

VERSION GALORE: ROCKSTEADY AND REGGAE FROM JA TO L.A.

Nina L. Cole

Postdoctoral Scholar

Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies

University of California, Davis

Version/Versioning

- Version: “Another cut of a popular rhythm. This can be the vocal, deejay, instrumental or dub version, employing the same rhythm track as the original, or another producer’s recording of the rhythm” (Barrow and Dalton 1997, 378).
- “The original version takes on a new life and meaning in a fresh context. ... It’s a democratic principle because it implies no one has the final say. Everybody has a chance to make a contribution” (Hebdige 1987, 14).
- “Both soul and reggae consciously reconstruct and celebrate their own histories through complex sequences of answer records. ... In reggae, the same idea has been refined to a point where an alternative sense of time and the historical process is one of the most important effects of the constant repetition (versioning) of particular pieces of music” (Gilroy 1987, 209).

Versioning from JA to L.A.

- The practice of versioning has long been a hallmark of Jamaican popular music, where classic rhythms are revived and reimagined in both live and recorded contexts.
- We might think of cover songs as a kind of versioning, as Jamaican artists frequently covered American rhythm and blues and soul songs in ska, rocksteady, and reggae styles.
- These cross-cultural musical exchanges continue in the contemporary L.A. vintage Jamaican music scene.
- Versioning brings another time and place into the here and now, accruing meaning and shaping aesthetics through lived and imagined histories and experiences.

Oral History Interview Segments

- The following slides contain segments from oral history interviews I conducted between 2014 and 2017 with thirty-three individuals involved in Los Angeles's vintage Jamaican music scene.
- Given my theme of “versioning,” I selected segments where my interviewees discuss connections between Jamaican and American “oldies” music and social life.
 - Motown, Chicano soul, and lowrider oldies were frequently cited.
- Interviewees speak to aesthetic, political, and social connections, while often speaking to the particularity of Angeleno experience within a broader translocal and temporal framework.

Keith Scott

- Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1943
- Started working in the Jamaican recording industry at Tropical Records
- Moved to Federal Records in 1961, where he and co-producer Sam Mitchell launched their Merritone subsidiary in 1966
- Moved to New York around 1970
- Sam Mitchell followed, opening Mitchie's Records and continuing to work together
- Relocated to Los Angeles in the mid-1980s, where he continues to reside



Sam Mitchell (Left), Keith Scott (Right).

“The sound system is what really broke the record. Because Jamaican music was made for the working class people, not for the people up in Beverly Hills or whatever. They give their finger to that music because they were listening to American Jazz, American popular music and whatever. That was what they basically was listening to. When Jamaicans started to produce their own music, it basically was for the poorer class. That's where it all originated from. Interesting.” (Scott 2015)

Interview with Keith Scott (2015)

- When the music first broke in Jamaica, when the Jamaican public first knew and realized that certain music they were listening to was recorded and manufactured in Jamaica, people went goo-goo ga-ga. They went crazy! They would go to the record store and they say, “is that one of our music?” And Vincent Chin's wife would say “yes, it was recorded right here in Jamaica, with Jamaican musicians, and produced by a Jamaican.” People were so impressed because the records, they could compete with any American record, and beyond. As you already know, a lot of Jamaican artists copied the American record and made the Jamaican version sound even better than the American record. So when the Jamaican public realized that Jamaica was recording and producing music for the island, they bought the records in droves. DROVES! Because they were so proud. Man, we're producing our own music now! That type of thing. So, that's very historical.

Ernesto Arce

Born in L.A. in 1974. News Reporter & Journalist



Arce, left, pictured with Jamaican artist Prince Buster

So the fashion, the outlook on life. You know, once you start reading a lot about Jamaican roots music and what they call sufferer's style. Who feels it knows it. And so you start, I think naturally, it's just a natural progression that you start, for me maybe, but you start understanding the socio-economics of it. You know, the injustice, the cries from countless reggae songs about the rich have so much power and influence while we, the poor masses, have very little. And so I guess then it just joined my idea of what the ska scene was, of what it meant to be a rude boy, being an outsider, rebellious, defiant of authority and of maybe those in positions of power and authority over you. And then it led to investigating, or looking more closely at issues of racism and injustice. Just all the inequalities in society, where OK. That's in Jamaica, that's happening in London, LKJ is teaching me what's happening in London and all the Jamaican artists are telling me about what's happening in Jamaica, but that shit's happening right here. And so, yeah. It comes full circle, you know? The music, the fashion, the style, and then the fascination with tropical music and all the troubles that come from tropical places. All the revolts, the defiance, the protests, the revolutions, and it just comes full circle. And so then naturally the politics became a big part of what I did. (Arce 2016)

Jeffrey Govan

- Born in Los Angeles (South Gate) in 1973
- Govan has played bass in numerous local ska and reggae bands over the decades, including the popular 1990s group Mobtown.
- He has backed legendary 1960s Jamaican and American artists, including Derrick Harriott and Roy Ellis
- Govan explored issues of sound, place, and society academically as an American and ethnic studies master's student



Interview with Jeffrey Govan (2016)

- I feel that right now there's like, like a lot of the bands are doing stuff that's like it can't get more authentic sounding than what they're doing right now. Cannot. If they were aiming for getting like the realest sounding kind of thing, I think it's not just them, but it's through them backing other people and those experiences that I think gives L.A. another character. Because we've had the bands, like aside from not just in, as their own band, their own original music, but for the fact that we back— Like I've backed Derrick Harriott and Roy Ellis and different folks and people have backed the Clarendonians and all kinds of people. It just does something. It just does something to the—to musicianship and approach and feel. Like, even if it's something like, "ah, I just come to sing my songs." Over time that I think they really get a feel. It's not just like what you can do technically, because technical for any of us is very easy. It's easy for any of us to pick up—I can pick up, like you can play something and I can listen to it and pretty accurately repeat it. It's easy. But the feel that comes through all these opportunities to back different people, be in different bands of greats or be in festivals where people are doing, like Expanders and Arise Roots, be in places where it's like in all the culture of this you're able to see where you fit. You know? I think that just adds something to L.A. that is kinda hard for other people to have. I mean. And then the memory of that goes all the way back. It goes way far back. It goes all the way back.

Interview with Jeffrey Govan (2016)

- Well I think that culture and the people who play the music are just as important as the people who listen and consume the music. And I think that if we look at the ways that people are very much conditioned with labor and who they are in terms of whatever they do, and determined by what they do day-to-day, this idea of family and belonging. It escapes a certain American standard. I would say it's an American standard definitely, like the important things are for your immediate family and folks. Whoever you're blood related to. But I think that, at least in Los Angeles, there might be other places, but there are folks that come from many places where music is equal to enjoyment, or it's another— It would be base for me to say that music is another form of expression, or emoting. That's something you'll hear anywhere. But what I really, really mean is that it literally is the body. The instrument is the body and the sound is part of some kind of resonance that's inside. And then the social engagement that that yields is important for healing. For healing of different things that people might be oblivious to in a day-to-day reality, and I think that it's more. I don't know much about Jamaica, but what I know from the music about Jamaica is I feel you. I felt that. I know what you're talking about. It happens in my world too.