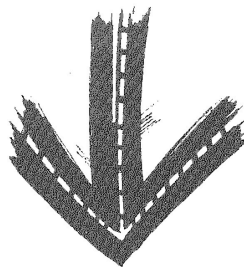


# EXCURSIONS



### Fite Dem Back

*We gonna smash their brains in  
Cause they ain't got nothin' in 'em  
Some of dem say dem a nigger hater  
Some of dem say dem a nigger beater  
Some of dem say in a black star bar  
Some of dem say dem a Paki-basher  
Fascists on di attack  
No matter worry 'bout dat  
Fascists on di attack  
We will fite dem back  
Fascists on di attack  
We will counter-attack  
Fascists on di attack  
We will drive dem back.  
L.K.J.*



## LINTON KWESI JOHNSON

### Politics in the Cultural Trenches

**I**t's not for me to define my audience. Well who are you? What are your political views? Are you political or non-political? Why did 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.

Structurally, Larry's is one of the worst places in Toronto to listen to music. "Obstructed view" is transformed into a principle. Aesthetically, however, it's always seemed perfectly in line 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 Petty Booshwah" 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. While songs like "Sonny's Lettuh Home (Anti-SUS Poem)" and "Di Insuhrecshun" 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 Workin' Class", a comparison between Poland and England.

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

To open the second set, Johnson came out without the band and recited a number of his poems without accompaniment. In essence, this was Linton Kwesi Johnson: a very serious poet, not a performer. His deeply intoned poetry arises out of strong political commitments and his concern is to communicate artistically, as a poet, the experiences of an oppressed people.

I just saw it as artistic activity which had no political significance and relevance hopefully. But to see it primarily as Art and Art how to entertain people. If it doesn't entertain people then it's just cheap propaganda. It must conform to certain artistic criteria. So I've always seen it as artistic activity with political relevance... Once you begin to put a political role to your art you can get into difficulties.

Johnson's concentration on his music as poetry, his poems set within reggae, is a concentration on the voice as instrument. In the lilt and pauses of Jamaican-English Johnson captures both the art of the story-telling tradition and the dramatic emphasis of poetic utterance; a sonorous, verbal music. As well in Johnson's writing, the Creole Jamaican enunciation is spelled out, an affirmation of Jamaican language and idiom. Johnson's music become the scat rhythms of his language.

In this sense Johnson joins on oral history within popular music pioneered by the jazz poets of the '50s, 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 Daddi". 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 they're using the dub technique reggae's been using for years... the American version of the reggae DJ and the rapping 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, Miriam Makeba's Azanian 'click' songs, Thomas Mafumfo'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.**

