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ONE-MAN MISSION RASTA

Don Letts and Afro-Punk weekend

By Jesse Serwer

Whether they were the only kids on the block sporting Doc Martens instead of Timbos, or the only non-white faces in the local hardcore scene, the subjects in James Spooner's 2004 documentary, *Afro-Punk*, recall being both black and punk as a typically solitary experience.

Spooner's film, however, has catalyzed a burgeoning movement. Connected through the film's website and by screenings across the country, black punks, indie rockers and other rebels of color have joined together in increasingly visible numbers. For the second year, the phenomenon has spawned a weekend-long festival, with film screenings at BAM Rose Cinemas in Fort Greene and band performances at Southpaw, CBGB and The Delancey. This year's Afro-Punk Weekend scored the next best thing short of a proper Bad Brains reunion: the presence of OG Afro-Punk and UK Rasta, Don Letts. An influential London DJ, prolific music video director, filmmaker and founding member of Big Audio Dynamite, Letts will man the decks alongside DJ Spooky during the festival's opening night at Southpaw June 30, and introduce (and answer questions about) films like 1997's *Dancehall Queen* and 2005's *Punk: Attitude* throughout the weekend.

SERWER: You famously turned the first wave of UK punks like The Clash and John Lydon onto Jamaican music with your reggae sets at (London club) The Roxy. What can we expect to hear from you in 2006?

LETT'S: I'm more of an old-school *selector* than a DJ. I'm not beat matching. At The Roxy, I had one deck and two spliffs. My thing's all about the selection and the bass lines—old and new dub/reggae, from Dennis Brown to "Jam Rock." I'll just be warming up for the master, DJ Spooky. I'd play his new remix of Dawn Penn, if he wasn't playing it himself. It's the bomb.



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continue with it as you got into filmmaking and your own music?

I restarted recently after putting out a couple compilation albums with all the stuff I was playing back then. DJing is just my way of networking—it's better than hanging out at the Soho House. A year-and-a-half ago, all my vinyl burned in a warehouse fire, so I'm playing CDs now. I had 30 years of vinyl destroyed. If I talk about it any more, I'm going to end up crying. It was like losing a family member, except people die—vinyl is supposed to be forever.

Were you surprised to learn how many black punks there are? Did you ever feel alienated being the only black person, or were there others from the beginning?

I never thought about that in my entire life. I was always a one-man mission Rasta, I never knew there were black punks. Pre-punk, I was already a freak. I remember as a kid going to see Marvin Gaye or some big superstar and thinking, "What's my part in this thing?" Then hearing Bob Marley and going to see *The Harder They Come*, coupled with this thing called punk rock, and Don Letts just took off. I didn't look for blessings from my brethren, I was gone and they were choking on my dust. Granted, I was a laughing stock. The last time I spoke to Bob Marley, he was taking the piss out of me for wearing bondage trousers. I was like "There's something going on here, dude." Two months later, he stayed in London, and that's when he wrote "Punky Reggae Party." I refuse to be defined by my color, and I never have been.

June 30. *Southpaw*, 125 5th Ave. (betw. Sterling & St. John's Pls.), Brooklyn, 718-230-0236; 8; \$10.

June 30-July 4. *BAM Cinematek*, various locations; www.bam.org.

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