Excursions

Structurally, Larry's is one of the worst place in Toronto to listen to music. "Obstructed view" is transformed into a principle. Aesthetically, however, it's always seemed perfectly in line with hardcore rock and roll nights: loud, dirty and cavern-like. Appropriately scuzzy.

Perhaps it was against this background that Linton Kwesi Johnson's performance took on its anomalous character. Introducing the social and political origins of each of his songs he moved easily from "Inglan is a Bitch", to "Di Eagle and Di Bear", to "Di Black Peety Roadwah" and it became clear, not only through the lyrics but also through the detail of his introductions ("We expected support from certain sectors of the white left..."), that the regular clientele of Larry's was in for a very different type of evening.

Backed by Dennis Bovell and the excellent Dub Band, Linton Johnson's music charted the racist and fascist attacks on blacks in Britain and the daily oppression black immigrants face in the position assigned them by bourgeois and colonial ideology. White songs like "Sonny's Lettuh Home (Anti-SUS Poem)" and "Di Insuah-resahun" concentrated on the particular conditions for blacks within Britain, other songs were more global, such as "Reggae Fi Rodney", commemorating the assassination of Walter Rodney, leader of the Worker's Party in Guyana, or "What About Di Worktin' Class", a comparison between Poland and England.

Our experiences in Britain are still my pivotal point and everything else emanates from that. But it seems much broader, perhaps that's only a reflection of my political development over the years.

Linton Kwesi Johnson
Politics in the Cultural Trenches

It's not for me to define my audience. Why do you come to see my show? For the music? For the poetry? I don't know who my audience is. My audience is whoever comes. Being involved in sound organizations who have a clear political position worked out over a period of years is a source of tremendous strength to me and it would be very strange if I'm writing about things going on in England and whatever I have to say isn't informed by that political position. My audience? I see black people come to my shows. I see white people come to my shows. I see young. I see old.

In this sense Johnson joins on oral history within popular music pioneered by the jazz poets or the "90s, Gil Scott-Heron, Amiri Baraka, Melvin Van Peebles, Elaine Brown and The Last Poets. Their poetry expressed, through distinctly Afro-American forms, the daily effects of capitalism in limiting and shaping the life experience of oppressed people. Perhaps this was clearest in Johnson's reading alone a poem for his father who died two years ago, "Reggae Fi Daddy". The story of a man who had nothing but "just one life to give". Through this unsentimental unfolding of the nature of his father's life, Linton Johnson captures the essence of neo-colonial existence.

All that's happening in American music (rap) is that they're using the dub technique reggae's been using for years... the American version of a reggae hit. and the rap thing is an extension of that, and yes there is that particular social focus. In fact the rappers have brought back that social element, that protest element, that political content, back into black music in America because, post-black-power period, it seemed to be "let's get down" and that's all their was to it.

This tradition in popular music, however, has its own basis in the much deeper history of African oral traditions and culture. It is expressed in such diverse forms as Hi-Life, Mz que Maxaba's Azanian 'click' songs, Thomas Mapfumo's music from Zimbabwe, Sonny Ade, and is the inspiration for recent material from David Byrne, Brian Eno, and Peter Gabriel. The force giving rise to Linton Johnson's material comes out of an oral tradition characteristic of Jamaican national music today. Just as LKJ's songs reflect the oppression and rage of blacks in Britain, the current political affairs of Jamaica, Seaga's phony elections, are all telegraphed through popular reggae tunes. From Eek-A-Mouse, John and others, music becomes the form through which people's voices are expressed and their daily conditions recorded.

I've never tried to fuse politics into my poetry whatsoever. The fact of it is my initial impetus to write came out of my political convictions. So it wasn't a matter of bringing politics to bear on my poetry. That was the nature of the inspiration anyway. I write about what I write about because those are the things which move me emotionally or intellectually and I write about them. It's not a matter of bringing politics to bear on it. That is the nature of it.