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## **"FROM MEMPHIS TO KINGSTON": AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ORIGIN OF JAMAICAN SKA**

**PAUL KAUPPILA**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The distinguishing characteristic of most Jamaican popular music recordings, including reggae and its predecessor, ska, is an emphasis on the offbeat or afterbeat instead of on the downbeat as found in most American popular music. Many explanations have been proposed to explain this tendency. This study critically examines these theories through historical and musicological analyses and concludes that the prevalence of the downbeat is a mixture of Jamaican folk and African-American popular music influences in its earliest incarnation, but was later deliberately emphasized in an attempt to create a unique new musical style.*

The musical origin of ska, the Jamaican popular music form that eventually led to reggae, has historically been a matter of considerable scholarly disagreement. Above all, the defining characteristic of ska and reggae music is the "offbeat" or "afterbeat". Although ska and reggae music are both in standard 4/4 time, just like rhythm & blues (R&B), rock & roll, and country, the Jamaican style of playing emphasizes the second and fourth beats of the bar rather than the first and third. This has been described as emphasizing the "and" in a "one-AND-two-AND-three-AND-four" rhythm pattern. It is these heavily accented "offbeats" that give Jamaican popular music its unique bouncy, choppy feel. But what is the true origin of the Jamaican emphasis on the afterbeat?

### **Early Influences**

#### *Eighteenth & Nineteenth Century Jamaican Musical Traditions*

In Jamaica, unlike in most of the United States, slaves were generally allowed to maintain their African musical traditions such as Burru drumming, which was later adapted by the Rastafarian cult and used as religious music. These African drumming styles

may have resulted in a strong emphasis on the offbeat, which occurs in Jamaican mento as well as American R&B. The plantation owners hoped and expected that the music would act as an incentive to work harder and faster. In the United States, New Orleans was an exception to the norm and slaves were allowed to play their music in Congo Square in the French Quarter. In addition to their geographical closeness, this similar musical history may be an explanation for the Jamaican affinity for New Orleans rhythm & blues in particular.

After Jamaican slaves were emancipated in 1834, the island experienced a religious revival, which gave birth to two sects whose music was an early influence on ska. The Pukkumina (sometimes spelled 'Pocomania') sect used African-derived rituals and music made from body sounds like clapping or stamping. Heavy "over-breathing" was used as a percussion sound and as a way to induce a trance-like state. This may have led to the common use of "vocal percussion" sounds in early ska singles, such as "hup, hup, hup..." and "ch-ch-ch-ch" (Smith n.d.). The other sect, Zion Revival, was most popular in parts of Jamaica with large concentrations of Europeans and its music is characterized by improvised vocal harmonies and changing rhythm patterns. Clapping, stamping, and drumming are used as accompaniment to the songs. Other nineteenth century influences on Jamaican music include brass bands, quadrille (a nineteenth-century European dance music characterized by use of fife and drum), and sea chanties sung by British troops and sailors (Smith *ibid*).

### *Mento*

Mento is a form of Jamaican folk music that was to have an influence on ska and reggae. It is a fusion of African rhythmic elements and European melodies and reached its peak popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. Mento is usually performed in the streets on portable instruments such as guitar, banjo, bongos, and kalimba (African thumb piano). The lyrics are often topical and humorous and sometimes sexually suggestive. Rhythmically, mento is similar to rumba, with strong accents on the last beat of each bar (Smith *ibid*). One of the best-known mento acts was a duet known as Slim and Sam, who were active in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of their song titles included "Balm Yard Blues", "Nine Night Blues", and "Depression Blues". As Robert Witmer points out:

It would seem, then, that many of the hallmarks of early twentieth century southern US Negro urban musical life (itinerant street singers/bluesmen/songsters/vaudevillians) had contemporaneous analogues in Jamaica, with a class of professional — or at least quasi-professional — musical entertainers of which Slim and Sam are representative (Witmer 1987: 7).

Witmer continues:

The inclusion of 'blues' in the repertory is revealing — whether the items were truly blues or blues in name only. The usage of the term adds to the evidence already presented that Jamaica was firmly under the influence of US popular music culture in the early twentieth century. To find the term 'blues' in use by Jamaican musical entertainers active in the 1920s and early 1930s indicates quite rapid diffusion to Jamaica of either US race records themselves, or, if not that, certainly at least the knowledge of their existence (Witmer 1987: 7).

The change in lifestyles of the Jamaican people contributed to their interest in American music. In the 1940s, Jamaica was being transformed from a rural to an urban society, as farmers and country people migrated to the cities in search of improved living standards. "The island was moving towards urbanization, cosmopolitanism, and away from mono-crop colonialism, provincialism, and pre-World War II values" (Kaslow 1975: 13).

The influence of mento is often credited with the emphasis on the afterbeat that characterizes almost all of Jamaican popular music. However, audible evidence demonstrates clearly that the emphasis on the afterbeat was often present within American R&B as well. Early recordings by Fats Domino, Barbie Gaye, Cookie and the Cupcakes, and especially Rosco Gordon, all contain the seeds of the "behind-the-beat" feel of ska and reggae. Although Fats Domino and Rosco Gordon did tour Jamaica, it is clear that these unique rhythmic elements existed in American R&B regardless of the artists' familiarity with Jamaican music. For example, "Twisted", by Cookie and the Cupcakes, features an unmistakable emphasis on the afterbeat, giving the song a very distinct "ska" sound. Yet it is unlikely that this group from rural Louisiana was aware of Jamaican music when the song was recorded.

## Big Bands

Jamaicans became aware of American popular music in several ways. Many American soldiers were stationed in Jamaica during and after World War II. In many cases, they brought their favorite big band and R&B records with them, sometimes bartering them for consumable goods or as payment for rum or more illicit substances or services, such as marijuana or the favours of a local prostitute. Legendary sound system operator Winston "Merritone" Blake remembers the various ways American records were disseminated in Jamaica:

"Those days, our records came into the country in two ways," Blake explains. "When the ships came in, the guys would go to the whorehouses, and the touts of the sounds used to hang around the whorehouses — that's where they used to get the records to tout to various sound people. Then a lot of our people used to go up and do farm working and carry back records. Later on, there was some station [WLAC] sponsored by Randy's Record Shop out of Tennessee, and you also had a station out of Miami, WINZ, and we could hear those stations just like we pick up the local station. In those days we would listen to WINZ because we only had one radio station at that time, which was ZQI, and we would hear Cuban stations; later in the night, after about twelve or one o'clock, the Tennessee stations would come in very clear and they would advertise specials, which would include ten records for a price. That's how a lot of records came into Jamaica. Later on, one or two of the guys started to travel, started shopping for these records and carrying them back" (Katz 2003: 4-5).

Jamaicans were fascinated with big band music and the island soon developed its own big band tradition. Bandleaders of the era included Eric Deans, Redver Cook, Baba Motta, Sonny Bradshaw, and Val Bennett. The bands emulated the sounds of Count Basie, Erskine Hawkins, Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Woody Herman, Perez Prado, and others. Ellington in particular acknowledged the close relationship between Caribbean music and jazz (Carnegie 1970: 26). Another important element of the Jamaican big band sound was the influence of Latin music such as cha-chas, boleros, and merengues. Most, if not all, of the Jamaican musicians who would go on to create ska were steeped in jazz. Later, these musicians would also be influenced by early bebop jazz as played by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie.

## Sound Systems

One problem with live big band concerts was what to do when the band took a break, leaving the venue in silence for 20 to 30 minutes or more. Dance promoters wanted the music to continue without interruption so that patrons wouldn't leave for another dance, and most importantly, so that they would keep drinking beer and rum, the sale of which was the main source of profit. The sound system solved these problems and also cost a lot less than paying for live musicians (de Koningh 2003: 17).

Meanwhile, in the United States, immigration restrictions were relaxed during World War II because of labour shortages. Many Jamaicans were admitted to the US on short-term agricultural contracts of less than a year. While there, they attended African-American dance parties featuring recorded music and got the idea to try the same thing in Jamaica (Katz 2003: 3). Using the contacts they had made in the States, some of them later returned on music-buying trips where they acquired the latest records as well as the equipment necessary to play them. Through these sources, some Jamaicans were able to assemble substantial collections of sound equipment and recordings. They began to run mobile discotheques from flatbed trucks that they used to transport their equipment.

As Jamaican musicians learned the techniques that would later allow them to create ska, non-musicians and fans were exposed to the then-new and exciting sounds of American rhythm & blues. The rise in popularity of R&B corresponded with the advent of the "sound system". Sound systems were large dances featuring a DJ and a selection of records. Although often referred to as "dancehalls", these events usually took place outdoors. Working-class and low-income Jamaicans were starved for entertainment and most of them could not afford the price of a home record playback system, which amounted to approximately a year's wages for the average Jamaican (Witmer 1987: 15). Consequently, the "sound systems", or just "sounds" as they are called in Jamaica, became a phenomenon. The events were sometimes also called "blues dances" and were often held in large open areas referred to as "lawns". In addition to the DJ booth or stage, stalls were set up at these events to sell fruit, drink, and traditional Jamaican dishes such as curry goat and roast fish and cornbread. The audience would eat, drink Red Stripe beer, and

dance for hours to the latest American R&B hits, especially those from New Orleans and other Southern cities.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, many working-class Jamaicans were too poor to even afford radios. The Jamaican big bands tended to play engagements in hotels, where high prices prevented working-class and lower-income Jamaicans from attending. Sound system dances, often on weekends, were the main way in which new American R&B records were exposed to a mass Jamaican audience. Not that they were always the "latest" hits — many of the songs popular in the dancehalls had been hits two or three years earlier in the States. Tom Wong, who went by the title Tom the Great Sebastian, operated the best-known sound system of the early days. Later in the decade, Clement "Coxsone" Dodd, Duke Reid, and Vincent "King" Edwards (a.k.a. the "Big Three") became the most popular sounds (Barrow 1997: 13). All three, along with Prince Buster, later became innovative record producers as well. Other early sound system pioneers included Count Smith the Blues Blaster, Count Nick the Champ, Roy White, and a man known as "V-Rocket".

The dancehall DJs were larger-than-life characters like the legendary Reid, who would show up for his dances in a long ermine cloak with a pair of Colt .45 pistols strapped to his waist in cowboy holsters, a cartridge belt across his chest and a loaded shotgun over his shoulder. A large gold crown would be on his head as well as a gold ring on every finger. He would be carried through the crowd to the record players. As the records played he would get on the microphone and exhort the dancers with chants and shouts such as "Work it!", "Good God!", "Jump up!", and "Shake a leg! (Thomas 1973: 48)."

Dodd and Reid made regular flights to the States to buy records, visiting record stores in cities such as Miami, New Orleans, Chicago, New York, Nashville, and Memphis. Randy's Records in Gallatin, Tennessee, just northeast of Nashville, was one such store. Randy's advertised their mail-order business extensively on WLAC, an extremely powerful clear-channel station from Nashville (its signal could be heard clearly at night by American soldiers stationed in the South Pacific during World War II). The store was so well known in Jamaica that reggae producer Vincent "Randy" Chin named his Kingston record store "Randy's" in homage. Randy's Records also advertised on stations in Memphis,

Chattanooga, Atlanta, Tupelo, Jackson, and other locations (Radio Connection 2000: 75).

Competition amongst the various "sound systems" was fierce and cutthroat. Whoever had the best records could draw the largest crowds. Sound system operators went to great lengths to obtain the latest and hottest R&B records. The sound system men would attempt to protect their "exclusives" by scratching the original labels off the records or replacing them with their own labels. This was done so that competitors wouldn't know what was playing, even if they leaned over to look at it as it spun round the record player.

### **American Influences**

#### *New Orleans R&B*

The music played on the sound systems was almost exclusively American rhythm & blues. Recordings from New Orleans were a particularly important influence. The relaxed, piano and horn-led melodies of New Orleans rhythm & blues seemed to strike a chord with the Jamaican audience. R&B from that city and other Southern cities had a different groove from the music produced in more northern cities, which tended to have a harsher and more frantic feel (Hebdige 1987: 62). Small group rhythm & blues combos from the States also were instrumental in popularizing the electric guitar, organ, and electric bass — all of which were vital to the development of ska (Hussey 1989: 236).

The American R&B performers most influential to the development of ska were Arkansas-born Louis Jordan, Memphis-born Rosco Gordon, and Fats Domino from New Orleans. Domino toured the Caribbean several times and was personally acquainted with legendary Jamaican producer and sound system operator Duke Reid. Tommy McCook and other Jamaican musicians sometimes backed him when he toured the island.<sup>1</sup> Other American performers who toured Jamaica backed by local musicians included Sam Cooke, Martha & the Vandellas, and Jackie Wilson.

1 Keyo, Brian. "A Tribute to Tommy McCook." [http://www.tallawah.com/liner\\_notes/liner6.html](http://www.tallawah.com/liner_notes/liner6.html) (accessed 26 May 2000).

### Rosco Gordon

Although New Orleans R&B musicians were crucial to the development of ska, the performer who exerted the single greatest influence on the music was Memphis-based singer and pianist Rosco Gordon, whose unusual piano style (possibly a result of a lack of formal training) tended to emphasize the offbeat, or “afterbeat”, rather than the downbeat, suggesting a kinship with the Jamaican emphasis on the offbeat already present in mento. He refined this style on subsequent recordings and it became known as “Rosco’s Rhythm” (Finnis 1998). His records were tremendously popular in Jamaica and he toured there as well. Gordon began his career in the late 1940s as a member of the Beale Streeters, along with future stars Johnny Ace, B.B. King, and Bobby Bland. Gordon was also reputed to employ a rather sloppy band that sometimes came in on the wrong beat (Vera 1993), thus raising the possibility that the entire history of Jamaican ska and reggae can be traced to one band’s accidental reversal of the traditional downbeat emphasis found in American R&B! The relationship between Rosco Gordon’s rhythm & blues and Jamaican ska was made explicit when Gordon performed with Skatalites’ saxophonists Lester Sterling and Roland Alphonso at a 1994 gig in Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> Gordon was also a key influence on Jamaican pianist and singer Theophilus Beckford, whose single *Easy Snapping* is frequently cited as the first ska record.

### American Musicians Touring Jamaica

In 1957, American popular musicians performing in Kingston included Bill Haley and his Comets, Louis Armstrong, Rosco Gordon, and the Platters. In late August of that year, a rhythm & blues package tour known as “Rock-a-rama” played the Carib Theatre in Kingston, featuring Bull Moose Jackson and his Buffalo Bearcats, the Teenchords, and Clarence “Frogman” Henry. “The high proportion of ‘Afro-American’ popular music entertainment (rhythm and blues, rock and roll, jazz) in the roster of traveling musicians playing Kingston is worthy of note, as it reinforces the evidence of strong Afro-American input” (Witmer 1987: 13). Other

2 Keyo, Brian. “A Remembrance of the Chief Musician: Roland Alphonso, January 12, 1931 – November 20, 1998.” [http://www.tallawah.com/liner\\_notes/liner7.html](http://www.tallawah.com/liner_notes/liner7.html) (accessed May 26, 2000).

New Orleans performers popular in Jamaica included Roy Brown, Smiley Lewis, and the arranger and bandleader Dave Bartholomew. The duet act of Shirley and Lee was tremendously popular on the island, and their influence can be seen in the scores of male/female duets that released singles in the early days of Jamaican R&B and ska.

## **Radio & Recordings**

### *American Radio Stations*

As living standards improved for working-class Jamaicans, radio ownership became more common and they were able to hear the R&B hits of the day over the air as well as at the dancehalls. During the 1950s, extremely powerful "clear-channel" radio stations from Southern cities such as New Orleans, Memphis, and Miami could be picked up clearly in Jamaica, especially at night. American radio stations popular with Jamaican listeners included WINZ in Miami, WLAC in Nashville, and WNOE in New Orleans (Barrow 1997: 11). The advent of rhythm & blues radio programmes with African-American disc jockeys was another factor in creating a market for American R&B. The hipster "patter" of stylish DJs like "Doctor Daddy-O" and "Poppa Stoppa" in New Orleans and even white DJs who "talked black" like Dewey Phillips in Memphis captivated the Jamaican audience. The sound system DJs copied their jive talk and slang, eventually contributing to the DJ craze launched by U-Roy in the late 1960s.

It is also important to remember that at that time, radio programming was much more "regional" than it is now — that is, different cities' radio stations would tend to feature music recorded in the immediate area. Jamaicans thus may have been predisposed to acceptance of the New Orleans R&B sound, since they heard it so frequently on the stations broadcasting from that city.

## **Recording Industry in Jamaica**

The Jamaican recording industry began operation in the 1950s. Prior to this time, there was virtually no music recorded on the island for commercial release or use. Entrepreneur Stanley Motta may have been the first to sell records commercially in Jamaica when he recorded mento and calypso tunes in his primitive studio

as early as 1952. Skatalites saxophonist Roland Alphonso may have recorded with him as early as 1954.<sup>3</sup> The island had no record pressing facilities at the time and so Motta had to send his recordings to England to be mastered and pressed (Katz 2003: 13). Ska historian Brian Keyo claims that a 1953 recording session at pioneer radio station ZQI may well be the very start of Jamaican musical recordings. The session featured Don Hitchman's Group, with Tommy McCook on saxophone. Federal, another early Jamaican studio, opened in 1954. Clement Dodd claims to have recorded there as early as 1956. Two Jamaican radio stations, Radio Jamaica Rediffusion and the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation, both opened studios in 1959.

Originally, songs recorded at Jamaican studios were not intended for commercial release. They were meant for sound system use only. At the time, no one thought there was a consumer market for these recordings, which were called "specials" or "pre-releases". Jamaican recordings were not sold commercially until 1958 and after (Keyo, *Foundation*). The secrecy surrounding the identity of the biggest sound system hits may have contributed to the lack of their commercial availability. Others suggest that actually selling records simply never occurred to anyone. In the late 1950s, the newly emergent rock & roll sound dominated the charts in the United States and the supply of new R&B records began to diminish. In addition, "...people such as Edward Seaga made a business out of finding out the real names of Coxson's and Duke Reid's specials and then importing them for their competitors (Stolzoff 2000: 58)."

As a result, Jamaicans began to record their own R&B material using local musicians. At first this music was virtually indistinguishable from American R&B, especially records made in New Orleans. A good example is Jamaican singer Al T. Joe, who imitates Fats Domino with uncanny accuracy on several early singles. This pre-ska style is sometimes referred to as "shuffle", "boogie-woogie", "Jamaican blues", or "Jamaican R&B". Although often considered to be merely an early form of ska, Jamaican R&B deserves to be considered a distinct form of its own. Katz claims the 1953 recording session of "Till the End Of Time" and "Give Me Another Chance", by Noel "Zoot" Sims and Arthur "Bunny"

3 Keyo, Brian. "Foundation Ska: A Brief History of the Skatalites." [http://www.skatalites.com/music/liners\\_foundation.htm](http://www.skatalites.com/music/liners_foundation.htm) (accessed June 1, 2000).

Robinson, also known as Bunny and Skully, was the first recorded Jamaican R&B (Katz 2003: 14-15). Another seminal early Jamaican R&B recording session from 1957 featured calypso singer Laurel Aitken performing a tune called "Aitken's Boogie." The Jamaican R&B sound lasted just a few years and by 1960-1961 the sound of the music was changing into something identifiably "ska".

As Jamaican R&B gained in popularity and it became clear to entrepreneurs like Dodd and Reid that there was indeed a market for recordings of this music, bands like the Skatalites began to build a following amongst Jamaica's middle and upper classes. This new audience, unlike the working-class sound system dancers, did have the money to buy phonographs and records. This was a critical transition phase that helped expose Jamaican music to a wider audience within and beyond the island (Goodwin 1996: 15).

Despite their attempt to copy the American rhythm & blues sound, even the earliest examples of Jamaican R&B have a different feel than the American music that they attempt to imitate. In an article for **Melody Maker**, writer Johnny Copasetic explains why:

Although musical notation doesn't make it obvious, in most popular music of the English-speaking world, the four beats of a musical bar do *not* take equal amounts of time. The first beat tends to be rather longer than the other three, which are proportionately shorter than the first. In ska, the divisions of the bar into beats are much more equal. It's this character that makes even the earliest and most New Orleans-influenced of ska records subtly different from the originals – the triplet offbeat is slightly longer than Fats Domino would play it (Copasetic 1979: 41).

### **Transition from Jamaican R&B to Ska**

As Jamaican R&B progressed, the emphasis on the afterbeat became more pronounced and the beats became more evenly spaced. The guitar and piano combined to heavily emphasize the offbeat, which gave the music a choppy feel that was highly suitable for dancing. Changes in drumming styles mark the transition from Jamaican R&B to ska. Arkland "Drumbago" Parks was the best known of the early shuffle drummers. His style can be contrasted with the much faster, busier technique of Lloyd Knibb of the Skatalites. Besides being an accomplished jazz drummer, Knibb added Latin rumba and mambo and African-influenced Burru rhythms to the mix.

Often, especially with the Skatalites, a “rhythm” tenor sax was added to the guitar and piano, simply blowing one note.

Pioneering ska DJ and performer Prince Buster was a seminal figure in the transition from Jamaican R&B to ska. He introduced and popularized the addition of indigenous elements such as Burru drumming and mento influences and also advanced the political content of the music by addressing themes of black consciousness (particularly the teachings of Marcus Garvey) and Jamaican nationalism. With the addition of Rastafarian hand drumming, more jazz-oriented arrangements, and Latin and Middle Eastern influences, the music became known as “ska” and became more uniquely Jamaican.

### *The Afterbeat*

The exact origin of the Jamaican emphasis on the afterbeat is difficult to determine. Conventional wisdom holds that mento’s traditional emphasis on the offbeat was combined with American rhythm & blues to produce the earliest examples of pre-ska – that is, Jamaican R&B. However, some of the earliest Jamaican blues tunes don’t seem to have much mento influence at all. Many American rhythm & blues songs from the 1940s and 1950s (besides Rosco Gordon’s) feature a very similar emphasis on the afterbeat and were played by musicians who had likely never heard of mento. An example is Barbie Gaye’s “My Boy Lollipop”, which later went on to become the first ska single to make the charts in the United Kingdom when covered by Millie Small. Even if it was not the direct source, the mento sound may have predisposed Jamaican musicians and audiences towards a preference for the so-called “off beat” rhythm.

In American R&B, the afterbeat manifests itself in different ways – sometimes in the guitar rhythm, as in Cookie and the Cupcakes’ “Twisted”, and sometimes in the piano, as in many Rosco Gordon songs, particularly “Booted” and “New Orleans Wimmen”. The drums, however, usually play a standard shuffle rhythm and do not emphasize the afterbeat to the degree found in later ska recordings. Early Jamaican R&B recordings add an additional emphasis to the guitar and/or piano afterbeat – perhaps influenced by mento rhythms – but the drums usually play the same shuffle as in American R&B.

Some historical accounts place the beginning of ska in about 1962, and claim a similar date for the earliest emphasis on the afterbeat. Yet such an analysis implies that the afterbeat was not emphasized on the earliest Jamaican R&B recordings, while the audible evidence clearly indicates that it is.

Theories abound as to the origin of ska — the musical style and the word itself. In a seminal early 1960s recording session, Clement Dodd encouraged guitarist Ernest Ranglin to emphasize the upbeat of the then-popular shuffle rhythm and to speed it up slightly (*Keyo, Foundation*). Meanwhile, Prince Buster is also credited with inventing ska when, in 1962, he told his guitarist Jah Jerry to emphasize the afterbeat instead of the downbeat. However, as we have seen, even the earliest ska recordings already showed a marked emphasis on the offbeat. Other sources cite guitarist Lynn Taitt as the first man to play the beat known as ska (Tulloch 1971: 48). Yet another claim for the origination of ska comes from drummer Lloyd Knibb, who describes Dodd asking him to "change the beat".<sup>4</sup> Knibb obliged, mixing the standard offbeat emphasis with African rhythm patterns taken from Burru drumming and with his own jazz training. A unique musical mixture was produced that combined the simplicity and danceable quality of the ska rhythm with the improvisational complexity of jazz.

Another interesting theory explaining the Jamaican emphasis on the offbeat comes from Paul McCartney of the Beatles:

When the kids in Jamaica first got to hear Chuck Berry and the rock & rollers, they never had any way of seeing the artist perform because they never went to the islands and there was no TV. So the drummers had to make up what they thought the records were doing. Now with rock & roll the main beat is the offbeat, which we do on the snare and which is the loudest thing the kit does. I think the first drummer on the island to get a kit from a catalogue is sitting there listening to the thing and they hear this big noise and they know the bass drum is the loudest drum in the kit. Now what I think he's done is to lay the offbeat on one, two, three, four. He's got the emphasis on the second beat hence one, two, three, four. He's figured it out that way and ends up like a left-handed drummer or someone who doesn't technically know. He's got the same rhythm and the same result, but back to front (Thomas 1973: 46).

4 Van Pelt, Carter. "Burru Style: An Interview with Skatalites Drummer Lloyd Knibb." <http://incolor.inetnebr.com/cvanpelt/knibb.html> (accessed May 26, 2000).

Rock scholar and musician Billy Vera's observation regarding the incompetence of Rosco Gordon's band is another alternate explanation of the prevalence of the offbeat, and some scholars have even suggested that the jerky rhythms of ska imitate the sound of distant radio signals breaking up as they are beamed across the ocean to Jamaica from the United States.

Early ska and Jamaican blues singer Laurel Aitken probably is closest to the truth when he states: "So I don't like this groove about who invented the music. Nobody actually invented the music. It is nobody...no proper founder (Hewitt 1980: 13)." The identity of the first ska record is a matter of debate as well. Claims have been made for "Easy Snappin'" by Theophilus Beckford, "Shufflin' Jug", by Clue J and his Blues Blasters, "Humpty Dumpty", by Eric "Monty" Morris, and "Fat Man", by Derrick Morgan.

#### *Origin of Ska (the word)*

There is general agreement amongst reggae scholars that the word "ska" can be traced back to Clue J (Cluett Johnson) and His Blues Blasters, the most important of the early Jamaican blues bands. Johnson was known for greeting people with a call of "Love Skavoovie", although guitarist Ernest Ranglin disputes this account of the word's origin.<sup>5</sup> Producer Bunny Lee claims that Ranglin himself coined the term as an onomatopoeic way of describing the sound he wanted. He is reputed to have said, "Mek the guitar go ska-ska-ska". However, Ranglin denies this as well and claims that it was "other studio musicians" who first began to call it ska (Smith n.d.).

Legendary organist Jackie Mittoo claims that early ska pioneer Byron Lee coined the term from the phrase "Staya Staya" (Clarke 1980: 69). And in yet another possible explanation for the origin of the word, Lester Sterling, the Skatalites' third saxophonist, reveals that he was called "Ska" Sterling as early as 1958 because of the percussive "ska-ska-ska" sound he would make with his sax. He mentions a man named Blackie who was "One of the hep guys who say Skavoovie and ting" (Keyo, *Foundation*). The expression "Skavoovie" may have originated with American jazz musician

5 Timm, Bob. "Rappin' with Ranglin: An Interview with the Originator of Ska Guitar." <http://ska.about.com/musicperform/ska/library/2000/aa040700a.htm> (accessed March 23, 2001).

Slim Gaillard, known for his "hipster" jive patter and slang (Atherton and Cane-Honeysett 1979: 40).

### Conclusion

The development of early ska, or Jamaican R&B, is an example of a complex process of cultural transfer between the United States and Jamaica. The various theories of ska's origins can be broadly divided into three categories: "Purposeful" theories assert that the emphasis on the offbeat was conscious and deliberate. Clement Dodd's studio interactions with guitarist Ernest Ranglin and drummer Lloyd Knibb and the claims made for Prince Buster and Lynn Taitt would fall into this category. McCartney's theory of unknowing Jamaicans playing a standard drum kit in the opposite manner normally found in American music, Vera's description of Rosco Gordon's incompetent band, and the suggestion that the rhythms of ska imitate the sound of distant radio stations might all be termed "accidental" theories. Finally, "inherent" theories argue that the predisposition towards emphasis on the afterbeat already existed within both mento and American rhythm & blues. It should also be noted that while emphasis on the afterbeat was present in the earliest Jamaican R&B singles, it was amplified a few years later when the sound of ska changed, meaning that some of these theories may be more applicable to the earliest Jamaican R&B recordings while others might more aptly mark the transition from Jamaican R&B to ska.

Evidence indicates that the added emphasis on the afterbeat that signified the change from R&B to ska in about 1961 was largely deliberate, as in the Clement Dodd and Prince Buster anecdotes. However, the slightly less-emphasized afterbeat found on the earliest Jamaican R&B recordings from 1957-1959 has a more organic origin, as the tendency to accentuate the offbeat, as we have seen, is already inherent in both mento and American R&B, and became even more so with the Jamaican popularity of Rosco Gordon's recordings.

The accidental explanations are the least likely. McCartney's theory, while interesting and provocative, implies a naiveté belied by the professional quality of even the earliest Jamaican R&B recordings. Listening closely to recordings of this era (1957-1962) also reveals that Jamaican musicians recorded many direct cover

versions of American R&B and doowop songs, as well as originals written in the style, that display almost no trace of afterbeat emphasis at all. This suggests that Jamaican musicians, far from being uneducated "folk" musicians, were talented professionals who were capable of emphasizing the afterbeat or choosing not to depending on the needs of the song. Vera's "sloppy band" hypothesis, while interesting and amusing, is not supported anywhere else in the literature and Rosco Gordon's own role in accentuating the offbeat is well-documented. Possibly what began as an accident later became a trademark sound and style.

Many Jamaican musical histories suggest that the music's origin lies in a mixture of American R&B and Jamaican mento. Often, this implies a roughly equal emphasis on each genre in the mixture. Yet in listening to early Jamaican R&B singles, the American R&B influence is much more pronounced. The mento influence became more noticeable later, during the formative years of ska (1961 forward), and even more so during the early reggae period from 1968 through the 1970s. But in the 1950s, the influence of mento can be heard much more clearly in calypso music of the time than in Jamaican R&B, which is readily apparent in the recordings of Laurel Aitken, who performed in both styles. Yet this is not to say that Jamaican R&B is indistinguishable from the American version. Even in Aitken's 1957 recording of "Aitken's Boogie", the congas give the song a distinctly African feel not present in American R&B.

The most likely explanation for the prominence of the offbeat in Jamaican music during its earliest years (1957-1959) is that it represents a combination of an inherent tendency in American R&B with a similar tendency in mento. However, a few years later (1960-1962), early Jamaican producers and musicians deliberately chose to stress the offbeat even more, which, with the addition of other musical elements, denoted the transition from Jamaican R&B to a truly unique and truly Jamaican style known as ska.

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