

Christmas cake and calypso

Val Wilmer

Val Wilmer remembers the music of the Windrush generation, and the effect they had on British cultural life.

I must have been about ten and my brother was just seven when we added a new 'I spy' game to our repertoire. Sitting in the front seat upstairs on the 59 bus, we'd crane our necks in search of black faces and score points for spotting what was still a very rare quarry. It was the early 1950s and an exciting departure from logging car number plates or BSA motorbikes, although even back then, I was instinctively aware that what we were doing was not quite 'on'. As bus top rituals went, this one was a trifle subdued. We had only an inkling of parental disapproval but that was enough, our mother being embarrassed not on her account alone but on behalf of the 'strangers' we counted on these voyages through darkest Brixton.

So shameful is the memory of this childhood game that I had forgotten it until I started writing this essay. I only mention it in order to illustrate the all-encompassing whiteness of the world as I knew it back then. I was three-and-a-half years old when the Second World War came to an end and too young to know anything about it. In the part of South London where I grew up, there were no people of colour - at least as far as I knew. We lived in a solid Edwardian 'semi', and I went to a creaking, old-fashioned school run by two women eccentrics. On the day a dog jostled a lunchtime drinker outside the school I learnt my first swear words. When I repeated these at home I was banished to my room for the rest of the evening. Discipline and good manners, chasing butterflies on the bombsites, rhubarb and roast lamb on Sundays, these measured

my middle-class life at the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s.

And yet, was it really so white? Even then the contradictions were there. Six years before the *Windrush* chugged up the Thames I'd heard my first black music - in my mother's arms. At least I can remember her singing an old 'southern' style lullaby to my baby brother so I'm certain she would have sung the same song to me. Her mother had probably sung it too, at the start of the century, a hangover from the days when 'blackface' minstrels were a commonplace sight in the streets. The words don't bear repeating, and I know, from having asked her about it years later, that Mum had little real idea of their meaning. The important thing is that in those wartime and post-war years there was nothing unusual in her turning to a black music song-form for making this most intimate of connections.

Black music was to change my life dramatically, but in my pre-teen years the power and the passion of Armstrong and Parker were still unknown. And yet, looking back now I realise that for all the 'absolute' whiteness of my world, there *was* a black presence there, albeit not one that was immediately obvious. Underlying the culture that we whites doubtless would, without thinking, have described as 'our own', there was a hidden world of black influence. Unsurprisingly it revolved mainly round music, its specifics being wrapped up in a kind of mishmash of religion and minstrelsy that was never quite what it seemed. As a child I remember no concert party or church social being complete without at least one 'negro spiritual', and by the age of eleven I had joined the Girl Guides where many songs derived from the same source. Around the campfire we'd lustily sing a guiding version of the spiritual 'This little light of mine', followed closely by 'I ain't gonna grieve my lord no more' and 'On Ilkley Moor bah'tat'. The scouting movement was partly responsible for fostering my internationalist outlook, but to be truthful, some aspects of its songbook were unbelievably racist. I even once attended a scout gangshow where they wheeled out a blacked up Mr Interlocutor and the Bones and a banjo. Come to think of it, it's not surprising that the Black and White Minstrel Show took off on television in the 1960s, it had never been away. And in truth, songs that affirmed and comforted the African people in the days of enslavement have never disappeared from mainstream life. Anyone who has been part of certain folk music circles will know them; they surface in the occasional outburst at sports events, in particular in the convention for singing 'Swing low sweet

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chariot' at rugby matches.

I don't know how old I was when London's West End lights went on again after the war, but I do remember the excitement of evening trips 'into town' in order to see them. Mugs of Horlicks in raffish milk-bars and being allowed to stay up past 9pm were revolutionary experiences; so too was spotting racing tipster Prince Monolulu in Piccadilly Circus, a black man decked out in head-dress of ostrich feathers, waistcoat and breeches, and busking the cinema queues. But like the man with the roses behind his ear who danced for a handful of pennies and the women selling violets outside the London Pavilion, he was part of the general panorama of streetlife. Nobody told me his name at the time, although I remember seeing him on several occasions. There were sightings of other black individuals too: the anonymous 'African' drummers and dancers who appeared at Christmas circuses, and at the end-of-pier shows we went to on holidays. However, I do know that the first black face I could consciously identify belonged to a woman. She was Adelaide Hall, the distinguished American singer, who had recorded the wordless 'Creole Love Call' with Duke Ellington back in the 1920s. We children were not to know that, of course. When I saw her on stage in a show called *Love from Judy*, I was ten years old and she was playing the inevitable maid.

Just a couple of years on from that trip to the theatre I'd bought my first jazz records. Always curious, I began reading up about this new discovery and made rapid strides in my knowledge. I learnt about the music's New Orleans roots, about King Oliver and Louis, Johnny Dodds and Kid Ory, and saved my pocket money to buy 78 rpm records which could be had second-hand for around two shillings apiece. By one of those leaps of faith known only to teenagers, Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Seven became a kind of spiritual template for my existence at a time when most of my friends were listening to Elvis. Now when I noticed the *Windrush* contingent while passing through Brixton, I began to wonder just who they were. I don't know how conscious it all was, but I do know that I automatically associated them with New Orleans and Jelly Roll, Bessie Smith and the blues, and wanted to know what was their story. How did they fit into the received tale of the music that began in New Orleans and went 'up-the-river' to Chicago? Not surprisingly, given the increasingly hostile climate that was developing around the new settlers, I was discouraged from finding out at first hand. But with black music becoming increasingly a part of

my life, I could not be deflected forever.

Did other white English jazzers ask themselves these same questions? Over the years I've met some who did. Certain aficionados even thought that the new black arrivants could help them appreciate the music more fully as well as, in some kind of essentialist way, explaining themselves to themselves. I know such ideas are now regarded as cliché, that the then commonly held belief that to be black meant being 'hipper than hip' is reductive, but as Windrush style itself becomes a cliché at the end of the century, I want to stand back and examine the way in which the burgeoning black presence changed one English life.

Caribbean style became, for some white people, almost as important as the music - even if we wouldn't always admit to this belief in more enlightened times. Larger than life West Indians seemed to me then, leaning on the street corner railings in Brixton, outside the long gone Prince of Wales, twirling their key-chains and spinning a yarn. Hats were very much the order of the day, with padded shoulders and sharp knitwear featuring heavily, and I just knew that these guys were 'cool'. When I started going out to listen to jazz and ran into them as fellow enthusiasts, their personal style - the epitome of relaxation, knowingness and 'hip' - was hard to ignore.

Although I was really quite shy, where the music was concerned I was also precocious. It was hard for a woman to survive on the music scene then, men challenged your presence and would try to break down your resistance in order to deny your integrity. I was fortunate to be befriended by a number of people who wrote about music as well as by several musicians. Through these contacts I found my feet in a difficult world and was enabled to establish an identity as a serious advocate of the music at a time when most women in my position would have fallen by the wayside - that is, gone off and got married. Most importantly, it was through the more perceptive individuals I met, both black and white, that I was encouraged to always think of jazz as being a black creation.

It is not generally realised outside the jazz world, but in the years before and after the war the music's followers often divided into two camps - those who favoured 'black' jazz and those who championed white players. Despite the near universal perception of jazz as something that black people do, for all the lip service paid to equality and the acknowledged innovators, the white British jazz world could, and can still, be shamefully antipathetic to the wider black presence. Where the white proselytisers I met were concerned, there was some

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racial stereotyping involved in their otherwise positive attitudes - a further legacy from the days of the spirituals and minstrelsy - nevertheless it was because I embraced a belief in vernacular authenticity that I got to know the music's movers and shakers.

There has always been great irony in the racist element that persists in the jazz world, of course, for the Windrush generation was responsible for changing the way in which the British appreciated and responded to black music. Even if differences of aesthetic persisted, the arrivants were a dominant factor in developing the climate of receptivity for African musical expression in all its diversity. For many of us growing up post-war in British cities, our listening was significantly conditioned by the sounds to which the newcomers danced. Revolutionary black music had a similar effect on our parents' generation. They'd responded enthusiastically to jazz and swing. The difference now was that these sounds meant something special for a group of people living here in our midst. From calypso and bebop to ska and rocksteady, black Britons began to make some of the runnings. And while white Merseysiders may have been the conduit whereby much rhythm-and-blues entered the mainstream, it's acknowledged now that black Liverpool seamen were the people who brought those records back from America. Whenever West Indians and Africans danced to this new music, the uptown modern blues, they were doing so not only because those sounds were hip, but because they represented black creativity and positive expression. And, albeit as an outsider, I was fortunate to be part of that movement.

'Songs that affirmed and comforted the African people in the days of enslavement have never disappeared from the mainstream'

My own Caribbean connections began one afternoon in 1960. I had skived off from college to go to the Wood Green Empire, taking my camera with me. Nat 'King' Cole was rehearsing a TV show, and I was hoping I might get some pictures. I ran into a group of Jamaicans who had just started a magazine and wanted the singer's stamp of approval. They were looking for writers too, and saw me as a likely contributor. The magazine was called *Tropic*, its publisher was Charlie Ross, a one-time bassist and drummer who'd made a few records. The editor was a lifelong jazz enthusiast named Edward Scobie from Dominica; both had been in Britain with the RAF during

the war. Scobie would eventually settle in the United States and write *Black Britannica*, a history based on his *Tropic* articles and BBC broadcasts about the black British presence.

Scobie wanted me to do a piece on Joe Harriott, the Jamaican alto saxophonist noted for his fiery and passionate playing. Harriott was an important member of the *Windrush* generation. He arrived in England in 1951 to play at The Festival of Britain and quickly established himself in London jazz circles. During a lengthy illness, he developed a concept of improvisation that freed its participants from some of the strictures of bebop. Each weekend he played at the Marquee, then a jazz club in Oxford Street, so I went there to meet him. I found him involved in a dispute with the club's manager with the result that, instead of interviewing the leader, I ended up hanging out with the band. From that point everything snowballed. His drummer asked me to take publicity photographs of his trio at a little black club where he was playing; his trumpeter befriended me and invited me home. Through these new friendships I got to know about other local black instrumentalists who made a living from music.

The Harriott group were hot and controversial so they attracted a perceptive, and bohemian, audience. At one of their gigs I met a Nigerian sculptor called Lucky and we began to go out together. At home he'd kick off his shoes and dance to what we then called 'modern jazz' records. He loved people such as Kenny Clark and Thelonius Monk, the American *inventors* of bebop, and taught me to recognise their music as a vehicle for personal self-expression as much as the purely serious business of listening. As I ate Lucky's *fufu* and pepper soup, I imbibed a sense of the way that the music meant something quite different for him than it meant to outsiders like me. I was yet to put all this into words, although I do know that as a result of this understanding I began to operate instinctively with this in mind while carving out a career for myself as a writer and photographer. I'd go through many changes in my personal life, yet I always retained a belief in the purity of the music and a feeling for what those early friends and acquaintances showed me. American musicians taught me plenty as well, but the sheer visceral understanding of what it meant to black people to acknowledge the music as being *one's own*, with a value - and values - quite separate from mainstream perceptions, began for me in places like Lucky's Camden Town bed-sit.

When I left college prematurely, Ed Scobie offered me a full-time job on his

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magazine. I thought it would be the making of me as a journalist but the sobering truth was that they just wanted someone to answer the phone. Nevertheless, installed in their battered shop-front premises in Bell Street off Edgware Road, I made connections with *Windrush* graduates that last to this day. In the winter of 1960-61, with a single paraffin heater for company and the wind whistling round the street-corner, I warmed to a new way of seeing between trips to the little cafe next door for rice-and-peas and coffee thick with Carnation milk.

A Jamaican trombonist named Herman Wilson helped form my vision. He'd come to Britain in the same band as Joe Harriott and when I met him in Bell Street I invited him home. He arrived wearing his duffel coat and carrying a small pepper plant as a gift for my mother. We'd never seen one before - it was only recently that peppers and aubergines had appeared in the shops after all, no-one knew what they were - and he told us he'd never been in an English home for tea. In Herman's room off the Harrow Road I had another salutary and life-altering experience. His mother had just sent him a cake for Christmas, packed with fruit and dripping with rum. He offered a slice **but** to my dismay cut the tiniest sliver. Coming from a home where cake always came in fat slices, I thought his action a little on the ungenerous side. It would be ages before I'd realise the ungraciousness of harbouring such thoughts, but I was nineteen years old and had so much to learn. Herman had no need to share something so special, something that was such a lifeline to home. It was his way of recognising my own acknowledgement of him by inviting him home. Only recently, when I was writing a story about the musicians who came on the *Windrush*, we spoke at length. We exchanged memories of those first meetings although I couldn't bring myself to tell him how I felt about the cake. But I've never forgotten my ingratitude. The memory of the rudeness I harboured rises to haunt me now along with visions of playing that numbers game on the buses.

Where the music was concerned, there was a sense in which the *Windrush* generation liberated what was already there. Calypso, after all, was not unknown before the newcomers unpacked their suitcases, any more than were jazz, swing, the gospel songs and the blues. Right back to the Fisk Jubilee Singers who made Queen Victoria cry and the ragtime songs of the turn of the century, black music had always had a strong effect on white lives. Until the *Windrush*, however, it could be dismissed as phenomenon or entertainment. The vivid, the living, Caribbean presence gave it a credence it hadn't

previously possessed. Respect for black music did not occur overnight, neither was any kind of sophisticated musical analysis swift to emerge, but the process of understanding began when the calypsonian Lord Kitchener and his fellow passengers put down their roots in this county. They needed the music to ease the process of settlement, and the songs they brought with them provided spiritual sustenance and cultural affirmation.

Initially, Caribbean music captivated and intrigued that section of the jazz audience concerned with authenticity. In time, it became an essential part of the backdrop to the rock-and-roll generation. Even into the 1960s, as white people began embracing the gospel-inspired soul music that grew out of the civil rights struggle, few really 'hip' British homes were without the odd single by the risqué Kitch or his misogynist musical scion, Prince Buster. As both a feminist and a lifelong jazzer, I have to own up at this point and admit that I too was one of those who danced and chuckled along to both 'Dr Kitch' and 'Wreck A Pum-Pum' in that halcyon period. Soon the pioneering *Windrush* 'versions' would be replaced by the reggae nationalism of Bob Marley and Burning Spear, but the contribution of the people who walked down the gangplank at Tilbury half a century ago endures in the lives of those of us who took up their challenge. They inspired us to discover a new way of hearing, of listening and looking. Through this, British people fashioned a new way of being.