WHITE RIOT
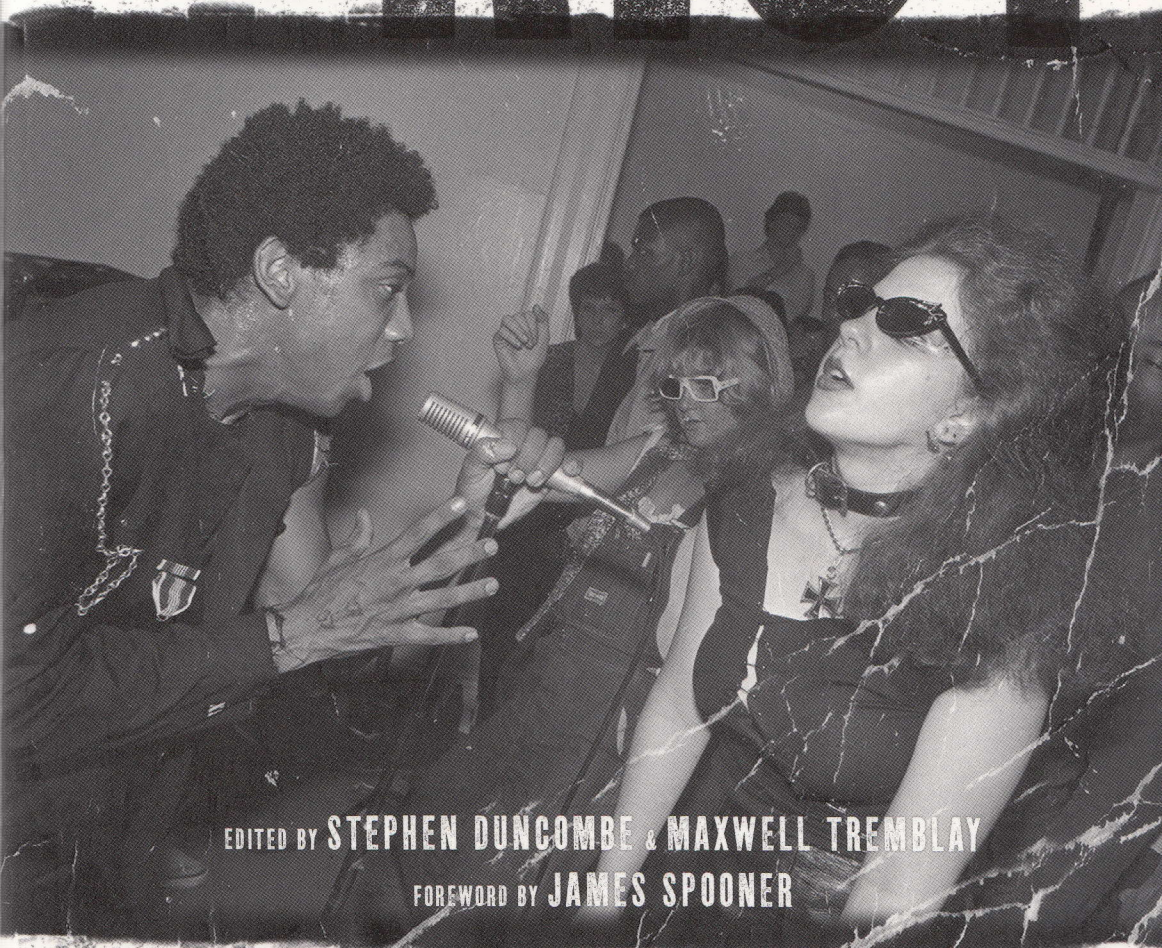
PUNK ROCK AND THE POLITICS OF RACE

EDITED BY STEPHEN DUNCOMBE & MAXWELL TREMBLAY

FOREWORD BY JAMES SPOONER

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are black; hardcore is white (and no matter how much Hendrix and Berry they ripped, it still ain't nothing but some whiteboy *sounding* shit now) and who would've ever thought that one day some bloods would go to the white boy looking for the spirit? Not to mention the revolution! I mean, if the Brains wasn't so serious I'd think they were trying to revive minstrelsy. Because while they play hardcore as good as any white man ha ha, like it was in fact second nature, their reggae ain't shit. Not only does it have less bottom than their punk, it also sounds half-assed and forced; more an outgrowth, like Dylan's nascent gospel, of sanctimonious intent than of innate religious fervor. Signifying, if nothing else, how far down the river the Brains' missionary work has taken them from the wellspring of most black music's spirituality—namely, the black community. Because where punk's obnoxious energy is an attack on the parent-community, Rasta-influenced reggae draws strength from the ideal of a black community working in harmony. An ethic which isn't foreign to black music not from Yard either: The Funk Mob identified it as one nation under a groove, James Brown called it soul power, and I call it doowop tribalism. The need for which makes even such outré individualists as Jarman-Moye-Favors-Mitchell-Bowie bind into "Great Black Music" ensembles; makes Cecil Taylor work himself into a "Black Code Methodology/Unit Structure"; makes Ornette Coleman improvise a funk-based, democratic system of notation. The need, in other words, for a unified black community respectful of both holy tradition and individual expression. An ideal which leaves me respecting the Brains for their principled punk evangelism and worried for their souls.

Greg Tate, "Hardcore of Darkness: Bad Brains," *Village Voice*, April 27, 1982.

SIMON JONES,
BLACK CULTURE, WHITE YOUTH: THE REGGAE TRADITION FROM JA TO UK

These days, with a few exceptions, most punks wouldn't be caught dead with a Bob Marley record, as reggae as a whole has come to signify a kind of collegiate bohemianism (or worse: frat boys partying on spring break) and is incompatible with punk's serious politics and no-bullshit aesthetic. In this selection Simon Jones revisits the Punky Reggae Party, but his point is not merely that some punks and Rastas saw the potential for solidarity between the musics, but

rather that reggae as a Black art form actually structured what punk would become. As Jones argues, it is precisely punks' involvement with reggae and appropriation of some of its tropes that gave rise to "the movement's DIY approach to music-making, its directness of expression and its attempts to close the gaps between artists and audience." One could even argue that these three elements represent punk distilled to its most basic operating assumptions. If this is true, then why the subsequent repudiation? Despite claims of "punky reggae" reciprocal solidarity, another path is open: cooptation and then *pure disavowal*; or Black culture without Black people. This road, of course, is well traveled in the history of (White) popular music, the very culture against which punk is ostensibly in rebellion.

The fruits of Island [Records]'s campaign with Bob Marley were first signaled by the successful 1975 British tour, during which Marley played to large, mixed audiences in London, Birmingham and Manchester. However, it was not until the following year that the mass gravitation towards reggae by white youth really began. That process must be understood against the backdrop of an increasingly inert and clichéd rock culture in the mid-1970s. As one journalist succinctly put it:

> The white kids have lost their heroes; Jagger has become a wealthy socialite, Dylan a mellow home-loving man, even Lennon has little to say anymore. So along comes this guy with amazing screw top hair, and he's singing about "burning and looting" and "brain wash education," loving your brothers and smoking your dope. Their dream lives on.[1]

In Marley's music a generation of white rock-fans rediscovered the oppositional values which so much contemporary rock music appeared to have lost. The marketing campaigns conducted by Island and Virgin caught the eyes and ears of white fans increasingly dissatisfied with mainstream rock. For while Marley made compromises in his musical style, by successfully combining reggae with other international pop forms, his songs maintained a political militancy and a counter-cultural quality which appealed deeply to young whites. In the universal, egalitarian themes which he addressed, white youth found meanings with which to make sense of their own lives and experiences in post-imperial Britain. The live performances to which Marley regularly attracted large white audiences throughout the 1970s, often witnessed the remarkable spectacle of thousands of young whites chanting "Rastafari" in unison and singing "stand up for your rights" along with the band.

The promotion of Marley as "reggae superstar" by sections of the recording industry served to encourage his reception as a "hero figure" amongst thousands of young whites. Indeed, the projection of reggae as a whole as "rebel music" and the imagery by which many other artists were marketed as "protest" figures and counter-cultural heroes, enhanced their political appeal amongst those white youth disillusioned with the complacency and self-indulgence of many rich white rock-stars. It was out of similar concerns and conditions that the punk movement emerged in 1976 as something of a reaction against rock's increasing technological sophistication, the gigantism of its live concerts and widening gap between audience and artists. Punk challenged the musical orthodoxies and aesthetic criteria of rock which had become dependent on recorded rather than live performances and on the primacy of albums over singles.[2] It was no coincidence, therefore, that many punks chose to register their rejection of the "dinosaurs" of rock culture through a strong identification with reggae. Reggae was particularly suited to signify that opposition. It had the political "bite" and the spontaneous, participatory qualities that were absent from so much contemporary pop. Reggae singers, by addressing themselves to the concerns of everyday life, and to themes of poverty, suffering and protest, were felt to have an authenticity that was lacking in rock. In its attempt to "shock" mainstream morality and culture, punk found in reggae and Rastafari a rich source of subversive and forbidding qualities, qualities of "dread," of conviction and rebelliousness.[3]

There were similarities between the discourses of punk ("Crisis," "Anarchy in the UK") and those of Rastafari ("Armaggideon Time," "War inna Babylon"). Punks drew analogies between their position and that of Rastas on the basis that both faced discrimination as a result of their appearance and beliefs. Such connections were immortalised in the Bob Marley song "Punky Reggae Party," which acknowledged the links between the two movements, proclaiming that while "rejected by society" and "treated with impunity," both were "protected by their dignity." Punk and new-wave groups like the Ruts, the Clash and the Slits incorporated reggae and Rasta rhetoric directly into their music. The Clash, for example, played live in front of a large backdrop of the 1976 Notting Hill riots, wearing stage clothes stencilled with phrases like "Dub" and "Heavy Manners." (The riot at Notting Hill was a seminal event in punk culture and had provided the inspiration for the Clash's "White Riot.")

At many punk gigs, reggae was frequently played during the interval between bands, as the only acceptable alternative to punk.[4] Punk artists like the Sex Pistols' John Lydon, moreover, openly declared their

enthusiasm for reggae, an enthusiasm which in Lydon's case was pursued further into an experimentation with dub in his subsequent group, Public Image Limited. The Clash also paid homage to the music by recording their own version of popular root songs like Junior Murvin's "Police and Thieves" and Willie Williams's "Armagiddeon Time." (Thousands of copies of the originals, together with cult records like *Two Sevens Clash* and "Uptown Top Ranking," were also bought by punks on import.) Besides the Slits, several other all-female and mixed new-wave bands, such as the Mistakes, the Au Pairs and the Raincoats, also employed reggae rhythms in their music.[5] Some groups began the practice of putting instrumental or dubbed versions of their songs on the B-sides of their singles. This practice, clearly borrowed from the dub mixes on soul and reggae 12-inch records, opened up possibilities for new kinds of experimentation with instruments, sounds and voices, through an appropriation of dub techniques.

Reggae was adopted by the punk movement for its ability to signify, in a particularly graphic way, white youth's own struggles for political and cultural power. In the same way that young white rock-musicians in the 1960s found in the blues a particularly apt means of expressing the collective experience of youth, so the model for punks seeking to recreate rock as a communal music in the mid-to-late 1970s was reggae.[6] Like the organic artists of the reggae tradition, punk musicians insisted on relating musical expression to the mundane concerns and experiences of everyday life. Punk's concern to expose the oppressive nature and boredom of everyday life under capitalism resonated with reggae's antipathy to commodity forms, its emphasis on "roots" and its faithful documentation of topical issues and current events. That resonance was itself partly predicated on white youth's own developing political consciousness of Britain's gathering economic and social crisis, experienced increasingly in the form of unemployment.

It was in punk's challenge to orderly consumption and its deconstruction of reified notions of pleasure that the movement intersected most clearly with reggae's own refusal to distinguish between "leisure" and "politics." Reggae's ability to integrate explicit lyrics with musical intensity, its spontaneity, performance-orientation and commitment to improvisation, all proved profoundly attractive to young whites increasingly alienated by the predictable musical products of mainstream rock and pop culture. Reggae's contribution to punk's demystification of pop ideology and its reaffirmation of young people's creative power was everywhere evident, in the movement's DIY approach to music-making, its directness of

expression and its attempts to close the gaps between artists and audience. The fruits of this connection were realised not only in the democratisation of musical performances and band formation, but also in a widening of access to the means of production and distribution themselves. Here the parallels with the reggae industry were striking, in the emergence of an autonomous network of independent labels, distribution organisations and retail outlets. Such connections were made concrete in organisations like Rough Trade, which provided a distribution service and retail outlet for both punk and reggae records.

In these ways the impact of reggae created scope for new kinds of opposition and new ways of being "political" in white youth culture which reflected the continuity of cultural expression with political action in black musical traditions. …

Simon Jones, from *Black Culture, White Youth: The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK* (London: Macmillan Education, 1998).

SKEETER THOMPSON OF SCREAM, INTERVIEW IN *FLIPSIDE*

Scream is now perhaps better known for being the band Dave Grohl left in order to move to Seattle and join the first stratospherically popular punk rock band: Nirvana. However, for many years prior Scream had been a pillar of the Washington, D.C., punk scene. In this interview, conducted by Donny the Punk for *Flipside*, the bassist Skeeter Thompson is posed a series of questions about the issues raised by being a Black punk kid in a predominantly White scene. The brief exchange is characterized by both sincere affection for, and a deeply hurt suspicion of, the punk scene. "[I]t doesn't really matter if you're black or white," as far as Thompson is concerned, but he then describes the casual racism of his White bandmates, the lip service given anti-racism by the punks, and what it feels like to be racially isolated at shows. Using words like "walls," "blocks," "tension," and "pressure," he reveals something about the seeming impenetrability of punk rock's whiteness. Yet not completely impenetrable, as Thompson also describes the "special kind of relationship" he feels with the other Black punks who come to shows—a sentiment which, we'll see later in Afro-Punk, will turn into a call for the building up of a Black punk community.