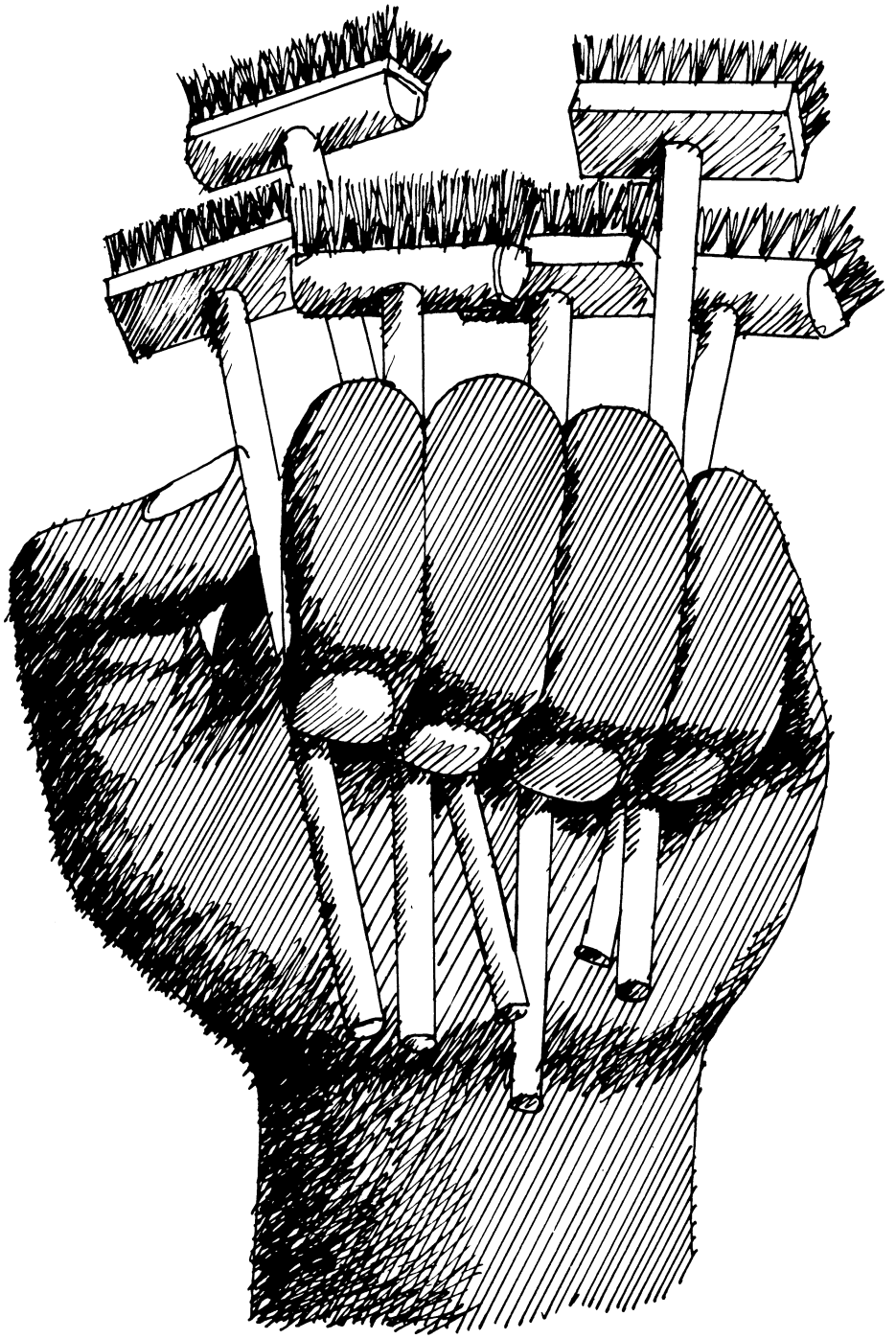

black london

BY HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

Extraterritorial: By the Rivers of Babylon

"It aint," said the black man emphatically, "no such-a thing as a 'black Briton.' And it's not a matter of going back-a-home to the Islands, either. When we came here, we brought back-a-home with us. Wherever the black man is in dis country, mahn," he concludes, his voice up an octave, "dat's *Jamaica."*

—Lu Garvey, Jamaican, aged 23.

Midnight on Saturday in Black London, and the people of the night emerge: the people that day cannot hide, the people who own the night. They are shadows converging on pre-appointed circles of sound, Da Word spread along the Wire all the week before. In the ritualized rendition of the week-end squat, black folks are "goin' blues."

On Bravington Road, in "The Grove," voices seemingly out of the darkness assault shadows from across the street: "Hey! . . . where da blues, mahn?" the strangers call out to commence the rite of demarcation of what will soon become an almost hermetic, autonomous universe, one unified and signified by blackness. "Hey mahn! . . . where Papa Sufferer playin'?" The music itself, however—reverberating down the street, bouncing off the walls and rattling the windows of back-to-back council flats, engulfing the normal night-sounds of the block—makes it pointless to ask.

The man at the door says "twenty pence," in a tone relegating to futility any urge to argue. Inside the vacant house—"liberated" only a few hours before, electricity and gas reconnected for the evening, surreptitiously—a wave of heat, as awesome as the noise of the music, nearly overwhelms. A solid wall of black bodies, two,

maybe three, hundred, slowly gyrates to the moan and the heavy drum rhythm of *reggae,* amplified by huge bass speakers, some as much as a thousand times louder than a normal stereo system, owned and defended by the "Sound Man" himself. Upstairs, another fifty or so queue for hot food and illegal booze, a joint of ganja (marijuana) making its rounds. As many more bodies crowd around the "gambling parlor," watching the regulars play "Brag."

Despite the heat—a sweltering, unbearable Jamaican heat, the kind of heat that breeds gnats and mosquitos to feed off sweating skin—the prevailing emotion is "the cool," an ice blue cool. No one speaks; there is no laughter: no sound other than the *reggae,* the monotonous, tyrannical, pounding beat of *reggae,* a racial mnemonic device, carrier of a way of life.

Each man has his own style, a veritable cult of fashion himself. Black Stetsons and "stingy-brim's" mask huge Afros, just as immobile features, frozen beyond "the cool," mask all emotion except for "the hip." A white face is as rare and as out of place here as are black ones at the Court of St. James; the only foreign accent, mahn, is the English accent. "Domicile," a voice on the record announces, "this former slave plantation island . . . Jamaica." The bodies start to grind now, a new tension in the room. "By the rivers of Babylon," the mellow voice continues, now quoting Psalm 137. "Where we sat down,/ And there we wept,/ when we remembered Zion." As he approaches the certain climax, long familiar to everyone in the house, the atmosphere electrifies, the tension thickens, yet still no sound is uttered—no sound, but Count Ossie's:

> *But the wicked carried us away—captivity*
> *Require from us a song.*
> *How can we sing King Alpha's song*
> *In a strange land?*

In England, where the tribe has replaced the nation as the prime focus of loyalty, and in London, a sprawling composite of hundreds of "villages" and neighborhoods, each defined by geo-cultural affinity, Black London stands isolated and marginal to the mainstream of British society. Ironically, Black London is itself fragmented and scattered throughout the city,

these patches of the Caribbean separated from each other by space and by point of origin of its émigrés, but united by a common situation vis-a-vis "da monkeys" (the English) and by a lingua franca known as *reggae.* Indeed, Black London is perhaps the most overstudied and least understood community of its kind: it exists as a mass of demographics, published annually by the Community Relations Commission, which capture little of the sense of life or of place peculiar to the West Indians there, a sense that has grown up only during the last quarter of a century, related to but distinct from the prevailing English cultural norms.

Black London is a term euphemistic, one more political than descriptive. Its colors shade from ochre to umber, from sepia to ebony, with sienna most probably the norm. Each of Black London's composite neighborhoods remains a remnant of one island or another: Ladbroke Grove residents are primarily from Trinidad, while Barbadians and South Islanders dwell mostly in Finsbury Park, Notting Hill Gate, and Shepherd's Bush. Jamaicans, who form about seventy percent of the total, traditionally concentrate themselves in Brixton.

This community is unique from other black enclaves in the West because its members came there in droves, but voluntarily, in search of economic freedom in a post-war Britain. Consequently, it brought with it a discrete and viable culture, one with its own attendant values, an extended family structure, its own religious and secular liturgy—all built on a firm foundation of black music, known at various points in its own evolution as calypso, bluebeat/*ska,* rock steady, and now as *reggae,* an unvarying and despotic bomp, jingle-jingle, bomp, very heavy on the bass, sung in terms of apocalypse and political in-group appeal, revelation and revolution; it is the music of sufferation. Each of these communities grafted onto English culture its world from *back-a-yard:* the West Indian rural culture of food, music, and language, with a concomitant joie de vivre grafted into turf assigned it when it arrived. This insular world, isolated by history, tradition, class, color, and culture, became a world apart, a separate society, precisely when the same color that was a socio-economic liability *above* ground, became the password for membership *under* ground. "What the heart lacked," wrote Edward Braithwaite in his *Rights of Passage,* "we supplied with our hips and the art of our shuffle shoes."

Recruited to man menial jobs in a work-force-depleted postwar

Britain, and rebuffed by the McCarran Act in 1952, which limited to one hundred per year the number of Jamaicans who could emigrate to the United States, black folks from the islands flooded into an all-white Britain, seeking the "forty acres and a mule" that their black brothers in the States have found evasive since Emancipation. Relegated initially by skills, but later by convention, to specified menial tasks—running the tubes, driving the buses, sweeping the streets—and treated suspiciously because of cultural differences, the community turned inward and fused not only what it remembered from *back-a-yard,* but also what could not be effaced by a pervasive, seemingly tyrannical English culture, with whatever it could appropriate from England to form its own institutions—from religious ones such as the African churches, to practical, secular ones, such as the blues clubs and blues parties, held each weekend to raise the monthly rent. And of all the manifestations of cultural autonomy that characterize Black London, it is its music that provides the heart-beat.

Reggae, in fact, is such a pervasive institution itself, that it has in turn given rise to other, subsidiary institutions, such as the Sound System—that homogenized sheaf of music that weaves together these splintered factions each week-end—and goin' blues: not only the loom, but the warp and the weft of that weaving itself, the very instrument by which this ritualized unity occurs, every Saturday night. It is the point of reference for the community: heroes called "Bogart" and "Al Capone," or "Jesse James" and "Dr. Spock," are as common to *reggae* as are "Babylon," Lot's wife, and Job. Most *reggae* have a message, cloaked beneath a language of imagery unparalleled in West Indian literature. Seemingly undecipherable nonsense lines, coupled with scat rhymes and riddles, mask an uncompromising determination to alter the social order in this country. The monotonous and apparently harmless lyrics of the Sounds Man's "talk-over's" are pure rebellion:

> *So, have gots, have nots,*
> *Trim-heads, comb locks, dread-nots,*
> *Is sheep from goat?*
> *Find yourself, row your own boat,*
> *Be ready for Da Day!*

Reggae is the channel for urging forth an inevitable and drastic social change . . . soon.

Accordingly, a whole way of life has built-up around *reggae.* When British disc jockeys refused to air it, and when pop music tabloids gave it scant coverage (and therefore record promoters and distributors), the Sounds Men arrived, often with a shirt on their back and a suitcase full of the latest bootlegged *reggae* tunes. These were men who forcibly gained access to the records produced back in Jamaica, but distributed only to certain local d.j.'s. The Sounds Men, who ripped off the unlabeled forty-fives from these disc jockeys originally but who operate well-established, lucrative "ah-rangements" with them now, acquired a degree of power within the community that surpassed even that of the infamous pimp, "him with da hog and da fine bitches": their whim spelt financial success or disaster for an artist. As with the aristocracy of jazz, the Sounds Men are titled: there is Count Suckle and The Fat Man, Sir Coxone and Chaka, Papa Sufferer and The Chicken, The Kind of Shelley, and hundreds more. Each has a sounds system of from fifteen to twenty speakers, operating through four one-thousand-watt amps, each costing about $2.50 a watt. And because the Sounds are not marketed as are white popular musics, each Sound Man has his own set of Sounds, his own collection straight from "J.A.," and his own, personalized following. The incredible aspect of the pervasiveness of *reggae* is that its only means of advertising or of review of new records (except for "accepted" artists, such as Jimmy Cliff, Toots and Maytals, or Bob Marley) is through the Sounds Men. From them, from this motley band of music hustlers, an institution grew to house their functions—the blues parties.

Blues parties, known now as goin' blues when on any Saturday night literally thousands of black folk emerge from hiding to seek out their very own Sounds Man, are held to raise the rent, much as were "rent parties" in the Harlem of the 1920s and '30s. The "host" pays the Sounds Man as much as $150 a night to bring with him his crowd. Illegal booze, hot food, gambling, all take place upstairs in the squatted, ghetto house. Everyone's smoking: you can get high by breathing, all for an admission of fifty cents. Venue shifts each week, to stay one step ahead of the police; still, the scene remains the same: jamming all night, *skanking* till dawn, blowing weed, sipping illegal shots of Johnny Walker "Black, mahn," from the bottom of Coke cans. A few white women are allowed in, but only accompanied. And one white dude stands ubiquitous and unmolested; he's the "pusherman," the dealer, distributing the al-

mighty ganja and dealing coke. "Him not white, mahn," Louie advises me as my eyebrows rise. "Him da pusher-mahn, dat all."

The decibel level would drown out all semblance of conversation—if there were any. But no one speaks: there is no laughter, no small talk, except maybe "Pass da ganja," or "Don't touch me, mahn," as my strange black face unavoidably brushes past the Brother in the crowded room. But it's not only to the stranger that no one speaks; no one speaks to *anyone,* not even to the regulars with whom they party every week. Goin' blues is escape, but a radically different one, say, from what black folks use in the States. These blues are not happy or sad, but limbo—limbo plus despair. And the Sounds, the Sounds, blare at an almost unimaginable level, deadening the nerves, killing response. Anesthetization of the Soul. No pain any more; but no pleasure either. Just the Sounds, the Sounds of Armageddon.

And the Styles—each person has his own, from Jamaican Peasant to Ebony Peacock, meant to murder the non-initiate with color shock, electric hair and all. This, of a Saturday night, is their world . . . at least until dawn on Sunday. It is a world of music and myth and the monotony of mime: Jamaica in Britain, Kingston-on-Thames, Africa in England. But by dawn, the plumes have wilted. And black folks slip away, their brass, fitted for the evening, now tarnished by the light. No longer can they be owners of the night. The cool stumble home, lost in the sunshine. And the quiet of the morning weighs heavily as I watch the plumed countenances metamorphosed into plucked chickens.

Although it is through the quality of each man's suffering that we must begin to understand this community, it is through demographics that we begin to understand the function of its isolation. And these statistics are devastating: unemployment for black youth is twice that of young whites, mostly because they are refusing to perpetuate "traditional" occupation mentalities which relegated their parents to the London Transport Company. Unemployment for their parents is at fifteen percent, compared with six percent for the society as a whole, at a time when there is a severe shortage in the service areas, where blacks predominate.

Homelessness for blacks is higher than for any other immigrant group (and any people who weren't in regular attendance at the Globe are "immigrants"), as is the percent of substandard housing. And more people per family squeeze into less room per household than for any other immigrant population. Accordingly, the crime rate is extremely high in black neighborhoods, as is the "school-leaver" age. The result is that an insular community has become more insular, with very little hope for escape.

"But how can they be 'English?' " asks John la Rose, none too rhetorically. La Rose, a West Indian poet and head of the New Beacon Books Publishing Company, located smack dab in the middle of the black community at Finsbury Park, contends that "the structure of their home life has remained West Indian, the food they eat is West Indian, and their music is West Indian. Not only that," he continues, "but the clubs, the music clubs, are all black. The kids speak in Jamaican to avoid detection in school. And the people here think of them as black, and not English, as the Jews are in the Soviet Union. The essence of the recent change in consciousness in the community is that now, rather than English, the kids feel black. And most important of all, *reggae* gives to the entire population a kind of autonomy, an independence from the rest of the society. Even their language, through the use of secret meanings and double entendres, tries to negate all that Babylon has tried to do to them. They are a society apart."

Robert Cunningham, director of the one-year-old Ashanti Record Company, which records local *reggae* musicians almost exclusively, concurs with la Rose. "When it comes to our immigrant community," he says, "the people want to hold onto anything from home, because it's so damn cold here. The closest ties to *back-a-yard* are all found in *reggae.* But we can't even control its dissemination: white shops won't stock it, although there is a big and growing demand. There are no black disc jockeys in London. Our artists have no protection over copyrights or royalties. White artists can come along and steal our stuff anytime they want. And they do. What the hell can we do about it'?"

Indeed, Cunningham's sense of powerlessness pervades the community and transcends social class. Ashton Gibson, who runs the Melting Pot, a youth hostel in Brixton that provides one hundred and twenty otherwise homeless people with housing, says that "there is going to be no end to the problems that these children, and

their children, will be causing in the next decade and in forthcoming generations, unless the authorities can somehow alter the pattern. The West Indian family structure," he continues, "has collapsed in this country. West Indian parents can't cope with the responsibility of parenthood in British urban society. And then the children have adopted the same attitude as the rest of this society about their own parents. Because the society does not provide the opportunity for West Indians to make a mark in, say, the police or teaching or the professions, our children assume we are of little or no account and refuse to accept our discipline. They don't give us respect. And because we as parents are fairly ill-educated, we can't extend to them tolerance. So we and they fight, and there is a parting of the ways."

"Of course the middle and lower classes are depressed," la Rose concurs. "But where will they go? Why should they go back to Jamaica? How would they survive? Look at the bone structure of the kids who emigrated. There is more milk and more cheese here, and less lack of food in general. But that shouldn't be the point," he argues, shifting emphasis. "If their situation is better than it was in Jamaica, it is still not better than for the rest of the English population; in fact, it is worse. One does not compare the living standard of living before and after the Revolution, for the society as a whole. We are still substandard."

In part because of its sense of isolation and powerlessness, Black London defines itself through its own instruments. Language, along with music, is the obvious example. The language, known as "Jamaican," is a patois comprised of words and expressions from all over the Islands, as well as of inverted English usages. "It is a form of nationalism," holds Tony Soares, who was the first person arrested under the Race Relations Act two years ago for "incitement to riot and arson," in what many held to be the test case to frighten away the more politically-minded from even thinking about protest. "Language allows us to stand unique and separate, and to be understood by others only when we want to be." In this linguistic system, *back-a-yard* is anywhere in the West Indies, but usually Jamaica; *ras* means "prince," as well as "kiss

my ass"; *mih nuh no,* of course, means "I don't know." *Da rotted Kayan* are the Po-lice, while *da monkeys* or *da natives* are the English. *Dunny?* means "are you working?" and *skanking* is dancing. *Babylon* is either England or Jamaica, depending on who is being blamed. *Da Oppressor,* that ubiquitous archvillain who punctuates and darts his way through Black London's singularly omnipresent musical life-force, is sometimes *da monkey,* other times "the system," and sometimes, indeed, one's own black self. And *over-stand* means to comprehend in a political manner. *"Da monkey understands,"* observes Lu-Garvey [a combination of the names of his two heroes, Patrice Lumumba and Marcus Garvey] wryly. *"But da Black mahn over-stands."*

The principal keepers of the cultural flame, in terms both of language translation and musical tradition, are the enigmatic Rastafarians, an esoteric religious order who embrace values, such as blackness, Africa, natural hair styles, and collective economics, not generally shared by capitalist Jamaica and capitalist England. Ras Tafari was the name of the uncrowned first and final Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia: King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of Judah. His coronation was a fulfillment, they held, of an age-old prophecy, reiterated in the twenties by Garvey, that a black man, out of Africa, would be crowned, then lead his people home. Each Rasta is a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (officially recognized since 1965 by the Ethiopian order). Each has an Amharic name, given at baptism. Each is a student of the Bible. They mix into their normal conversations Old Testament language of Apocalypse along with New Testament beliefs in nonviolence, as well as in Armageddon and Revelation. They are recognizable immediately, and generally feared, because of their peculiar hair style: long, never cut, never combed "dread locks," similar in appearance to that of the East African Masai tribesmen, a cross between Gorgon and Medusa. They are absolutely passive, while managing all the while to command the respect of all sections of the black community, not only in England, but in Jamaica as well.

Tesfa Zaba led me through "Ethiopian World Federation,

Incorporated. Local 33," under the watchful countenance of Emperor Yohannes, to speak with the political spokesman, Emmanual Fox, called "Pinta." "Our names have meaning," wisely counsels Tesfa Zaba. "They are no ordinary names. Mine means 'the Grace of God.' " Pinta, with the presence of a lion but the demeanor of a priest, mingles astute observation with Rasta dogma. "The Western Church," he begins, with no introduction, "has flipped the black man's mind. 'Blessed are the meek,' it says. But how can a man be meek in this class society? The white man," he hurries on, warming up, "has built his 'civilization' on blood: savagery and blood. Even Herodotus spoke of Ethiopia as the origin of life. I don't want to be equal with the white man. When it comes to the crunch—and this *is* the crunch—we must be black first in a racist society."

The Rastas see repatriation to Ethiopia as the only answer to Western racism. "When our ancestors were reciting poetry at Timbuctu, and were building the Pyramids," Pinta continues, now echoing the teachings of the late Mohammed Elijah, "da monkey was crawling around in the caves of Europe. But he keeps us weak and exploits us. The black man has no rights in this country. Where can he turn politically? Certainly not to the Conservatives. And Labour hasn't helped us. This country has given the black man a concept of being inferior, which we didn't have back-a-yard. That feeling is here: you can feel it in the air in any of the black neighborhoods. As long as the black man stays here, he is a eunuch. It is wrong for a black man to make his home here. He's the first to be sacked, the last to be hired. He has no political power."

Pinta's analysis, along with many others, concludes with the belief in a forced repatriation from England. "It doesn't matter, really, what we think, because the black man will be forced out one day soon—forcefully repatriated to Jamaica. And then all black men will see Rasta Thought as the Chairman Mao Thought of the black man." Until repatriation at least, the Rastas happen to be the most active community workers, assisting black people to get decent housing, good and better jobs, helping them to enroll in adult education courses, bailing young people out of jail. They are missionaries, sent to England to administer to the wayward flock, floundering in the desert. Oddly enough, they engage in very little political activity, that is, overt political activity, because

they fear they would be crushed outright by the English, be they of the Left or of the Right (neither, though subtle in discourse, has had any compunction about using the letter of the law to stifle any autonomous black political activity). But they form the bulk of the reggae musicians and hold regular dances and parties for the community. And although feared by much of English society, they have very solid identities. One teacher at an Educationally Sub-Normal School (E.S.N.), where black children are over-represented, said that the "Rastafarian children are always more secure in their sense of who they are than are any of the other colored children. They have a sense of themselves and of where they are going. Regardless of my personal view of their beliefs, this makes them much better and more sincere students. Almost never did one leave school—a miracle for the colored child."

So let the words of our mouths,
And the meditation of our hearts,
Be acceptable in they sight
Over I.

—*By the Rivers of Babylon,* Bob Marley and the Wailers.

Although they listen to some of the new reggae and respect, from a distance, the nonconformist Rastas, the older immigrants have their own areas of cultural autonomy, not only separate from the broader English milieu, but also separate from the rest on their own island within. For these people, Saturday Market Day and Sunday Church, and for the "back-sliders" a shot or two of black rum at one or another of the ramshackle "clubs," is all that's left of Jamaica. The clubs, from the refined joints such as the Q-Club or Mr. B's, All Nations and Bluesville, or the Four Aces, to the make-shift ones for the "have-not's," where the price of a drink changes on each order—these clubs are the center of night-life for the older ones, the ones who still can remember Jamaican nights and Carnival, first hand. These are the people, says photographer Armet Francis, for whom Jamaica "is not just a warm feeling as it is for those of us who grew up here. Jamaica, for

them, is an alive thing, but in the form of a memory they nurture through dances and through the market place, and especially through the Church. They can smell *nyah-nyah* or *oily-oily,* or shop for cassava and plantains, then close their eyes and see J.A. What else can they do, mahn—be British?"

Unlike people at the blues parties, those in the clubs laugh a lot —laugh right out loud, sing loud and long, and just plain feel good. Decor is always the same: heavy linoleum, broken-down chairs with backs missing, and an over-sized, old fashioned juke box. Sometimes the club is a shell of an entire house; other times it is just a few rooms in an otherwise vacant or condemned block of houses. And the people who make the London Tubes run on time, and who make the double-decker buses the most efficient in the Western world, come to these clubs each week-end, doing the old dances like the calypso, listening to Harry Belafonte and Nat "King" Cole, dreaming of a life lost and left behind, back-a-yard.

Market Day means Ridley Road or Brixton Market, Dalston or Shepherd's Bush. It means finding goat's meat and greens, salt fish and ackee, bammy and breadfruit, plantains and frying bananas, and maybe even a *juju* talisman to ward off unemployment or to win at the pools. Market Day means peacock plumes and combed-out Afros, corn-roll braids or straightened hair, Rasta presence and Rasta dread. It means hours spent hassling to save a few pence, and never enough money to buy never enough food. It means big, fat mamas with rags tied around their heads, babies straddled over their shoulders like a sack of just picked yams. Market Day means keeping one's stomach in tune with the Islands, at the expense of salted fish and chips, or steak and kidney pie. Market Day means a shared ritual, every Saturday morning and half the afternoon, a ritual of the gut. It means a city block full of black folk who speak the same tongues, the language of shanty-town, back-a-yard. All this and more is Saturday Market Day.

Sunday church for the faithful means one of a hundred Pentecostal sects, or the Rasta's Ethiopian Orthodox, or else one of the underground cults of Shango. The Pentecostal services are Church of God or "Jesus Name" or scores of variations on either. Church is where the wayward are "saved," where the possessed "Dance in the Spirit," and where some are granted the gift of the tongues: "He shall be my *ad a la,* He shall be my *a Kekobai,* He

shall be my *Atandeboina.*" Sunday church is where they "twitch" or "shudder," and where the Preacher Man touches base with home with his call-and-response sermonizing. These churches are bastions of the middle classes, or of those who pray to be. Unlike the Southern black American church, these organizations perpetuate political apathy. Whereas the black church in America in the early sixties concerned itself with theological justifications for social concern, the church in Black London busies itself with painting God and his Son black and with painting heaven in terms of the never-never land they emigrated from. It is an insidious other-worldness which makes the sort of political urge characteristic, say, of King's once flourishing Southern Christian Leadership Conference almost impossible. Converts are apolitical, and stay that way or else leave.

Part of the reason for the non-role of the black church politically lay, of course, with the priesthood. Senior Apostle Samuel Adefila Abidoye, of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in London, concerns his public statements with the racial origins of the historical Jesus: "Christianity has not only done a lot to the black race, but it also originated from the black race." To answer criticism from the younger West Indians, who thus far avoid the church like the plague, the Senior Apostle says "Who has more claim to Christianity and can have the pride of celebrating the birth of the Founder, then, than the black race?" Still, the young remain unconvinced. Tony Soares, whose "Grassroots Bookshop" in Golbourne Road is a center of political activity in Ladbroke Grove, believes that the church's potential as a social tool is largely unrealized, and largely unrealizable. "It is purely a religious institution," Soares contends. "It is completely nonpolitical. The older black folks still feel as if they are in a foreign country, and don't have the *right* to be men. So, they go to church, while their children are growing even more alienated from society. Even the kids's games, like Black Pudding, reflect this alienation. And look at the statistics for juvenile crimes and teen-age unemployment and school-leaver age. It is depressing."

The biggest event of the year for the old ones, outside of Christmas, is Carnival, rechristened in Britain "Trinidad Carnival," and held the last Saturday and Sunday in August, rather than at the beginning of Lent, as it is in the West Indies. Here, people "jump up," and keep themselves "topped up" with whatever

stimulant (cheap wine, ganja, or the almighty black rum), climb aboard elaborate floats, and parade through London, picking people up wherever the parade passes, just sucking them in. It begins under the big arches on Portobello Road, winds its way through sprawling London, then reconvenes late at night, again on Portobello Road. The parade slowly makes its way past Westminster and Buckingham Palace, with the same degree of incongruity as Scottish Tartans would have uptown in Harlem. After two too-short days, Carnival is over; and so is the closest touch the old ones have with back-a-home.

This, then, is their world, in the main built on the shaky foundation of a dream of Jamaica: full of color, but full of despair. It is blue, but not a mellow lapis lazuli or Miles's *Kind of Blue,* but a heavy shade, Ellington's *Indigo,* where life is marked off by confusion because most think they can save a little money, buy a plot of land back-a-yard, and return the conquering heroes. Almost none will do this; almost none will be able to. Their dream of Jamaica is the dream of an impossible return to the native land, a world that no longer exists. And this dream gives to the sordid existence in this black Western ghetto an ethereal quality of tolerance, which allows them to accept a condition of living, of powerlessness, against which other black people in other ghettoes flail. As a character in Mustapha Matura's current popular play, *Play Mas,* says: "Ah don't care how much it a-change, ah don't care if as soon as ah land der dey shoot me. Ah'd die happy, really happy, not happy fer a minute because yer see something funny on de telly, but happy all de time. Her' in yer heart, even when yer enhappy yer still happy in yer heart. Ah cain't describe it, but it's a feeling yer have inside." This "feeling inside," an alienation from themselves, only furthers the cycle, and further alienates the young here from their parents, from each other, and both from the society at large. It makes the use of political institutions a not very fruitful alternative.

The dream of Jamaica has been transformed into the fear of repatriation to the Islands. One community social worker, who has operated in Brixton for seven years, is vehement in his belief

that repatriation is what's in store for the unassimilated West Indians. "Repatriation is on the cards, unless the black community as an oppressed minority discovers its strength as a movement which can exert political pressure, especially in areas in which we predominate. Our future here is bleak. It's hard to predict violence—and dangerous to do that publicly in Britain—but the situation is deteriorating very badly. There is a lot of tension, just below the surface."

Rudy Narayan, a black barrister, doesn't go so far as to see repatriation as the natural end of the black man in England. But almost: "I advocate a time of insularity and introspection," he says, "say, for the next five years. Our people are alienated from this society. Even a qualified barrister can't get jobs from solicitors, so how is the average man expected to assimilate into this society? We need to think and act as a community, much as do the Jews. They are the example, par excellance; our people are largely working class and don't have a lot of leisure time to think about politics. Until we can infiltrate the political spheres, either through a separate party, or through the three major parties, strength enough to 'put' candidates, then our situation won't change."

Sir David Pitt, a medical doctor and the first black man to be chairman of the Greater London Council (which effectively runs London), sees assimilation and mainstream political involvement as the only means for achieving social equality, and predictably so. "They," he says, "have to get into the machine and use it. It's the only way they can really do it here. They don't have any other place to go." Peerage notwithstanding, most English people would tap Pitt lightly on the shoulder and remind him graciously that his "they" should be "we": this is the problem. But Pitt's is a minority of one. His isolation is as poignant as is the black lower class's from the rest of the country, and perhaps even more tragic. It was made graphic when Pitt ran for Parliament in 1971 and lost, only because his own black constituents refused to vote for him. The prospects for a black man in Parliament are slim, indeed. A black caucus of public officials is not even a possibility in this century.

Part of the problem of the half million black Britons (seventy-five percent of whom make up ten percent of the Greater London area) is that the English are still largely oblivious to the subtleties of

racism, in all its myriad forms, despite race relations boards and anti-discrimination laws. This is a country where a black woman can be criminally accused of "assault occasioning actual bodily harm," for placing tribal marks on the cheeks of her children; where "cultural pluralism" is a paper concept; where much of their future depends on the whim of a handful of liberals; and where the election of one black man to a city council is heralded as a new day in race relations, with the end of separate societies now in sight. Few black Britons attend university; only one is now at Cambridge, for instance, one less than the number of black Americans there! Most never even finish high school. Significantly, the first widely distributed black film, Jimmy Cliff's *The Harder They Come,* seemingly permanently installed at the Brixton Theatre, pictures a country boy who comes to the city, rips off the Man, tastes the Good Life—only to be snuffed out by the Almight "Oppressor"—and black oppressors at that. For me, who watched my own people, by fits and starts, by jerks and degrees, try to crawl up out of a similar ghetto world, Black London's isolation, insularity, and fragmentation are frightening.

The complexity of the problem is best glimpsed from the refreshingly frank comments of Tom Rees, the concerned deputy director of the Runnymede Trust, a well-respected "education charity" established in 1968 and funded by two Quaker charities to study racial relations; it analyses and publishes official census statistics and sub-reports. Rees says that "The West Indian younger generation has been failed by but has also failed the British school system. Their isolation and marginality, if you will, is being reinforced by all our new information. We can only conclude with a degree of honesty that this generation is opting out of conventional British society and its concomitant conventional institutions. The black man is taking refuge in a subculture, with its whole range of attendant social opportunities, including delinquent ones."

The reasons for this extra-territoriality, Rees suggests, is that "the real opportunities for mobility are disproportionately blocked and bad. So some have chosen to choose outlets such as snatching purses, or mugging, in part because other alternatives have appeared closed." Politically, Rees continues, "we must get a bit depressed. Whereas the Indian and Pakistani communities have moved into the local authorities, largely through the Liberal Party

in Ealing and in the North of England, the West Indians are an extremely fragmented community. Thus, they have been very unsuccessful in forming up behind black candidates. Any attempts to break into national politics have been colossal failures," he observes, echoing the Pitt failure.

"You see," he continues, "there is a surprisingly large gulf between black West Indians who have made it and those who have not. And this is the difference between Indians and Pakistanis on the one hand, and West Indians on the other: the former have a quite effective internal structure, which allows for some moving into society and for crossing social barriers; the latter do not. There is no gap between different classes in the Indian community—people lift one another up."

Social mobility for the black Londoners is both an internal and external matter. Until black people in England can achieve representative influence in national institutions, and a fair amount of control over their own cultural institutions—especially the reggae industry—they will remain isolated in sub-standard worlds, victims of a social order most don't even understand. They must break down the barriers between environment and aspiration. If not, then the barely concealed racial tension will explode in the near future, perhaps on an unprecedented scale. After months in Black London and with black Londoners, one must take seriously Chris Mullard's conclusion in *Black Britain:* "If no steps are taken, the protests of today will become the riots of tomorrow—there will be war." Only time will test Mullard's prediction. But, till the war at any rate, it will be goin' blues this Saturday night.