West Indian Roots and Routes of British Jazz

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On 22 June 1948 the *Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury in East London having made the transatlantic journey from the Caribbean. (Passengers had boarded first in Trinidad, before the ship proceeded to Jamaica, Tampico, Havana, and Bermuda). Amongst the passengers were the Trinidadian calypsonians Lord Beginner (Egbert Moore), Lord Woodbine (Harold Philips) and Lord Kitchener (Aldwin Roberts), whose performance of his calypso ‘London is the Place for Me’ on the deck when the ship arrived in Britain was captured by Pathé News.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although the arrival of the *Windrush* is understandably heralded as a significant moment in the history of Britain and the Empire, historians have recently developed a more critical approach to the event. Matthew Mead suggests that ‘the shorthand symbolic usage of the Windrush tends towards the monadic’[[2]](#footnote-2) and the editors of *Before Windrush: Recovering an Asian and Black Literary Heritage within Britain* argue that ‘the *prehistory* of that event becomes more crucial than ever for a country trying to understand the process through which it has become a postcolonial nation state.’[[3]](#footnote-3) These perspectives illuminate the arrival of the *Windrush* within the broader context of migration and its impact on British culture and society. Certainly, there were precedents for West Indian migration, albeit not on such a scale. The aforementioned calypsonians in particular found in London a flourishing live music scene with many established West Indian musicians.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this essay I explore the pre-*Windrush* migration to Britain of West Indian musicians, who were mainly from Jamaica and Trinidad, assessing the impact of their cultural roots and migratory routes on the development of British jazz in the interwar period.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the early twentieth century, several West Indian musicians came to Britain via the USA. Trumpeter Leslie Thompson, a later migrant direct from Jamaica, recalled that the circumstances of economic stagnation around the turn of the century led Jamaicans to seek work in America, often via Cuba or Panama.[[6]](#footnote-6) By the start of the century violinist and pianist Dan Kildare, whose father was Paymaster General of the Kingston (Jamaica) Constabulary, was resident in America. A contemporary of James Reese Europe who was famous for bringing syncopated music to France with his Hellfighters band during the First World War, Kildare was similarly involved in the Clef Club, which had been set up to advocate black musicians and to act as a booking agency. He assumed the presidency of the organisation in 1913. In imitation of the exhibition dancers Vernon and Irene Castle who performed with Europe’s all-black orchestra, the dancer Joan Sawyer hired Kildare to provide a similar band for her performances at the Persian Garden at the Winter Gardens Theater in New York. As with many American fashions of the day, this trend for black musicians became influential in London, where a group led by Kildare arrived in 1915. Kildare’s West Indian roots are not obviously reflected in the surviving performances and known repertoire of this ensemble. Rather, in accordance with the fashions of the times, Hawaiian references are frequent, and Kildare’s band was billed in explicitly racial terms in Britain as ‘Ciro’s Club Coon Orchestra’. Moreover, the continued presence of the banjo linked this latest manifestation of American popular music performance in Britain unequivocally back to the stereotyped, generalised racial imagery of the minstrel show.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the early 1920s, West Indian musicians also performed in Britain with the Southern Syncopated Orchestra (SSO). Formed by the violinist, composer and conductor Will Marion Cook in New York to perform a wide-ranging repertoire of spirituals, plantation songs, ragtime, blues, jazz and light classical pieces, the original group which arrived in Britain in 1919 consisted mainly of African American musicians, including noted saxophonist Sidney Bechet. Once the group was resident in Britain, disputes led to multiple fractures in the personnel. Replacements came direct from the US, but increasingly also drew on diasporic populations in Britain and Europe including those with West Indian connections. Egbert Thompson, a Sierra Leonian raised in Jamaica who developed his career in New York, took over from Cook as leader of the group for a time. Similarly, trumpeter James Briggs from Grenada, George Clapham from St. Kitts, and clarinettist Anthony Rivera from Puerto Rico had all joined up with the SSO to come to Britain having first emigrated to New York. Jamaican-born clarinettist John Russell and trumpeter Joe Smith, as well as Trinidadians Cyril and George Blake (vocalist and drummer respectively) and banjoist Alston Hughes also became members. Latterly, the SSO included some white British musicians such as the trombonist and later bandleader Ted Heath, trombonist John Greer, pianist Billy Mason, drummer Harry Robbins and trumpeter Tommy Smith.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In this early period then, the precise racial identity of the musicians was not a factor which significantly influenced either the nature of their performances or their employment opportunities in Britain, but their migratory routes via New York, or collaboration with African American musicians in Britain, were often vital in allowing them to gain experience of the music which would secure their success. As we shall see, by 1935 the origins of the performers began to become logistically significant and more explicit in musical performance. But the story of the SSO also makes clear that by the early 1920s there was a growing community of black musicians in London who were well-placed to exploit current fashions in popular music performance.

Alongside those West Indian musicians who had developed their musical skills in America, the structures of the Empire, notably the Exhibition and the military, were significant in bringing musicians directly from the Caribbean to Britain. In the summer of 1905 the band of the West India Regiment from Jamaica performed at the Colonial Exhibition at Crystal Palace in South London.[[9]](#footnote-9) The following year the Kingston Choral Union came to Britain to perform at the Colonial Products Exhibition at St. George’s Hall in Liverpool, and then toured the country, billed as the ‘Native Choir of Jamaica.’[[10]](#footnote-10) A notable precedent for the latter was the Fisk Jubilee Singers, an African American choir who toured Britain in the late nineteenth century to raise money for University buildings at Fisk University, a historically black college in Nashville, Tennessee. The Jamaican Choir performed a not dissimilar mix of religious and popular material in formal dress which endeared them to their British audiences.[[11]](#footnote-11) These types of encounter with black ‘others’ were familiar tropes in Britain. Exhibitions had long provided a way for Europeans to encounter their ‘others’ in a controlled manner, since they allowed a suitable distance to be maintained between the visitor and the exhibit.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, the close links between the British and West Indian military were more significant than to merely permit invitations for the West India Regiment band to perform at exhibitions, since a steady stream of West Indian musicians were sent to Britain to study at Kneller Hall, the Royal Military School of Music. Military service enabled West Indian musicians such as trumpeters Leslie Thompson and Leslie ‘Jiver’ Hutchinson, saxophonist Louis Stephenson and numerous others to experience something of life in the ‘mother country.’ The three musicians later settled permanently in Britain where they had significant musical careers.

The importance of the West India Regiment band, which became the Jamaica Military Band when the regiment disbanded in 1927, to the musical life of Kingston, Jamaica cannot be overstated.[[13]](#footnote-13) In particular, the band enjoyed close links with the famous Alpha School which provided an education for poor boys in Kingston, with an emphasis on music. The school boasts an impressive list of musician alumni including saxophonist Joe Harriott, who was to develop a style of free jazz playing in when resident in Britain which ran parallel to that of African-American saxophonist Ornette Coleman. Leslie Thompson, a pupil at the school, recalled that the soldiers were employed as instrumental instructors, and the Regiment band provided an obvious destination for the pupils when they left school.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The few early reports of jazz performance in Jamaica are associated with the Myrtle Bank Hotel, originally constructed to house visitors to the 1891 Jamaica Exhibition and then rebuilt following an earthquake in 1907. Although proficient jazz performers began to emerge from the 1930s, jazz was regarded primarily as music for outsiders and therefore its performance would be influenced primarily by their tastes rather than the artistic expression of the musicians involved.[[15]](#footnote-15) The idea that Jamaican audiences were not sufficiently equipped to understand jazz was advanced persistently, and even by the time of independence, jazz continued to be positioned as an adjunct to the musical culture of Jamaica. Rather, independence could encourage jazz musicians to be more original within the context of the development of a local music industry. In 1962 journalist Hartley Neita described how ‘Jamaican jazzmen threw off the colonial cloak they had worn these many years. In the past, our jazzmen looked abroad for their musical ideas’ arguing how it was now possible for Jamaican jazz musicians to be more creative and individual.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, the critic Dermot Hussey remained sceptical:

It is one of the myths about Jamaica that we have jazz musicians, and I must set about destroying it. The only jazz musicians that Jamaica has produced are currently abroad, what we have behind are hotel musicians and club musicians, an occupation merely for them not to grow thin and take up other arts like janitoring and pool-room keeping.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Indeed, the successes of Jamaican jazz musicians in Britain were reported with great fanfare in newspapers such as *The Gleaner* in the 1930s and 40s. Amongst the first Jamaicans to make a living from jazz in Britain was saxophonist Joe Appleton, who apparently went AWOL from the West India Regiment and arrived in Britain in 1924. In 1929 he was joined by Leslie Thompson, whose fascinating memoirs have been published by Jeffrey Green.[[18]](#footnote-18) Thompson had already visited Britain twice, to attend Kneller Hall in 1919 and then with the West India Regiment Band for the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. Thompson recalled that his decision to settle permanently in Britain was unusual at the time: ‘That American magnet was still pulling Jamaicans away from the island in the 1920s. Indeed, hardly anyone thought of going to England unless it was on a scholarship, or to study law or medicine. Ordinary working chaps thought of America.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Having left the military band, Thompson had enjoyed a career as a theatre and cinema musician in Kingston, but had little direct acquaintance with jazz. However, he found that in Britain, as he put it, ‘my face was my fortune’ and that he was in demand as a black trumpeter as Louis Armstrong’s records became better known prior to his 1933 visit. He recalled that ‘I had never heard anything of Louis Armstrong in Jamaica, but … fanatics had his records. .... Absolutely marvellous – the style was new to me, and that swing, that beat, was tremendous. … It taught me a lot, and I knew that my concept of trumpet playing was lacking.’[[20]](#footnote-20) Despite his apparent authenticity, then, Thompson was in a position similar to aspiring white British jazz musicians who were increasingly reliant on records for their experiences of American jazz. Around this time, young British jazz cognoscenti like Nigel Finch-Hill and Spike Hughes, with whom Thompson performed and recorded, had begun to appreciate and perhaps fetishize the black contribution to jazz. Hughes recalled this discovery,

The Negro’s music achieved a degree of personal expression rarely found in that of his white colleagues; it had a directness, a suggestion of personal experience translated into terms of music which began to raise jazz from the status of a musical accomplishment to that of an art.[[21]](#footnote-21)

At this stage, as with previous West Indian immigrants, Thompson’s Jamaican roots had little influence on the nature of his musical output. However, it was in London that he became more politically aware through his interactions with the community of West Indian students, lawyers and doctors, amongst them Harold Moody who led the League of Coloured Peoples. This fuelled his desire to form an all-black band.

It can be no coincidence that Thompson judged that the time was right for this venture following a significant increase in numbers of West Indian musicians in London in the mid-1930s, but the wider context for the migration of musicians in the interwar period is also significant. During the 1920s the British Ministry of Labour introduced increasingly restrictive policies on visiting musicians in response to pressure from the Musicians’ Union. By 1935 American musicians, as ‘aliens’, were restricted to performing only in theatres (rather than for dancing) as soloists or as part of a band accompanying an act and positioned on the stage, thereby ensuring that a band of British musicians was retained in the pit.[[22]](#footnote-22) The established popularity of African American entertainment in Britain fuelled a demand for black musicians to provide apparently ‘authentic’ jazz performances which, as citizens of the British Empire and therefore not subject to the restrictions, West Indian musicians were well placed to provide. Thompson’s group was later taken over by British Guianian Ken ‘Snakeships’ Johnson as the West Indian Dance Orchestra and achieved great success in London before the bombing of the Café de Paris in 1941 caused the band to split.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Trinidadian brothers Cyril and George ‘Happy’ Blake were vital to the development of West Indian music scene in London in the interwar period. Both were long standing residents of Europe and listed as part of the SSO at the time of a disastrous collision in 1921 involving a boat transporting the group to Ireland, in which several members were killed. After some time in France, the Blakes returned to London and ran a band at the Cuba Club on Gerrard Street in Soho for which they recruited Jamaicans Louis Stephenson and Yorke De Souza, who arrived in Britain in 1935, and subsequently Bertie King and Leslie ‘Jiver’ Hutchinson. These migrations are significant as they are the result of a specific demand for West Indian musicians, rather than general economic reasons. London’s club scene had long been vital to the development of British jazz, since it provided spaces in which visiting American jazz musicians and their British colleagues could interact, largely free from musical, social or legal restrictions. In the 1930s clubs such as the Nest, Jigs and the Bag O’Nails remained popular amongst the large numbers of African American performers who visited Britain and also attracted a white clientele who were keen to interact with them and possibly experience an impromptu cabaret of a more intimate and informal nature than was possible in a theatre.[[24]](#footnote-24) Entrepreneurs were keen to exploit the fashion for black entertainment, providing opportunities for black musicians that brought them to the capital from elsewhere in the UK and, indeed, the British Empire.

At the same time, Latin American and West Indian music, which had also begun to become available on record in Britain, contributed to its popularity beyond the associated diasporic communities.[[25]](#footnote-25) This musical migration produced a vibrant diversity of styles in Soho’s clubs, including West Indian calypso and Cuban rumba as well as jazz, which were often played by the same musicians. The West End policeman Robert Fabian recalled, ‘I learnt all about jazz, boogie-woogie and calypso from my coloured friends years before they became known outside the murky little “coloured clubs”.’[[26]](#footnote-26) The Cuba Club was an early example of a venue which referenced Latin America and the Caribbean. The black Welsh guitarist Joe Deniz remembered the club as a small, dark, tatty basement, most likely of the ‘bottle party’ type in avoidance of licensing laws. Deniz also recalled the mixture of music performed, which included jazz standards such as ‘Honeysuckle Rose’ with the occasional rumba.[[27]](#footnote-27) Even in this early period there is some evidence of stylistic fusion, as Ken ‘Snakehips’ Johnson’s band was said to have played ‘intriguing Calypso rumbas.’[[28]](#footnote-28) In time, this fusion of styles began to become more deliberate, and can perhaps begin to be understood as an expression of black British and/or diasporic identity. Obvious examples include Lord Kitchener’s ‘Kitch’s Bebop Calypso’, recorded with Guianaian saxophonist Freddy Grant’s band in London in 1951, which alternates calypso and jazz styles with lyrics that name-check key jazz musicians, and Young Tiger’s 1953 ‘Calypso Be’ which was rather less complimentary of modern jazz (‘This modern music’s got me confused/to tell your friends I’m quite unenthused’), while still drawing on its stylistic features to some extent. Later examples include Joe Harriott’s ‘Calypso Scenes’, which uses a calypso groove as a basis for ‘free’ improvisation, from his 1960 album *Free Form.* More recently, black British bassist Gary Crosby’s group ‘Jazz Jamaica’ has fused West Indian music with jazz.

In Britain in the interwar period, the racial non-specificity was key to the reception of West Indian musicians in Britain, and thus influenced the work that was available to them – Thompson’s statement ‘my face was my fortune’ powerfully reminds us that the generalised assumptions around blackness, inherent musicality and jazz were both limiting of a better understanding of racial diversity but also offered important opportunities to newly-arrived West Indian musicians. However, there is evidence of an emerging understanding of the specific styles that West Indian immigrants contributed to popular music in Britain, alongside a growing awareness of the origins of jazz as African American music, all of which were present and popular especially within subcultural environments. This led to more explicit combinations of musical styles, initially within the repertoire of bands and venues but then extending to musical fusions within individual numbers. Jazz has provided a common denominator through which these cultural and musical relationships have been articulated, resulting in musical outputs which often and variously reflected roots, both longstanding and newly constructed, and routes, the literal and metaphorical spaces between them.

1. ‘Pathé Reporter Meets’. 1948. www.britishpathe.com/video/pathe-reporter-meets/query/windrush [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew Mead, ‘*Empire Windrush*: Cultural Memory and Archival Disturbance’, in *Moveable Type* 3 (2007), 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pallavi Rastogi and Jocelyn Fenton Stitt, eds, *Before Windrush: Recovering an Asian and Black Literary Heritage within Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Cowley has studied the careers of Lionel Belasco and Sam Manning, calypsonians who were resident in the UK and recorded here before the arrival of the *Windrush.* See Cowley, ‘Cultural “fusions”: aspects of British West Indian music in the USA and Britain 1918–51’, in *Popular Music* 5 (1985), 81-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I focus here specifically on musicians who had an impact on jazz in Britain. For details of the pre-*Windrush* black presence in Britain more broadly, see Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), Jeffrey Green, *Black Edwardians: Black People in Britain 1901-1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1998),and David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan, 2017)*.* For black music specifically, see Paul Oliver, ed., *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music* (Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Leslie Thompson with Jeffrey Green, *Swing from a Small Island: The Story of Leslie Thompson* (London: Northway, 2009), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Catherine Parsonage (Tackley), *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, c. 1880-1935*.(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 114-9. Tim Brooks provides a full account of Kildare’s career in *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 299-319. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Howard Rye, ‘Southern Syncopated Orchestra: The Roster’, in *Black Music Research Journal* 30:1 (Spring 2010), 19-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jeffrey Green, Black Edwardians: Black People in Britain 1901-1914 (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jeffrey Green, ‘The Jamaica Native Choir in Britain, 1906-1908’, in *Black Music Research Journal* 13:1 (Spring 1993), 15-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jeffrey Green, ‘The Jamaica Native Choir in Britain, 1906-1908’, in *Black Music Research Journal* 13:1 (Spring 1993), 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Timothy Mitchell, ‘Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order’, in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 289-318. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Brian Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve: The Story of the West India Regiments of the British Army*. (Antigua: Hansib, 1997), 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Leslie Thompson with Jeffrey Green, Swing from a Small Island: The Story of Leslie Thompson (London: Northway, 2009), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For more on this, see Daniel Neely, ‘“Mento, Jamaica’s Original Music”: Development, Tourism and the Nationalist Frame’. PhD diss., New York University, 2008. In the context of Trinidad, the adoption of jazz was regarded as a symptom of colonialism: ‘The impact of Jazz on the music of Calypso was part of a more comprehensive adoption by Trinidad of the powerful cultures and styles of Harlem and Hollywood.’ (Rohlehr, 1990: 117). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hartley Neita, ‘Jamaican Jazz Grows Up’, *The Star*, 17 December 1962, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dermot Hussey, ‘Jazz Beat: Bleak Future of Jamaican Jazz’, in *Sunday Gleaner*, 24 February 1963, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Leslie Thompson with Jeffrey Green, *Swing from a Small Island: The Story of Leslie Thompson* (London: Northway, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Leslie Thompson with Jeffrey Green, Swing from a Small Island: The Story of Leslie Thompson (London: Northway, 2009), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Leslie Thompson with Jeffrey Green, *Swing from a Small Island: The Story of Leslie Thompson* (London: Northway, 2009), 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Spike Hughes, *Second Movement: Continuing the Autobiography of Spike Hughes* (London: Museum Press, 1951), 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Catherine Parsonage (Tackley), *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, c. 1880-1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 253-5, and Martin Cloonan Matt and Brennan *‘Alien invasions: the British Musicians’ Union and foreign musicians’* in *Popular Music* 32:2 (2013), 277-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Catherine Tackley, ‘Jazz, Dance and Black British Identities’, in *Bodies of Sound: Studies Across Popular Music and Dance*, ed. Sherril Dodds and Susan C. Cook (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 193-207. I have discussed the resultant dissemination of the surviving personnel to form racially-integrated dance bands elsewhere; see Catherine Tackley, ‘Race, Identity and the Meaning of Jazz in 1940s Britain’ *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, ed. John Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), 11-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Catherine Parsonage (Tackley), *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, c. 1880-1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 256-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. John Cowley, ‘Cultural “fusions”: aspects of British West Indian music in the USA and Britain 1918–51’, in Popular Music 5 (1985), 81-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Robert Fabian, *London After Dark* (London, Naldrett Press 1954), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Joe Deniz, Interview (with Val Wilmer) (The Oral History of Jazz in Britain, British Library Sound Archive, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. ‘Ken Johnson has New Air Ideas’, in *Melody Maker*, 2 December 1939, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)