Cultural Crossroads

*ROOTS ROCK REBELS:**When Punk Met Reggae 1975-1982* (3CD, Cherry Red)

What do reggae and punk share? Attitude! Whether you call it slavery, Babylon or society, the bands gathered here wanted to rebel against the stifling conformity of the 1970s, against racism, oppression, ageism, poverty and dull music.

In these days of right-wing muscle flexing and aggression, it's good to be reminded of this cultural mix and the power of Rock Againt Racism, a genuine street level response to the rise of the National Front.

Reggae of course, had been in the mix for a while, on the back of Island Records launching Bob Marley in the UK. But many dispossessed youth had grown up with it, since they lived in the same run down areas that evidenced both dub sound systems and then the arrival of D.I.Y. punk. In London it was Notting Hill and the Portobello Road area, where each Saturday the market would throb to the bass, and every August sound systems would aurally lubricate the carnival. (By 1980, of course, Dread Broadcasting Corporation would be transmitting and had a presence in Portobello Market.)

Other cities had similar areas of musical and cultural cross-fertilization, although it did seem to mostly be the punks drawing on dub and beats than the other way round. Anyway, this compilation has a great mix of roots music, pop dub, pop reggae, political and social critique and punky reggae.

So we get great reggae tracks from Matumbi, Steel Pulse, Black Uhuru, Aswad and Burning Spear, some two-tone delights from The Selecter, The Beat and The Specials, pub rock dressed up with punk attitude and reggae beats from Graham Parker and posh boys The Clash, squeaky studio experiment from XTC, and mighty dub dementia from The Pop Group, Public Image Limited and Creation Rebel. And there's poetry from Linton Kwesi Johnson, pop silliness from Madness and the next generation Musical Youth.

Of course, there's stuff here I like but don't see as quite fitting the concept (Elvis Costello, Doll by Doll) and stuff I dislike (UB40, Generation X) but it doesn't really matter. Over 3 CDs and 3+ hours, this music reminds us that good music can be both political and subversive, can share, stretch and question musical genres, and might even help change the world.

Rupert Loydell

(374 words)