



# **Caribbean In/Securities: Creativity and Negotiation in the Caribbean (CARISCC)**

## **Working Papers Series**

### **Singing Security: Representations of State and Non-State Protection in Jamaican Popular Music**

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## **Caribbean In/Securities: Creativity and Negotiation in the Caribbean (CARISCC) Working Papers Series**

### **Singing Security: Representations of State and Non-State Protection in Jamaican Popular Music**

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This working paper explores representations of security and policing in popular Jamaican music, offering an initial survey of themes and a preliminary analysis of this music as a creative negotiation of insecurity emerging from some of the Caribbean's most precarious urban spaces. In the context of consistently high levels of violent crime, Jamaica has seen a pluralization of security professionals, with private security companies, neighborhood watches and informal "dons" complementing or supplanting state security forces. Drawing on an analysis of reggae and dancehall songs, this paper examines how these different policing agents are represented in reggae and dancehall lyrics, and specifically how their relationship to the urban poor is narrated. I build on previous analyses of urban violence and real or metaphorical gunplay in Jamaican popular music (e.g. Hope 2006; Cooper 2007) by emphasizing representations of security provision and protection rather than of aggression or "badmanism" per se, although these emphases are of course not mutually exclusive.

I focus on three initial themes: multifaceted representations of the police; dons as protectors; and connections made between spiritual protection and non-state security. The Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF) has been the topic, or target, of many songs over the decades, while references to non-state

forms of security provision – neighborhood watches, dons and private security – emerge more clearly from the end of the twentieth century. Taken together, the often-ambivalent representation and imagination of these different sources of policing and protection provide a sense the ongoing negotiation of socio-political relations with Jamaica, and framing of security acts as ill/legitimate, historically rooted, marked by human frailty, or achieved through superhuman powers.

#### **Police as both inhuman oppressors and as fallible humans**

Starting with roots reggae songs in the 1970s, the JCF, the state police force, has tended to be presented in music as brutal and unjust. They are often seen as representing "Babylon", as agents of an oppressive state who create insecurity rather than security in inner-city neighborhoods. Police are often depicted as upholding an unjust social order, protecting the rich and punishing the poor. However, more recent songs present police officers in multiple ways: as an occupying force that is resented and tricked, but also as humans and fellow Jamaicans with whom you can negotiate or even form relationships.

Many of the earlier songs focus specifically on the ill treatment that Rastafari received from the police, or how their persecution for using marijuana. The solutions advocated for this tended to still be state centered – many

of these songs are voiced as please directed at “Mr. Officer” himself, asking him to cool down his temper, to use his discretion. Examples include Jacob Miller’s Mr. Officer and Gregory Isaacs’ Mr. Cop – the polite use of the title “Mr.” could be read as a rhetorical attempt to negotiate relations of courtesy and respect rather than antagonism and violence.

The 1970s also evidence brief mention of alternative forms of security. For instance, the refrain of one of the first dancehall songs, General Echo’s Arleen, is “Whether home guard or a whether bodyguard, a one General inna di yard”. While this phrase can be read as serving primarily as a gendered move, presenting General Echo as the only protector of Arleen’s home, it does so by referencing two types of non-state protection: the home guard – the civil defense guards promoted by Jamaica’s PNP Prime Minister Michael Manley as a type of armed neighborhood watch, but interpreted by the opposition JLP as the prelude to revolution – and private bodyguards. A less known song is a Burning Spear’s song Own Security from the late 1990s, which appears to advocate a type of neighborhood-level non-state security: “Give us our own security in our neighborhood / We will understand them / And they will understand us / We will work together / So things will be better”. While it is unclear whether this “own security” refers to dons or neighborhood watches, such statements indicate many Jamaicans’ experience of the police relations as characterized by a lack of understanding and cooperation.

Contemporary reggae and dancehall artists still complain about police officers harassing Rastafari over ganja use. While such songs may still emphasize brutality and misunderstanding, a number of these songs depict their relations with the police as a site of negotiation rather than confrontation. Chronixx’s song “Rastaman Wheel Out”, for instance, is a playful narrative in which Rastas outsmart the police. The artist sings of being stopped on the street by a district constable who accuses him of smoking weed and

solicits a bribe (asking him “Rastaman, what can you do for me?”), but whose search for a ganja spliff is unsuccessful as Chronixx does not smoke spliffs but keeps his weed hidden in a chalice. In another song, however, the same artist demonstrates more empathy for JCF officers, portraying them as fallible humans trapped within a larger system of injustice. Chronixx’ Ain’t No Giving In encourages Jamaicans to stay strong in the face of the economic and political hardships face. While directed at poor Jamaicans in particular, he also sings: “Police nah get pay, so them find it hard fi serve an’ protect”, acknowledging the difficulties of maintaining an effective security force in the context of economic crisis.

Another recent hit, Wasp’s Unfair Officer, depicts another type of engagement between the police and inner-city residents: negotiations over street dances. The JCF’s role in enforcing the Noise Abatement Act by “locking off” such dances at a given hour is sometimes interpreted as part of broader state or elite strategies to curtail the livelihoods and cultural expressions of the (Black) urban poor. Songs such as Unfair Officer present the JCF’s intervention in street dances as part of a larger historical logic: “Me know fi a fact / Say dem a fight ghetto youths before mi born”. This historical contextualization echoes Noxolo and Featherstone’s (2014) move to understand security in light of longer trajectories of colonial endangerment and how these inform the contemporary economic and physical precarity of residents of Jamaica’s low-income urban areas. Yet Wasp narrates the lock-off not just as a confrontation, but as a space for negotiation. He hints at the possibility of paying off the police, but also appeals to the officers for empathy, suggesting that dancehall parties offer an important form of nonviolent sociality. He entreats them to understand street dances not just as noise and nuisance but as the “ghetto youth’s” own attempts at peace and conflict resolution: “Officer mi a beg you please / Come make the ghetto youth them want to hold up the peace / Man from west



and east / Mi rather see dance than see funeral keep”.

### **Dons as protectors and peacemakers**

Beyond the police, the most common form of security professionals represented in reggae and dancehall is so-called dons, criminal leaders who have taken on an important role in providing inner-city residents with protection and conflict resolution (see Jaffe 2012). Even as their activities are also an important source of urban violence, these informal security providers tend to receive a more positive assessment than the JCF. In his 2009 song *Nuh Bwoy Cyaan Violate*, Kiprich list a number of dons and hails their success in maintaining order in their respective communities. Christopher “Dudus” Coke’s rule in Tivoli Gardens, he suggests, meant that “Nuh bwoy cyaan violate no Tivoli Man / Cyaan go ‘round di ting from Prezi a di Don” – nobody could hurt or disrespect men from Tivoli because Dudus (also known as the President of Prezi) was the don. Similarly, in *Jungle*, perpetrators are punished swiftly and effectively: “rapist get bullet and stumble”.

In addition to this type of representation as protectors, dons are also sometimes depicted as peacemakers who can overcome the political divides that have been the historical source of violence in downtown Kingston. A 1990s song by Cocoa Tea and Louie Culture, titled *Zeeks*, lauded the don of that name for being able to create unity between previously hostile PNP and JLP supporters from West Kingston. A recent conflict in which a don allegedly took a peacemaking role was that between supporters of the two dancehall artists Vybz Kartel (representing “Gaza”) and Movado (“Gully”). Here, Dudus was seen as one of the few people with sufficient stature to compel the artists and their fans to put an end to their hostility.

### **Spiritual protection**

The plurality of security professionals is evident in various songs that contrast the effectiveness of different policing agents.

In particular, a number of songs contrast non-state security – including private security, dons and guard dogs – with religious protection, making a statement about the role of God/Jah in providing both physical and spiritual security. In his song *Most High*, for instance, Chronixx praises Jah, asserting that “You are the reason mi no inna the morgue yet / A you gimme peace inna mi heart / All when mi get rich with three body guard / And some big bad dog inna mi yard”. Even when he achieves wealth that needs to be guarded by private security and “bad dogs”, this song maintains that true peace and security relies on a divine protector. In an opposite move, in *Here Comes Trouble*, Chronixx draws on military language to further his spiritual mission:

*Left, right, Jah soldiers a come / Here comes trouble, here comes the danger / Sent by the savior welcome the Rasta youths / I and I a start recruit soldiers fi Selassie I army / ... / So I'm recruiting soldiers coming from near and far, by truth / Executing Selassie I works and build Rastafari troops.*

Other artists make a different comparison, contrasting God/Jah with dons. In his song *God A Mi Don* (perhaps echoing 1987 Freddy McGregor song titled *Jah A di Don*), Konshens makes a similar metaphorical connection between different sources of protection, likening God/Jah to the don as an extralegal security protector. Here, an omniscient Jah provides an invisible but most effective kind of surveillance and protection; he can distinguish between threat and non-threat; and is a powerful “link” or social connection:

*You see God / A my don that / ... / Bwoy a fight, haffi fight and drop, dem full a links but a God a the right contact / Yuh see Jah, a my linky / And mi nah go step lef di link with mi / All when yu no see no man beside mi / Mi have the greater one beside mi / I tell dem Jah know it all: who a pray fi mi down fall / ... / Jah show mi my enemies, Jah show mi my friends / ...*

While analogies such as those drawn by Konshens are perhaps primarily intended as

testimonies of faith, asserting that God is one's dons simultaneously serve to associate criminal leaders with a quasi-divine status. Some songs that feature the JCF function to humanize police officers; in contrast, this song works to make dons attribute dons with more-than-human powers.

### Concluding remarks

The brief survey and preliminary analysis of representations of reggae and dancehall presented here suggest a number of ways that music serves as a site for negotiating insecurity. As with any form of cultural texts, the songs discussed here contain a large measure of ambivalence, proposing normative statements about the legitimacy and efficacy of different security actors that can be read in multiple ways. Popular music sometimes represents the Jamaican police as a brutal, inhuman force, but at other times humanizes the figure of the JCF officer, imagining him (never a her) as a figure who is disposed to negotiation rather than merely confrontation. In apparent paradox, songs that celebrate the policing role of dons often emphasize their (police-like?) tendency towards using violence as a crime prevention strategy. Yet even as the dons' supposedly effective violence is lauded, they are also imagined as peacemakers who can overcome longstanding political divides. A final theme identified here is the turn in popular music to another, non-human form of security pluralization, which goes beyond human forms of protection to include divine sources of protection. Specifically, God/Jah emerges as an important site of the imagination within more-than-human geographies of policing and protection. This turn to non-human actors, is an additional creative negotiation of precarious and insecure situations, and one that connects directly to a pervasive sense of distrust in other humans. Reading representations of different state and non-state, human and non-human security actors together allows an appreciation of popular music as a site of contestation in which the allocation of blame and responsibility for crime, order and protection are reimagined.

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