

RUDE BOY STYLE: MOVING SKA INTO THE POSTNATIONAL WORLD

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It is undeniable that the world as we know it, our cultures, communities, and identities, did not just appear out of thin air. Every aspect of our lives is built on roots buried deep within travels of the past. Throughout history, cultures have journeyed across social and transnational borders through migration and trade. Along the way they have changed, evolved, and influenced the people and societies that they have crossed. One of these major, yet little noticed, influences came in the form of ska music. Originating in Jamaica, ska is a musical genre that combines elements of Caribbean mento and calypso with American Jazz and R&B. Beginning in the late 1950's, it progressed through three main waves across the Atlantic, with each new wave showing a change in ska's sound, style, and setting. The first wave emerged in Jamaican shantytowns as the people's voice of poverty and oppression. The second wave erupted in England to stand behind intense riots and a cultural backlash. During the second wave, an offshoot of ska, reggae, became a component of the Civil Rights Movement. The third and final wave shows ska as a U.S. commodity with little intrinsic value. How has this constantly changing and migrating music genre influenced and affected our political, social, and cultural structure and identity across transnational borders in the twentieth century? Nagel's "Constructing Ethnicity" and Appadurai's "Modernity at Large" give us a solid foundation to ground our answer. Nagel's ideas are used to show how ska was formed not only as an individual style of culture, but also as a strategic use of ethnicity to bring people together as a community. Appadurai's theories apply to ska culture by identifying it as a symbol to ground political movements in both a national and transnational setting and its effects on native traditions in postnational societies. Joseph Heathcott's "Tracing the Routes of Ska" demonstrates how the exploitation of ska culture and identity has affected people throughout the years and in different settings. Incorporating these themes into the transnational history of ska shows how the creation and constant change of ska culture breaks through our traditional notions of identity. The music fulfills our perpetual desire for identity, need for community, and grants us the power to change social and political structures across the postnational Atlantic.

The first wave of ska erupted in the urban shantytowns of Jamaica, particularly Kingston, in the late 1950's. These shantytowns are the roots to ska's constant trend of creating communities through transnational, as opposed to traditional, influences. The start of the first wave and the culture that accompanied it was the product of transnational influences. Appadurai's article states that "the modern nation-state grows less out of natural facts—such as language, blood, soil, and race—and more out of a quintessential cultural product, a product of the collective imagination" (161). As Jamaica moved further into the "postnational" world as a modern nation-state, its borders became increasingly porous and susceptible to interactions with outside influences (Appadurai 158). In turn, the Jamaican people were now liable to be influenced more by transnational influences rather than their traditional identities. Ska, therefore, grew out of the influences from several other countries. Jamaica had a large music exchange with the U.S.; Jamaica sent their mento (traditional) style of music over to the U.S., which then transformed into jazz and R&B and was sent back to Jamaica. These two countries were already influencing each other's music and breaking away from their traditional styles. The transnational flow of music was beginning to change people's identities in both the U.S. and Jamaica, and its listeners started to leave behind their traditional music forms and accept these new transnational sounds into their culture. The music was evolving in each new setting, as was its diaspora of followers. Soon after Jamaica declared its independence from England, Jamaica's main industries of sugar and bauxite felt a steep decline. The economy collapsed, causing a rapid growth in unemployment, and poverty forced many people to move into small urban shantytowns. They could no longer afford the American R&B imports that had been such an integral part of their society, leaving a gap in their culture where music used to be. The shift in their lifestyles gave the Jamaican people the sense that they had lost their former identity and had no control over their future: "Jamaican working-class people struggled for some amount of spatial autonomy and control over their destinies" (Heathcott 192). Those who had the music woven into their culture felt that their branch of the diaspora had been cut off, taking their identity and culture from them. With their new experiences of poverty and oppression, Jamaicans demanded music that reflected their common situations and empowered them to do something about it. Reckord states, "Soon the audiences began to demand lyrics which reflected their own lifestyles and ways of life" (7). The people came together to fill the hole in

their identity left by the end of commodity trade. They utilized whatever music they could gain a hold of, as well as instruments left by the British army, and created their own music to reflect their new culture and “collective imagination.” Ska spread through the urban shantytowns of post-national Jamaica and filled the missing piece of the Jamaican identity.

An important aspect of the creation of ska is not just the people’s desire for their own identity and culture, but their need for a sense of community in the process. Nagel states that the creation of an assimilated culture, in this case, ska music, “aids in the construction of community and serves as mechanisms of collective mobilization” (61). The impoverished neighborhoods now had an autonomous form of music to give them a better sense of fellowship in an otherwise disconnected society. Ska music met the people’s need for “spatial autonomy” and comradeship. Their collectivity helped them to feel less controlled by the government and gave them the notion that they did have control over their destinies. Both the style and lyrics of ska music are what made it so popular. Ska paralleled lower-class life to “provide the resources for creativity and resistance” in these despondent times (Heathcott 191). Most of the songs developed in these shantytowns dealt with the all-too-familiar themes of poverty, oppression, and political injustice. Jamaicans felt empowered through the expressions of ska, identifying it as the tumultuous voice behind their political movement. The fast-paced upbeat in the music made its listeners feel more active and combined with the lyrics to give them the motivation to take action against their oppressed lives. Ska served as the soundtrack for the urban youth and created the Rude Boy culture (Heathcott 191). These Rude Boys (or “Rudies”) were seen as hooligans who came to the urban towns in search of work, both licit and illicit. As a porous nation-state, they assimilated themes of violence and anarchy from the easily accessible American western films, British spy films, and kung fu movies from Hong Kong. This “transnational flow of cultural commodities provided the raw material for Jamaican youth to piece together new identities in a fragmented urban world” (Heathcott 193). Similar to the original Jamaican / U.S. commodity trade of music, the Rude Boy community was formed as a collective identity by piecing together the transnational influences of other societies rather than a traditional focus on their own blood, soil, and race. The incorporation of these foreign influences into youth culture spread throughout the shantytowns. It brought

the youth together as a community of Rudies in a rebellious political movement against their oppressive society.

While ska empowered Jamaicans towards political activism, the artists and influences behind the music held the power to change these motivations. Ska provided a sense of community among the youth, but the Rudies' extreme interpretations of the foreign films often led them to imitate the chaos and violent acts as seen in these movies. In the summer of 1966, the anarchistic crime and violence among the Rude Boy culture intensified. The Rudies were driven by songs such as Prince Buster's "Too Hot," saying "Rude Boys never give up their guns / No one can tell them what to do / Pound for pound they'll say they're Ruder than you" (2001). The top ska artists realized that the lyrics and musical style had contributed to these problems and thought of ska as "a symbol around which many groups can come to articulate their desire to escape the specific state regime that is seen as threatening their own survival" (Appadurai 165). Although the Rude Boy identity was seen as causing much of the violence, the people's desire for identity sought a more peaceful community. Since ska music was the symbol that created the Rudie identity, musicians utilized it to change the Rude Boy lifestyle and bring peace to the shantytowns. The musicians changed the sound of ska to help curtail the violence; the tempo was slowed down to provide a more harmonious dance floor. The lyrics also changed to be more peaceful and anti-violent. Songs such as the Rulers' "Don't Be Rude Boy" went against the Rude Boy culture, saying "Young man you're inclined to be rough / Time to leave all that Rude Boy stuff / 'Cause one day you'll realize / Your rude ways were so unwise" (1996). This sub-group of ska was aptly titled "rocksteady" and eventually formed into reggae. As much as ska had influenced these cultures, it also had the ability to change them.

The transition between the first and second waves of ska shows the first signs of its emergence as a transnational influence and its connection to our changing societies. While the first wave was based in Jamaica mostly through internal migration from rural neighborhoods to urban shantytowns, there was also a "collective mobilization" outside of the country. The declining Jamaican economy, as well as their independence from Britain, caused "a large-scale out-migration of families from Jamaica, resulting in new settlement cultures in Britain" (Heathcott 190). Since ska was a part of the fabric of Jamaican culture, the people moving to other countries brought that culture with them. Just as Jamaican mento had

previously gone to the U.S. to influence Jazz and R&B, the Jamaican migrants were now setting their cultures into Britain through the establishment of neighborhoods, pubs, and dancehalls. An important factor with the establishment of Jamaican culture in British society is our understanding that cultures are constantly changing throughout their interactions with other influences. Verena Reckord states, "there are no exact dates for the beginnings and endings of social and cultural periods, and so it is with music" (10). The transnational change in ska music throughout the waves is a continuous process. Each ska artist adds his own elements to the music, creating many different sounds and sub-genres. Likewise, our cultural identity is continually changing with each person it contacts. However, conflicts arise when these new changing cultures interact with traditional societies that "are believers in terminal conversion" and unwilling to change (Appadurai 175). People with traditional cultures and ideas tend to believe that these traditions are permanent and will never change. This security of tradition is broken down in the postnational world when transnational influences transform the traditional cultures into one that is no longer based on language, blood, and soil. The acceptance of change is fundamental to the peaceful formation of the nation-state where foreign culture settlements mix with the traditional systems. Otherwise, the incoming transnational cultures might be viewed as an invasion or attack against the traditional notions of identity. Clashes between Jamaican settlement cultures and white English nationalists became prevalent throughout the ska community in the transition to the second wave.

These Jamaican migrant neighborhoods continued the strategic use of ska to form postnational communities. In Britain, some white working-class British youth worked alongside the Jamaican working-class youth and began to reform their culture and identity due to their new influences on each other. The youth's application of ska culture exemplifies how "individuals choose from an array of pan-ethnic and nationality-based identities depending on the perceived strategic utility in different settings and audiences" (Nagel 55). The British youth, "exhausted by the stagnant economy and alienated by a remote national political life," adopted many aspects of the Rude Boy culture, as well as the rebellious attitude of the American punk culture (Heathcott 200). Similar to the previous R&B exchange in Jamaica, American punk music already had a strong foothold in England. These influences changed ska back to the fast-paced sound it had previously been and used the Rudie style of transgressive lyrics to emulate the tough life in the British slums. The permutation of

Jamaican ska and American punk music strategically created the second wave of ska in order to form an active community around biracial values. This wave is also known as "Two-Tone" ska, aptly named for the integrated youth that created it. This new culture adopted the checkerboard pattern as a symbol of integration and unity that is still in use today, but these symbols have lost much of their political meaning in modern society. Showing signs of its Jamaican roots, this new culture among British youth still involved the same pattern of rebellion and anarchy adopted from the Rudies. Although this newly integrated community formed around ska, it also instigated a backlash to the transnational identity. Appadurai states that "principles of ethnic identity can very rapidly mobilize large groups into violent action," and that was exactly what happened to these large groups of defiant youth (164). This "interracial youth culture [and its] nascent renegade identities served as a crucial backdrop to the wave of intense riots that rocked British cities in the mid-1970's" (Heathcott 197). The mass immigration of Jamaicans and the integration and biracialism of the Two-Tone culture created a racial backlash in the U.K. Riots broke out between the pro-integration Two-Tone followers and the opposing white English "skinhead" sub-culture. Music played an important role in these riots, similar to the previous violence of Rude Boys in Jamaica. Ska continued its trend as a voice to empower the political movement. The anti-racist youth were a community led through their strong connection to the themes expressed by ska, while the "skinhead" culture was motivated by conservative white sub-genres of punk. Although this skinhead culture was a result of racial bigotry, it was a much larger backlash to the trope of the nation-state: "where soil and place were once the key to the linkage of territorial affiliation," identity no longer fully related to "images of place" (Appadurai 161). Traditionally, the white English youth based their identity on their race, blood, and colonial segregation in society. However, postnational England brought in cultures that defied this white English identity and made them feel a loss of self, similar to the loss of R&B in Jamaica. The skinhead culture was created for similar reasons as the Rude Boy culture, as a way to bring communities together to fulfill their desire for identity. Even though the transnational impact of ska on a nation-state can cause a backlash and break in traditional forms, it is still nonetheless creating and mobilizing communities in search of identity and control over their destiny.

During the development of the second wave in England, reggae showed a growing presence in Jamaica. Reggae in Jamaica branched out of the first wave's "rocksteady" genre and is similarly characterized by a slow tempo and pronounced upbeat. It is generally associated with Jamaica's Rastafarian movement through its strong references to African culture. Artists such as Bob Marley drew connections to their native roots singing, "Africa, you're my forefather cornerstone / Unite for the Africans abroad" (1979). Reggae gained a foothold in North American markets decades before the third wave of ska came about. The rise of Black Power and the Civil Rights movement in the United States created "a hunger for all things diasporic" (Heathcott 199). With the rise of this movement, the civil rights activists wanted to obtain a connection to the culture and history of their native land, Africa, in order to emphasize their sense of unity and history of oppression. This desire for identity and a connection to their society is similar to the creation of ska in Jamaica, its utilization in Britain, and the lyrics associated with each. Appadurai states, "In the postnational world that we see emerging, diaspora runs with, and not against, the grain of identity" (171). In our modern world of immigration and constant movement between countries, the relation, influence, and acceptance of music and culture coincides with the creation of pan-ethnic and transnational identities. Reggae is the perfect voice for this movement, as "it is a music created by the majority, who cling steadfastly to their basic African roots because therein lies their identity" (Reckord 4). Reggae's music and lyrics, with its deep roots in African culture, served as "a measure of ethnic pride, a symbol of black consciousness among recent transplants to a hostile racist country" (Heathcott 198). Reggae gave African-Americans their desired identity and much needed community to fortify their role in the Civil Rights Movement. It connected them on both a national level and as another part of the network of African diaspora, thus creating a transnational movement through reggae.

With the constant changes of ska and its applications in different settings, there are bound to be periods in which the culture is slowly lost. The third wave marks this loss of ska's original value. As powerful as ska has been throughout its history of impacts on political crises, social structures, and community movements, it has also gone through a period of depreciation of its meaningful past. This is the case in the emergence of ska in American youth culture. Ska, as opposed to reggae, did not appear in the U.S. until the late 1980's. During this time, British punk music arrived on the U.S. music scene and carried elements of the Two-Tone era.

Eventually, ska and punk combined to form the heavier and faster-paced third wave of ska. The youth that followed this new wave could not relate to the themes and meanings of the previous generations of ska; they had no need to apply them to their society and could not see any connections between the lyrics and their own lives. Reckord concludes that “as music becomes more commercial, more accepted and performed by people of varying tastes and cultures, the tendency is to ignore the roots of its origin and its deeper meaning and function” (3). The third wave of ska was more of a commercial product of the record industry than a cultural youth movement. This new form did not keep the same symbolic lyrics of the Rude Boy culture; the lyrics now focused on themes that kids could relate to, such as American teenage life. The emphasis of integration was lost, and the checkerboard pattern became mostly a marketing gimmick. Even the deep rooted reggae that boosted the Civil Rights Movement “is, in the words of Anglo-Indian reggae Apache Indian, ‘not an ethnic or minority thing anymore’” (McCann 1). In some ways, this shows that ska’s Jamaican roots and emphasis on integration have been lost. However, it also suggests that ska culture has been able to break across ethnic and traditional boundaries to create a community independent of ethnicity or race.

The history of ska is more than just a rise in a popular music genre and not at all trivial in our worldwide cultures of today. It is associated with banding together the people in poor oppressed communities and bringing them to political activism. With the start of the Rude Boy culture, the integration of communities in Britain, and as a background to the Civil Rights Movement, ska has fulfilled people’s desire for identity and need for community. The constant flow of internal and external migration spread ska throughout the Atlantic, and the influences that gave way to this music brought about a cultural collectivity. Ska broke through the barriers between traditional and postnational identities to create communities based on common interest rather than race. The lyrics formed a sense of community and identity among its disparate listeners. Even the tempo of ska was enough to cause riots and violence in Jamaica and Britain, yet it was strategically used to stop them as well. The social settings of ska created integration and unity in times of racism and oppression, as well as a backlash by those that opposed it. It has transformed from a meaningful expression of the Civil Rights movement to what Strauss labels as “the only music that makes [him] dance without thinking about it” (137). Although symbolism and

historical meaning have been lost throughout the years, all of the listeners are still connected to one another through the vast postnational diaspora of ska.

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COMMENTARY: Holly Lewis

Imagine hearing a song on the radio and immediately trying to trace its roots to a cultural heritage. Although this is an uncommon reaction, different genres of music are the fusion of our past. Every song is a combination of cultural influences with each beat, rhythm, and lyric formed from some specific moment in history. Thus, the collaboration of the sounds tells the story of a transnational journey; each

genre that meets a culture is shaped accordingly. If music was not fluid, it would never have the chance to grow and develop, and new genres would never have a chance to cultivate. The same sounds would stagnate throughout history and the genre would fade away.

Ska and music in general can be viewed as an unknown source of inspiration for those who are oppressed. It is rarely recognized as a motivational media, nor is it recognized for uplifting the dejected. However, in Nicholas Stambuli's essay, "Rude Boy Style: Moving Ska into the Postnational World," he proves the cultural importance of ska by discussing its evolution during its three major waves. Stambuli creates a roadmap through the history of ska, demonstrating how it moved from Jamaica to England, and finally the United States. In each location, ska ultimately helped the oppressed through granting them an outlet to voice their frustrations. In return, ska developed new sounds with each culture that it embraced, leading to the genre that we recognize today.

It is hard to imagine a genre of music having such a large impact on society. Specifically, ska is rarely acknowledged for its history in benefiting lives; rather, it is viewed as trivial and insignificant. However, ska does have a momentous past in shaping and changing the cultures it meets. Ska music began in Jamaica as a device to voice oppression. Hard-riden after the colonial void, Jamaicans needed to identify their own culture through the ruins of their economy. Ska became an outlet in which they rediscovered their freedom of expression. Once ska reached England in the second wave, it became a symbol of the clashing cultures of Jamaica and England. However, the British youth adopted this new sound and morphed it through a mixture of punk music. In doing so, ska music became an unaccredited link between the two cultures. The final positive influence that ska had was seen through reggae's introduction to the United States. Reggae debuted in the U.S. at the same time as ska reached England, which demonstrates another cultural effect of ska. The fact that ska became reggae as a result of the Civil Rights Movement shows the extent of the impact that culture has on a sound and how music can provide a "voice" to a movement. As ska music shapes and changes with each new culture it meets, it becomes representative of the larger cultural integration.

It is apparent in the third wave that record companies influenced ska music by bringing it into mainstream media. Inevitably, other genres of music have inflicted their own sound upon ska. However, through Stambuli's isolation of the genre, his

essay does not address the ways that other genres have affected ska. The third wave, when ska reached America in the 1980s, has not had a significant influence on America's youth. The cultural heritage of ska has been abandoned and ska has become just another mass-produced sound.

However, it is important to remember ska's past because it assisted in many cultural movements. Music has the ability to influence politics through the expressive powers it releases. Rather than turn to violence or repression, the art of music voices political frustration peacefully. It is unexpected that ska holds such a larger impact on race relations and cultural formation. Although it seems that music is simply a fanciful past time, it gives individuals a chance to find their own selves through cultural shifting. Stambuli's essay serves as an important reminder that every sound is a link to a cultural past.