

HOW REGGAE
INVADED THE
FASHION WORLD

BY JESSE SERWER

RASTA
ON THE
RUNWAY

The years 2003 and 2004 were in many ways the era that reggae culture truly became a part of the international mainstream. As dancehall artists like Sean Paul and Wayne Wonder were enjoying unprecedented crossover success with hits like "Get Busy" and "No Letting Go," reggae-influenced fashions were also showing up everywhere, from the runway to chain stores like Foot Locker.

In the fall of '03, Christian Dior introduced its Rasta Collection, a line of red, gold and green handbags, shoes and women's accessories. One year later Prada unveiled its Caribbean-inspired spring collection to a reggae soundtrack in Milan. For those with less expensive tastes, Puma promoted athletic apparel bearing the colors of the Jamaican flag using commercials set to Elephant Man's "All Out."

While this exchange was not always embraced—many Rastafarians protested what they saw as a misrepresentation of their culture by the high-end French fashion house Dior—the proliferation of reggae-inspired clothing was seen by others as yet another confirmation of the music's power and enduring cultural relevance.

"The mainstream media and mainstream fashion houses recognized reggae-influenced clothing as a trend," says Winston Jack, the founder and lead designer of Color Heritage, a New York City-based reggae lifestyle brand. "But for designers like myself who come from the culture, it was a sign that our time has come."

Jamaicans have seemingly always possessed an acute sense of style, putting their own unique spin on fashions brought over from Britain and the US. As ska began to emerge in the years immediately following Jamaican independence in the mid '60s, however, there was a notable synergy between the music of Prince Buster, Desmond Dekker and the Skatalites and the clothes—dark, single-breasted suits, pork-pie hats, capri pants—worn at the dances where their music was played. As the sound of Jamaica morphed from ska to rocksteady to lovers rock and finally to reggae, the rude boy look began to emerge, with mesh tank tops, Clarks shoes and applejack hats becoming the calling cards of style-conscious rebels.

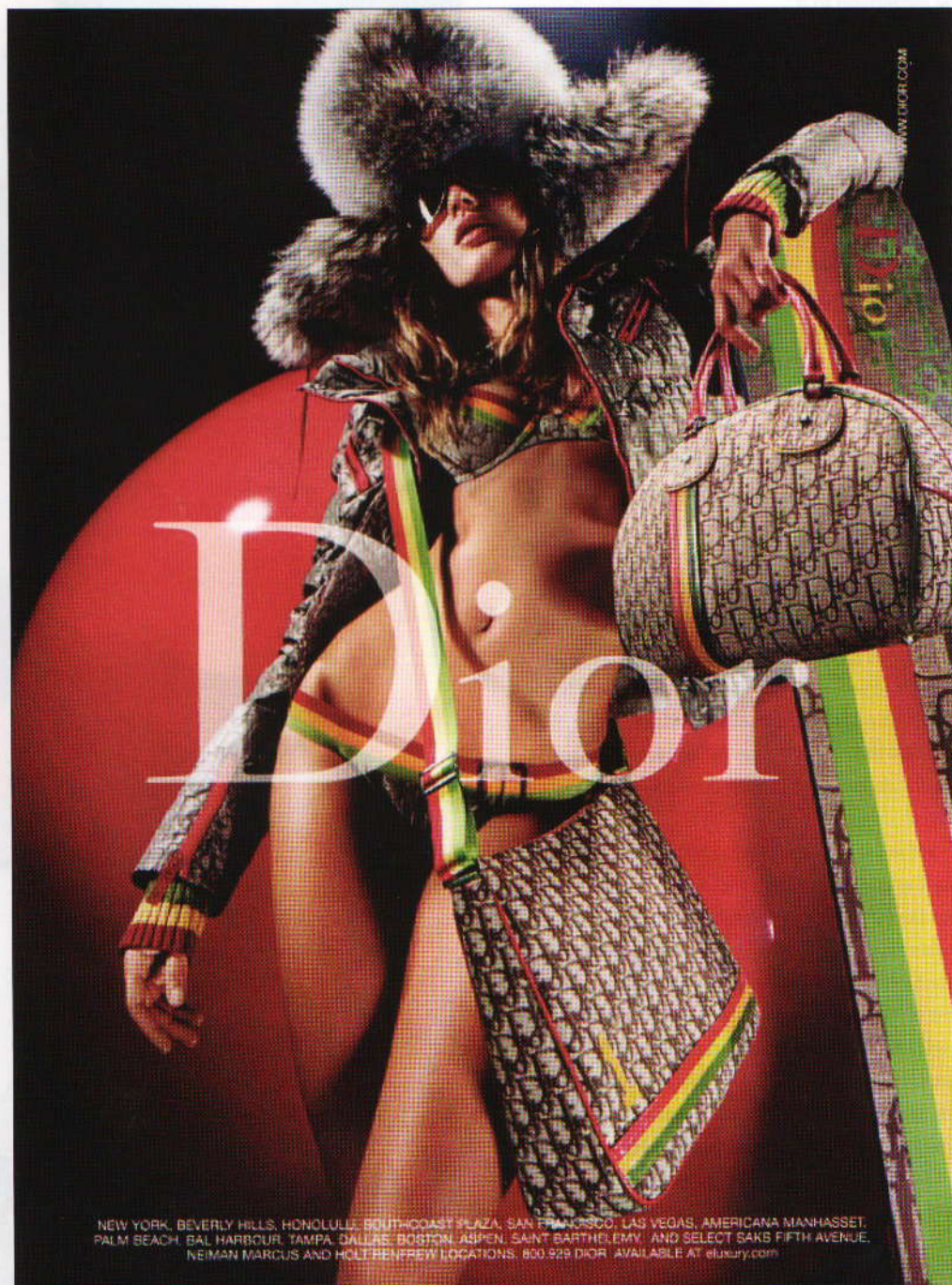
Meanwhile, Rastafarianism had become a huge phenomenon in Jamaica in the years following Haile Selassie's visit to Kingston in 1966; and it

was the adoption of Rasta principles by emerging young artists like Bob Marley and Toots Hibbert that would lead to the new, more spiritual strain of Jamaican music we would come to know as reggae.

Naturally, Rasta artists were compelled to express their devotion by wearing red, gold and green clothing and, of course, dreadlocks. The revolutionary nature of the music they put forth also led Marley, the Wailers and other conscious Rasta artists like the Abyssinians to don militaristic garb such as khaki suits, camouflage jackets and

berets, while Rasta women (most notably, Bob Marley's backup singers the I-Threes) wore head wraps and African-inspired prints and jewelry that underscored the music's underlying message of repatriation.

"That came at that rebellious, revolution time," says Homer Bair, founder and lead designer for popular Jamaican clothing label Cooyah, of the '70s-era paramilitary look. "A lot of the style came from Che Guevara. The idea was [to be in a] military stance, because we're at war."



Meanwhile, the release of Perry Henzell's film *The Harder They Come* in 1972, followed by Ted Bafaloukos' *Rockers* in 1978, brought rude boy and Rasta style to the rest of the world, in full living color. Young people from all over the world began co-opting elements of the look.

"I remember walking in Manhattan [in the '70s] and seeing a white guy with dreadlocks—I realized how influential our music and our culture was," Bair says. "[I thought], if this guy can want to learn about our culture and be dread, there must really be something to it."

International interest in reggae began to wane following the death of Bob Marley in 1980, and a new, back-to-basics musical style emerged in Kingston. Dancehall artists like Barrington Levy and Yellowman set the tone for the era with flashy, sometimes gangster-style suits.

"In the days that I came out, every artist wanted to have their own identity on stage," says singer Cocoa Tea, who first emerged in 1983 with a style that both musically and aesthetically bridged the gap between the new dancehall sound and conscious roots reggae. "In those days, I'd find a tailor who would tailor my linen suits in a way that represents Cocoa Tea. Every man had a tailor for himself who would make your thing look way different from the other artists."

The dancehall era was also when women really left their mark on reggae fashion. Competitors on the dancehall queen circuit, artists like Patra and casual club goers all put their local seamstresses to work, creating elaborate outfits designed for grabbing maximum attention at dances. The '90s also saw the rise of the revealing women's shorts known alternately as "pum-pum shorts" or "batty riders."

In the late '90s and early 2000s, male dancers like Gerald "Bogle" Levy and dance-minded artists like Elephant Man ushered in yet another look, making it cool for Jamaican men to sport platinum blonde hair as well as biker chains, studded belts and other accessories typically associated with punk rock. Today's artists and dancehall denizens seemingly take cues from all sources, and are just as likely to sport up-to-the-minute designer brands, vintage threads or a combination of both.

"Nowadays artists will have one specific designer for everything who is dressing them and coordinating their entire look," says Kingston-based fashion designer Keneea Linton. "It is no longer just



JAMPulse

a costume once a year for some fest and that's it."

Following the lead set by Cooyah and the for-us-buy-us mentality of hip-hop brands like FUBU and Ecko, a veritable cottage industry of reggae-inspired lifestyle brands has emerged over the last decade. Color Heritage, Ras Judah, Rockers NYC, Riddim Driven and Catch A Fire—all US-based companies run by Caribbean-born entrepreneurs—promote reggae's cultural heritage through woven and silk-screened T-shirts, track jackets and other items depicting cultural icons like Bob Marley and the Lion of Judah, as well as patois slang.

"I did my first Emperor Selassie I shirt 21 years ago—now everybody is making shirts like that," says Bair, who launched Cooyah out of an upstate New York garage in 1987 before taking the business to Kingston and, ultimately, Miami. Today, Cooyah is the most recognizable T-shirt brand throughout Jamaica and Jamaican communities in the US. "Now, everybody's got a clothing line in Jamaica," continues Bair. "When we started, everybody was doing this little Rasta Man on a shirt for the tourists, but I was sensing that there was a market out there. Just like the music, we have experimented and let it work with the people."

Today, the market for reggaewear is perhaps even bigger internationally than it is in Jamaica. "The ones who really love the [Jamaican and reggae inspired] clothes are in Japan," says Patricia Chin, cofounder of VP Records, which launched Riddim Driven in 2005. "When we started the brand, that is where we went first."

Color Heritage's Jack explains. "For a lot of people, Jamaica is not a country alone—it's also a brand," he says. "What you are seeing now is reggae becoming another strong industry, like how, over time, hip-hop started to support Phat Farm, *The Source*, BET and all these other businesses. Clothing is just one part of that." ■

