

Horsemouth

story and photos by Garter Van Felt



In 1978, Leroy “Horsemouth” Wallace starred in the Theodoros Bafaloukos film *Rockers*, a whimsical story of a Jamaican session drummer who hustles his way through the Kingston recording scene, like a third-world Robin Hood. In reality, Horsemouth is very much the ebullient character portrayed in *Rockers*, a Rasta from downtown Kingston who “uses what he’s got to get what he wants.” Horsemouth’s enormous contribution to reggae drumming is entirely non-fiction. Wallace made key recordings for Coxson Dodd’s Studio One before freelancing for nearly every major producer in Jamaican music.¹ His beats can be heard on thousands of recordings from the late ’60s to the present, keeping Jamaican music in touch with its African antecedents.

The following is excerpted from an October 1998 interview at Horsemouth’s home in Kitson Town, Jamaica. It is one of the only substantial interviews he has ever given.

What was your first session?

My first session, I think it was with Familyman [Bartlett]. It was a Bunny Lee session. [The record] spent thirty-eight weeks on the *BBC* charts. It’s called “Wet Dream.” “Every night you go to bed, you have wet dream. Ride him Jack, make we gi dem up gi dem up.” Max Romeo sing that song.

You did that for Bunny Lee before you ever went to Coxson [Dodd]?

When I went to Coxson, I used to be in and out of [the studio]. The first opportunity I get at Coxson, I used to work inside the factory as a printer. I [had] learned three trades at Alpha [Boys’ School?]. I learned music, printing, and tile making. Like at Alpha, sisters say, “Son, when you leave Alpha, don’t go down back in the ghetto, go uptown. Wear a necktie and a white shirt. Look good.” So I tried out white-collar work by working in the government printing office, but my vision was like Marcus Garvey.

Musically, at that point in time (roughly ’67–’68), was rock steady already happening?

That time...was like ’70, ’71 when I break up with the Mighty Vikings band. ’Cause I used to play with Byron Lee and [then] the Mighty Vikings with Ernie Smith. [That was] like ’69. I wanted to be like Don Drummond [of the Skatalites]. [Drummer] Lloyd Knibb was my idol. In those days I was a young kid at Alpha, all we had was this little brown [box] we call Radio Rediffusion, Radio Jamaica [RJR]. The Skatalites was like mad on the radio every day. When you at school, you got two [RJR receivers]

for six hundred boys. Don Drummond was in your ears, and those people were all from Alpha Boys School. So they become your idols.

Who gave you the name Horsemouth?

It was like Reggie [Lewis] and Glen Adams [of] the Upsetters. [Lewis was] the first person who play, *chen-que*, *chen-que* on a guitar. People say, “Him create reggae?” No one wants to give him credit, ’cause he’s a madman—not really mad, but him drink a lot of rum. And then Jackie Mittoo, he play the shufflin’ in Coxson’s studio. And he play it on a song name “Nanny Goat,” the first [reggae] song.

I used to play at Studio One, and they used to play with Upsetters [for Lee Perry]. I used to say, “Studio One music a classical.” We used to boast on this corner called Idler’s Rest. It’s on Chancery Lane, North Parade, right near Randy’s record shop. “Dem tune weh ya a play, Upsetters, a joke music, mon! Yuh nah listen to Studio One tune me a play?” So they say, “Horsemouth, *blab, blab, blab!*” First time I used to be mad when people call me Horsemouth. But after that time, I say, “Shit, I’m going to make this name a big movie-star name.” So after that, if anyone start to call me Mr. Wallace, I say, “No, call me Horsemouth.”

Tell me about using the pseudonym Mad Roy.

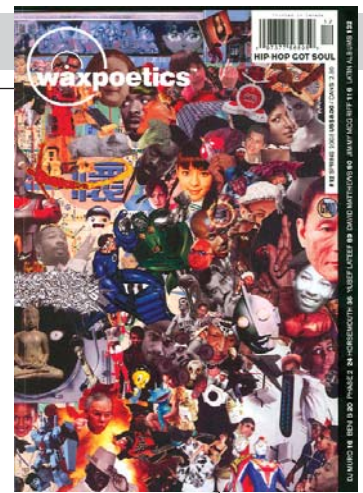
In those days, we just make different names—like I can be ten different artists with ten different styles if I want. That time we weren’t thinking about copyright and all those things. We [thought] we’re like some secret agent. We take time, mash up the society, change it the way we want it, and nobody know us. That’s the plan we had.

[Under pseudonyms,] I have done some melodica songs too for Coxson, like instrumentals. One is called “Far Beyond,” [also recorded as] “Where I & I Belong.” I was the first one that [recorded] that. Mutabaruka write that [poem] long time [ago] in *Swing* magazine. And I just adapt those words and say it on a record, not knowing that this is the man’s copyright.

Do any others come to mind?

There’s a lot more instrumentals that I’ve done for Coxson, and for “Scratch” Lee Perry too, blowing a melodica. I had different ideas from Augustus Pablo. I didn’t think he liked me at that time. After a couple years, he say, “What about the melodica, you stopped blowing melodica?” That was just my mood. I used to live in Waterhouse in those days, and all I had was a melodica.

Talk about the jonkanoo and pocomania traditions



and how they affected your drumming.

Those music are things that your grandmother and your grandfather in Trench Town [know], where you grow up, where there was no electric lights. There was just [oil] lamps burning all over the place. Those are the songs we used to hear. There were Rastas. There were pocomania,³ and there were jonkanoo, [who] were masqueraders.⁴

Jonkanoo is between kumina⁵ and a more French style [i.e., quadrille]. Kumina are like warrior drums. When a Black man play drum, his idea is fe stab you, *boom boom boom!* Like nyabinghi drums, Rasta is to work on your soul, the heartbeat. You understand that your heartbeat [goes] *boop-boom, boop-boom*. He works on your mind with his drums. And he tries to make the drum reason with you, see if he can make your mind go on another level. And sometimes he gives you a draw of ganja because when your mind is on one stage... I think if you draw a herb, maybe you might just see something else different than you never

normally see.

You call this [other] one pocomania. My grandmother, she's from Africa. She come from Africa with all this African heritage and things, and then she have to change to Christianity. So she blend her Christianity. She have this drum. She's still in her African thing, but she's trying to please backra-master⁶ by singing, "Oh Jesus come...praise him, Hallelujah, praise the Lord!" [*plays poco rhythms on the table as he sings the Christian praises with subtle sarcasm*] There's a lot of regimentation. It's colonial mixed with African. You've got a lot of rolls.⁷

You [also] have the burru⁸ drumming, and then you've got this bass on the bottom. That music sounds [to me] like the White slave owner was telling the slave, "Make it sound more European." But then the man that play the bass drum, he was still determined to make it African. The beat is African, but the melody is sort of neo-colonial, Judeo-Christian.

A beat like this, it get a rich guy very scared. When they hear the horns, is like the horns a say, "Hey, one day I'm going to fuck you up! One day I'm going to catch you! Yo!"

And it's based on a European scale, too.

Okay!

You hadn't mentioned quadrille, but...

Okay, quadrille⁹ is more like a dance, an African dance, but backra wants it to be colonial too, so they dressed up in long dress and a lotta tings underneath it. [*plays a quadrille rhythm on the tabletop*] It's like it's related to jonkanoo, but it's not jonkanoo. A lotta [penny] whistles. And sometimes you hear Scottish and Irish melodies on this beat.

There are some other recording sessions I want to ask you about, like a track you did called "Herb Vendor" for Lee Perry.

Well the "Herb Vendor," I play almost all the instruments and sing [lead and] backup harmony, and Lee Perry don't give me no money. Trust me. I see him in Europe, and he dodge me out. I was playing with the Gladiators, and he open a show, and after the show I see him, and he don't want to pay me. Starts singing, "Walking down the alley, typically, with me crocus bag of collie, officially." I sing all those words. I think [Scratch wrote] like two lines.

You had a songwriting credit on the Inner Circle album *Reggae Thing*, the song called "This World."

Yeah, that song, "This World." I was supposed to sing that. Here I am in a band with some guys who go to university. Me is a one little ghetto mon, my mother used to be an old fisherwoman from Trenchtown. Jacob Miller [who would later become Inner Circle's singer] was a nice bredren. I meet him every day on Rousseau Road, and his aunt used to own a hotel on 20 Rousseau Road. He walk from Rousseau Road to 13 Brentford Road [Studio One]. I used to do printing at that time at Coxson's. And young Jacob Miller used to come... I used to rob a lot of vinyl from Coxson, because I used to get like four pound ten a week, and I need more. So I used to hide a lot of vinyl in the rubbish box. In the evenings when Coxson close up, I act like I'm emptying out the rubbish box, and I put all vinyl in my waist and sell it to record shops and get an extra money.

Jacob Miller used to come and dig up the rubbish box where we have we especial vinyl. I tell you, like Heptones *On Top*, Jackie Mittoo *Evening Time*, Jackie Mittoo *in London*. All those albums are selling albums. Anywhere you can get it on the street, you get lotta money for them. So Jacob Miller would come and dig up the rubbish—he and Al Campbell. Them both used to move together. I used to take up stones and say, "Hey lickle bwai, leave me rubbish

alone or I'll lick you with some stone!"

We became good friend. One time I was in jail and I see him passing, and I say, "Hey fat bwai, go down a Coxson and tell him say mi inna jail." Him say, "A who dat, Horse-mouth?" Me say, "Yeah." Him go and call Coxson, and Coxson's mother come and bail me out. From that time I never trouble Jacob Miller. He brought me to the Inner Circle. We like two bad bwai. We used to be in this band named the Spell. Me and Jacob Miller and another guy named Smokey, good singer.

Tell me about the Black Disciples band, Burning Spear, Jack Ruby.

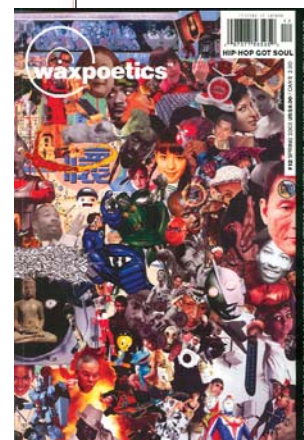
The Black Disciples was a good experience. Jack Ruby was a very revolutionary person, an herb smuggler who used to put a lot of ganja on planes. The mon dem weh do dem ting, the people respect you in Jamaica when you can put forty and fifty bag a ganja pon a plane! We don't call that drugs. That is ganja business. What is going on that is drugs is cocaine, with the Columbian and all dem ting deh. In those days is like survival. We do those things like we are revolutionary. We put forty bag on a plane and feel good! You understand me, me bredren? We send those so people in America could smoke the good ganja, not just for money alone.

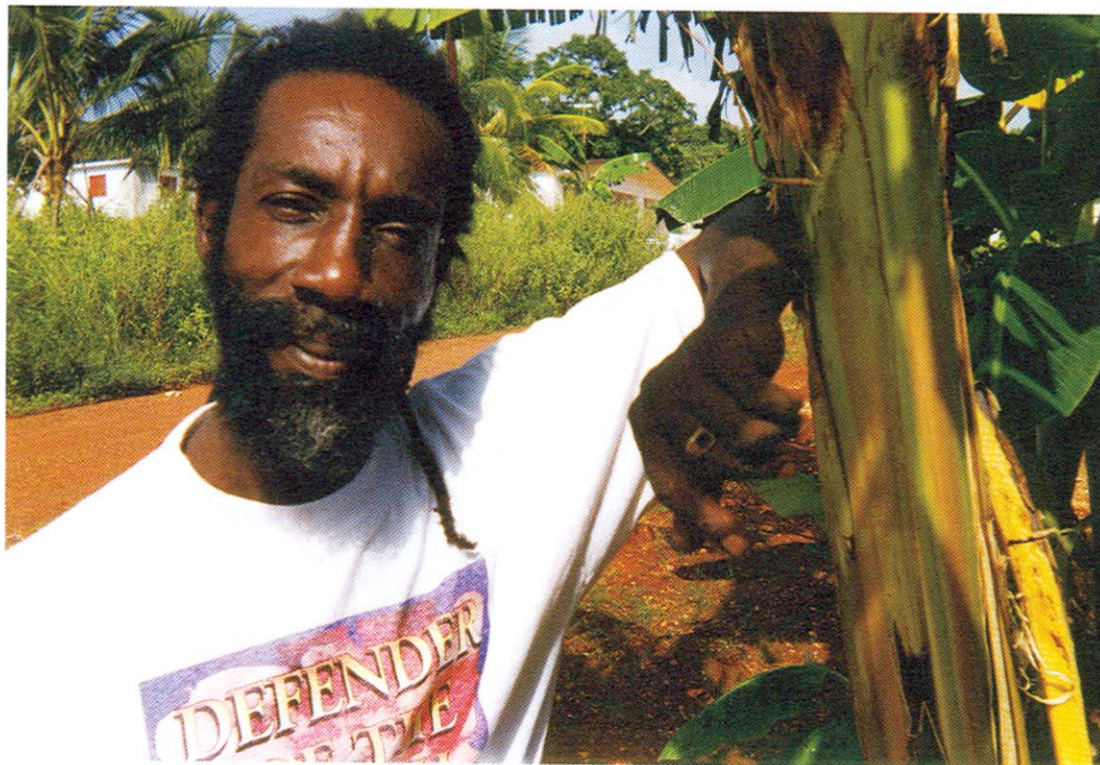
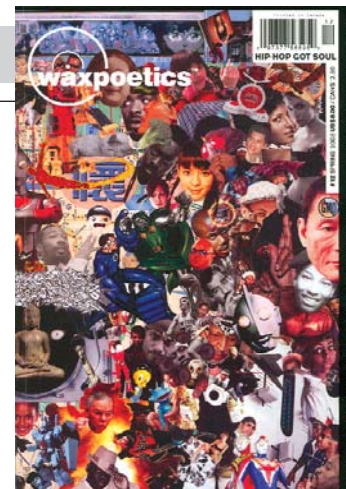
But Jack Ruby was a great sound-system man...

Jack Ruby! Trust me! I respect him, 'cause this man make nuff ting gwaan fi me. Just like him say inna *Rockers*, "Horsemouth, you're the only drummer can play pon this music yah, 'Free Rhodesia.'" It's an instrumental, like "MPLA." "Free Rhodesia" is what it was all about. It was a [political] statement and bad music, too.

Jack Ruby, he was the one who organized the Black Disciples. He create the name, like, "Give me a name for the band." Everyone was like, "African this, African that..." Nobody can get a good name, and he say "Black Disciples." A person like me growing up with a Catholic background, right away it become good for me, 'cause I used to see pure White disciples, understand me? [*laughs*] Yeah, is unusual, like who would think that could be?

The music we would play was [with] very professional musicians, like Ranchie [McLean], a very good guitar player. Robbie Shakespeare was a very cold bass man in that time. Trust me, that time they used to call him Shakey. That was his bad-mon name, real rude bwai name. Ya mon, pure facts Horsemouth tell you.





You also played on [the Abyssinians's original] "Declaration of Rights" at Studio One.

Ya, I'm the first one that play "Declaration of Rights." [Bernard Collins] told me it's bigger than "Satta Massa Ganna." I think Coxson didn't do it justice with the mixing. I hear it sometimes, and it doesn't sound right.

You're the only drummer credited on Linval Thompson's album *I Love Marijuana*.

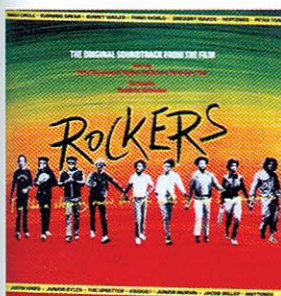
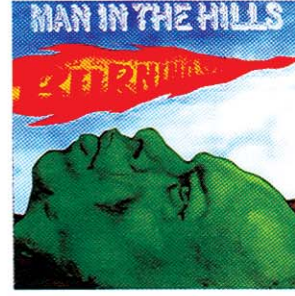
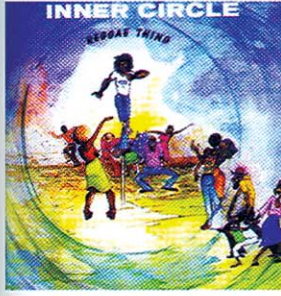
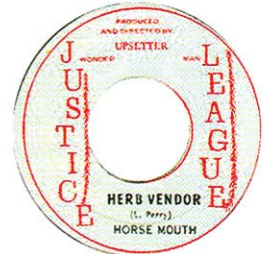
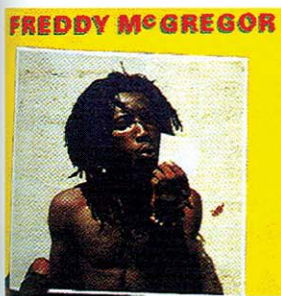
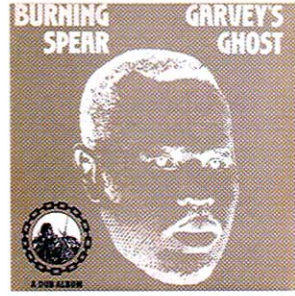
At Channel One. Me do a lotta session at Channel One. I go to Channel One every day. I used to live at 47 Maxfield Avenue. That's where I star in *Rockers* movie. So I take a bass drum, a snare, two tom-toms in the bass drum, there's the hi-hat, the bass drum pedal in my pocket. I take this [whole] kit to studio, forty houses down the road.

I play lot of albums, producers I don't remember. I always leave a letter, a written thing on my drums, the way I hit the cymbal, the way I roll the drum.

You're saying you have a signature that you can hear?

There's a way I crash the cymbal, different from Sly [Dunbar], Santa [Davis], everybody. *Spshhhhh* in the action. You can play this *Marcus Garvey* dub album and hear the action of Horsemouth. [puts on a recording of the dub to "Slavery Days" from Burning Spear's *Garvey's Ghost*]

A beat like this, it get a rich guy very scared. When they hear the horns, is like the horns a say, "Hey, one day I'm going to fuck you up! One day I'm going to catch you! Yo!" That's what the horn is saying. Then this dangerous drop of the beat now...*boof!...boof!...listen to this drumroll.* When you hear the drumroll, is like [it's] cutting, making a fight, making problems. That roll is no joke roll! Is like you're mixing up a lotta tings together, and the whole basical truth about it is that the tempo is right. You can never say it's wrong. It's like revolutionary. It's like people trying to say, "Hey, watch the beat yah now, watch out, one day I'm going to lick off your head!"¹⁰ What happen to equal rights?! Weh ya a do fi we?! Yo, watch it yah now, be careful." A roll



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