sup>

This introduction exemplifies the popular musician's role in Jamaican society. As previously mentioned, Jamaican musicians almost invariably originate from the lower class, a group which is intensely marginalized and, although the vast majority in society, has little or no say. Yet, in music, the artist acquires a voice through which the reality of this group is expressed. As one commentator noted:

[T]here is an unexamined . . . notion about modernism in art, which is that it is private, subjective, that the artist is some kind of alienated genius working out of his [or her] own ego. And there is a countervailing African-Caribbean tradition that the artist is a man [or woman] anchored in his [or her] society, anchored among his [or her] own people, working out the collective experiences . . . the collective sensibilities, the collective values of the people, and as a consequence only a medium through which the people's reality is expressed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> RODNEY PRICE (Bounty Killer), *Fed Up, on MY XPERIENCE* (Killa Dogg Music (BMI)/Water House Music 1996).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Michael Thelwell, *Rhygin . . . and now the book*, SUNRAYS, SUNDAY SUN MAGAZINE, June 29, 1980, at 18 (discussing *The Harder They Come*).

In many songs, however, the artist goes one step further, becoming a representative or advocate of the poor and oppressed; or, as Rodney Price put it: "Di leader for Poor People Government."<sup>9</sup> Thus, music empowers poor Jamaicans by providing a forum where musicians may expose injustice and confront oppressors. In this way, Jamaican music functions as a powerful tool for resisting oppression. Yet this is not all, for music also provides an important vehicle for communicating and promoting values, ideas and beliefs. Given relatively high rates of illiteracy, as well as the fact that television and computers are luxuries that few Jamaicans can afford, music may be the most effective vehicle for mass communication and mobilization on the island. As the song progresses, Rodney Price directly confronts the leaders of mainstream society:

Me ask di leader—him a di arranger  
 Fi make poor people surround by danger:  
 Fly and di roach and giant mosquito  
 Sewage water dat fill with pure bacteria  
 You ever take a look down inna Riverton area  
 Bactu, and Seaview, Waterhouse, Kentire . . .<sup>10</sup>

In these lines, Rodney Price accuses the island's leaders of arranging the system so as to "make poor people surround by danger."<sup>11</sup> He also notes the squalid conditions (e.g., "sewage water dat fill with pure bacteria")<sup>12</sup> in such oppressed areas as Waterhouse and Riverton, the latter of which happens to be the particular ghetto from where the artist originated.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, when Rodney Price describes the abhorrent conditions that prevail in ghetto communities, he is drawing on his own experiences and speaking out for his own people.

In the next few lines of the song, Rodney Price accuses the MPs (Members of Parliament) of neglecting their constituencies and exacerbating existing problems by plundering scarce resources:

Long time di MP, him nuh come near yah,  
 And di other one dat claim say she a councilor—

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<sup>9</sup> PRICE, *supra* note 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *See id.*

Rob seventy-five percent and give we quarter,  
Conquer di land and nuh want fi give we an acre . . .<sup>14</sup>

In these lines, Price accuses the MPs not only of neglect, but also of corruption. More specifically, he blames politicians for plundering scarce resources for their own benefit (“Rob seventy-five percent and give we quarter”).<sup>15</sup> In doing so, Price alerts his audience to the unscrupulous behavior of government officials. Aside from heightening the sociopolitical consciousness of the poor, this song also serves as an important vent for societal frustration with a government that is virtually non-responsive to the problems of the majority of its citizens.

Due to the incendiary nature of Rodney Price’s *Fed Up*, it is interesting to note that the Jamaican government banned the song from the airwaves.<sup>16</sup> This ban is reminiscent of the days of slavery, when playing the drum had been outlawed by a white colonial government that viewed black music as a serious threat to the social order.<sup>17</sup> Over two hundred years later, a predominantly black Jamaican government seems to view black music as a similar threat.<sup>18</sup>

The government also banned the next song, entitled *Fire Pon Rome*,<sup>19</sup> by Anthony B.<sup>20</sup> Although Rodney Price’s *Fed Up* was unusually critical of the government, *Fire Pon Rome* goes much further and as we shall see, is one of the most revolutionary songs of the past two decades. With regard to the title of the song, Rome is synonymous with the Babylon System. Although the phrase “Fire [U]pon Rome” may be interpreted as a call for action, Anthony B. has repeatedly asserted that it is only a call for awareness.<sup>21</sup>

In the opening lines of the song, Anthony B. confronts various upper class whites, such as the Issa and Matalon families:

Dis is my question to Issa and di one Matalon  
How you get fi own so much of black people land?

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> See Rob Kenner, *Bounty Killa*, VIBE, June/July 1996, at 4.

<sup>17</sup> See SEBASTIAN CLARKE, JAH MUSIC 25-26 (1980).

<sup>18</sup> See Kenner, *supra* note 16, at 4.

<sup>19</sup> ANTHONY B., *Fire Pon Rome*, on REAL REVOLUTIONARY (V.P. Records 1996).

<sup>20</sup> See Andrew Clunis, *Angry Young Men*, THE STAR, Feb. 8, 1996, at 12.

<sup>21</sup> See Patricia Meschino, RHYTHM MUSIC, Aug. 1997, at 32, 34 (describing message behind and banning of *Fire Pon Rome*).

After dem slave, achieve nothing inna hand . . .<sup>22</sup>

In the past, musicians have targeted rich elites in general terms, but never before has a Jamaican musician named names in such a manner. In the second verse, Anthony B. levels his attack on politicians, specifically naming the heads of Jamaica's three political parties, including P.J. Patterson, the island's first black Prime Minister:

My Lord, dont talk just listen  
 Me have to bu[r]n fire fi P.J. Patterson  
 Him make certain move and we nuh too certain  
 How much black youth behind iron curtain?  
 Through me nuh go trod inna Babylon order  
 We have to bu[r]n fire fi di one name Seaga  
 Everyday di cost of living get harder  
 Have more seller, me say, more than buyer  
 Oh my Lord what a pressure!  
 So many things the politicians have stolen  
 Still dem return with di one Bruce Golding  
 Saying a brand-new party dem forming  
 But apart dem a part we with dem politics meeting  
 Out of politics, poor people get dem beating. . .<sup>23</sup>

Once again, such fearless finger pointing is unprecedented. It should be noted that in the past, musicians have sided and even campaigned for a particular political party, such as the People's National Party during the 1970s. Yet, in light of repeated disappointments and failures, it seems musicians, not to mention the general public, have lost faith and hope in politics as a vehicle for change. This is evidenced by Anthony B.'s distrust of the leaders of all three political parties, including Bruce Golding, the leader of the newly formed National Democratic Movement. Indeed, Anthony B. criticizes the political system as a whole, concluding that politics divides the island ("apart dem a part we with dem poltics meeting") and that "[o]ut of politics, poor people get dem beating."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> ANTHONY B., *supra* note 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

Anthony B. subsequently criticizes the corruption within the Jamaican police force:

Look who dem have a turn metropolitan officer  
Fi take your hustling<sup>25</sup> outta your hand  
When you look pon dem face  
Is your own black man . . .<sup>26</sup>

Although Anthony B. initially targeted white elites, his criticism of black politicians and police officers suggests that he is exposing all oppressors, regardless of race. Indeed, subordination in Jamaica continues to occur on both an inter- and intra-racial basis.

Rampant gang violence is one of the most disturbing examples of intra-racial subordination and oppression in modern Jamaican society. Gang violence in Jamaica has its origins in the “rude boy” culture that emerged during the 1960s. This brings us to the rude boy phenomenon, the next context in which music serves as anti-subordination praxis.

The rude boy phenomenon was a product of the socioeconomic conditions facing urban youths during the years following Independence, 1962 to the present. Many of these youths had recently migrated to the capital from rural areas in search of employment and a brighter future. However, with unemployment rates as high as thirty-five percent, thousands were forced to settle in the swelling slums and shantytowns of West Kingston. Frequently, these disenfranchised youths turned to crime and violence, often terrorizing their own communities. Since the 1960s, popular music has served as an important forum for debate and commentary with regard to these rude boys.

Prince Buster’s *Judge Dread*<sup>27</sup> was one of the first songs of the 1960s to directly confront the rude boys and expose their toll on Jamaican society. The format of the song mimics the proceedings of a court of law, in which the musician is the judge. This format alludes to the government’s failure to deal with the threat posed by the rude boys. Hence, the musician must assume the role of the courts, which traditionally have been insensitive to the plight of the

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<sup>25</sup> “Hustling” refers to an individual’s wages or income.

<sup>26</sup> ANTHONY B., *supra* note 19.

<sup>27</sup> PRINCE BUSTER ALL STARS, *Judge Dread*, on *ROOTS OF REGGAE*, VOL. 2 (Rhino Records, Inc. 1996).

masses, and correct injustice on his own. The song begins with Prince Buster calling the “court” to order:

Order!  
 My court is now in session, Will you please stand  
 First allow me to introduce myself  
 My name is Judge hundred years—  
 Some people call me Judge Dread  
 Now, I am from Ethiopia  
 To try all you rude boys for shooting black people . . .<sup>28</sup>

In the remainder of the song, Prince Buster goes on to try some of Jamaica’s most notorious rude boys for such crimes as shooting and murder.<sup>29</sup> Prince Buster eventually sentences the rude boys, some for as long as one thousand years, and justifies these sentences by declaring that he is setting an example.<sup>30</sup> This demonstrates the authority Jamaican musicians assume in order to pass judgment on the behavior of certain members of society and, in the words of Prince Buster, “to set an example” for the people.<sup>31</sup>

Prince Buster’s *Judge Dread* prompted many responses by other musicians who were more sympathetic to the rude boys. Honey Boy Martin’s *Dreader than Dread*<sup>32</sup> was one such example.

Now fellow rude boys,  
 Stand fast and let us unite,  
 And deal with one hundred or one thousand years  
 This meeting is now called to order . . .  
 I introduce myself as the rudest of all rude boys—  
 Some people call me Dreader than Dread  
 If anyone tries to stop us rude boys  
 You’ll . . . end up . . . dead . . .<sup>33</sup>

These lines exemplify the intertextuality and dialogue among musicians within the body of Jamaican music. Indeed, Honey Boy Martin, as representative of the rude boys, is challenging Prince

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *See id.*

<sup>30</sup> *See id.*

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> HONEY BOY MARTIN, *Dreader than Dread*, on THE TROJAN STORY, DISC 1 (Sparta Florida Music Group Ltd. 1967).

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

Buster, the representative of those opposed to the rude boys, by making references to *Judge Dread* and even employing a lyrical format similar to Buster's song. On a different note, this song demonstrates the way music serves as a force for unification and mobilization, as Honey Boy Martin urged: "Now fellow rude boys/ Stand fast and let us unite."<sup>34</sup> Yet, *Dread*er than *Dread* shows that Jamaican music does not always serve as antisubordination praxis, for the song glorifies the rude boy and promotes violence, a subordinating force in society.

To this day, rude boy culture still flourishes as its origins such as high unemployment and feelings of marginalization and hopelessness among Jamaican youths, have yet to be remedied. As a result, the rude boy remains a popular theme in Jamaican music as some musicians continue to condemn rude boys, while others glorify guns and gangster culture in much the same way as the gangster rappers of the United States.

The final context to be explored deals with gender inequality and the status of women within Jamaican society. Like many *Latinas*, Jamaican women have been subordinated through a mentality akin to *machismo*, whereby male dominance is asserted as if it were a God-given right. The reference to God-given right is not a figure of speech, for Jamaican men use the Bible, whether interpreted through the lens of Christianity or Rastafarianism, to reinforce male dominance in society.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, female musicians have played a secondary role in what has traditionally been a male-dominated business.<sup>36</sup>

During the 1980s, however, female musicians began to gradually assert themselves and the rights of women. In a song entitled *Legal Rights*,<sup>37</sup> a duet by Papa San and Lady G, we may witness the first assertion of gender equality by a female musician. In the song, Papa San states, "Me have my legal rights you know."<sup>38</sup> Lady G responds, "Well, Papa San, me have mine too."<sup>39</sup> Papa San then asks:

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<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> See CAROLYN COOPER, NOISES IN THE BLOOD: ORALITY, GENDER, AND "VULGAR" BODY OF JAMAICAN POPULAR CULTURE 131 (1993).

<sup>36</sup> *See id.*

<sup>37</sup> PAPA SON & LADY G, *Legal Rights*, on THE STORY OF JAMAICAN MUSIC, DISC 4 (Winston Riley Music Ltd. 1989).

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

“Alright, so we nuh even then?”<sup>40</sup> However, the answer to this question clearly is no. Women and men are not even or equal as illustrated by Pap San later in the song:

Man have a right, woman have a right too.  
 If you dont hurt me, I wont hurt you.  
 If you cheat on me . . .  
 De amount a lick you get,  
 You drop down a ground . . .<sup>41</sup>

This disturbing warning, whereby Papa San threatens physical reprisals for infidelity, serves to legitimize brutality against women and illustrates the limits of the phrase “woman have a right too.”<sup>42</sup> Papa San’s warning also illustrates a double standard with regard to infidelity, for in Jamaican society a male may generally do as he pleases.

Yet, much has changed since the 1980s as female musicians have become some of the most outspoken and influential feminists in Jamaican society. In order to illustrate the extent of these changes, it is necessary to introduce Beenie Man’s smash hit entitled *Old Dog*<sup>43</sup>:

Old dog like we  
 We have to have [women] in twos and threes. . .  
 From we see a gal dat look good  
 We have to fool her and get what we want  
 Dat mean we to have warn dem  
 We have to get dem  
 And nuh tell me say we cant . . .<sup>44</sup>

This song, which became an anthem among Jamaican men, encouraged male sexual promiscuity and portrayed women as powerless sex objects. In response, however, Queen Paula and Lady Mackerel recorded *Hot Girls*.<sup>45</sup> The song begins with a warning to Jamaican women:

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<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> BEENIE MAN, *Old Dog*, on BEST OF 2 BADD DJ’s (V.P. Records 1996).

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> QUEEN PAULA & LADY MACKERAL, *Hot Girls*, on STONE LOVE MOVEMENT PRESENTS GO GO WINE (V.P. Records 1996).

Beware of Old Dog!  
Beware of Old Dog!  
Hot gal like we  
We nuh want no dog come bite we  
You nuh see we a hot gal?  
We need hot man  
We nuh want no Old Dog . . .<sup>46</sup>

As these lyrics show, the female musician is explicitly asserting her sexual needs and confronting the *Old Dog* mentality on its own terms. Thus, music provides an important forum for dialogue in the context of gender and sexuality. As opposed to other forums, music ensures a large and captive audience, thereby maximizing the odds of effecting a change of mindset.

Songs like *Hot Girls*, coupled with the growing presence of female musicians who have begun to more forcefully assert themselves and the rights of women, have helped to elevate the status of women in Jamaican society. This notion is evidenced by a dramatic increase in the number of songs in honor and praise of women. At the same time, there has been a conspicuous decline in misogynistic songs, such as the one where Papa San legitimized brutality against women. Yet, the struggle for gender equality in Jamaica is far from over as notions of male dominance remain deeply entrenched. Nonetheless, female musicians continue to challenge these notions and advance the rights of women in their music.

In conclusion, there are a few points worth emphasizing. First, this Essay has illustrated some of the ways that literature and the arts in general, and popular music in particular, serve as a potent form of ant subordination praxis. Indeed, popular Jamaican music has yielded various tangible benefits, ranging from shifts in consciousness to mass mobilization. This success affirms the power and utility of other forms of narrative, including narratives employed in the context of legal scholarship. Second, this Essay has demonstrated how normative or essentialist notions of race/color fail to shed light on the realities of subordination in Jamaican society. Such notions suggest that black Jamaicans are, for the most part, subordinated by whites. Yet, as the music has shown, essentialist notions obscure the reality that, at least in contemporary Ja-

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<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

maican society, blacks are subordinated not only by whites, but also by browns and other blacks.

The third point stems from an insightful suggestion made by one of the panel's commentators. As Adrienne Davis stressed, scholars should devise a framework for distinguishing between music that functions as antisubordination praxis and the more common form that functions merely as entertainment. However, this framework must not hastily discount the values and sensibilities embedded in the latter form of music. Indeed, music for music's sake, no matter how commercialized or problematic, still provides us with pieces to the whole story.

Finally, it should be noted that the foregoing songs were chosen to highlight the critical role music has played in the struggles of the Jamaican people against various subordinating forces. As Edward Brathwaite, the Jamaican poet and scholar, once wrote:

Jamaica: fragment of bomb-blast, catastrophe of geological history, volcano middle passage, slavery, plantation, colony, neo-colony has somehow miraculously — some would say triumphantly — survived.

How we did it is still a mystery and perhaps should remain so. But at least we can say this: that the secret and expression of that survival lies glittering and vibrating in our music.<sup>47</sup>

At the doorstep of the twenty-first century, Jamaica faces a number of complex challenges that threaten to shatter the fragile social order that has been so tenuously maintained over the years. In light of Brathwaite's comment, let us hope the music continues.

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<sup>47</sup> DAVIS & SIMON, *supra* note 3, at 9.

