

Urban spaces and working-class expressions
across the Black Atlantic: tracing the routes of
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Historian Paul Gilroy observes that a focus on *roots*, the authentic origins of peoples and cultures, obscures the *routes* through which encounters unfold and identities shift, realign, and coalesce in space and time. African identities in the "New World," for example, are recombinant, forged of necessity, emerging as soon as disparate people meet in the brutal hold of that most modern of institutions: the slaving ship.¹

Though principally concerned with the formation of identities through the Middle Passage, Gilroy's assertion is as true for black studies and the Atlantic world as it is for any diaspora. The conceptual frameworks of motion, encounter, and identity shift are generally useful for understanding how cultural forms and expressions develop through routes of communication across borders.² For Gilroy, and for Stuart Hall and C. L. R. James before him, the local and the transnational are inextricably linked by regimes of production and consumption as well as by systems of thought and meaning. Cultural forms may be grounded in local spaces of production and consumption, but the very material basis for that production, and indeed the ideologies that underpin meaning, often knit together people and processes across national boundaries.³ The deployment of this concept as a central feature of scholarship is one of the great legacies of black studies as the field has developed since 1970, taking the best of Marxism, the best of British culture studies, the best of immigration studies, and the best of intellectual history. **[End Page 183]**

It is only within a theoretical framework enabled by black transnational studies that the development of ska music and its descendent forms (rocksteady and reggae) can be fully illuminated. The history of ska illustrates the central theme of movement between the local and the transnational in the formation of identities and in the creation of cultural forms. Now in its third wave, ska has for forty years formed the basis of a cross-border conversation in music. Ska was generated out of a transnational network of labor and music migration, nurtured in particular cities within the broad cultural geography of the black Atlantic. The history of ska binds together dislocated, proletarianized Kingston workers, American sailors on their seafaring ship floor, urban black families in London and Manchester, New Orleans juke joint regulars, and an emerging international recording industry. The ska sound forms part of a broad, transoceanic musical development that both emerges from and transcends urban, working-class spaces of labor, residence, and leisure. Finally, ska's descendent musical forms weave together white and black youth through a variety of genres and practices linking Jamaica, Great Britain, and the United States.

The Three Waves of Ska Music

Ska washed over the black Atlantic in three waves, each associated with a transnational set of conditions and processes.⁴ The first wave of ska erupted in the early 1960s out of the energetic dance hall culture of urban Jamaica among working-class youth cobbling together old island traditions and new forms of expression from a range of materials found in American, British, and Jamaican popular culture. The horn-dominated instrumentation, syncopated rhythms, up-tempo timing, and downbeat emphasis marked ska as an emergent genre of music. Ska music formed part of a broader Jamaican urban youth culture anchored by the so-called Rude Boy, a suit-and-tie hooligan bent on turf protection and the defiance of adult authority. Many artists associated with the global reggae explosion of the 1970s, such as Bob Marley, Bunny Livingston, Toots Hibbert, and Lee "Scratch" Perry, got their start as young Rude Boy instrumentalists in ska bands. By the late 1960s, Marley and other stars began to slow down the tempo of ska, launching experiments with the genre that would result in rocksteady and reggae music. Nevertheless, these

DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH

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