

When I first started collecting records down in Florida, digging through piles of old 45s, I'd often stumble upon a stash of intriguing discs from Jamaica—weird singles on cheesy-looking labels (often just type on white paper) like Coxson, Studio One, Upstetter and Musik City. The artists had cool names like **Prince Buster**, **Stranger Cole** and the **Riots** (whose “Yeah Yeah” I played over and over until the grooves wore out to the point of leaving shreds of vinyl on the needle; I've never seen another copy since). These records were pressed on dogshit vinyl that makes 'em harder to collect than Charlie Patton 78s, but for those brief moments when I'd find a pile of 'em at a flea market, they were the ultimate in exotica for my teen imagination. Scratchy guitars, out-of-tune horns, plenty of grunting and moaning. Some of 'em (when you could figure out the words) were filthy, like Prince Buster's series of “Pum Pum” discs which dealt with pussy and its endless variations (c.f. “Fishy Pum Pum,” “Sweet Pum Pum,” etc.). They all sounded pretty much like “Louie Louie.”

The history of early ska is very similar to that of the American R&B that influenced it—music of the disenfranchised underclass, recorded by small labels run by hoodlums. The performers were pretty much strange characters or dirt-poor teenagers, and by the time the big labels caught up with it, the thrill was pretty much gone (for me, anyway).

Ska grew out of the Sound System scene in Jamaica in the '50s. Sound Systems were huge, outdoor dances held by DJs with colorful monikers like **Sir Coxson Downbeat** and **V-Rocket**. They toured the island with their own PA systems, turntables and portable generators on the back of flatbed trucks, pumping out a sweaty mix of New Orleans R&B, local singers like **Jimmy Cliff** and **Lord Creator** and the calypso sounds of **Mighty Sparrow**. American R&B discs were highly prized, and some DJs would protect their stash with guns or body guards. Others would scratch off the labels so rivals couldn't identify just what the latest hit record was.

Local musicians began playing their own mix of these sounds by the mid-'50s, using electric guitar (as a percussion instrument—the word “ska” probably derives from the *skat-skat-skat* sound of the guitar riffs), drums, electric bass, horns and later organ. It immediately caught on with Jamaica's huge, impoverished

HOUND'S eye view

by James Marshall

IT ALL SOUNDED LIKE "LOUIE, LOUIE"

A Look at Ska & Bluebeat

black population. By the late '50s ska was exported to West Indians living in England, where it was called bluebeat (after the Bluebeat record label, which issued the UK's first ska discs.) In the early '60s Britain's mods embraced ska with the same fervor they showed for Stax/Volt Memphis soul.

America first heard ska in 1964 with **Millie Small's** novelty hit “My Boy Lollipop” (#2 on the R&B chart in May of '64). Atlantic records jumped on the non-existent band wagon a year later with the LP *Dance the Ska*, a collection of early Lee Perry productions featuring **Byron Lee & the Dragonaires**. **Desmon Dekker** scored in '66 with “The Israelites,” ska's last and greatest moment on the US charts.

By the late '60s, ska was a booming field. The 1966 World's Fair had a ska review as part of the Jamaican exposition. Hundreds of discs on dozens of labels fed this natural-born cottage industry, and many names who would later find fame as international reggae stars got their start around this time, including the **Maytals** and **Jimmy Cliff**. (The ska boom has confounded **Bob Marley** discographers over the years, since early Wailers records were spread out over a bewildering array of oddball labels.) Others fell back into island obscurity. Many died young on the Kingston streets. At the core of much of the best ska music was **Don Drummond and his Skatalites**, house band to several important record labels. Functioning much like Booker T. & the MGs did at Stax, the band provided rhythms for hundreds of fine sides. Drummond, a trombonist, was considered the finest musician Kingston ever produced, the tutor and inspiration to an entire generation of Jamaican players.

Unfortunately, Drummond's mind took leave of him in January '64 when he stabbed his girlfriend to death and was committed to a mental hospital for the rest of his life. The Skatalites scattered to various other units, most of them active in music to this day.

By the late '60s, the political climate of Jamaica became fiery, and more rude boys and musicians embraced Rastafarianism, ska metamorphosized into reggae (named for Toots & the Maytals tune “Do the Reggay”). The sound of early ska was revived in Britain in the late '70s by Two Tone bands like the **Specials**, **Selecter** and **Madness**. The rest, as they say, is history. ●



Millie Small.