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Christopher BATEMAN & Al FINGERS, In Fine Style: The Dancehall Art of Wilfred Limonious

Illustrating Dancehall, Illustrating Culture: The Art and Humour of Wilfred Limonious

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Christopher Bateman & Al Fingers, *In Fine Style: The Dancehall Art of Wilfred Limonious*, London, One Love Books, 2016.

In Fine Style is a big book. It's big in size and it's weighty. The heft of the book means space for page after page of illustrations, many in colour so bright it leaps off the page. Capturing the trajectory of a career: early illustrations for educational publications, work-for-hire to cartoons, advertisements, comic strips, and his wide range of record sleeves, this book demonstrates the innovation and versatility of Jamaican artist Wilfred Limonious. Yes, Limonious's work was commercial, but his illustrations and designs represent a kaleidoscope of society. Through Christopher Bateman's words and the accompanying images, *In Fine Style* provides a window into the creative process, not just of Limonious himself, but of the Jamaican music industry in the heyday of 1980s dancehall.

Though Jamaica is an island of three million people, it's international influence and reach far exceeds its size, giving credence to the saying "*wi likkle but wi tallawah*" ["we are little but big"]. This means that gaining any understanding of Jamaica at all means that one must absorb a huge amount of information and experience a range of settings, from the country to the city—looking and listening is imperative. So it's no surprise that *In Fine Style* is thick tome that encourages the reader to flip through page after page of gorgeously reproduced images whilst tracking the trajectory of one man's life in text as well. Its subject, the prolific Limonious, whose own subject was the immense cavalcade that is Jamaica, provides the reader with a way into the country's culture through art.

An illustrator most famous for his work on reggae and dancehall album covers, Limonious's work, as Bateman admits, is instantly recognizable by anyone who has even a passing interest in dancehall music and its history. Depicting a society that argues, jokes, dances, laughs, works, fights, parties, among other things, Limonious's illustrations drew Bateman to want to know more about the artist. But to learn about the man, Bateman had to do more than look at record sleeves—but even with the resources of the internet, he was unable to unearth much about the man who had provided access to a whole world of dancehall and Jamaica through image. To write this book, Bateman had to travel to Jamaica and speak directly to those who knew

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Limonious and his work. Thus, Bateman is able to quote from interviews with friends, family, colleagues, contemporaries and admirers, painting a picture of a quiet, dedicated artist whose work spoke volumes.

Beth Lesser, writer and photographer¹ who has chronicled the rise of dancehall in the same period, provides the foreword to the book, providing essential context for the humour of Wilfred Limonious. Acknowledging that the range of Jamaican joking is not as well known outside of the island as reggae music, Lesser provides an overview of comedic theatre and poetry from the pantomime to the much beloved Louise “Miss Lou” Bennett-Coverley. She links the performances on the stage to that of reggae music—the idea of providing a persona to make audiences laugh. Artists like Yellowman and Brigadier Jerry played with lyrics and self depreciation to combine comedy with music. Limonious’s work reflected this dynamic—this desire to engage with laughter and to extend from the tradition of performance and comedy. Bateman also contributes to the context by discussing the role of cartooning in Jamaican newspapers and other publications.

Lesser also underlines the importance of folk practices and of the Jamaican language, patois.² Patois is the language of the people, and Limonious’s work reflects the wide range of Jamaican society, “the handcart man, the dread with his big-head spliff, the rude boy rushing past on his motorcycle with a fat girl flying off the back” (15). Just as the sound of Patois indicates Jamaicanness, so too does Limonious’s artwork and illustration: “A Limonious drawing was one hundred per cent yard” (15). The artist also did not

shy away from difficult topics, but used comedy, exaggeration and laughter to raise questions.

Notes from Orville “Bagga” Case, friend and fellow graphic artist as well as Donna P. Hope, senior lecturer at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, both underline the role of comic relief in Jamaican society at large. The varied narratives of Jamaican society are provided by Limonious. The access that his illustrations provide demands further consideration of dancehall, but also Jamaican culture.

One of Bateman’s most interesting discoveries is Limonious’s early work for the Jamaican Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL) Foundation, after graduating in graphic design from the Jamaica School of Art (this is now part of the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts). From images meant for manuals with titles like *Hotel Work and You* or *Pig Rearing* to illustrated folk tales or the history of national hero Paul Bogle and heroine Nanny of the Maroons, Limonious provided carefully crafted visual accompaniment. Images of the Morant Bay Rebellion are particularly evocative. It is clear from these early works that Limonious had an ability to capture facial expressions and human movement. Though his work eventually moved further towards cartoon and caricature, this talent for depicting people is clearly evident from the beginning of his career.

In addition to this work, Bateman also reveals that Limonious was also musically talented and released some interesting singles—the labels, of course, illustrated by the musician himself. After doing work for Sonic Sounds in Kingston, initially Limonious’s identity was kept secret. But when the word got out, the demand was high for his talents and this means that his work

is found on many of the most popular 1980s records. *In Fine Style* showcases over one hundred pages of these jacket designs, as well as a range of examples of the actual labels for the vinyl records and the covers for cassette tapes. The choice to organize the covers stylistically allows for appreciation of Limonious's range. Yes, he was prolific, but he was also able to produce such a variety of different images from cartoons to carefully rendered portraits.

Though the bulk of the book features dancehall-related designs and drawings, *In Fine Style* also compiles examples of Limonious's comic work. The early comic images that accompany poet and playwright Basil Lopez's *Easy Street* for JAMAL seem like work from a contemporary graphic novel. Strips like "Chicken" and "Shane and Shawn" (named for his two sons) are typical funny pages fare, but "Grass Root" and "Earthrunnings," both written completely in Patwa demonstrate experimentation with the medium as one to tell the stories of dancehall and the downtown life of Kingston, Jamaica.

The images themselves are accompanied with examples of sketches and scans of proofs. It's possible to see how Limonious utilized letters lifted from other publications—font linotypes were not available in Jamaica at the time. One can observe the creativity necessary to deal with problems that can be solved so easily with technology now. Bateman also is able to provide insight into the work environment, quoting, for instance from a contemporary of Limonious, Jethro "Paco" Dennis: "The labels came in droves. Sometimes you would do four, five, six labels throughout a day." (87) Not only is this a comment on Limonious's prolific produc-

tion, but also the equally prolific production of Jamaican music at the time.

Even nearing the end of his short life—Limonious died at the age of fifty in 1999—he was still adapting and developing his style. The book provides examples of "night time art," so named by the artist's friend, Alvan Francis. These works include a memorial portrait of the late singer Garnett Silk, finely detailed images of children and nature scenes. As with all of Limonious's work, it demonstrates his knack for capturing faces, specifically Jamaican ones.

Limonious's work ethic means that his art has become synonymous with dancehall—and synonymous with Jamaican culture. It's no wonder that illustrator and graphic designer Ferry Gouw chose an homage to the style of Limonious for contemporary international dancehall act Major Lazer's album covers. It would not be a stretch to say that the look of Major Lazer goes a long way in terms of connecting the music directly to Jamaica and directly to dancehall. *In Fine Style* serves very much the same function. It connects the work of Limonious to a time, a place, a music. The book is a careful and caring tribute to an artist whose work exhibits the aesthetic of dancehall and Jamaica in general.

Erin C. MACLEOD

Notes

1. Lesser is the author of *King Jammy's* (ECW Press 2003) and *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture* (Soul Jazz 2008). The author of this review worked with Lesser on the *King Jammy's* publication.
2. Patois is often written as *Patwa* or *Jamiekan*.