

Mykaell Riley

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISIED

YES, IT WAS

It's August 2018.

At this point in the year four decades ago, I was on one of life's incredible journeys.

Although punctuated by trains, planes and sometimes a dodgy van, it was a journey that transported me seamlessly through a collection of experiences.

I'd left home in Whitehall Road, Handsworth less than twelve weeks earlier, to return having achieved my main ambitions and in the process, an unexpected transformation of who I was.

Some of the stand out moments involved signing to Island Records, supporting Bob Marley on his European tour, and appearing at

'Rock Against Racism' in Victoria Park London in front of more than 80,000 people.

These were heady times. 1978 was the year in which I heard for the first time whilst walking home, music I'd worked on for so long, booming from someone's car. The song was Handsworth Revolution and as I attempted to catch the eye of the driver I caught sight of Thornhill Road police station. The building that would normally have provoke dread, now seemed small and consequently less menacing.

The release of the album meant new opportunities to share the

anxieties of the community and my generation in the mainstream press and to sing about it on national television.

These experiences resulted from being a child of Handsworth and a member of Steel Pulse.

Handsworth Revolution was more than just my first album. It was the story of my life and others like me. It was the culmination of the lived experiences of African Caribbean people in 70s Britain.

David's genius was his ability to condense this collective experience into lyrics that succinctly communicated our lives to the masses. Ronnie could be relied on

for the baselines, whilst Steve's unique approach to the drums meant the key elements were always anchored. Selwyn and Basil would provide warmth and rhythm, whilst myself and Alphonso injected harmonies and percussion.

This was a functioning family of musicians fuelled on a passion for the music but driven by the need to succeed.

Back then this was something I'd repeatedly say to myself at some point in every rehearsal, gig, performance and emotion fuelled debate.

Little has changed as the main topic was black life in Babylon.

But on reflection, we were also debating the challenge of being first generation, black British born individuals, exploring how best to express ourselves through music.

It's amazing how some experiences have the capacity to define your future. I've been fortunate to have had a career, and it's in no small part due to the experience of making this album - and this on so many levels still informs my practice.

Back then the idea of a career in music, let alone joining a reggae band in Handsworth, was for many laughable. In the case of my parents not something that would enter any serious conversation about my future. This meant acquiring and holding down an apprenticeship (a proper job), whilst being a band member.

We all signed up to the University of life wherein everyday reality provided the lessons. It was a period where, you were conscious of the physical, psychological and financial cost of everything, including being a musician.

Which at the time was physically exhausting because of the size and weight of each piece of equipment. Psychologically challenging are parents feared for our safety as we challenged; the government, the police and the media. We also explored Spirituality, and its religious impact African peoples.

Our Jamaican parents did not regard becoming this type of musician, a pathway to anywhere other than prison.

Gaining a record contract generated a lot of confidence in our potential future. It lulled everyone into the assumption it was safe to cross the road because the traffic lights were on green. In reality, this was the music industry where one had to continuously look both ways and button down your pockets.

Looking back the revolution was as much within the band, when compared to anything that was happening in the community.

Given that none of us had formal training, we were now considered experts on our chosen instruments, our interactions with the media and our relationship with the wider music industry. If only this were true. But it mattered not, we

had graduated from University of life with a 1st for our album and Handsworth celebrated in our success.

I've lived away from Handsworth since leaving the band, so returning home is always a big deal.

On these occasions after a long tour my father, now passed on, would refer to me as the Prodigal Son.

When I now visit it's to catch up with the family or promote local music related activities. But when I'm away I still refer to Handsworth as home.

Gil Scott-Heron said the "revolution will not be televised", so I did my best to put Handsworth on the map.

Mykaell Riley, now Director of the UK Centre For Black Music Research at the University of Westminster, began his life in music in Handsworth, Birmingham with Steel Pulse. He founded the Reggae Philharmonic Orchestra in 1988, working with artists including Soul II Soul, Courtney Pine and Baba Maal. Mykaell is also Senior Trustee for the Black Music Education Trust, leading on documenting the history of black music.

