

Tun Yuh Han Mek Fashion

Jamaican DIY and the Making of a New World

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In my attempt to figure out Jamaican DIY and critical making, I conducted an informal survey of one, asking myself "what do Jamaicans make?"

"Food, music, and trouble," I thought. We're a nation of disruptors and I mean trouble in the most positive, life-affirming way. This year, Jamaica will celebrate 50 years of independence as a result of tireless troublemaking, and the entire country continues to reverberate with a DIY spirit. That spirit is embedded in the struggle against colonialism and for the freedom to make what we wanted of our nation and our selves.

Our history of trouble puts Jamaican DIY as a grand project of making new things from the old, of making grand ideas, of making a new path to an intersection with what you've long felt was your destiny. DIY as that ability to "tek yuh hand tun fashion"—to take what you have and make something new—may just be the defining characteristic and expression of Jamaican life.

I think of Jamaican DIY in shapes formed and bounded by that history reaching back to the island's discovery: our world continually being re-made as New. All those revolutions, rebellions and projects of independence continue to be as much about making our world as about remaking our relation to it. Our national motto, "Out of Many, One People" recognizes this jumbled past and our jutting and rumbling assemblage of artifacts, people, and memories.

When I think about Jamaican DIY, I also think about my father. This year he too marked a milestone and retired from 30 years as a life insurance agent. I'm still young and foolish, and that's longer than I can imagine doing any one thing. But my father never really did one thing—few Jamaicans do.

Multiplicity is our default mode of being; our definitions tied up with the multiple and evolving sources of income and pastimes from which we source our identity. More than a way to maintain economic viability, our multiplicity is central to our curious embrace of freedom: our expression of our soul and its determination.

My father started his career as a teacher of what was known then as the "Industrial Arts," a transcendent, yet somehow contradictory sounding 19th century term for what might otherwise seem prosaic: technical drawing and working with wood and metal. He's never retired from the Industrial Arts, and my family, under his watchful captaincy, was so DIY that it hurt... frequently.

At home, the projects my father led sprawled across a stunning variety of fields. We grew produce, raised chickens (and a pair of rabbits named Chuck Norris and Diana Ross), and kept bees for honey. Storerooms and closets were filled with tools and the remains of projects prototyped, postponed, and in progress. Together we repaired cars, poured concrete and laid tile, fashioned sophisticated scarecrows high in the tops of fruit trees, repaired appliances and fiddled with electricity. Friends avoided my house on Saturdays, lest they be dragged into some scheme or the other.

As a child I failed to appreciate being pressed into labour and a lesson but now, when I think about DIY, I know that we did these things because my father had no intention of letting ignorance lead to inability, or our material lacking to a metaphysical one. More than a response to material absence, our DIY cultures are also a response to a spiritual loss; a way to repair a break in the continuity of people and culture sustained in the creation of our New World.

So, when I think about critical making, I reflect on the circumstances that drove my father and countless other Jamaicans to become self-made men and makers. I travel back to our early founders and wonder what they must have thought. How did they conceive of and fashion a new nation? How do you go about the task of re-making a people? I think of the interwoven and fragmented histories that are a staple of Caribbean people. I think of peoples who were remade without much of a memory; people who had their languages, customs, and beliefs obscured, constrained, and disassembled. I think that for us to remember is to reassemble these fragments—to re-make. Those of us transplanted to the Caribbean were consumed in a New World and, from inside the beast, have produced an even newer one.