WEST INDIAN CULTURAL INFLUENCES

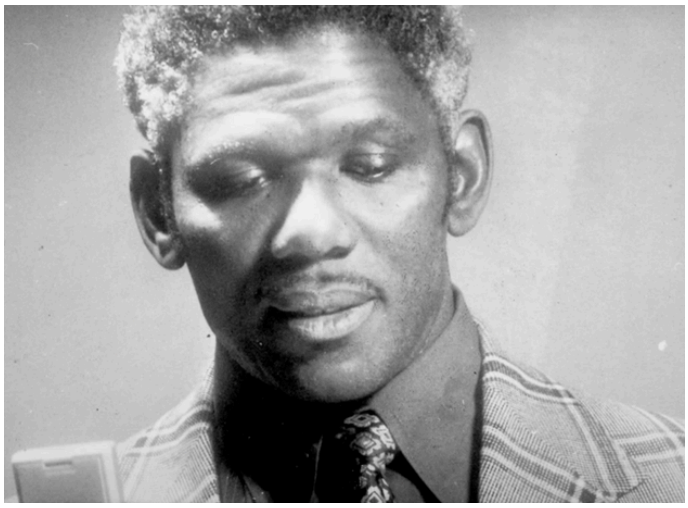
WOW WRITING ON THE WALL

This series is dedicated to Dr. Ray Costello, the foremost historian of Black Liverpool

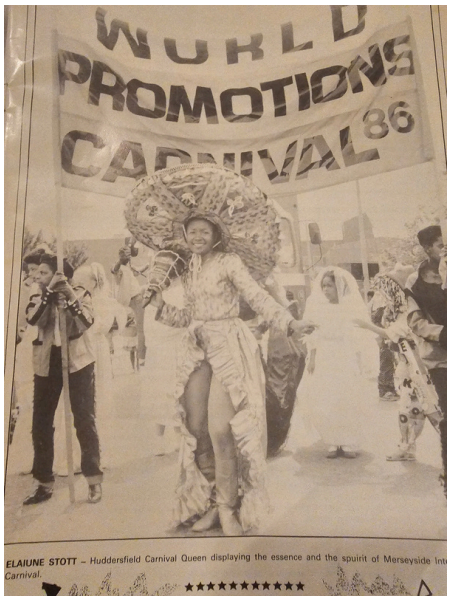
In the late 1970s, a friend of mine - a Black Londoner - came to Liverpool for the weekend. We went out clubbing on Prinny Avenue. He said to me "your friends all look like Rastas, they dress like Rastas and they speak like Rastas, but they've all got African names like Mendy and Mensah. They all sound like they were born in Jamaica, but you say they were all born here. And the clubs are all playing reggae music but they've all got African names. This is completely different from everything I've ever seen in London" - *Stephen Small*

HOW REGGAE AND RASTAFARI EMERGED IN LIVERPOOL

Reggae and Rastafari were embraced across Liverpool 8, but not in the same way as their counterparts in London and other cities.One difference was that they arrived in Liverpool a little later than in other cities - not much later, but enough to notice. That's because the Black community in Liverpool was not predominantly West Indian in origin, so developments did not emerge organically as they did in other cities. This meant that we had to go to Manchester and Birmingham, London and Leeds to attend reggae sound systems and Caribbean carnivals. We went individually and we went on coaches and minibuses organised by Herbie Higgins out of Stanley House and the Caribbean Centre, and by World Promotions.



Herbie Higgins MBE



World Promotions Carnival 1986

Some reggae was played in Stanley House, and increasingly in the Prinny Avenue African nightclubs, and in private house parties and shebeens. L8 eventually produced its own reggae sound systems with names like Struggler, Crasher, One-A-Penny, Kwamina, Creation, Senator Sound and King David Sound.

Crasher Hi Fi badge: photo credit Jimi Jagne

Many of them competed successfully against sound systems from other cities.

And while Black British youth in other cities effortlessly spoke Jamaican patois, it wasn't so easy for many Liverpool-born Black youth to speak in patois where Jamaican family origins were often missing, where the scouse accent was so strong, and where so many of us had a white mother. But we did the best we could, and sometimes the variance was so little that only an expert could tell the difference.

CALYPSO AND CARNIVAL

Before saying any more about reggae, I have to mention that **before reggae even existed, calypso music was the most popular West Indian music in England in the 1950s and 1960s.** Musical forms in Jamaica that came before reggae – like ska and mento –also existed in this period. The most famous calypsonian in Liverpool at this time was Lord Woodbine (real name Harold Phillips). He performed calypso, owned several clubs in the city centre, and was one-time manager of the Beatles. John Lennon even wrote a calypso song – though the lyrics are lost.After reggae took over as the number one West Indian music, calypso continued, and both calypso and carnival remained very evident in Liverpool. Herbie Higgins – probably Liverpool's most famous Jamaican – popularised calypso music and carnival before reggae was even on the scene. Herbie planned and organised the first Liverpool Caribbean carnivals, raised funds, designed the route of the carnival march, invited performers from inside and outside the city and helped promote carnival in the city and across the nation.

Reggae was so new that when Herbie was first told that there was a local band playing reggae he asked, "What's that?" But he soon embraced reggae.

Arnold Davis, known as "Shadow" was Liverpool's most famous Trinidadian associated with carnival in the city in the 1980s. Born and raised in Trinidad he relocated to Liverpool in 1955. Shadow was the most recognisable performer at the Liverpool Carnival, and was well-known at the world-famous Notting Hill Carnival in London where he also performed and won awards.

Shadow as the Royal Fifty Pence Piece

He was a highly charismatic, experienced and accomplished carnival performer, and an eccentric character. When Shadow performed, young children hid behind their mothers in trepidation, while older onlookers stared in awe at his realistic costumes. Among the most fascinating carnival characters he gave us were "The Royal Fifty Pence Piece", "Jesus Christ on his way to Calvary", "Abraham Lincoln" and "The Curse of Tutankhamun".

REGGAE'S CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING LYRICS

Perhaps the foremost impact of reggae in Liverpool (and across the nation) was in its consciousness-raising lyrics. Reggae lyrics provided information and education, and expanded Black collective self-awareness beyond the solid foundation that Afro-American music had established. **Reggae music pushed even more forceful waves of knowledge of Africa onto the shores of Liverpool and into the L8 community.**

Reggae lyrics informed us about Africa and Ethiopia, about Jamaica, the West Indies and slavery. We heard about Black historical figures in West Indian history like Sam Sharp and Nanny of the Maroons in Jamaica, and Nanny Grigg and Bussa in Barbados – all leaders of rebellions by the enslaved.

Reggae introduced us to the thought and analysis of Marcus Garvey and Walter Rodney. The issue of repatriation to Africa was common, as were insights into contemporary West Indian life and culture. As I mentioned in the previous article, reggae also led us to Africa both past and present.

Liverpool schools had told us nothing about the history, resistance or humanity of Africa and Black people. The lyrics of twelve songs by Bob Marley and the Wailers were worth more to Black people than twelve years of Liverpool schooling. I was personally fortunate that reggae and Rastafari emerged when I was a teenager. They inspired me to read about the history of Jamaica and Ethiopia, and I wrote an extended essay for my BA degree at the University of Kent at Canterbury on ***Rastafari: The Search for an identity***. Together they helped prevent British education from fully colonising my mind.

While much reggae centered on resistance and resilience, it also celebrated Black humanity, dignity, love and romance. For example, in songs by Ken Boothe and John Holt, Marcia Aitken and Marcia Griffiths. The "Lovers Rock" genre (a soulful and romantic variety of reggae music that emerged in London in the 1970s) was performed by popular British-based artists, like Louisa Mark and Carol Thompson.

THE CULTURAL INFLUENCE OF RASTAFARI

The Rastafari movement began in Jamaica in the 1930s, born out of the horrific conditions of slavery and the oppressive practices of British imperial rule after slavery.Rastafarians (named after Crown Prince Ras Tafari, who in 1930 in Ethiopia was crowned His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie) rejected Christianity as "a white man's religion". Instead, Rastafarian preachers highlighted a Black god, in the form of Haile Selassie, and the nation Ethiopia, an African nation never conquered by Europeans. The movement came to England with Jamaican settlers. As a cultural movement Rastafari involved dreadlocks, red, gold and green colours, and other practices that demonstrated pride in Africa and Black culture.

Dreadlocks represented an affirmation of pride in characteristics which were clearly African in origin. Reggae was Rastafari's major vehicle, and Bob Marley and the Wailers the kings of reggae.

The colours of Rastafari reflected the flags of African nations like Ethiopia, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. The colours adorned the headwraps, dresses and wristbands of women and the shirts, jackets and belts of men. They appeared in the artwork of L8 magazines and newsletters, and were prominent in the banners of carnival processions. They appeared on shopfront signs, in the offices of the L8 community centres, and on the walls of the Prinny Avenue nightclubs and Jamaica House (the reggae club on Upper Parliament Street).

Princes Road and Kingsley Road

The colours were highlighted in the markings and images of reggae sound systems. Some street names were painted over in the colours. Beyond that, some Liverpool statues, buildings and street signs - especially those known to be named after Liverpool slave traders, imperialists and politicians that supported slavery - were painted over in the colours red, yellow and green as a sign of defiance. Some of the best examples of these colours can be found in the creative artwork of L8's most distinguished photographer, Leroy Cooper, available in press and books, online and in museum exhibits.

My brother, Terry Small, a tailor by profession, designed and created items of clothing in Rastafari colours - jackets, shirts, pants, dresses, hats and tams. He travelled to cities across the nation for materials and new ideas. He also worked with World Promotions creating carnival costumes for all ages and teaching young people tailoring and creative work.

Terry Small at World Promotions

Much of the phraseology and dialect of Rastafari became common in L8 - words like "Ital" (meaning pure or natural), "bredren" (brother) and "baldhead" (pronounced "ball-head") which in Jamaica meant someone who did not have dreadlocks. It meant the same thing in England, while in Liverpool it also referred to white skinheads - because they had no hair. And most popularly, "Babylon" (the wicked western system); and phrases like "Whappen Rasta?" (which meant "how are you?"). This dialect was not the same as Black British youth (with two Jamaican parents); nor was it the same as white Liverpool youth. These variations are far better understood in spoken language than in writing; and examples can be found on videos and audio recordings from back then.

Reggae and Rastafari led to poetry and performance and several of Jamaica's finest artists performed in England (and sometimes in Liverpool). People like Mutabaruka, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean Binta-Breeze and Michael Smith. Benjamin Zephaniah was a resident artist in Liverpool in 1988-1989. Several poets and performers emerged from the Liverpool 8 Writers Group, (like Carlene Montoute and Ebony). For L8 based poets reggae and Rastafari was only one of a number of themes and issues, as their poetry spoke to the specifics of Liverpool history, local identity, Black women's experiences, inter-racial marriage and colour. There are also poems on these themes by Leroy Cooper, Ivan Freeman and Anne Lopez, amongst many others.

RASTAFARI AS RELIGIOUS FAITH AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Many aspects of Rastafari were deeply religious and filled with spiritual belief and practice. The most popular faith community of Rastafari was the Twelve Tribes of Israel, which also held meetings in Liverpool. African drums were central at religious ceremonies.

Twelve Tribes Dance Card

There were several key tenets - the Divinity of Haile Selassie, the need for repatriation of the Black 'race' to Africa and viewing of Europe as Babylon, that is, a wicked and oppressive regime. Alongside Bible reading, interpretation and prayers, (typically called "reasonings"), other topics in Black lives - locally, nationally and internationally - were discussed - like the Toxteth Uprisings in 1981, the New Cross Massacre in London the same year, anti-Apartheid activities, Mandela's release from prison in 1990, and the "UK Reparations Movement" founded by Bernie Grant in the 1990s. Young Black people who had grown up with images of a white Jesus, and knew how the bible was used to justify the enslavement of Africans were introduced to a new perspective on the Bible, a realisation that the people in the time and place of Jesus' life were not white. There were some young Black people in Liverpool who were illiterate before Rastafari arrived; they learnt to read and write so they could read the Bible.

The Twelve Tribes organised dances in cities across the nation typically one per month, in venues like Brixton Town Hall, London, Handsworth Sports Centre in Handsworth Park in Birmingham, and Longsight Youth Community Centre, Manchester. Reggae dances with similar themes took place in Liverpool, many organised by the Caribbean Centre and World Promotions. Massive portraits of Garvey, Selassie and the Prophet Gad, hung on the walls of the dances alongside quotations from the Bible, and maps of Africa and Ethiopia.

FOUR NOTABLE EPISODES

Four notable episodes from this period live on in L8 community memory. The first was when the Methodist Church took a coach-full of L8 young people to Manchester in 1976 to see Bob Marley and the Wailers (as well as his backing group, the I-Threes) perform live at Belle Vue. The second also involved the Methodist, when they took four L8 Black youth on a two and a half week trip to Jamaica in the 1970s to gain first-hand experience of Jamaican culture. The third experience happened in the early 1990s, when World Promotions took twenty-five youngsters (between the ages of 7 and 15) and several chaperones, to the Caribana Carnival in Toronto, Canada. The final episode was the tragic incident in a reggae dance at the Toxteth Sports Centre (between a Liverpool based Reggae Sound System and Saxon Studio International sound system from London) which led to the killing of one of the members of Saxon Studio International. Verbal abuse around colour was a major factor in that unfortunate incident. These episodes capture the range of ambitions and aspirations of the L8 community and disclose some of the underlying antagonisms that sometimes erupted.

Ongoing community tensions

Several tensions existed across Black communities inside and outside Liverpool, but most of them did not end as violently as they did at the Toxteth Sports Centre.

For example, many people in L8 with dreadlocks were mixed origins and had light skins, which was fine and well in L8 where there was no contradiction between having a light skin and a radical Black or African identity. But these identities were sometimes challenged in other cities and occasionally when Black people (presumed to be unmixed) came to Liverpool. Colour issues were one of the ongoing legacies of slavery and the colonised minds imposed by the British Empire in the West Indies to divide and rule. People with light skins in the West Indies rose to dominate politics and business, especially after the abolition of slavery. This fact was captured in the Jamaican expression, “If you’re white, you’re alright, if you’re brown stick around, but if you’re Black, get back!”.

But the economic and political colour privilege of elites in Jamaica was not matched in the experiences of people of mixed origins in Liverpool. Quite the opposite, as I explained in an earlier article. In Liverpool, people of mixed origins (typically called ‘half-caste’ through the 1970s) were regarded by the authorities as degenerate and immoral and treated with contempt. Although it’s true that in some interpersonal experiences within the L8 community, some people who were mixed were scornful of dark-skinned people.

Stephen Small at university

There were generational tensions, too, as parents became anxious about their children growing dreadlocks, following Rastafari, and even smoking marijuana. As for me, my dad was a barber – the eternal enemy of Rastas (who obviously did not get haircuts) – and he wasn't too happy when I grew dreadlocks.

There were also tensions around sexism – which was widespread in so many other aspects of British and Black British culture – as reggae and Rastafari mainly focused on issues important to men, and sometimes promoted a strident masculinity.

Daughters Of The Windrush

Several reggae artists sang songs that were homophobic. Then there was the emergence of "slackness" – a style of reggae music filled with vulgar and crude sexual lyrics. "Slackness" was regarded as unfeminine and inappropriate. But women in Reggae were not invisible and there were some important female artists, like Hortense Ellis, Judy Mowatt, Dawn Penn and Diana King. Defenders of "slackness" – including several female Jamaican women singers – countered that it revealed how Jamaican women refused to confirm to Jamaican notions of respectability and femininity, and preferred instead to assert their own public affirmations of female agency especially in the form of sexual desire. **Despite some of these tensions, they did not in any significant way detract from the overall positivity and consciousness-raising contributions of reggae and Rastafari.**

Local Rastafarians were, arguably, the L8 community's most radical collective, committed to a way of life that fully embraced and promoted Black identity at a time when most Black Britons were struggling to establish commonality with mainstream society. Liverpool born Rastafarians, regardless of whether they belonged to Black British, African, mixed heritage or Caribbean families, found common strength and a shared sense of cultural worth in overcoming racial intimidation and social marginalisation - *Jimi Jagne*

AUTHOR PROFILE

Stephen Small, PhD, is a Professor of the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley, a role he began in January 2025 after he retired from teaching. Prior to that he taught in the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies since 1995. He was Director of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (June 2020 to January 2025). He has held visiting positions at universities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe. As a professor he researched the history and sociology of Black people across the diaspora, including the United States, Western Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil. Since retirement he mainly works on legacies of British imperialism, with a particular focus on Liverpool. He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley (1989); his MS.C in Social Sciences from the University of Bristol (1983); and his B.A. (honours) in Economics and Sociology from the University of Kent at Canterbury (1979).

His most recent book is ***In the Shadows of the Big House: 21st Century Antebellum Slave Cabins and Heritage Tourism in Louisiana,*** 2023. Before that he published ***20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe***, January 2018. His next book is tentatively entitled: **Black Liverpool "The real thing". West African, West Indian and Afro-American culture at the end of the 20th century**, and will be published by Liverpool University Press in 2026.

Stephen was born and raised in Liverpool 8, in the city with the nation's longest-standing Black population. He was a member of several Black and multi-racial organisations across England, and in the 1990s was research assistant to the Right Honourable Bernie Grant, MP, researching and lecturing on reparations and museums. He was a member of the Consortium of Black Organisations and the Federation of Black Liverpool Organisations, both in Liverpool, in the early 1990s. And he was a Guest Curator at the Transatlantic Slave Trade Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum which opened in 1994 (and which became the International Slavery Museum in 2007).

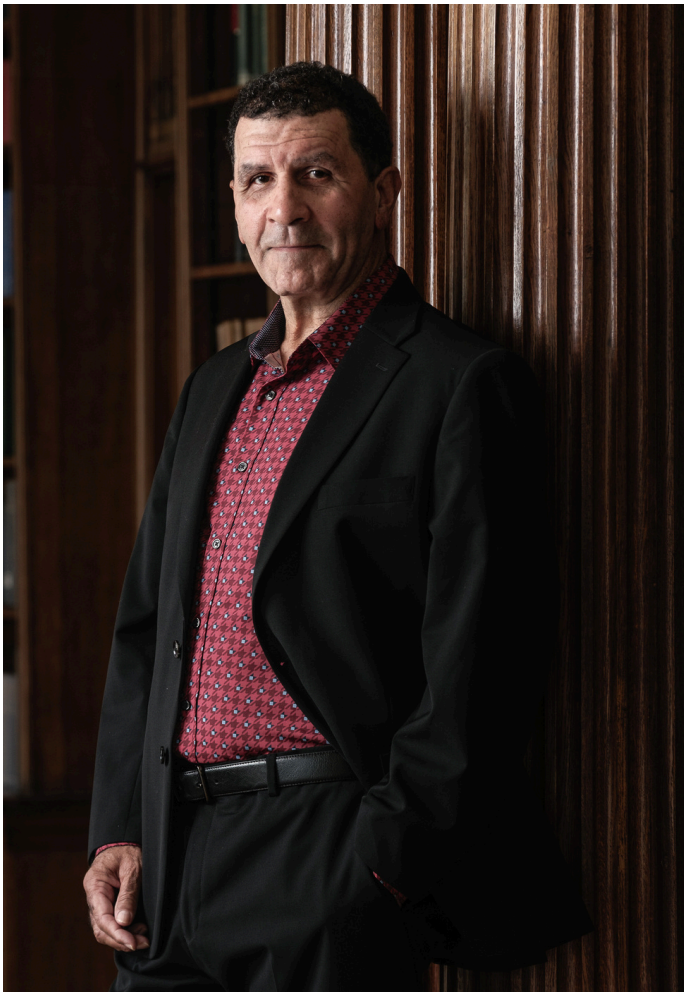


Photo credit to Ean Flanders