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This is Renegade Files Episode 91, Reggae, Rastas, and the CIA: Cultural Espionage in Jamaica.

In this episode we travel to the heart of the Caribbean, to a nation whose palm-lined beaches and sweet reggae rhythms often ebb and flow on tides of political unrest.

We'll first visit Jamaica in the 1970s, where politics wasn't just ballots in Parliament, but bullets in the streets. To outsiders, the island was, and still is, the cradle of reggae, the land of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and the Wailers. But just beneath the surface of this counterculture soundtrack, lay a geopolitical chessboard, where the CIA, U.S. State Department, and Jamaican politicians moved pawns and bishops across neighborhoods divided by ideology.

In this episode, we'll examine how the Jamaican two-party system became entangled with Cold War posturing, how the CIA played its hidden hand in shaping the course of Jamaican democracy, and how reggae music, and the figures who defined it, emerged as both cultural icons and political activists, either by choice or by force.

We'll uncover the roots of Jamaica's political divide, and how Washington saw both opportunity, and threat, in Michael Manley's promises of a socialist solution.

Then we'll explore the CIA's covert influence, weapons deals, gang allies, and controlled opposition. And we'll download declassified CIA documents that read like dispatches from a shadow war.

Finally, we'll look at how figures like Bob Marley and Peter Tosh became folk heroes in this geopolitical storm, and how a single concert, the "One Love Peace Concert", attempted to bandage a wounded nation back together.

"Rasta don't work for no, CIA," - Peter Tosh

And through it all, we'll find that the Jamaican experience isn't just a story from the past. The echoes of CIA interference, of politics fused with celebrity, of cultural figures caught in the crossfire of ideology, those echoes ring out today in other lands, not the least of which being, the USA.

So follow me now, deep into the rocksteady rhythm, as we stroll down a humid side-street in 1970s Kingston, where reggae sways the dancehalls, while superpowers pull the strings.

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Episode Text

Hello my friend. You have tuned into Renegade Files, your portal into the hidden currents of history, covert culture, and paranormal experiences. You are now in the company of outcasts. I'm your host Lex Gordon propagating this unauthorized transmission from The Jungle Villa Outpost, Deep in the Uncharted Tropics.

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Before we begin, remember our upcoming "Renegade Files ***Fan Theories***" episode, where I'll share your favorite Conspiracy or Paranormal Theory.

Submit your favorite crazy conspiracy theory or paranormal possibility (in short anything weird or mysterious or conspiratorial) in an email to LexGordon@Mail.com with the word "Theory" in the subject line.

It can be anything, whether we've covered it in an episode before or not. Just any conspiracy or weird theory that you think is cool. I'll fit in as many as I can, on a first come basis, so don't delay.

I'm taking submissions for all of September 2025, and the ***Fan Theories***" episode will come out in October.

Anything goes. No deep research needed on your end, just a summary of the concept. Send your favorite crazy conspiracy theory or paranormal possibility to LexGordon@Mail.com with the word "Theory" in the subject line.

Follow us on your podcast app right now so you don't miss it, and send me your favorite crazy conspiracy theory today. Thank you.

Part 1 – Jamaica At The Crossroads, The Cia And The Two-Party Trap

When you think of Jamaica today, you might imagine turquoise seas, all-inclusive resorts, and the easy sway of reggae drifting through the air. But roll the clock back to the 1970s, and the island was something very different. It was a country at war with itself, not an official war, but a dirty, grinding conflict that turned neighborhoods into fortresses and made every election a bloodbath.

And hovering above it all, like a hawk circling a wounded rabbit, was the CIA.

Jamaica After Independence

Jamaica gained independence from Britain in 1962. Like many postcolonial nations, it inherited a Westminster-style parliamentary system with two dominant political parties. On one side was the People's National Party (PNP), led by Michael Manley. The PNP leaned toward social democracy and, in the 1970s, increasingly toward socialism. On the other side stood the Jamaica Labor Party (JLP), led by Edward Seaga, which cultivated a pro-business, pro-Western identity.

Now here's the first twist: despite its name, the "Labor Party" was actually more conservative and right-leaning. The PNP, despite the word "National," was the progressive force. This linguistic reversal confused outsiders, but Jamaicans knew the score: PNP was red, JLP was green. And every neighborhood, every "yard," knew which flag it flew.

The Garrison Communities

By the late 1960s, politics had fused with organized crime in Kingston's inner-city neighborhoods. These were the infamous garrison communities. A garrison wasn't just a voting bloc, it was a fortified zone of loyalty. If you lived in a JLP-controlled garrison, you voted JLP or you risked your life. Same for PNP zones. Guns were plentiful, turf wars constant.

Politicians provided money, jobs, and sometimes literal crates of weapons to local "dons." In return, the dons delivered votes and kept the community under control. This system meant that Jamaican politics wasn't just debated in parliament, it was enforced in the streets with M-16s, Uzis, and home-made pipe guns.

For Washington, this kind of violence was destabilizing, but it was also an opportunity. If you could tilt the balance toward the "right" side, the anti-communist side, you could keep Jamaica out of the Soviet orbit.

Enter Michael Manley

Michael Manley, son of Jamaica's founding father Norman Manley, was charismatic, tall, and eloquent. When he took office as Prime Minister in 1972, he promised to lift the poor out of poverty with democratic socialism. He wore bush

jackets instead of suits, carried a carved wooden staff given to him by Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, and spoke the language of equality and empowerment.

Manley nationalized industries, raised minimum wages, and courted close ties with Fidel Castro. In 1975, he invited Castro to Jamaica, and tens of thousands turned out to hear the Cuban leader speak in Kingston. To the United States, this was the ultimate alarm bell.

Remember: this was the Cold War. Washington was obsessed with the idea of "another Cuba" popping up in the Caribbean. Jamaica was only 90 miles from Haiti, just 500 miles from Miami. To U.S. policymakers, Manley wasn't just a reformer. He was a potential Castro protégé, a gateway for Soviet influence.

The CIA's Calculus

Declassified documents from the CIA's CREST archives confirm this. In March 1976, a report titled "Jamaica at the Crossroads" described how Manley's reforms could "radically alter" Jamaican society and tilt the island firmly toward Cuba. The memo reads like a mixture of alarm and strategy: here was a country sliding left, and here was a chance to do something about it.

Meanwhile, in the U.S. State Department's FRUS series, the official record of foreign policy, we find proposals for covert action in Jamaica. Options included funding opposition media, boosting friendly unions, and cultivating moderate voices within Jamaica's political landscape. These weren't wild conspiracy theories. These were typed up, filed, and stamped Top Secret.

The Opposition: Edward Seaga

Edward Seaga, leader of the JLP, was the perfect partner for Washington. Harvard-educated, technocratic, and a staunch anti-communist. Seaga presented himself as the man who could modernize Jamaica and steer it away from Castro's orbit.

But Seaga wasn't just an academic. He knew how to play the garrison game. Under his leadership, JLP strongholds became heavily armed, sometimes with alleged assistance from U.S.-backed networks. While Manley was hugging Castro in Havana, Seaga was cultivating ties in Washington.

But after generations of British Imperialism, the people of Jamaica are quick to recognize the meddling of outsiders. In fact, they saw Seaga's game from a mile

away, and locals leery of his glowing promises and seemingly bottomless budget, began calling Edward Seaga, *“Edward CIA-ga”*.

The 1976 election loomed as a test: would Jamaica continue left under Manley, or swing right under “*CIA-ga”* ?

That general election became one of the most violent in Jamaica’s history up to that point. Nearly every day brought reports of shootings, arsons, and gang clashes. Estimates suggest hundreds were killed. It was at this time that Bob Marley began to speak out, asking in an interview, “Why are we killing each other, for these two white men?” (A question far more rooted in the absurdity of the situation, than race.)

Amid the chaos, Manley’s PNP did win, but the victory came at a cost. Violence had spiraled so far out of control that Jamaica felt like a country in civil war. The CIA watching from a safe distance.

The streets of Kingston after sundown glow orange under dim streetlamps. Corrugated zinc fences rattle as gunshots crack in the distance. On one corner, a gang loyal to the JLP strings barbed wire across the road, checking every car. On another, PNP youths build barricades from burning tires. Above them, American satellites drift in silence, while inside Langley’s walls, analysts pore over reports stamped “Eyes Only.” The Caribbean breeze carries both the sweet smell of ganja and the acrid stench of cordite. This is Jamaica in the 1970s: paradise turned battlefield, watched by invisible eyes across the sea.

Allegations of Destabilization

Here’s where it gets murky. Many Jamaicans, especially Manley supporters, accused the CIA of direct destabilization, smuggling guns to the JLP, funding violent gangs, and spreading propaganda.

Was it true? Some evidence suggests U.S. money did flow into anti-Manley organizations. A 1976 U.S. embassy cable acknowledges “charges of U.S. destabilization” were widespread, although officially denied.

Later reporting, both academic and journalistic, argues that the CIA worked indirectly, bolstering Seaga’s networks, supporting friendly media, and turning a blind eye to JLP-linked violence.

It was classic Cold War playbook: never leave fingerprints, but always tilt the scales.

Setting the Stage for Reggae

This is the backdrop into which reggae exploded. While Washington debated covert options and Kingston gangs traded gunfire, Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and their peers were singing songs about oppression, unity, and resistance.

And here's the irony: reggae became a global voice precisely because it spoke to the reality of Jamaican life, poverty, injustice, and political violence. The very conditions created by the two-party garrison system, and inflamed by Cold War meddling, gave reggae its raw power.

Marley wasn't just strumming a guitar. He was decoding political manipulation for the world.

Part 2 – Reggae, Rebels, And Gunshots

When reggae rose to the world stage in the 1970s, it wasn't just a new sound, it was the heartbeat of Jamaica's political crisis. The two-party blood feud, the CIA's shadow games, and the culture of garrison violence all converged on the very artists who carried Jamaica's story to the globe. At the center of that storm, one man: Bob Marley.

But Marley wasn't alone. His brothers-in-arms in The Wailers, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer, each carried their own visions of liberation. Together and apart, they turned reggae into the voice of the oppressed.

And in Jamaica, the oppressed were armed, angry, and caught between two political titans, both backed by much larger powers.

The Smile Jamaica Concert
In 1976, just as Jamaica was spiraling into election-year violence, the government announced a free concert: Smile Jamaica. The idea came from Prime Minister Michael Manley himself. His hope was to ease tensions by bringing people together with music, and to showcase Jamaican culture to the world.

But Seaga supporters suspected a trap, and rumors that the Manley goons would round up any Seaga loyalists at the event, threatened to derail attendance before it got started.

So promoters decided to reach out to the only band they knew who might bring everyone together: Bob Marley and the Wailers. Marley was already an

international star by then. His album Rastaman Vibration had cracked the Billboard charts in the U.S. He wasn't just Jamaica's biggest artist, he was Jamaica's biggest export.

But agreeing to headline Smile Jamaica wasn't a simple choice. By taking the stage at a government-sponsored concert, during an election campaign, Marley risked being seen as siding with the incumbent, Manley. And in Kingston's neighborhood logic, that was dangerous.

On December 3, 1976, two days before the concert that danger reared its head. As rehearsals went late into the night, gunmen stormed Marley's home at 56 Hope Road. Gunfire shattered the peaceful night. Marley was grazed on the arm and chest. His wife, Rita, was shot in the head but somehow survived. Band Manager Don Taylor took multiple rounds, and the attackers melted back into the Kingston night.

The message was clear: Marley's music had become too powerful to remain neutral. He was now a target in Jamaica's undeclared war.

To this day, speculation swirls over who ordered the hit. Some point to Seaga-linked gangs, eager to sabotage a Manley-sponsored concert. Others whisper about CIA involvement, an attempt to silence a persuasive voice.

What we do know is that in 1976, the CIA was deeply concerned about Marley's influence. A man who could draw tens of thousands, sing about liberation, and refuse to bend to either political party? That was a wild card not to be dealt, but to be dealt *with.*

Two days later, on December 5, Bob Marley walked onto the Smile Jamaica stage with his arm still bandaged. Before a crowd of 80,000 at the National Heroes Park. He played for over an hour.

At one point, he lifted his shirt to show the audience his wounds and said:

"The people who are trying to make this world worse aren't taking a day off. How can I?"

That wasn't just a stage line. It was a manifesto.

The concert was broadcast internationally, showing the world a Jamaica both torn by violence, and united in hope. For a brief moment, music triumphed over bullets. But for Marley, Kingston had become too hot. Within days, he left Jamaica for London, a self-imposed exile that would last nearly two years.

Imagine the heat of a Trenchtown night. Any courtyard not filled with music from a record player, is hosting a guitar player singing. Cicadas buzz in the palm

trees, and the smell of jerk chicken drifts from courtyards, periodically spiced with the scent of gunpowder smoke. From one of the windows, a transistor radio plays Marley's defiant anthem, "War," its lyrics echoing a Haile Selassie speech that speaks of everlasting war, the illusion of peace, and the victory of good over evil.

The lyrics echo between cracked walls as men with rifles whisper in the shadows. In Jamaica of the 1970s, music wasn't background noise. It was prophecy, and every prophecy needs a prophet.

Peter Tosh: The Rebel Prophet

If Marley became the reluctant statesman of reggae, then Peter Tosh was its revolutionary. Tall, clever, uncompromising, and brimming with rage at injustice, Tosh refused to soften his message for anyone.

In 1976, while Marley was bleeding at Smile Jamaica, Tosh was recording Legalize It. The album cover showed him smoking a giant spliff in a ganja field, a direct challenge to Jamaican law and U.S. drug policy. The title track wasn't just a song, it was a demand.

Tosh's second major album, Equal Rights (1977), pulled no punches. With tracks like "Downpressor Man" and "Apartheid," he called out systemic oppression everywhere, from Kingston to Johannesburg to Washington, D.C. His fiery rhetoric drew fans across Africa and the Global South, but it also earned him ongoing surveillance.

According to interviews and secondary accounts, U.S. embassy staff in Kingston kept a close eye on radical musicians like Tosh. His open support for liberation movements made him a suspect figure in Cold War eyes.

Unlike Marley, who could weave universal messages of love into his songs, Tosh was direct, confrontational, and he infused his messages with an air of authority. Peter Tosh was highly intelligent and witty. He created a subtle code language of slang he would use in interviews, to constantly ridicule colonial imperialism, political strife, and leaders on both sides.

He would refer to the system as the *shitstem*, and politics as *poli-tricks.* He called technology *tricknology,* and he referred to Christopher Columbus as *Christ-Thief-Come-Rob-Us*. And it is widely thought that he was the first to call Edward Seaga Edward *CIA-ga.* We can't be sure, but that does sound like him.

In his song Rat Race, Tosh comes right out and says, "Rasta don't work for no, CIA."

Which brings us to the One Love Peace Concert of 1978.

After two years abroad, Marley returned to Jamaica in 1978 for the One Love Peace Concert at the National Stadium. By then, Kingston was drenched in blood. Nearly 800 people had been killed in election-related violence in just two years.

The concert was meant to broker peace between the gangs, the political parties, and the people. In the crowd were the dons of rival garrisons, the foot soldiers, the politicians, and ordinary Jamaicans desperate for relief.

In fact the idea for the concert came from the two heads of the opposing political street gangs, Claudie Massop and Bucky Marshal, when they were locked in the same cell together after an arrest. Massop flew to London after being released from jail to convince Marley to perform at the event. Marley accepted the invitation, and the concert was Marley's first performance in Jamaica since the Smile Jamaica concert held right after he was shot in 1976.

The afternoon had been rainy with thunderstorms moving over the island, but at the last minute the sky cleared, the sun came out, and the first bands took the stage at 5pm. Local talent was showcased with openers for the first half of the event, and most sang songs calling for peace, love, and ganja.

The second half was booked for bigger acts, with Marley headlining.

With Edward Seaga and Michael Manley seated in the front row, Peter Tosh walked onto the stage. At 6’3’’ and with the demeanor of a born leader, he used half of his hour-long set to shift the tone to his more confrontational ways, addressing Manley and Seaga directly, chastising them for ganja laws used to marginalize the Rastafari, and for preaching peace while condoning violence. He said, “Your peace is the diplomas you hand out in the Cemetery.”

Bunny Wailer played a full set after Tosh, then Ras Michael, U-Roy, and one song performed by Judy Mowatt, who had been a backup singer for The Wailers.

Bob Marley took the stage just after midnight, and performed several songs. The next to last was an extended version of “Jamming,” and he sang and danced himself into what can only be described as a mystical trance.

Then, in an unscripted moment that has become legend, he called both Michael Manley and Edward Seaga onto the stage.

Bob was dancing on the edge of control, jumping, calling for the people to get together, and asking for Seaga and Manley to join him.

At one point Bob jumps into the air and exactly as he does, a freak remnant bolt of lightening struck from the storm that had passed hours ago. The lightening strobed the stage and the thunder boomed. A supernatural moment. It seems like the two politicians realized that if the other one went up, they would both have to go up, and so they climbed onto the stage with Bob.

With Bob between them, the two political enemies shook hands. Bob raised their clasped hands over his head, and said, “Love, Prosperity, Be with us All. Jah. Rastafari. Sellasiai,” and in that moment, Jamaica was united in a symbolic act that was broadcast worldwide.

The gesture electrified the crowd. For one night, music seemed to bridge the unbridgeable divide. And more than anything, that act cemented Bob as the prophet of peace and love for Jamaica. Peter Tosh may have been the people’s soldier, but Marley was their saint.

But the peace was short-lived, and within months, shootings resumed, and the truce collapsed.

Still, the image of Marley between Manley and Seaga with hands united remains one of the most powerful intersections of art and politics in modern history.

Throughout this time the CIA seems to have had its hands in the machinations of the island’s affairs. Declassified cables from the late 1970s show U.S. officials analyzing not just elections, but Jamaican cultural exports. Music was seen as part of the ideological battleground. Marley’s Survival album in 1979, with its cover of African liberation flags, alarmed Washington because it celebrated movements often supported by the Soviets or Cubans.

Peter Tosh’s militant lyrics, equally, were viewed as a threat to U.S. influence. Even though no document shows a direct order to neutralize artists, it’s clear American intelligence paid attention to reggae’s political power.

Picture a dim club in London, warm tube amp bass shakes the walls as Bob Marley works out the chords for “Exodus.” Outside, red buses groan through the drizzle, but inside, the music is thick with smoke and prophecy. An ocean away, in a windowless room in Washington, a buttoned-down analyst slides a vinyl record from its sleeve, sets it on a turntable, and listens carefully. To him, this isn’t just island music; it’s subversion in stereo. Every lyric is a data point. Every drum beat, a threat.

By the end of the 1970s, reggae was global. Marley was a superstar. Tosh was a firebrand prophet. Burning Spear, Culture, and Steel Pulse carried the message across continents.

But at home, Jamaica was still bleeding. The CIA continued an alleged campaign of destabilization. The two-party garrisons fed on money and guns. And reggae artists walked a tightrope between art, politics, and survival.

In a way, reggae became the mirror. If you wanted to know what was happening in Jamaica, you didn't need to read a CIA memo. You could drop the needle on a record. The truth was being sung in plain sight.

Part 3 – The Final Chapters

By the dawn of the 1980s, Jamaica had become a test case in Cold War geopolitics. The island nation, smaller than the state of Connecticut, was drowning in debt, plagued by gang violence, and divided into armed camps of red and green.

Reggae thundered out of every government housing yard, every dancehall, and every independent sound system. But beneath the music, the country was heading toward its most violent election yet, one that would transform Jamaica's future and close the most dangerous chapter in the CIA's Caribbean playbook.

After Michael Manley's PNP victory in 1976, things only got worse. The CIA continued to monitor, and, according to many Jamaicans, meddle. Guns poured into the country. Smugglers brought M-16s, semi-automatics, and pistols into Kingston's outskirts. By 1979, the death toll from political killings was climbing into the hundreds per year.

Whole neighborhoods became warzones. Tivoli Gardens, a JLP stronghold, turned into a fortress, heavily armed under the control of Seaga's lieutenants. Rival PNP neighborhoods like Jungle and Arnett Gardens fought back. Kids grew up knowing which streets they could walk and which colors they could wear. Red or green wasn't just political branding. It was life or death.

And once again into the fray stepped Edward Seaga, determined to ride the chaos into power. And behind him stood the power of the United States.

In 1980, as America elected Ronald Reagan, Jamaica was about to elect Edward Seaga. The two men would quickly become close allies. Reagan needed an anti-communist partner in the Caribbean; Seaga needed U.S. aid and political cover. It was a perfect marriage.

Washington no longer had to play the subtle game of covert destabilization. With Reagan in power, U.S. support for Seaga became explicit. Aid packages, military assistance, and loans through the IMF and World Bank were promised if Jamaica abandoned its socialist experiments.

For Manley, the writing was on the wall. He was fighting not just Seaga and the JLP, but the weight of a Cold War superpower to the north.

The 1980 campaign was the bloodiest in Jamaican history. Estimates put the death toll as high as 900 lives lost in shooting, arson, and revenge. That number is staggering when you realize Jamaica's population at the time was only about two million. A staggering number of political deaths for a small island country.

Foreign journalists reported open warfare in Kingston. Uzi submachine guns rattled through tenement yards. Dons turned neighborhoods into bunkers. Trucks with loudspeakers blasted campaign slogans while gunmen trailed behind.

And in the middle of it, reggae artists tried to hold the country's soul together. Marley, weakened by cancer caused from an untreated soccer wound, returned briefly but avoided open political entanglement. Tosh continued his fiery denunciations, and younger acts like Black Uhuru and Burning Spear carried on the rebel soundtrack.

But this time no concert could stop the tide.

When the votes were counted, Edward Seaga and the JLP swept into power. Michael Manley's PNP was crushed, winning only 9 of 60 parliamentary seats. The CIA didn't need a covert operation anymore. Their man was in charge.

Let's travel to Kingston on that election night in 1980. Fireworks explode in the distance, but so do gunshots. In one neighborhood, JLP supporters dance in the street, waving green flags, their faces lit by bonfires. In another, silence except for the wailing of mothers mourning sons gunned down at polling stations. High above, a U.S. satellite looks down upon the island, and Washington watches, safely out of range.

By the end of that election Bob Marley was a dying man. Cancer had spread from his toe to his brain. In May 1981, he passed away in Miami at the age of 36.

His funeral in Kingston was a state event, attended by Michael Manley, Edward Seaga, and dignitaries from across the globe. For a brief, surreal moment, the bitter rivals stood shoulder to shoulder honoring the man who had tried to unify them. But viewing the entire affair as another political showpiece, Peter Tosh was conspicuously absent. His song "Funeral," expressing his position on it all.

Declassified U.S. cables from May 1981 describe the funeral as both a cultural milestone and a political spectacle. To Washington, Marley's death symbolized the end of Jamaica's most volatile decade. For Jamaicans, it was the loss of their hero.

With Seaga in power, Jamaica aligned fully with the Reagan administration. Washington praised Jamaica as a "Caribbean showcase for democracy", a victory over Castro's Cuba and Grenada's revolutionary government.

And the foreign aid poured in, but it came with strings: IMF structural adjustment programs slashed social spending, devalued the currency, and deepened poverty. To quote Ron Paul, *"Foreign Aid is taking money from the poor people of a rich country, and giving it to the rich people of a poor country."*

Seaga built highways, courted investors, and opened Jamaica to foreign capital. But in the downtrodden Jamaican neighborhoods, conditions worsened. Garrison warriors didn't vanish, they simply evolved. The armed posses that once fought over votes turned to another booming business: cocaine.

By the late 1980s, Jamaican drug posses were exporting both drugs and violence to Miami, New York, and beyond, arguably, a direct result of the CIA-era gun and cash infusions.

With his lifelong friend gone, Peter Tosh continued recording, touring, and demanding justice. His album Mama Africa in 1983 kept his radical voice alive. He railed against apartheid, police brutality, and global oppression.

But he lived his life under constant threat. He had been beaten by Jamaican police, harassed by authorities, and watched warily by what he thought were U.S. spies.

On September 11, 1987 unkown armed men invaded Tosh's home in Kingston. They said it was a robbery, shot Tosh dead, injured several others, and stole nothing.

Officially, it was a crime by local thugs. Unofficially, many fans and activists believed Tosh's killing was part of the same political-criminal nexus that had haunted Jamaica for decades. In a country where politicians, and covert agencies blurred into each other, the line between street crime and political assassination was thin.

Peter Tosh's house is quiet now. The ganja smoke long gone. The guitars lean silent against the wall. Bullet holes are patched, but in Trenchtown, they still whisper. A robbery? An assassination? Or was it just the way the powers that be punish prophets who refuse to stand down? The streets of Jamaica are quieter

now. Kids play in the courtyards, not caring who killed Peter Tosh. And the silence of the powerful speaks louder than any gunshot.

So what's the legacy of CIA involvement in Jamaica?

From declassified documents, we know the agency feared Manley's socialism, cultivated Seaga's opposition, and kept tabs on reggae as a cultural force. While hard evidence of direct CIA involvement in specific acts of violence, like the shootings of Marley and Tosh, remains elusive, the pattern is clear: Jamaica's instability was a threat to Washington and powerful Caribbean business interests until Seaga took power.

They feared losing their deep investments, like they had when Castro had taken power in Cuba, and nationalized all of the big hotels and casinos. This reluctance of corporate development set Jamaican infrastructure and tourism back by two decades, for good some may argue.

And once the U.S. finally installed Seaga (to put it bluntly), the tools of destabilization turned into the tools of modern geopolitical adjustment. Guns that once enforced votes now enforced drug profits. IMF policies deepened inequality, feeding the very despair that reggae had warned about.

Meanwhile, reggae's global rise transformed it into the soundtrack of resistance. The same music Washington once feared became a global brand. But inside Jamaica, the musicians who carried that torch, Marley, Tosh, and later many others, paid the price.

Step off a Cruise Ship in Jamaica today and you still might hear a neighborhood sound system blasting "Get Up, Stand Up."

Young men in fresh sneakers nod to the beat, even though they were born long after Marley died. Down the street a grandmother hums "One Love" while hanging laundry. In the parliament, politicians debate IMF loans. And in the archives of Langley, Virginia, dusty folders marked "Jamaica, 1970" sit forgotten, their red stamps faded.

But outside, On the streets of Trenchtown, the consequences of those dusty folders still walks, still breathes, and still bleeds. And while the music lives on, it often does so under the shadow of the past.

By the end of the 1980s, the CIA had moved on to other battlegrounds: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Panama. Jamaica faded from the headlines. But the scars of that decade remain etched into the island's politics, its neighborhoods, and its music.

Reggae told the story before the documents were ever declassified. Marley's "Survival," Tosh's "Equal Rights," Burning Spear's "Chants," all of them were dispatches from the front lines of a Cold War in paradise.

And the paradox… In trying to control Jamaica's politics, the CIA helped fuel the very conditions that gave reggae its defiant, global voice. In trying to silence prophets, they made them immortal.

Because long after the secret memos are shredded, long after the politicians are forgotten, and long after the JLP and PNP posters have faded to white in the Caribbean sun, reggae still rolls, and voices still sing: equal rights, justice, one love, Jah, Rastafari.

My summary

So there we have it, the tangled web of politics, espionage, and culture in Jamaica during the Cold War. It's a story where the CIA's invisible fingerprints smudge the edges of a small island nation's fight to define its destiny.

It's a story where two political parties, the PNP and the JLP, didn't just compete at the ballot box, but armed their followers in a street-level civil war that serves as a warning to all who value civil discourse and freedom.

This is a story where reggae musicians, born in the ghettos, carrying guitars and microphones instead of pistols and bullets, were thrust into the roles of prophets, peacemakers, and sometimes martyrs.

Bob Marley tried to rise above politics, yet his music was inherently political. Songs of justice, freedom, and resistance can't help but rattle the cages of power.

Peter Tosh refused to dilute his messages and confronted authority head-on, ultimately at great personal cost.

These artists weren't mere entertainers, they were cultural warriors, and whether they wanted it or not, they were pulled into the gravitational field of Jamaica's political chaos.

When Marley was shot before the Smile Jamaica concert, the world saw just how dangerous it could be to strum a guitar in a country divided by ideology.

Then, when the One Love Peace Concert took place in 1978, and Marley joined the hands of bitter rivals Michael Manley and Edward Seaga, the image became instantly unforgettable. It galvanized a divided nation as one, but cast it into a

fragile peace that was fleeting. The guns didn't fall silent. The CIA didn't pack up and leave. And the cycle of violence continued.

And yet, even as Jamaica suffered, the music it gave the world grew stronger. Reggae carried its message of defiance and redemption across the globe. For many outside Jamaica, it was the first time they glimpsed the reality of life in the Third World. People in the suburbs suddenly saw both oppression and hope, and heard songs of real resistance. Reggae became not only the soundtrack of rebellion but a beacon, reminding the world that even in struggle, there can be beauty and harmony.

But what lessons do we, here and now, draw from this history?

Consider the American landscape today. Two dominant parties locked in bitter rivalry. People shooting people they disagree with. Cultural icons and celebrities carrying political weight, sometimes more than elected officials.

Foreign influence creeping into our discourse, whether through covert funding, media manipulation, or digital interference.

The parallels should make us uneasy. Jamaica in the 1970s was a small island stage where Cold War powers rehearsed tactics of destabilization, propaganda, funding rival factions, arming groups, and co-opting culture. Today, those same tactics are more sophisticated, travel at the speed of digital, and their reach is global. But the endgame is the same: fracture a society until it can't see itself as whole. Our previous episode deconstructed this us versus them falsehood.

And here, the story of Jamaica warns us that when politics becomes too deeply intertwined with culture, when artists are forced into the trenches of ideology, when foreign intelligence agencies meddle unchecked, the result is not just instability, it's violence.

Yet the story also offers hope. Even amid bullets and betrayals, there was Marley's voice, calling for unity, calling for peace. There was music that transcended the chaos, reminding people of their shared humanity. And that's a reminder we could use today: that while politics divides, art can unite.

So the next time you hear the offbeat guitar skank of a reggae tune, don't just nod along. Listen. Hear the history it carries. Hear the warning. Hear the hope.

Because what happened in Jamaica wasn't just an island's problem, it was a chapter in a much larger book. Let's not write the sequel over the dreams of our children.

Thank you sincerely for diving into Reggae, Rastas, and the CIA: Cultural Espionage in Jamaica, with me.

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I'm your host Lex Gordon…

Stay Wild, Tropical Child!