

The Transom Review

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Parachute Radio

by Christopher Lydon

I. Dropping In

"Parachute radio" was one slogan we were trying out in Jamaica. To ourselves we kept quoting from the old revolutionaries' manual: "First, seize the radio station..."

The idea was to drop into a country we didn't know (English speaking, in this case, and geographically handy) and say: "take us to your interesting talkers." And then the mission became to strike up a nightly radio call-in conversation on all things Jamaican, hosted in effect by a curious Martian. Part of the trick, and the test, would be to make engaging sense to the local broadcast audience and, equally, to Internet listeners in the States and elsewhere who tuned in live, or archivally.

And so for two very lively weeks in December we guest-hosted "Tell Me About It" on Jamaica's mainstream (commercial) radio station, RJR. The show was long-established; our themes were our own. Late-night radio was the perfect medium for the conversation--the only medium, I'm convinced, that could be so expansive, digressive, intimate, satisfying, real.

Would you tell me, I asked, for example, about Jamaica's identity as the child of Africa and the British Empire, in the Caribbean family, off the superpower's shores?

Would you tell me about post-Marley reggae and dancehall music?

Could we talk about Post-Colonial Sex, from the renta-Rasta trade in resorts like Negril to the balances of power, pleasure and pain in the conspicuously macho public culture of Kingston?



In the season of V. S. Naipaul's Nobel Prize (nine years after Derek Walcott's) could we talk about Caribbean books?

Could we talk about Jamaica's halting, polite, very popular drive to take the criminal curse off mere possession and private use of its banned, beloved weed, ganja?

Could we talk about the flawed heroism of Jamaica's Maroons, the rebel and runaway slaves who in 1738 (nearly 40 years before the North Americans) beat the Brits into a treaty that gave them freedom and their own territory--on condition that they mercilessly chase down any new refugees from the colonial plantocracy?

II. Talking with Strangers

And of course what we really wanted to know was: could we sustain an authentic conversation with strangers--of a color not mine, in many shades? Jamaicans are English-speakers who move in and out of their own patois, not a dialect but a Creole language. They are islanders with vital attachments to our mainland (there are 400,000 Jamaicans in Brooklyn alone) and much more knowing about us than we are about them. Could I learn the gentle rhythm of their speech? (My producer Ben Walker ran in with notes on the first few nights: "Ease up, man, you're in Jamaica.") Would we gather some insight into ourselves, our North American culture and politics and the imperial travails ongoing in the war in Afghanistan and the search for Osama bin Laden?

Well, you can hear me wrestling with accents and equipment on our website: <http://www.christopherlydon.org>. Maybe you will understand the long and lovely bursts of patois that blew past me like birdsong; I learned to study the faces of our in-studio guests, and lean on them for an implied translation. And then you may answer the larger questions on your own. For ourselves, we felt we'd stumbled into a wondrous intersection of an old medium (broadcast radio) and the Internet future. Some of us want to go immediately to Singapore, or Ghana, or Zimbabwe, or India. Or, because we're not restricted to the Anglophone red-colored lands of the old British Empire and Commonwealth, to Eastern Europe, or Japan. The mission is to open many more conversations--why not a continuous series?-- that can be local and instantly global, wide-open as to subject matter, candid and incisive when they choose to be, also smart, modern, unofficial, inexpensive, non-commercial and memorable.

III. Thematic, Cultural, Nosy

"We are an excessive people!" a music producer shouted at me. "Likkle but with tallawah," said another Jamaican, "that is to say: we're a small but dynamic and exciting nation." These were the bass lines under every radio show we did.

Jamaicans love to talk, and they are old hands at talk radio--much of it, like the local North American variety, given to pothole complaints and the parsing of newspaper stories and the daily scandal. The tempo is slower, but the picture is familiar: man alone in studio, trolling headlines, seeking controversy

and phone calls. On as many as six Jamaican stations radio chat is a day-time staple. The afternoon host of "Perkins On-Line" on HOT-102-FM, one Wilmot known as "Muttie" Perkins, is a national institution and a true phenomenon. An erudite and stentorian basso, "Muttie" declaims for five hours a day in the persona of a deeply disapproving neo-colonial schoolmaster. Jamaica should be studying Singapore, he was browbeating the faithful when we arrived. "We are not organizing ourselves to be rich, but to beg, borrow and t'ief our way in the world," he observed. In the newspapers and on rival radio stations, Perkins was being roundly condemned for stirring the hornets in his own head: black people are better off as a result of slavery and colonialism, he was arguing and re-arguing daily, as also Jews, he insisted, got benefits from the Holocaust, like their own state of Israel. "But for slavery most of us would not be here at all," he repeated--not exactly a persuasive argument in slavery's favor, but exactly the kind of verbal and political mischief that Jamaicans seem to be hooked on.

We decided at the start to duck politics--starting with the reparations-for-slavery debate underway everywhere, it seemed. We would err on the side of the thematic, the cultural and the nosy. We leaned heavily on guests that Jamaicans knew but not on talk radio--figures like Luciano, the leading singer in the roots-reggae revival; the novelist ("Waiting in Vain") Colin Channer; and the folklorist and comedienne Joan Andrea Hutchinson.

Among radio buffs, a little bragging is in order just for the talking medium itself, the warmth of the human voice, the closeness of callers we never saw. Jamaicans open with "Good night, Christopher" where we would say, "Good evening." Rastafarians greet you endearingly with, "Bless-ed." One repeat caller who never identified himself is well known to other listeners as a blind man named Garnett: "I am enjoying the conversation with my visionary caller," said another woman on the line. I had the feeling I was in a very wide circle of familiar enthusiasts who were taking liberties on talk radio to be themselves. And furthermore I felt that spontaneous radio gave them the opening to make arguments about race, sex, and Jamaican identity that would not appear among Letters to the Editor. One example: "Bongo Jerry" Small, a poet and maverick historian, observed on our air that in any international track meet today there will be Jamaican sprinters and jumpers scattered among half a dozen or more national teams--but not milers or marathoners. "Most of the Jamaican accomplishment is explosive," he said, making a sorry connection as well with Jamaican domestic and political violence. On paper he would have been a target for PC world police; on radio he was just interesting.

IV. Starting in Prison

Our inaugural plunge dealt with prison reform because our sponsor from the Harvard Law School, Professor Charles Nesson and his Berkman Center for Internet and Society, were already studying the drive in the prisons of Kingston toward spiritual regeneration and self-management by the prisoners themselves. This was part of the substantive agenda that helped trigger our trip in the first place. Kingston is the murder capital of the Caribbean, with as many killed by gangsters and police this year as have died in the second Intifada, Israelis as well as Palestinians. "It should be called a civil war," said a Jamaican lady from the countryside. "And it would be, but for the fear of scaring tourism away. If we had a Fidel Castro in Jamaica," she added, "he'd stop the uptown/downtown war in Kingston."

Curiously the only popular figure in that relentless war is Jamaica's Corrections Commissioner John Prescod, a professional military man who has set a course among prisoners and the public in the

direction of self-help, education, work-release and rehabilitation of criminals. "Reverence for Life" is the name of the redemptive movement that has taken root in the worst of the prisons we saw on arrival--the General Penitentiary on Tower Street in Kingston. Were we looking at a light unto the nations that have given up on rehabilitation? Or were we looking, as Professor Nesson wondered aloud, at "another Jamaican scam?" In truth we never did sort out the collision of impressions inside Tower Street. 1400 men are bunked four-to-a-cell in a dilapidated brick warehouse; most seemed to have a free run of the dusty courtyards and exercise areas where we met them. It seemed to me a confoundingly medieval but not demoralized pen, full of high-spirited men who cheered loudest of all in our presence when their chief warder and hero, Colonel Prescod, said he believed in holding prisoners until they can read and write! "I believe in what I am doing," Prescod said, "because I believe in you." It was a prisoner on hand that day, dubbed "Phantom," who, Prescod said, had taught him the basics: "There are two things we need," Phantom had said. "Hope, and discipline."

The prison conundrum was, at least, a starting point. Our nightly radio conversations began with Prescod on criminal rehabilitation, "the revolution from inside" and the challenge of changing a prison culture. It was not so long a leap on our second night to inquire how societies heal themselves, or don't, after imperialism and slavery. Fidel Castro is revered in Jamaica for driving a stake through the heart of colonialism, and holding it in place for 40 years. Jamaicans, by contrast, are stuck (articularly, nay volubly so) in a long post-colonial moment. They are embarrassed to be stymied still by plantation hierarchies of color and class, by shade-ism if not racism, by fierce physical divisions of Kingston between the new hotel and shopping-mall zones and the "no-go areas" downtown, the garrison housing projects and the musical Trenchtowns that Bob Marley sang about. The "Reverence for Life" guru and visionary Desmond Green, as a guest on our program, made a direct connection with prisoner rehabilitation and social recovery. Jamaica, he said, has yet to forgive itself for being born in slavery. A culture of violence comes naturally, he said, in "a nation that thinks it is bad."

V. Voices of the People

A culture of young bands and endless new musical grooves comes naturally, too, from a nation that produced Bob Marley and thinks of itself, 20 years after his premature death, as still the song-and-dance capital of the world. Colin Channer, called "the reggae novelist," a citizen now of Kingston and Brooklyn, N.Y., outlined on our program a "reggae aesthetic" that extends to all the arts, and fiction in particular: a vital narrative force encompassing (as Marley's songs did) sex, prayer, poor-people's politics, ganja highs, Jamaican roots, world consciousness, Rastafarian spirituality, Marcus Garvey's race-consciousness and Afro-centrism and Garvey's still larger social inclusiveness ("One God, One Aim, One Destiny"). Or "One Love," in Marley's thematic song. It is a powerful combination, as the music historian Lloyd Bradley observed: reggae gave the Rastafari a world stage; and the depths of Rastafarian thinking meant that Jamaican reggae musicians would always have something to say. But really, do they today? The dominant pop music of Jamaica in the 90s, much ruder than the nice old "rude boys," was the "dancehall" sound of guns, gangstas and x-rated "slackness." Dancehall fans argue that its violence validates it as just what downtown music was always supposed to be: music of hard-core reality, the newspaper of the ghetto, or as Prince Buster said in the 1950s, "the voice of the people." But dancehall does not travel as well as traditional reggae did, and the younger musicians we met are trying to get over it. The voice that Jamaicans aspire to is a mix of Marley and Garvey, born, buried and still revered in Jamaica. The poet and historian Robin "Bongo Jerry" Small said it best to

me: "The Afro-centric movement will continue--and Jamaica will continue in it--as long as suffering and poverty are issues in the world, and as long as music and dance and expressive culture that's rooted in Africa are valued."

VI. This Life

Jamaican views on the United States can veer from near-worship to asperity, in the same sentence. They remind me of the Irish on the English--shrewd and witty commentators from the underside of empire. "And what about this American boy in Afghanistan, John Walker?" began the painter Ken Abondarno Spencer. "A great American heeero! The real t'ing! And they want to hang him in Ground Zero. They should make him the U. S. Ambassador to all the Arab countries. He is... what's the word? An adventurer! He wanted to learn their languages so he could understand their religion. This is a great American, and you want to kill him!" Jamaicans on the radio phone line kept hammering on the phrase, "cultural imperialism." As in: CNN, KFC, BET. "When I take my nephew into Kingston," said a man in rural St. Elizabeth parish, "he doesn't want to eat Jamaican jerk chicken; he wants Kentucky Fried." For better and worse, Jamaicans also see a lot their own gold-draped, sexually charged self-imagery coming back to them on BET. They are betting (more confidently than I would) on the power of their own voice, their deeper voice of suffering and survival, in the world conversation.

Well, these were the kinds of things we talked about in what we wanted to call, with a tip of the hat to Ira Glass, "This Jamaican Life." Paul Theroux might have kayaked across the island. Johnny Apple might have eaten his way around it. At another point in my own life, as a New York Times reporter, I would have been angling for an interview with the Prime Minister. I liked it much better that we had our chance just to talk with Jamaica through the middle of the night on the radio, and after a couple of weeks they were calling me "Christopher" like a new friend, and we felt we were getting the hang of this universal love of gab, in a new place. So many places out there.. and so many conversations. Shall we talk about it?

About Transom

What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.

Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere -- by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

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ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH*-Boston.

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