

Reviews

***Dubwise: Reasoning from the Reggae Underground.* By Klive Walker. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2005. 292 pp. ISBN 1-894663-96-9 (pb)
10.1017/S0261143006211036**

Reggae is often treated in the singular. There is a temptation to see it as linear with a relatively straightforward history of stylistic development: first ska, then rocksteady, then reggae, then roots . . . Associated with this is the idea that reggae grinds to a halt around 1981, the year of Bob Marley's death, and the moment when classic roots and dub begin to give way to harder dancehall *riddims*, when good marijuana is replaced by bad cocaine.

But as Klive Walker shows in *Dubwise*, this is far from the case. Rather than being monolithic, reggae is many faceted. It is also a continuous tradition which thrived in the 1980s and 1990s as much as in the previous two decades, and is undergoing something of an international revival today. Walker stands in a good position to make such an assessment. Born in London in the early 1950s, he moved to Kingston with his Jamaican parents in the late 1960s, and then on to Toronto in the 1970s. Apart from a brief return to the island in the 1980s, Walker has lived in Canada ever since. This trajectory matters, as the autobiographical Introduction makes clear, because it has enabled the author to engage with a whole series of reggae routes, both in Jamaica and the *outernational* diaspora, routes which have generally been ignored until now.

There are three chapters on diasporic reggae. They focus on Canada, the UK and the US, and show very effectively how Jamaican musicians and their styles have burrowed deep into popular music in these territories. Walker does not cite Paul Gilroy, but it strikes me that what we have in these parts of the book is a highly effective fleshing out of the *Black Atlantic* thesis. Reggae music has moved backwards and forwards from the Caribbean, along the North American seaboard as well as across to the UK, in a triangular dance of tradition and transformation.

Jamaican jazz and poetry too are read by Walker as part of the larger reggae world. In a striking chapter he discusses the relationship between Louise Bennett's poetry and Bob Marley's lyrics. Bennett was a popular, proto-nationalist poet whose writing in the 1940s and 1950s incorporated Jamaican patois, and, so Walker convincingly argues, the rhythms of mento, the island's pre-reggae folk music. Bennett's work was broadcast on Jamaican radio in the 1960s and Marley almost certainly knew of it. Jazz also had a key part in the evolution of reggae. In a chapter which examines the central figure of ska trombonist, Don Drummond, Walker shows how important Jamaican jazz players have been in tipping reggae in the direction of a modal harmonic language, and supple rhythmic articulation. Drummond himself was not only an important musical innovator, but also a mythic figure – an early adopter among Jamaican musicians of Rastafarianism and black nationalism, and as much a catalyst in the critical period of 1962 to 1965, as Marley was a few years later.

Walker's earlier chapter on Bob Marley does something else important to reconfigure our map of reggae. It acknowledges Marley's global significance, while at

the same time locating him firmly in the Jamaican music scene. Crucially, Walker will not repudiate the international reggae style that Marley developed over the course of his Island label albums from 1972 up till the time of his death – as some reggae ‘purists’ have done. Instead he tracks the Tuff Gong’s continuing development as a writer and performer of political or social-real songs.

If reggae is many-faceted, if it reaches across the world, how far can we talk about it as a specifically Jamaican form and culture? Walker’s response to this question comes in his concluding chapter. Here he insists that ‘the writing about reggae must skank to an authentic rub-a-dub bass line’, and he argues for the priority of the ‘insider perspective’. That ‘authentic’ may jar with some readers who feel that discourses of authenticity are there to be deconstructed. These days I have no problem with the notion itself – the issue is surely whether an authenticity claim is valid in any particular case. From that perspective I wonder about Walker’s privileging of commentary on reggae by ‘insiders’. One may well ask whether Walker is an insider, given that he has spent most of his life outside Jamaica. Of course if the diaspora becomes the substantive place of reggae than he is back ‘in’ again. The problem is that the diaspora does not have clear boundaries, indeed this absence is a defining characteristic of the phenomenon, something which Walker shows very well, for example in discussions of the reggae-hip hop connection, and of Two Tone ska in the UK.

And yet, despite these doubts, in the end I am persuaded by what one might call the strategic essentialism at stake here. Above all, insider writers like Garth White, Robin ‘Bongo Jerry’ Small and indeed Klive Walker himself engage with class and race. They locate reggae in a global-local system of power relations where poor black people, the historical subjects and agents of reggae, are at the centre, and where the cultural specifics of Jamaica and its diaspora are deeply felt and understood. Of course literal insiders are not the only ones capable of commentary of this order. Walker makes the point himself. But other reggae scholars ought surely to try and live up to the challenge set here.

Dubwise is an important book. It tells you things you probably won’t know about reggae, and it represents a significant breakthrough in the project of working out what the music means, and how it mobilises people.

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***Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy.* By William Echard. Indiana University Press, 2005. 208 pp. ISBN 0-253-34581-2 (cloth)**
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Writing a book, particularly one which privileges a particular theoretical conjunction, on a discreet repertoire is always a precarious undertaking. How much does one assume? How far is a reader willing to travel to meet you? How do you keep a reader interested enough to pick up reading again once you’ve lost her/him? These questions were very much in my mind as I tried to get to grips with what purports to be a study of Neil Young’s music. And I guess it is this, but it certainly isn’t an introduction to Young’s music. I suspect that, in order to get the most from Echard’s theoretical

synthesis, you need to have a very full recollection of Young's output. I suspect, too, that it is the theory which drives the book – at least, that's how it reads. So, what theory? Well, intertextuality, for a start; Echard is concerned with redefining style and genre, and how Young transgresses these categories, and he follows Ingrid Monson and Kevin Korsyn in proposing a dialogical interpretation. He's also keen on the whole concept of noise as disruption, on many levels, and brings semiotics, topic theory, embodiment and metaphor into the mix. And, although he eventually offers a section on 'An overview of my interpretive practice', I remain unsure of where the core to this theory is. And that, I'm sure, is the crux. Echard offers an interesting series of thoughts, where an aspect of theory informs his understanding of particular Young songs, and particular songs inform his understanding of theory issues, without ever getting to something substantial and, what is key for me, transferable. And that is why, unfortunately, I don't think I shall find the book of much use. By chapter 5, which is where he finally addresses how Young's music sounds, and why it sounds like that, his refusal to be pinned down, to summarise, and the constant leaving of things inconclusive leaves me seriously unsatisfied. Now that's my problem, I know, but the book's evident wealth of learning doesn't compensate. For instance, Echard focuses strongly on whether Young's music is all 'rock'. He suggests that for some listeners, Young strays beyond these negotiable boundaries, and he clearly disagrees (p. 76). Fair enough. But, although we are given a sense of Young's innate practice, why this is all rock is not specified. Echard notes that his analytical approach '... almost makes Neil Young sound postmodern, and I would argue instead that he is an arch-modernist in a sense typical of 1960s rock ideology' (p. 65). And yet the questions this begs (So why adopt such an approach? Can either the term 'modernist' or the term 'typical' be defended in this 'sense?') are left to one side. Although the book endeavours to bridge the gap between abstract theory and musical practices, too often specifics are avoided and, in this, argument too easily seems to give way to assertion. For instance, Echard takes up Young's image of a 'trip through a power chord', in order to address lacunae in Attali's analysis of noise as disruption, arguing that what might be more important is the 'emphasis on the unique perspective opened up in such a disruption' (p. 105). Interesting, at least. But then he introduces a crucial new idea which, again, he leaves to one side: '... the image of a trip through a power chord, relying as it does on schemata of spatial organisation...'. Not only does this assume we understand the relative force of the differing connotations of 'trip' in the same way (I'm not actually sure I do), and permit the metaphorical nature of this to be left to the imagination (despite his reliance on the explanatory power of the metaphorical mode subsequently), but what schemata? This refusal to explain is very frustrating, and seems to me symptomatic of the provisional approach Echard wants to take. I am thus left wondering what is the function of this book in my hand. Am I wiser about how Young's music works, or about how to achieve an understanding of other musicians' work? Unfortunately I don't think I am.

The book is nicely set and produced, and virtually error free. It would have benefited from stronger editing: Young's guitar 'Old Black' is, for instance, introduced carefully on p. 87, but has already been introduced in a previous chapter (p. 79). In part, I suspect I'm reacting to that very questionable practice of turning a Ph.D. thesis into a book (the acknowledgements imply such a thesis to have been the origin of this study), assuming that the relative criteria of evaluation are sufficiently similar. So, I leave this book with disappointment. Its theoretical stance offered a great deal but, for me, has failed to deliver. Whether that is because it presents too unstable

a mix, or because the issues simply cannot be explored as unequivocally as I require, or whether the author can convince with a book written without the pressures of doctoral research, remains to be seen, But I hope it's the latter.

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