

Sangster International Airport, gateway to Jamaica, is a mere hundred dollars return from the garish opulence of Miami Beach, U.S.A. The echoes of the empty terminal, which once processed hundreds of thousands of tourists annually, are a stark reminder that this small Caribbean island has been victimized by an international "slander" campaign since it elected a democratic socialist government in 1972.

Outside, visitors are almost immediately struck with Jamaica's typical Third World schizophrénia. Montage Bay grafts the incredibly modern, ultra-contemporary in architecture, leisure amenities and jet-set lifestyle with the poverty, almost elemental, tribal and, until recently, rural reality of indigenous Jamaicans.

A stroll down Gloucester Avenue's tacky tourist strip, past the spanking new Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, through the Market centre, and on to the squalid poverty of Railway Lane is a graphic testimonial to the economic and social factors of multinational penetration of Jamaica. Prosperity and power for the few, idleness and exploitation for the vast majority of the island's two million people.

It is in Railway Lane, Trenchtown, Concrete Jungle and the other urban ghettos and shanty towns of neocolonialism, jammed with uprooted peasants and farmworkers, that reggae music and the rebellion got its start and found its base. It was in this environment that the militant mystical-anarchist credo of the Rastafarians took hold in the mid-Sixties. By 1970, when the repressive regime of the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) was in full swing, the mood of the Rastafarian Dr. Walter Rodney would identify the "numerically powerful" (30,000 to 50,000 Rastafarians as the "most progressive element" of the population). The present Prime Minister, Michael Manley of People's National Party (PNP), admits to thinking "that the only Jamaican who truly knows who he is has to be the Rastaman. They're very beautiful and remarkable people."

Reggae, music and the Rastafarian ambience which surrounds it are at the forefront of a "cultural revolution" which is reforming Jamaican society. Throughout the island, ill-produced but topical 45-rpm records are the primary form of political communication. From Montego Bay to Negril, Kingston, and the

Blue Mountains, the people talk about the music, the words and their political meaning. Record stores, like the one run by the Burning Spear group in Ocho Rios, proclaim revolution and are the centres of much social activity. On an island where forty per cent of the population is illiterate, reggae music has become the popular propaganda of a profoundly anti-authoritarian resistance culture.

Bob Marley and the other well-known Rasta reggae artists, are only the most visible manifestations of a cultural phenomenon which is playing a consciously progressive role in Jamaica and, incidentally, producing the most explicitly revolutionary music available on a mass scale in English. In response to rock'n'roll journalists who would dismiss the politics of reggae, Marley says, "Me hafta laugh sometime when dem scribble some like Mick Jagger or some superstar ting like dat. Dem hafta listen close to the music, cause de message not de same... Noooo, mon, de reggae not de Twist, mon!" (Quotes in Jamaica's English patois are transcribed phonetically.)

The Rastafari

"Just because I'm a Rastaman
Everybody want to say I'm wrong."

—Just Because, Evolution

They put the rebel plumb in reggae music. They are relentlessly optimistic, forever "battering down the gates" in Babylon, refusing to serve a militant in a society which disgusts them in every way.

The Rastafari believe they don't belong in Jamaican society and they attempt to divorce themselves from the civil institutions which have been established by the oppressors. The Rastas' appearance (the long matted dreadlocks, their arcane language and the smoking of illegal ganja (marijuana) as a sacrament are means of resisting assimilation and preventing infiltration by the oppressor's social values.

For the most part, the Rastafari don't vote; they don't marry to formalize their rejection of the repressive individual ownership of property, choosing mutual aid methods of economic and social organization. They believe that work is good but wage labour is merely a perpetuation of slavery. As a general rule they consciously prefer socialism to capitalism.

The primary organizational form is the "congre-



BOYS, ROCK ON! PERISAN REBELS THE GAMMA MUSIC

BY FRANK LLOPARD

gation," consisting of a loose circle of friends who smoke ganja and carry on a wide range of discussions of a spiritual, political, and personal nature. On occasion these congregations have grown into vast communal and non-hierarchical networks sharing a single geographical location and carrying on collective activities. The Rastas have been at the forefront of land occupations, seizing unused land for popular use.

The cult began in the Thirties after Ras Tafari, Haile Selassie, assumed the throne of Ethiopia, fulfilling the prophecy of Marcus Garvey (a native Jamaican) that a Black king crowned in Africa would be a sign that

the day of liberation was near. Contrary to common belief, the Rastafari do not worship Selassie in any formal sense. They believe that each human being is equally divine and look to themselves for solutions to problems.

The traditional Rastas maintain that the late dictator is the symbol of God as a living man, but even this fundamental concept varies from Rasta to Rasta and the trend amongst people influenced by the Rastafari is moving beyond belief in Selassie entirely. For the non-believer it is easy to secularize almost any reggae song: Babylon represents oppression or the State (usually capitalism); Ethiopia, Africa, or Zion refer to liberation or the land of freedom; Jah is revolution, the

force of change, and also the symbol of hope and freedom.

"I remember on the slave ships
how they brutalized our very souls
Today they say that we are free
only to be chained in poverty."
—Slave Driver, The Wallers

The importance of reggae music in the Jamaican political process was demonstrated during last December's bitterly contested election campaign. Over eighty-five thousand people turned out for the "Smile Jamaica" reggae festival organized to support Prime Minister Michael Manley's progressive People's National Party (PNP).

The huge audience, nearly ten per cent of Jamaica's popular voters, was charged with electricity, anticipating the songs hammered out into the gummy Kingston air weeks of right-wing violence. "Now you've seen the light," came the words of Bob Marley and the Wallers, "Get up, stand up! Stand up for your rights! Get up, stand up! (People struggling on!) Don't give up the fight!"

"Some people think great God will come from the skies, take away everything and make everybody feel high! But if you know what life is worth you would look for yours on earth..." The singer, Bob Marley, is a

figure as significant as Michael Manley in the Jamaican social equation. Even Time magazine has recognized Marley as "a political force to rival the government."

Jamaica's right-wing also knows this. Only two days before the concert, which Marley, a Rasta, agreed to play "for the love of the people," he narrowly escaped assassination in an attack on his home by political thugs. He was wounded in the arm and his wife and a number of friends were seriously injured in heavy machine gun fire.

Since 1972, when he adopted the Rasta slogan, "Better Must Come," Manley has retained the confidence of the Jamaican people by identifying himself and his progressive policies with the cultural revolution. According to the conservative Jamaican daily Gleaner, "This is the basis for the massive lead the PNP enjoys among younger voters below thirty which our data indicate as a major factor accounting for the PNP strength in many areas."

Manley is no revolutionary, but he has contended with a Chile-style campaign of "destabilization" promoted by the multinationals, primarily American, Canadian and British interests. There is an unusual squeeze on the

DISCOGRAPHY

The following reggae records are generally available in North America and represent a fair sample of the most politically-conscious and diverse reggae music being recorded today. Don't take a chance on the jacket artwork.

Bob Marley & The Wallers, the most popular and published reggae artists, are reggae in style, in lyrics, and in sound. **Babylonian Vibration**, their *Natty Dread* of the earlier *Bumbe* or *Catch A Fire* African Herbsman is also good for a glimpse of the island's history.

Burning Spear, is the African name for Jomo Kenyatta. Their best album to date is *Marcus Garvey* not to be confused with *Garvey's Objection*. *Adams* is a good album, but *Burning Spear* is the best.

Bunny Wailer, one of the original Wallers. "Battering Down Sandstone Walls" is a gem. *Adams* is also good. *Blackhearted Man* album. **Prince Toshi**, another original Waller, had the cut out of his album *Legal* II banned by Manley's government.

Climons, a Spanish word for runaway slaves. The original *ganja* (cannabis) singer, a quintessence for a human yearning and liberated themselves from British imperialism 38 years before the United States. *On the Rock* is perhaps the most overtly political album available. Very good.

The Mighty Diamonds, provide excellent listening on *I Need A Roof* as *Max Romeo & The Upsetters*, a group based in England, on their album *War In A Babylon*.

Big Youth, is among the best of the disc-jockey philosophers. Check out his *Hill The Road*, *Jack* album for the straight goods.

Third World, has one album out which blends jazz, reggae and politics.

Jimmy Cliff, the hero of "The Harder They Come" is considered foreign music in Jamaica, but many of his albums are highly rated. Try *Struggling Man*, *Follow My Mind*, *Unlimited* or the classic soundtracks album *The Harder They Come*.

Island Records, the quality reggae label, puts out two sampler albums. *This Is Reggae Music*, Vol. 1 & 2, which provide a good overview of the music. Some of the proceeds go to JAMA, the Jamaican literacy project.

Needless to say most of the best political reggae is put out on 45-rpm records which never make it to North America, because someone has decided they have no commercial potential.