

# Roots Routes: Japan, Jamaica, and the Global Flows of Vintage Reggae Vinyl

**John Vilanova**

LEHIGH UNIVERSITY  
jjv319 [AT] lehigh.edu

## Abstract

AuQ1

*This article excavates the historical, cultural, and music industrial significance of the buying and selling of Jamaican vinyl records in Japan. It reveals an unexpected connection between alternative distribution flows and the persistence of material music in the digital era. The Japanese market for Jamaican records exposes an under-theorized distribution relationship between two island nations on opposite sides of the globe. The durability of this market—launched by amateurs in the 1980s and nurtured into a productive and ongoing discourse—suggests that the materiality of Jamaican vinyl has particular meanings in Japanese culture and that Japan has played an important role in the preservation of Jamaican vinyl. Research consists of interviews with Japanese reggae fans, record store owners, and artists, conducted at reggae record stores throughout Tokyo, Japan. Studying these connections is important because it reorients our approach to flows of music and requires an engagement with the materiality of music-industrial products despite digital distribution's growing hegemony.*

## Introduction

This article explores how the buying and selling of Jamaican vinyl records in Japan reveals an unexpected and significant countercurrent to the ways the popular music industry is conceptualized, particularly with regard to the growing hegemony of digital distribution in the contemporary moment and the long-standing centrality of the Atlantic and global North in the industry's flows. The Japanese market for vintage Jamaican reggae records highlights an under-theorized relationship between two island nations on opposite sides of the globe that is based on material subcultural goods. These goods—records from the so-called golden age of Jamaican reggae music—have symbolic significance for Japanese consumers as well as a particular cultural legibility as a result of the

nations' ongoing relations and large-scale Japanese music consumption patterns. This significance complicates over-easy ways of conceptualizing the music industry spatially and technologically.

The durability and discourse of this market—launched by amateur collectors and fans in the 1980s and nurtured into a productive and ongoing discourse today—reveal that the materiality of Jamaican vinyl has particular meanings in Japanese culture and that Japanese engagement with reggae has been beneficial to the music's preservation and cultural life. This article discusses the historical and cultural factors that have contributed to Jamaican vinyl's particular status among Japanese collectors, music industry workers, and reggae fans, as well as the on-the-ground goings-on in Tokyo's vintage reggae vinyl stores. I approach reggae records as both specific cultural texts and music-industrial commodities. This provides a way to grasp the “social life” of Jamaican vinyl.<sup>1</sup>

The article first offers an overview of material music in Japan and Jamaica and then historicizes the international relationship between the two nations through a combination of primary source archival research and interview data from major figures in the birth and life of Japan's relationship to reggae music. It then draws conclusions about the contemporary scene from twenty-six interviews conducted throughout the city. The researchers visited the various reggae stores throughout the city (many located in the commercial centers of Shibuya and Shinjuku) in the summer of 2016, conducting semi-structured, English-language interviews with staff and customers within the businesses. These ranged from a few minutes with store patrons to multi-hour discussions with industry workers. This strategy led to a snowball sample, where many connections came from store owners, who telephoned friends and colleagues to aid the researchers in setting up follow-up interviews.

Overall, the sample included fifteen reggae fans, two scholars, and nine store proprietors and employees at reggae shops. The latter category offered the most critical analysis and consisted of many major figures in the history of reggae's growth in Japan as well as its contemporary day-to-day business. This included Naoki Ienaga, the founder of Dub Store Records, the preeminent distributor, wholesaler, and manufacturer of vintage and reissue reggae music; Shizuo Ishii, the founder of Overheat Music and *Riddim* magazine; Jey Inoue, the founder of Oasis Records; Yumi Uehara, the only female reggae record store owner in the city; and major Japanese reggae (J-Reggae) artist Rankin' Taxi. All interviewees were given the option to have their identities anonymized; none chose to do so.

Together, these reveal a set of productive insights into (1) the fertile, under-examined trade and tourism relations between the two nations centered around reggae over the past sixty years, (2) Japanese-contextual reasons for material music's persistence and reggae vinyl's attractiveness, particularly in terms of signaling “authentic” cultural connection, and (3) a template for musical respect and cultural exchange outside of traditional frameworks, epitomized through the preservation of material music. These conclusions are ostensibly of use for scholars of the creative industries in non-Western contexts as well as industry workers who find—reasonably—that the popular music industry as historically constituted is, in effect, a colonial enterprise.

At the center of the so-called Western world is the Atlantic, the crucible by which Black people and Black music were “conscripted”<sup>2</sup> into Eurocentric modernity and Black music-making and texts were constructed as a counterculture of modernity.<sup>3</sup> The global popular music industry—headlined by the three remaining (and highly consolidated) major record labels—is headquartered in the sites of ongoing neocoloniality that should be understood, following the work of Anibal Quijano, to define modern capitalism, labor, and culture.<sup>4</sup> This article argues that listening mediums are at the crux of intersections and contradictions in digital-industrial debates about modernity. Recording a song in one of Kingston’s studios only to have it manufactured and distributed by industry workers in London—Jamaica’s colonial overlord until 1962—was a process by which Black music traversed the Atlantic in the problematic wake of hundreds of years of horrifying triangular trade. Bob Marley—the global South’s most popular musician—lampooned what he saw as a “Babylon System,” a vampiric set of institutions that sucked the blood of the Rastafari “sufferahs.” Today, the popular contemporary means of digital distribution in the Western world—subscription-based applications such as Spotify and Apple Music—epitomize the estrangement of music-as-human-experience to a passive commodity, absorbed through headphones before an algorithm jumps to the next, calculatedly chosen song. Artists receive a pittance; consumers shuffle passively without significant engagement. The musical text has been devalued in the current model.

Marvin Sterling argues that Jamaican reggae music and Rastafari—the music’s dreadlocked, Afro-centric religious foundation—are lenses through which we can view Japanese social identity, complicating binary West/Other models and instead creating a triad in which the West as a site of identity formation is decentered and destabilized.<sup>5</sup> Sterling is the primary authority on Japan’s interaction with reggae, specifically, though others have contributed to the literature on the interaction between the island nations.<sup>6</sup> This work argues that reggae records offer the same model for decentering the Atlantic and destabilizing the digital focus of the moment, drawing on Sterling’s emphasis on culture and further contextualizing it within the industrial frame.

On a larger scale, the promise of Afro-Asian reciprocity, though, is long-standing: Mullen’s *Afro-Orientalism* suggests Black sharecroppers saw East Asia as “an imaginary ‘third way’ out of the crushing oppositional hierarchies of white supremacy,”<sup>7</sup> and W.E.B. Du Bois compared Japanese civil rights efforts during the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 to those of Black people throughout the world, eventually making clear that the “color line” he saw as the defining problem of the new century included the struggles of Asian people.<sup>8</sup> In 1912, Booker T. Washington told a Japanese journalist, “In no other part of the world have the Japanese people a larger number of admirers and well-wishers than among the black people of the United States.”<sup>9</sup>

Complicating racial binaries enables rich re-theorizations of cross-cultural relations, which is evidenced in the larger literature on interactions between Black and Asian identities.<sup>10</sup> Noteworthy, Prashad’s *Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* historicizes Afro-Asian solidarities and argues that cross-cultural texts are not just idle places of co-capitalist production but instead can be spaces for liberatory

praxis.<sup>11</sup> Japanese–Jamaican solidarity is performed by reggae fans and industry workers through their shared relationship to musical texts.

And so, the present article offers a practical counterpoint to the prefiguration of the music industry and its behaviors as ongoing processes of coloniality. The Japan–Jamaica vinyl resale exchange relationship illustrates the economic forces and business frames that shape this site of industrial formation, taking vinyl records as the empirical objects of a rich and understudied micro-economy. What is the role of the Jamaica–Japan relationship within the larger global industrial flow of music and recorded music? Why does this relationship matter? What can it teach us?

### *Material Music in the Japanese and Jamaican Contexts*

Scholarship and popular writing have addressed vinyl’s niche role for collectors, DJs, and enthusiasts.<sup>12</sup> Some writers have connected vinyl to research about the contemporary digital music age.<sup>13</sup> But these (as well as the mainstream media coverage that addresses material music) typically treat vinyl as a curiosity—as a niche audiophile subculture. The Japanese reggae vinyl story certainly represents a relatively small community, but the durability of its international industrial relationships and its broader ideological role suggest that there is more to the story and that the collector subculture is birthed from a specific set of international, cultural, and industrial relations.

In the recent past, music business experts have suggested that Jamaica produces more music per capita than any other country in the world.<sup>14</sup> But outside of attracting tourists, Jamaica writ large has struggled to profit from the global profile its music has helped cultivate. At the turn of the 21st century, the United Nations Commission on Trade and Development calculated the recorded music products of Jamaica to have had a worldwide wholesale value of at least \$1.2 billion in 1994, but the island’s recorded music exports totaled \$291,000 that year.<sup>15</sup> This disparity has roots in insufficient copyright and cultural expression protections as well as the privileging of a network of major labels run by Western nations most suited to profit from the creative labor of Jamaican producers.

Independent material music infrastructure in Jamaica begins with entrepreneur Ken Khouri, who imported a Finebilt record press to Kingston in 1954 that would eventually become Federal Records, the country’s first major studio, record-pressing and distribution company, before its sale to the Marley family in 1981. The press is housed at Tuff Gong Studios in Kingston today. “What was the significance of this press and its output on the island and as part of a larger system of global trade and distribution flows?” the researchers asked previously.<sup>16</sup> And where were the records produced on this press now? The answer—in large part—was Japan.

Meanwhile, the digital revolution has come swiftly to Jamaica, a phenomenon that concerns many cultural producers. In an article in *The Guardian*, DJ David Rodigan explained the vinyl industry’s downturn in Jamaica and its effect on cultural producers on the island.<sup>17</sup>

It’s a reflection of the economic realities in Jamaica that the emotional motivations of overseas collectors have for years propped up vinyl manufacture. Particularly in Europe, people still want to own reggae in that form because it helps them connect to the music’s original roots and culture.

Jamaican music industry workers are pulled in different directions, but the history of collective musical expression on the island is a democratizing one with vinyl at its heart.

At the same time, contemporary reggae fans and experts know that old and rare vinyl have always played an important role in DJ cultures, which also derive from Jamaican performance traditions.<sup>18</sup> During the golden age, enough of the island's population was unable to afford buying their own radios, turntables, and vinyl records that public listening became popular, and entrepreneurial Jamaicans purchased generators, turntables, and vast speaker arrays, hosting parties and playing records for paying guests and bridging the gap between the lower and middle classes.<sup>19</sup>

Within that cultural fabric, a rare record from the 1960s or 1970s could be a key piece of an artist's oeuvre, DJ set, or sound clash competition arsenal then and today. Unreleased dubplates—test discs and remixes pressed onto acetate and sometimes used for marketing purposes—are highly sought after and could be major attention-getters for Jamaican DJs, called selectors. While the genre's popularity growth was largely artist-driven, rare vinyl records also played an important role in spreading Jamaican music throughout the globe for collectors and enthusiasts.<sup>20</sup> Novelty—unheard songs, deep cuts, the experience of surprise in the live setting—was something vinyl could and still can offer.

The Japanese context is similarly unique, due to its outlier status with regard to musical medium. The island nation's outsized impact on the mainstream music business is significant, though due to a conflux of factors—from language barriers to longstanding Orientalist presumptions—the famed Japanese musicians have, in large part, failed to achieve the level of Western crossover, particularly in comparison to K-pop, the music of their East Asian neighbor (and former colony) Korea. Japan is the world's second-largest music market after the United States, but in stark contrast to US sales data, the vast majority of Japanese music sales today are still in the form of physical items. According to 2017 data from the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), a preeminent trade group, 70 percent of the United States' \$5.3 billion in retail music sales came from digital, with 18 percent coming from physical.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, in Japan, the numbers were reversed, with 72 percent of its \$2.7 billion in sales coming in physical formats. Digital had only a 20 percent share, though that number has increased in the years since. According to a 2,728-person survey conducted in December 2021 by the consumer data firm Statista, 45 percent of respondents suggested their most-commonly used method of consuming music was YouTube.<sup>22</sup>

Though things are changing, the power of material music is still evident experientially while walking Tokyo's streets. While the last Tower Records in the United States closed in 2006, a nine-story record store behemoth (one of seventy-six throughout Japan) looms in the heart of the well-trafficked Shibuya neighborhood, with large sections devoted to reggae CDs and vinyl records. There is a performance space in the basement that hosts concerts and events as well as large areas for memorabilia, connecting the commodities to the larger "It really sort of presents music as this all encompassing experience, you know, and of course, they want you to leave with a CD or in recent years a record, but they also want to highlight so much more," one Japanese writer remarked in 2022.<sup>23</sup> There is a social and public dynamic to listening that vibrates at the same frequency as the reggae sound system.

Reggae had a presence in virtually every mainstream store in the city, in addition to the niche stores focusing on vintage vinyl, such as Dub Store, Nat Records, Coco-Isle Music, Face Records, and Oasis Records. According to the Recording Industry Association of Japan (RIAJ), the island nation boasted roughly 6,000 music stores when this research was conducted; the United States, by comparison, has less than one-third of that number for a population nearly double the size.<sup>24</sup>

The persistence of material music forms also has aesthetic, affective, and performative dimensions for Japanese fans, often in parallel with Jamaican contemporaries. “I prefer CDs to downloads because I have the desire to physically possess what artists make,” a school-teacher told *Metropolis*, the large Tokyo-based English-language magazine in 2017.<sup>25</sup> “And there’s this inexplicable sense of joy and excitement I can feel as I open the package and smell the lyric booklet. I even enjoy just seeing my whole CD collection in my CD rack at times. I like CDs with cool cover artworks.”

Marketers and labels have adjusted and devised strategies to appease material-seeking consumers.<sup>26</sup> In a setting where the mainstream music market places a particular emphasis on Japanese artists, boy- and girl-groups such as Arashi, Nogizaka46, and AKB48 satiate collectors and create a rabid market. These groups and others like them are marketing machines. The latter, for instance, offers multiple versions and releases of its albums, corresponding to different members of the group, often with no changes to the actual content of the recorded disc. This prompted music industry expert Mark Mulligan to name the process “merchandise disguised as albums.”<sup>27</sup>

This is the context in which Japanese music is bought and sold, nurtured as much by fan interest as by industrial conditions, providing a counterexample to developments in the rest of the world’s music industries. It is also the context in which the fandom of reggae led to a significant accumulation of vinyl records imported from Jamaica. This is explainable through a combination of Japanese cultural engagement with material music goods and the larger meaning-making and cultural/communal tradition of the music, according to my interview data.

## **Historicizing Reggae Relations Between Japan and Jamaica**

Reggae originated in Jamaica in the mid-1960s as a blend of other indigenous Jamaican and Caribbean musics, like ska, calypso, and rocksteady.<sup>28</sup> By the 1970s, a variety of studios and labels had been established, and the genre entered its “Golden Age.” Scaling the industry became an important next step for the production and distribution of indigenous musical texts—the ability to change a production-forward process (the playing of the songs) into an industrial one (the recording and distribution of them). By manufacturing a material vessel to export reggae, Jamaicans could capitalize on their music and move their economy.<sup>29</sup> Thanks in large part to Island Records and its label head, the London-born navigator of postcolonial frictions Chris Blackwell, Bob Marley became the first international reggae superstar and the

first globally successful musician of the global South, drawing on a philosophical tradition of Black internationalisms even if the distribution apparatus that carried his music across the globe was effectively neocolonial.<sup>30</sup> Reggae was also a mixed media phenomenon, with two music-centric films—Jimmy Cliff’s *The Harder They Come* (1972) and *Rockers* (1978)—becoming important cultural texts in the popularization of the genre across the globe.<sup>31</sup>

Jamaica won independence from its British colonial overlords in 1962; Japan and Jamaica established bilateral diplomatic relations in 1964 in what is today known as the J-J Partnership. Contemporary materials suggest the nations saw sustainable co-development as necessary for “overcoming the vulnerabilities particular to small island states.”<sup>32</sup> As early as 1978, requests from Japan for Jamaican music fan pen pals were appearing in Kingston newspapers.<sup>33</sup> That year, Cliff would tour Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, “spreading the reggae gospel along the way,” according to Kingston’s newspaper, the *Daily Gleaner*.

Marley followed Cliff to Japan, performing at Nakano Sun Plaza Hall, Tokyo, in April 1979. The concert became a cultural touchstone for Japan’s growing reggae subculture. By the mid-1980s, Jamaican papers were calling Japan “the fastest growing market for the music.”<sup>34</sup> In 1982, Shizuo Ishii launched *Riddim* magazine, named after the reusable instrumental tracks that accompanied many Jamaican reggae songs. Ishii obtained distribution rights for *Rockers* and screened the film for sold-out crowds in Tokyo, with 3,000 guests attending in just one week. In an interview, Ishii cited the importance of informal, interpersonal networks in building reggae’s reputation in Japan: He only came to know of the film because the wife of one of the producers was Japanese. His label, Overheat, was first launched as a distribution company for *Rockers*, and he partnered with EMI to distribute the soundtrack in Tokyo after the film’s success. Ishii said he tried then and now to highlight the particularities of Black music, calling it “special” and admitting that in the early stage, he was unsure if there would be a market for it in Japan because of its particularity. He underestimated its relevance and potential.

During this period, Japanese tourists started traveling across the globe to visit famed reggae record stores in Jamaica, such as Randy’s Records and Rockers International. Federal Records and Studio One ramped up their recording and production rates as the genre’s global reach expanded. Jey Inoue, later the founder of Oasis Records, led what he believes to have been the first “record collector expedition” in 1983, serving as a guide to Japanese reggae fans visiting legendary record stores. One member of the trip would later become Rankin’ Taxi, one of the most successful and significant Japanese reggae (J-Reggae) artists.<sup>35</sup>

Economic ties between the two nations expanded throughout the 1980s, with Jamaican Prime Minister Edward Seaga visiting Japan in 1981 and 1985. Japan’s Overseas Economic Co-Operation Fund loaned the Jamaican government \$17.8 million to assist with economic recovery in 1981 and a \$22 million digital electronic phone system supplied through a contract with Matsui and Company in 1983.<sup>36</sup> As Jamaica’s Minister of Tourism Frank Pringle suggested, Japanese investment would go hand in hand with attracting tourists.<sup>37</sup> According to Jamaica’s Ministry of Justice, the number of Japanese tourists visiting Jamaica increased annually, from just 29 in 1980 to 11,534 in 1995.<sup>38</sup> Reggae music and culture were at the heart of the relationship. Jamaican academics even pointed to the maintenance of Japanese cultural identity in the face of the Marshall Plan as a model for the conflicted Caribbean nation

to follow.<sup>39</sup> “Japan has remained Japan, different in culture and in society from the United States,” Errol Miller, a Jamaican professor, remarked in reference to ongoing Cold War tensions and soft power.<sup>40</sup> Though Japan did not lack for its own international relations-driven self-interest, commentary such as this does suggest a more equal-footing reciprocity rather than neocolonial domination.

Ienaga, the founder and owner of Dub Store, the premier player in the scene, made his first record-buying trip in 1993; three years later he opened a storefront and mail-order service. As part of broader efforts throughout the Caribbean to attract more Japanese tourists interested in reggae and coffee (today, Japan imports roughly 80 percent of the well-regarded beans farmed on Jamaica’s Blue Mountain<sup>41</sup>), Jamaica’s Ministry of Tourism pointed to Japan as a linchpin of the tourism industry.<sup>42</sup> Arguments for a Jamaican music hall of fame cited Japanese tourists specifically.<sup>43</sup>

As both nations established embassies in the other’s capitals, J-Reggae and Japanese reggae fandom surged in the 1990s. Ienaga built relationships with producers and artists in Jamaica, such as Studio One and Federal Records, to distribute their work in Japan, though they lowered their output of vinyl in favor of more compact discs based on market conditions. Many older reggae vinyl records fell out of print and circulation; Ienaga’s focus on Golden Age records meant that he accumulated many recordings in vinyl because it was the only way they were circulating. At the time, many of the Federal pressings were in London; living in London at the time, Ienaga, an avid collector, accumulated about 200 duplicate copies of vintage records in his personal collection. He moved back to Tokyo, placing advertisements in music magazines and beginning a mail-order business to accompany the store.

At the social level, two major events epitomized Japanese engagement with reggae culture, both driven by media technologies: In 1999, Yokohama group Mighty Crown won the World Clash sound clash in Brooklyn. A sound clash is a battle between different DJ groups, with vinyl records played through a massive sound system speaker array while toasting (comically boasting or dissing) the opponent. Mighty Crown’s victory established Japanese selectors as important keepers of Jamaican sound recordings and cultural practices—they had the vinyl records and fluency with the performance practice to win the title. The 2002 victory of Japanese woman Junko Kudo in the National Dancehall Queen competition in Jamaica likewise reflected Japan’s place in reggae history. Kudo beat out an international group of dancers, suggesting in an interview with the *Gleaner* that she had learned to dance by watching Jamaican videos.<sup>44</sup> Cross-cultural events of this type cemented the relationship as more than just music—reggae culture was vibrant among Japanese enthusiasts, who Sterling suggests were invested in the symbolic capital of performance fluency that lent their subculture authenticity. Coco-Isle Music Mart’s Kazuki Nakamura suggested reggae’s popularity in the 1990s in clubs and primed the pump for social hip-hop listening soon after. I see the vinyl and technologies of social reggae playing an essential role in the sociality of what Christopher Small has called “musicking.”<sup>45</sup>

The internet has in some ways democratized access to some musical texts, but it has done so unevenly and in a way that throws the alienation and commodity fetishization that Frith traces through the history of recorded music into hyperdrive.<sup>46</sup> This research suggests industrial

rearrangement has—like the scholarship around contemporary music industry distribution and organization—moved too quickly, often to the disadvantage of participants—both workers and fans. The speed at which the digital has moved across the world has been striking and impactful, but for Jamaica, it has not been an unquestioned boon. Cultural industries workers there continue to wrestle with how to participate more equitably in the global music industry. As I have previously argued, vinyl’s history on the island may be key to current attempts to participate more equitably in the industry.<sup>47</sup> This work, which the authors presented at industry conferences held at JAMPRO, a wing of the nation’s Ministry of Economic Growth and Job Creation, can thus serve as context for recommendations for Jamaican artists and independent music business workers.<sup>48</sup>

Despite a slowdown in the subsequent years, a number of cultural producers invested in Jamaican vinyl remain optimistic about its potential impact. In a recent *Gleaner* article, Debra Bissoon, brand manager at the Bob Marley Group of Companies, singled out Japan as a nation whose tourists seek out vinyl purchases when visiting Jamaica.<sup>49</sup> Since 2013, Kingston has held a “Japan Day” each February, and a new means of promoting cultural exchange, the Japan-Jamaica Friendship Association (also called the JJFA or “Japamaica”), was launched in August 2022.<sup>50</sup>

## Findings and Analysis

The interview data yielded a number of worthwhile insights. First, interview subjects agreed that Japanese cultural tastes have created a landscape of music consumption uniquely suited for vinyl’s prominence because physical music sales have been so normalized in Japanese culture. They distinguished themselves from the idol group fans but acknowledged similarities around collectability and materiality, communicating value. Store owners cited collectability as a major motivator for fans, their employees, and themselves.

There is more to the story, though: In the case of reggae vinyl, attachment to the genre and the records themselves specifically gave fans an experience of heightened authenticity, where knowledge of the deeper, rarer cuts was a way to signal more serious fandom. The store owners and reggae fans that I interviewed are devoted to the music. They cite its bass sounds, unique cultural performance practices and traditions, and feel-good messages as motivations for their fandom. Like many vinyl consumers around the world, interviewees suggested the “real” way to hear music was analog. However, interlocutors such as Kazuki Nakamura, owner of Coco-Isle Music Market, intimated that this was especially the case for reggae in both private listening and public performances such as sound clashes, thus mirroring discourses around musical mediums in Jamaican cultural circles. Nakamura called vinyl and sound systems “necessary” for him and his contemporaries. Many Japanese DJs sought out vinyl for their live performances as a way to perform with the same authenticity. Records factor into the social life of reggae music in the city. According to Chikuma Tsuboi, Dub Store’s distribution manager, “Everyone’s involved somehow—with some club nights or bar nights that give us opportunities to play our records,” he claims.

This pursuit of authentic connection also opened spaces for consciousness raising, often with particular acknowledgment of the politics of reggae. “World war is changing to consciousness,” Yumi Uehara said, mentioning the suffering of Vietnamese boat people and nuclear fall-out. “People want to be conscious. That’s a thing in the lyrics . . . hip-hop and reggae.”

Store owners claim that they serve as informal translators, explaining the music’s political themes and lyrics to interested record collectors. “While they continue to listen they might be interested in lyrics and they’ll check the dictionary. Sometimes our customers will ask me about a lyric. ‘What did Derrick Morgan want to tell the people through this tune?’” Uehara shared.

This follows a smaller subcultural movement connecting Rastafari themes and ideologies to J-Reggae, specifically Rankin’ Taxi, whose song “You Can’t See It, And You Can’t Smell It, Either,” became a protest anthem following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster.<sup>51</sup> “Everyone’s feeling people not getting treated right,” Tsuboi said. “I think that’s what we have in common.”

For a relatively small subculture, the small circle of leading figures in Japanese reggae subcultures figure prominently in the global history of reggae from the late 1980s onward. For example, Shizuo Ishii claims (perhaps apocryphally) that naming his magazine *Riddim* standardized the word’s spelling worldwide (beating out Jamaican artist Sugar Minott’s *Rydim* (1985)). Though unverifiable, this claim is significant because it comes as part of a larger set of conversations where the historiographical roles of Japanese figures like Ishii, Ienaga, and Rankin’ Taxi are more significant than one would assume at first glance. These types of person-to-person relationships nourished the growing subculture and market centering around the trade of vintage vinyl. Ienaga, Inoue, and others describe cultivating relationships with Jamaicans and Japanese citizens living abroad who would send dozens of records each month for them to sell to friends and customers for their new businesses. It would seem easy to suggest a top-down approach where international relations—replete with power dynamics—drove ongoing relations between the nations. Reggae’s history suggests a more bottom-up, people-driven approach. Store owners served as precursors to larger mainstream connections between Japan and Jamaica through major labels and festivals like Japansplash.

But how do we eschew concerns about a new colonial enterprise and argue for a more reciprocal one? After visiting Japan in 2017, reggae icon Winston “Wee Pow” Powell called the Pacific island “the capital of reggae music”: “The Japanese. . . have visited Jamaica and they bought maybe 90 per cent of our vinyl collection and that vault is now in Japan,” he said.

[C]lassic vinyl that your grand parents [sic] used to collect. The Japanese came here and they knocked door to door and bought out the vinyl records . . . so most of our catalogue is in Japan. . . . We as a people and the government nuh<sup>52</sup> really embrace our music the way we should. . . . So the Japanese took it, and they proceeded to do what we should have been doing, and that is the reason why some people would say that they are the capital.<sup>53</sup>

What does it mean for Japan to be the capital of Jamaican music? A facile takeaway from the current condition would suggest the resonances between Japan’s control of significant vinyl and the reverberations of (neo)colonial plunder. Instead, though, when

contextualized in this history, we might recognize it as a product of a lengthy period of meaningful cultural interchange, where Jamaican producers might take advantage of these under-traveled trade routes, growing the relationship between the two nations with music at the forefront of exchange. After the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, Jamaican artist Junior Reid raised funds to aid the island's recovery, telling the *Gleaner*, "They support our music, so we affi<sup>54</sup> support them."<sup>55</sup> Contemporary Jamaican newspapers cite scholars such as Noriko Manabe, who suggests reggae as a gateway to a counter-hegemonic state of being for Japanese fans.<sup>56</sup>

Ienaga acknowledged the power dynamics at play, suggesting that his 21st-century move toward reissues and re-pressings had a more equivocal reasoning. "I kind of got fed up with doing the secondhand records because the money we make doesn't really go to any artist or the producer or whoever who made the music," he explained. "Factory-new records, the money properly goes to the producer and the artist. Some of the records I liked was not available. Nobody was putting them out. So I started to talk to those people that I want to press those records and that's how my label got started." The label has emerged as a preservationist enterprise, re-releasing unheard studio recordings and Iyaric Rastafari religious field recordings in addition to maintaining a vast archive of vintage vinyl items for sale. Without Japanese collectors' recognition of the complex value of reggae records (and the market for collecting and preserving rare vinyl), it is possible that many of these records would have remained even more obscure or become extinct.

## Conclusion

Jettisoning the material in favor of the digital ultimately hurts the Jamaican record industry's potential to maintain this partnership with Japan, which, interviews suggest, could benefit from a more robust process of producing new reggae vinyl. The premium placed on digitality keeps Jamaican cultural producers trapped within a prevailing industry network infrastructure that has never supported them—a new hegemon in a space of flows that has adapted and adjusted in the echoes of colonial organization. Japan can become for the Jamaican industry what Bob Marley called a "Small Axe"—a tool for resisting music industry hegemony.

Orthodoxies and market-epistemological assumptions preclude the kind of creative thinking that spawned the unique relationship between Japan and Jamaica in the first place. Scholars, artists, and creative industries professionals around the globe should move more cautiously toward the digital as a panacea for a flagging industry and for our scholarship. Alternative distribution networks might be more profitable for Jamaican artists than the traditional ones. Alternative orientations toward the digital might be more profitable for our scholarship than recent ones.

What does the emphasis on the digital overlook? How do we ensure that the industry-wide rush to accommodate the digital does not overwhelm scholarship? How do we account for the materiality of music products and their role beyond "retro" or nostalgic desires in the digital era? The case study of Jamaican vinyl in Japan shows that there are ongoing industrial

relationships outside of hegemonic trade routes and ideological assumptions that continue to traffic in material music—vinyl and otherwise—even as we settle into the digital era.

For industry professionals, it opens new pathways to profitability. In the Jamaican case, continuing to develop partnerships with independent labels outside of the West is a way to maintain a more autonomous, participatory place in industry discourse. Japan's industrial prerogatives, cultures, and buying patterns are ultimately more in line with some of the values held by Jamaican creatives. In this specific case, these findings can be both profitable and meaningful for Jamaican musicians and copyright holders. The Japanese industrial organization's ability to elide pre-established trade routes and preference for material media could open new avenues for Jamaican artists to profit from their work.

Necessary for this is a sustained engagement with the meaning and specific power of reggae and the medium of its message. The interlocutors with whom I spoke articulated a consciousness and respect for the art and those who make it. When digital technologies devalue artists, messages, and media delivery methods, reggae vinyl in Tokyo is a case study for respectful, mutually beneficial relations.

Alternative industrial flows are productive because they generate new ways of thinking about the global distribution of music, for both scholars and industry workers. For the former, it upsets traditional and staid epistemological frameworks about music distribution, suggesting new knowledges generated from surprising national relationships such as Japan and Jamaica might help us retheorize our understandings of global flows. Uehara, the female store owner, suggested a kind of gravitational pull of American culture and cultural influences throughout global popular culture. The relationship between Japan and Jamaica, she suggested, gave both countries a different partner for less-fraught cultural exchange.

In January 2017, vinyl collectors around the world were excited to hear that Tuff Gong, home to the Finebilt record press that engaged the researchers years ago and launched this scholarship, would begin undergoing renovations with the goal to begin producing new vinyl again for the first time in years. By early 2020, new presses were up and running, promising 250,000 records pressed per year, including limited-edition, rarer finds for collectors and selectors.<sup>57</sup> Undoubtedly, some of these will make their way to Tokyo.

“Whatever music technology is, it is not one thing alone,” musicologist Timothy Taylor writes in his important work *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology, and Culture*. “In short music technology—any technology—is not simply an artefact or collection of artefacts; it is, rather, always bound up in a social system.”<sup>58</sup> This article attempts to explicate the specific systemic relationality between Japan and Jamaica that gives vinyl its particular acclaimed status betwixt the two countries within a rapidly digitizing world. Digital files and analog records have different social-capital statuses and socio-cultural meanings, and by excavating the significance of reggae vinyl through an unexpected and rich international partnership, we can more fully understand the music industry and its workings.

---

John Vilanova is Assistant Professor of Journalism and Communication and Africana Studies at Lehigh University. He researches structural and institutional inequities in the culture industries, with a particular emphasis on anti-Blackness in global popular music.’

- <sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- <sup>2</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of modernity: The tragedy of colonial enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. (Verso, 2007).
- <sup>4</sup> Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, eds. Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2010).
- <sup>5</sup> Marvin Sterling, *Babylon East: Performing Dancehall, Roots Reggae, and Rastafari in Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
- <sup>6</sup> Timothy Chin, "Notes on reggae music, diaspora aesthetics, and Chinese Jamaican Transmigrancy: The case of VP Records," *Social and Economic Studies* 55, no. 1 (2006): 92–115.
- <sup>7</sup> Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xii.
- <sup>8</sup> Gerald Horne, *Facing the Rising Sun: African Americans, Japan and the Rise of Afro-Asian Solidarity* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).
- <sup>9</sup> Horne, 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> Roger Goodman and Kirsten Refsing, *Ideology and Practice in Modern Japan* (London, UK: Routledge, 1992); William F. Lewis, "The Social Drama of the Rastafari," *Dialectical Anthropology* 19 (1994): 283–94; Dean W. Collinwood and Osamu Kusatsu, "Japanese Rastafarians: Non-Conformity in Modern Japan," *The Study of International Relations* 26 (2000): 23–35; Deborah Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Deborah Thomas, *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- <sup>11</sup> Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2001).
- <sup>12</sup> George Plasketes, "Romancing the Record: The Vinyl De-Evolution and Subcultural Evolution," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 26, no. 1 (1992): 109–122; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Rebekah Farrugia and Thomas Swiss, "Tracking the DJs: Vinyl Records, Work, and the Debate over New Technologies," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 17, no. 1 (2005): 30–44; Emily Chivers Yochim and Megan Biddinger "‘It kind of gives you that vintage feel’: Vinyl records and the trope of death," *Media, Culture & Society* 30, no. 2 (2008): 183–195; Amanda Petrusich, *Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> Dominik Bartmanski D and Ian Woodward "The vinyl: The analogue medium in the age of digital reproduction," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 15, no. 1 (2014): 3–27.
- <sup>14</sup> Elena Oumano, "Music Thrives as Studios Proliferate," *Billboard*, February 4, 1995.
- <sup>15</sup> Zekja Kozul-Wright and Lloyd Stanbury, "Becoming a Globally Competitive Player: The Case of the Music Industry in Jamaica. UNCTAD/OSG Discussion Paper No. 138 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Geneva (1999); Dominic Power and Daniel Hallencreutz, "Profiting from Creativity? The Music Industry in

- Stockholm, Sweden and Kingston, Jamaica.” *Environment and Planning A* 34, no. 10 (2002): 1833–1854.
- <sup>16</sup> John Vilanova, “Beating the Babylon System: Paratextual Apparatuses and Theorizing 1960s Jamaican Record Pressing. [POSTER].” International Communication Association Annual Conference (2017).
- <sup>17</sup> Dave Stelfox, “Vinyl has been eliminated,” *The Guardian*, January 18, 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/jan/18/urban.popandrock1>
- <sup>18</sup> Norman C. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- <sup>19</sup> Norman C. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
- <sup>20</sup> Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Paul Sullivan, *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2014); Kim Ramstedt K “‘Chase Sound Boys Out Of Earth’: The Aura Of Dubplate Specials in Finnish Reggae Sound System Culture”: *Dancecult: The Journal of Electronic Dance Music* 7 no. 2 (2015): 25–42.
- <sup>21</sup> “Global Music Report,” *International Federation of the Phonographic Industry*, 2017, [https://www.musikindustrie.de/fileadmin/bvmi/upload/06\\_Publikationen/GMR/GMR2017\\_press.pdf](https://www.musikindustrie.de/fileadmin/bvmi/upload/06_Publikationen/GMR/GMR2017_press.pdf)
- <sup>22</sup> “Most commonly used methods of listening to music among people in Japan as of December 2021,” *Statista*, March 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1099431/japan-most-commonly-used-music-listening-methods/>
- <sup>23</sup> David Brancaccio, “Tower Records stores have actually been thriving all this time – in Japan,” *Marketplace*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.marketplace.org/2022/11/01/tower-records-stores-have-actually-been-thriving-all-this-time-in-japan/>
- <sup>24</sup> Mun Keat Looi, “Why Japan has more old-fashioned music stores than anywhere else in the world,” *Quartz*, August 19, 2016, <https://qz.com/711490/why-japan-has-more-music-stores-than-the-rest-of-the-world/>
- <sup>25</sup> Lucy Dayman, “Why CDs are Still Big in Japan.” *Metropolis*, March 13, 2017, <https://metropolisjapan.com/cds-still-big-japan/>
- <sup>26</sup> John R. Clammer, *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997).
- <sup>27</sup> Mark Mulligan, “The Handshake Economy,” *Music Industry Blog*, January 26, 2016, <https://musicindustryblog.wordpress.com/2016/01/26/the-handshake-economy/>
- <sup>28</sup> Kevin O’Brien Chang and Wayne Chen, *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998); Lloyd Bradley, *This is Reggae Music: The Story of Jamaica’s Music* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2001); David Katz, *Solid Foundation: An Oral History of Reggae* (London, UK: Outline Press, 2012).
- <sup>29</sup> Rohan Bell, “Muzik a Yard: The Retail Music Market in Jamaica,” *Research and Analysis Associates* (1999); Compton Bourne and S.M. Allgrove, “Prospects for Exports of Entertainment Services from the Caribbean: The Case of Music,” *Caribbean Dialogue* 3, no. 3 (1997): 1–12.
- <sup>30</sup> Michelle A. Stephens, “Babylon’s ‘Natural Mystic’: The North American music industry, the legend of Bob Marley, and the incorporation of transnationalism,” *Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998).

- <sup>31</sup> Rubn A. Gaztambide-Fernández, “Reggae, Ganja, and Black Bodies: Power, Meaning, and the Markings of Postcolonial Jamaica in Perry Henzell’s *The Harder They Come*,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 4 (2002): 353–376; Ifeona Fulani, “Representations of the Body of the New Nation in *The Harder They Come* and *Rockers*,” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2005): 1–12; Prakash Younger, “Historical Experience in *The Harder They Come*,” *Social Text* 23, no. 1 (2005): 43–63; Raphael Dalleo, “Performing Postcoloniality in the Jamaican Seventies: *The Harder They Come* and *Smile Orange*,” *Postcolonial Text* 6, no. 1 (2011); Rachel Moseley-Wood, “The Other Jamaica: Music and the City in Jamaican Film,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 61, no. 2–3 (2015) 24–41.
- <sup>32</sup> The Embassy of Japan in Jamaica, “Reflections: Japan-Jamaica Relations 1964–2022,” February 2022, <https://www.jamaica.emb-japan.go.jp/files/100360850.pdf>
- <sup>33</sup> “Request for Penpals” *The Daily Gleaner*, February 1978, 12.
- <sup>34</sup> W. Barnes, “Can Sunsplash Survive?” *The Daily Gleaner*, July 12, 1983, 4.
- <sup>35</sup> Douglas Webster, “Jamaican Vinyl Tourism: A Niche Within a Niche,” in *New Perspectives in Caribbean Tourism*, eds. Marcella Daye, Donna Chambers and Sherma Roberts (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).
- <sup>36</sup> Photo Caption, *The Daily Gleaner*, October 21, 1981, 1; “\$22-m Modern Telephone System for Kingston, Spanish Town,” *The Daily Gleaner*, October 4, 1983, 1.
- <sup>37</sup> *Gleaner* Western Bureau, “Pringle Warns of Tourism Collapse.”
- <sup>38</sup> Sterling, *Babylon East*.
- <sup>39</sup> “Small businesses urged to get involved in CBI,” *The Daily Gleaner*, April 6, 1982, 12.
- <sup>40</sup> “Small businesses urged.”
- <sup>41</sup> Jamaica–Japan Relations, Embassy of Jamaica Tokyo, Japan, <http://jamaicaembassy.jp/JamaicaA.html>
- <sup>42</sup> *Gleaner* Western Bureau, “Pringle Warns of Tourism Collapse,” *The Daily Gleaner*, January 4, 1988, 3; “Going after Japanese Tourists,” *The Daily Gleaner*, September 29, 1990, 3.
- <sup>43</sup> O. Clark, “Wanted: A Muisic Hall of Fame [sic],” *The Daily Gleaner*. December 20, 1991, 13A.
- <sup>44</sup> N. Plunkett, “If I don’t dance, I dead,” *The Daily Gleaner*, August 25, 2002, 1E–2E.
- <sup>45</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).
- <sup>46</sup> Simon Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (London, UK: Routledge, 2007).
- <sup>47</sup> John Vilanova, “Kingston Be Wise: Jamaica’s Reggae Revival, Musical Livity, and Troubling Temporality in the Modern Global Music Industry.” *International Journal of Communication* 13, (2019) 4087–4106.
- <sup>48</sup> John Vilanova, “Roots Routes: Japan, Jamaica, and the Surprising Global Flows of Vintage Reggae Vinyl. Jamaica Music Conference (2016).
- <sup>49</sup> Curtis Campbell, “Vinyl Collectors Eye Jamaica,” *The Daily Gleaner*, May 24, 2015, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/entertainment/20150524/vinyl-collectors-eye-jamaica-willing-pay-big-bucks-rare-commodity>
- <sup>50</sup> “Former diplomats, volunteers launch association to strengthen Jamaica-Japan relations,” *The Daily Gleaner*, September 17, 2022, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20220917/former-diplomats-volunteers-launch-association-strengthen-jamaica-japan>

- <sup>51</sup> Noriko Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music After Fukushima* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- <sup>52</sup> “Never” or “Didn’t” in Jamaican Patois.
- <sup>53</sup> Curtis Campbell, “Stone Love Crowns Japan The Capital Of Jamaican Music,” *The Daily Gleaner*, June 11, 2017, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/entertainment/20170611/stone-love-crowns-japan-capital-jamaican-music>
- <sup>54</sup> “have to” in Patois.
- <sup>55</sup> Hasani Walters, “Jamaica and Japan share ‘One Blood,’” *The Daily Gleaner*, March 20, 2011, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110320/ent/ent1.html>
- <sup>56</sup> Mel Cooke, “Reggae/dancehall popularity in Japan rooted in similarity,” *The Daily Gleaner*, July 27, 2010, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20100727/ent/ent3.html>
- <sup>57</sup> Dan Rys, “A Look Inside The Marleys’ Re-Opening of Tuff Gong Vinyl Pressing Plant,” *Billboard*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/marley-tuff-gong-vinyl-pressing-plant-video-9364364/>
- <sup>58</sup> Timothy Taylor, *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology, and Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 7.