



# BOB MARLEY AND THE WAILERS' MENTO ROOTS

By Michael Garnice

# Mento was everywhere in Jamaica, live and recorded, in the country and the city, uptown and downtown, at work, at funerals and in the dancehall. As musicians, it is no surprise that mento impacted the Wailers.

One aspect of the Bob Marley and the Wailers story that has never been fully explored is the influence of *mento* that threads through the group's music and history. More than a dozen songs from the Wailers' catalog borrowed a line from, were based on, or are versions of Jamaican folk/mento songs. Some of the musicians who helped create the Wailers' history and define their sound came to Bob, Bunny and Peter by way of mento. And mento was instrumental in young Marley's upbringing and decision to become a singer.

Although many written accounts have the story of Jamaican music as beginning with ska, mento was Jamaica's first music. Starting in 1951, exciting mento records began to be released in Jamaica on such labels as MRS (Motta's Record Service), Kalypso, Chin's and Times Store by such artists as Count Lasher, Lord Fly, Count Owen, Lord Lebby, Chin's Calypso Sextet, Lord Flea, Harold Richardson, Lord Messam and many more. Although often generalized as "calypso," mento was a different music, a Jamaican music, even if it was overshadowed by its more famous Trinidadian cousin. Mento recordings from the 1950s reveal that there were two fully realized styles of mento. The rustic, acoustic, rural style and the polished, jazzy, urban style were both popular. In the next decade, r&b would be infused with elements from both styles of mento to create ska.

Although mento wasn't recorded in Jamaica until the 1950s, it was played well before then. Mento's popularity in the 1920s is well documented. Even earlier, around the turn of the century, mento music was forming like a new alloy from such diverse elements as the *quadrille* and other European music, African musical traditions, American jazz and pan-Caribbean influences. Undoubtedly, the most important ingredient of all was the musicality and ingenuity of the Jamaican people, who took these diverse influences and created a new genre.

The songs themselves came from Jamaica's rich folk tradition, borrowed from hits elsewhere in the Caribbean, or were original compositions. The contemporaneously written songs provide rich documentation of life in Jamaica at that time.

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## BOB MARLEY'S MUSICAL HERITAGE

In the 1983 biography *Bob Marley* by Stephen Davis, we learn about the musical background of Omeriah Malcolm, Bob's maternal grandfather, as well as an unnamed great uncle. Although a farmer by trade, Omeriah played violin and accordion. Bob's great uncle "was a semi-professional musician who played the violin, guitar and banjo with several of the St. Ann quadrille bands that provided music for village dances. Doubtless the first music Bob Marley ever heard was his great uncle's band jamming on classic quadrille tunes... [and selections] based on native Jamaican melodies."

Quadrille was an instrumental music and dance that was an antecedent to mento. Mento bands would typically include quadrilles in their repertoire. Although Davis does not say it as such, a rural band, featuring banjo, fiddle, fife and acoustic guitar performing native Jamaican melodies was exposing the very young Bob Marley to rural mento in its purest form.

## YOUNG BOB DECIDES TO BE A MUSICIAN

In the film documentary *The Bob Marley Story*, Bob's mother, Cedella Marley Booker, recounts the first time young Bob showed an interest in music. Though just a boy, he declared that he was done with past endeavors and was

"singing now." Bob then performed for his mother a song he heard in Kingston. Accompanying himself with improvised percussion using two sticks, he sang the risqué mento song, "(Don't Touch My) Tomato." Born in 1945, the young Marley was at an age where he could have heard recorded as well live renditions of such songs.

## BOB MARLEY'S FIRST RECORDING

In 1962, just before the Wailers formed, Marley made his first recording, "Judge Not," for producer Leslie Kong. The song featured a penny whistle. Although not associated with ska or reggae, this instrument was commonly used in mento, and its inclusion gives the track something of a rural mento feel. Playing drums on these early sessions is the great Arkland "Drumbago" Parks. Although best known as a master drummer in ska, Drumbago also played and recorded mento. He is also known for playing the penny whistle, though it is very unlikely that Drumbago played both whistle and drums on this one-track recording.

## THE WAILERS ARE SIGNED TO STUDIO ONE

Before the Wailers recorded, percussionist Alvin "Seeco" Patterson was one of the musical tutors for the vocal group, specializing in rhythm. Seeco brought the Wailers to the

attention of Clement "Coxson" Dodd, the proprietor of Studio One. He even played congas for them as they successfully auditioned and became Studio One recording artists. Prior to this, Seeco Patterson had a career in mento. In Stephen Davis' biography, it is revealed that Seeco played with Lord Flea and various mento-calypso bands.

Sometimes credited by his other name, "Francisco Willie Pep," Seeco would make his Wailers recording debut in 1967 as a percussionist on the track "Lyrical Satyrical." (This is documented in the excellent *Bob Marley and the Wailers: The Definitive Discography* by Roger Steffens and Leroy Jodie Pierson.) He would continue to do numerous other Wailers sessions and later toured as a member of the Wailers band. As such, Seeco may have had a longer recording relationship with Bob Marley than any other individual.

But Seeco was not the only musician in the Wailers who had mento in his background. At Studio One, some of the Skatalites and other musicians who backed the Wailers had previously worked playing jazzy urban mento. The sax players for example: Roland Alphonso played on sessions for the MRS label beginning in 1952. Tommy McCook also recorded mento. Ernest Ranglin probably began performing mento jazz in the

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## BOB MARLEY AND THE WAILERS' MENTO ROOTS

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1940s, made notable recordings of such in the 1950s and 1960s, and continues to do so to the present day. It is likely that other Studio One musicians (especially the older ones) also played mento, escaping documentation thus far.

### WAILERS' RECORDINGS IN THE 1960s

In 1965, the Wailers recorded a classic ska track, "Rude Boy," for Coxsone, with lyrics that grab from American soul, Jamaican folklore and mento. It's the stanza:

*Now why you come wheel and turn me*

*Fi go lick a mi head 'pon you tambourine*

that comes directly from mento. It's from a song alternately titled "One Solja Man," or later, "Wheel and Turn Me." The first known recordings of this song come from the early 1950s. One was as part of "Medley of Jamaican Mento" by Lord Fly and the Dan Williams Orchestra. This 78 rpm single of urban-style mento released on MRS is believed to be the very first Jamaican record. The other recording was the folk-style "One Solja Man" by Edric Connor on his influential album *Songs from Jamaica*. Many other mento bands covered this standard, such as the rural "Wheel and Turn Me" by Lord Lebby and the Montego Hotel Calypso Band, from later in the 1950s.

Another line of interest in "Rude Boy" is one that makes reference to both mento's descendant and forerunner: *Ska quadrille, ska quadrille*

The Wailers recut "Rude Boy" for Lee Perry in 1970 as "Rebel's Hop." In this version, the mento and quadrille lyrics were replaced with quotes from American soul songs. It was the Wailers' "Soul Revolution," "Soul Rebel" era, after all. And Lee Perry's house band could play like the band of Marley's hero, James Brown. But when the Wailers toured this song in 1973, the original lyrics were restored. This was also the case when Bunny Wailer re-recorded the song as "Walk the Proud Land" in 1980.

Also in 1965, one of the few female mento vocalists, Girl Wonder, recorded a single, "Cutting Wood" backed with "Mommy Out De Light," on Coxson Dodd's Port-O-Jam label, and was seemingly never heard from again. "Cutting Wood" was a cover of a 1950s single by another female mento singer, Louise Lamb. Dodd revealed in an interview with ethnomusicologist Daniel Neely that Girl Wonder was none other than Rita Marley.

Like Bob, Rita Marley had mento in her bloodline. As revealed in Timothy White's Bob Marley biography, *Catch A Fire*, Rita's father, Leroy Anderson, was a musician who played stand-up bass, tenor sax, woodwinds and congas. In search of work, he and his wife emigrated to England in the late 1950s when Rita was eight. "The last anyone heard... had Roy going on to Sweden with a mento-jazz band and settling in Stockholm."

Also in 1965, the Wailers, with Peter Tosh on lead vocals, recorded two more ska songs with mento roots (though in both cases, they were originally calypso hits that migrated into the mento repertoire). In "Jumbie Jamboree," Peter changed the lyrics to describe the unruly fans at a Wailers' performance as a party of zombies. "Shame and Scandal" was a straight cover of this often-recorded West Indian song. Artists as diverse as American folk great Odetta, British pop-ska hit makers Madness and American roots music/world music great David Lindley, for example, have also recorded "Shame and Scandal."

In 1966, the Wailers recorded the wonderful ska "Rasta Shook Them Up" again with Peter Tosh on lead vocals. This song was based on an earlier calypso song called "Archie Buck Them Up." Around the same time that the Wailers recorded their adaptation, the Hiltonaires recorded a rural mento version, which was released as a single and on an lp. (On the same lp, the Hiltonaires also recorded a version of "Nobody's Business," which, as discussed below, Tosh also covered. Perhaps Peter was a fan of this lp, or more likely, this was a coincidence.) Simultaneously or shortly thereafter, other renditions were released. Jamaican guitar great Ernest Ranglin blazed a virtuoso jazz-calypso version of this song. Rural mento act King Arthur (Knibbs), the more calypso-oriented Dennis Sindrey and Jamaica's resident calypso singer Lord Creator also recorded this song in the mid-1960s, shortening the title, as Ernest Ranglin did, to "Archie."

In 1967, the Wailers, with Marley on lead vocals, were so impressed by the emergence of rock steady that they recorded a song in that style. It was called "Rocking Steady," and in it, they sang about the first time they heard this new music that had become all the rage. But earlier, in 1959, Count Lasher was so impressed by the emergence of cha cha, that he recorded a mento song in that style. It was called "Calypso Cha Cha Cha," and in it, he sang about the first time he heard this new music that had become all the rage. Lasher was perhaps the single greatest name in mento and this song was one of his hits. The Wailers covered it and extended the music lesson of the original.

In 1968, Peter Tosh and the Wailers released "Fire Fire." The melody was taken from a Jamaican folk song, "Mamma Me Wan Fe Work" as recorded by the Frats Quintet as the lead track on their first lp, *Authentic Jamaican Folk Songs* from 1958. Tosh provided lyrics that were new and very different from the original. In 1978, Bunny Wailer covered Peter's version, as did many other reggae performers. (The sharp-eared Olivier Albot brought this to my attention.)

Also in 1968, the Wailers recorded a number of tracks that would include percussion from mento singer Denzil Laing. These tracks, released on the JAD label, were "Rock to the Rock," "Rocking Steady (Soul Mix)," "Mellow Mood," and "Chances Are (Soul Mix)." Steffens and Pierson's *Discography* is again the source for this information.

#### THE 1970S

In 1971, Peter Tosh, with Bunny Wailer's help, recorded "Leave My Business." The liner notes of Tosh's *Honorary Citizen* box set mistakenly attribute this song to American blues and jazz singer Bessie Smith. They were likely thinking of her hit, "Taint Nobody's Bizness If I Do," a different song altogether. Peter's "Leave My Business" is of Jamaican folk/mento origin. Recordings can be heard by Edric Connor folk-style in 1952, as part of an excellent rural mento medley by Boyisie Grant and Reynold's Calypso Clippers from the 1950s, and the more urban stylings of Mapletoft Poule on his 1960s lp, *Jamaica Mento*.

In 1976, Peter Tosh recorded "Whatcha Gonna Do" on the *Legalize It* lp. The melody is taken from a mento song, "Charley's Cow." This melody is also found in a different and probably older mento song, "Matty Rag."

#### THE 1980S

In 1982, in what was probably their first sessions after Bob Marley's passing, the Wailers band led by the Barrett brothers backed former Jolly Boys lead singer Donald Davidson and his wife on the lp *Beautiful Garden*. Perennial mento act the Jolly Boys can trace their roots back at least 50 years in Port Antonio, where they started and are still active today. This lp included covers of three Jolly Boys songs played as reggae.



#### THE 1990S

In 1992, Bob's mother, Cedella Marley Booker, released *Smilin' Island of Song*, a Jamaican folk music cd for children. It includes songs from the mento repertoire such as "Chi Chi Bud," "Matty Roll," and "The Banana Boat Song (Day-O)."

Also in 1992, Bunny Wailer's *Dance Massive* lp was released. The title track quotes from numerous songs, including the melody of the mento song "Mango Walk," which is heard twice.

In 1994, Bunny Wailer released a recording of the historically important Lord Lebby mento song "Etheopia," as "Here in Jamaica." The title and some of the lyrics are updated, but the melody and back-to-Africa theme of the original remain. It appears on Bunny's *Crucial! Roots Classics* cd. It's interesting to note that Bunny Wailer, who famously recorded the quintessential back-to-Africa reggae song in "Dreamland" also covered "Etheopia," the first song with this theme in all of recorded Jamaican music. ("Dreamland" was written by Al Johnson and originally performed by El Tempos on Vee Jay records, as revealed in Steffens and Pierson's *Discography*.)

In 1995, Bunny Wailer recorded "Conscious Lyrics," which borrows the chorus of the classic mento song, "Emmanuel Road."

#### THE CIRCLE COMPLETE

By 2002, it had been nearly three decades since the Wailers began honoring Jamaica's first music by covering mento songs. It was that year when Stanley Beckford released his cd, *Stanley Beckford Plays Mento*. It included mento renditions of three Bob Marley and the Wailers songs ("Guava Jelly," "Three Little Birds" and "One Love"). Though it has become common for today's mento bands to include Bob Marley songs in their sets, this is the first time such had been recorded. With this release, the circle of recorded appreciation between Bob Marley and the Wailers and mento music had completed itself.

For more information on mento, visit the author's Web site, [www.mentomusic.com](http://www.mentomusic.com). It includes audio clips and record labels from the original mento songs mentioned in this article. It also presents information, pictures, video, lyrics and news on mento music, as in addition to showcasing hundreds of mento records of the past and present. See also Don Neely's article "Mento Is Back" in *The Beat*, Vol. 20 #6, 2001 (back issue #102).

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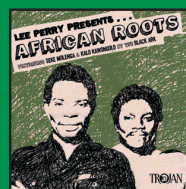


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