

# WITH THANKS TO HARRY NICHOLS

*A (very personal) cockney history of reggae*

Tony Cordell

## So, who is Harry Nichols?

Well, he lived just around the corner from me when I was growing up in Hackney back in the 1960s, and although we never went to the same junior school, we did meet up and became friends when we both attended the same karate class in nearby Stoke Newington. The then eight-year-old Harold and his family lived five minutes from me in one of those big old houses where every floor had a different family living on it, probably paying ludicrous rents to some dodgy geezer landlord. I can't remember how many storeys there were, but all the houses in that part of Amhurst Road were enormous. Well, they seemed that way to me, as an eight-year-old East London urchin. My family lived on the third floor of Kingsdown House in the nearby Downs Estate, a typical inner-city council estate that had been built by the old London County Council, the forerunner to the Greater London Council that Maggie abolished years later. Our flat was overlooking Hackney Downs and, at the time, the flat seemed massive. It was the sort of flat,

though, that seemed sometimes like a prison, with two small bedrooms. But for the first time in their lives, my parents had an inside bathroom and a proper kitchen, no more scullery like the old downstairs flat they'd had in Bethnal Green.

On Harold's eighth birthday, in the summer of 1966, he invited me and some other karate kids to his party and it was there that I heard a new sound that changed my perception of music forever. Harold's parents had come to England in the late 1950s from the West Indies. I wasn't sure then which country they came from, and it didn't matter either, although now when I think things through it was obviously Jamaica. But, wherever they were from they brought with them a love of ska and this was the first time I had ever heard that sound. It was completely unlike anything I'd ever heard before as all I'd been brought up on until then was the kind of music that mother would listen to: the Beatles or Elvis bleedin' Presley. I'm convinced she only liked Presley because he was born in the same week as her in 1935. There was also a fateful day when mum and dad

went round to a neighbour's flat along the balcony and she heard Frank Ifield for the first time... yodelling all the way for the next few months! Dad, however, was a country music fan so, again, ska was something he was never likely to have listened to. And I had to suffer Jim Reeves!

All through the evening of Harry's birthday party there was the sound of ska playing away as Mr Nichols was in charge of his treasured radiogram, and this sound became hypnotic.

It was one of those great old radiograms where you could pile eight records on top of each other and they'd play one-by-one. By the last one or two records they would always be whirring, which obviously meant they were warped, but we had one exactly the same at home so thought nothing of it. This ska sound was a whole new musical experience, and even at that young innocent age I knew I was hearing something special. I liked it instantly and became hooked. I couldn't tell you the names of any of the artists or tracks, but I was humming tunes all the time afterwards. The next month it was my eighth birthday and when I was asked what I wanted as a present I answered that I wanted a record of the music that I heard at Harry's party. This was never going to happen as, I realised in later years, there was a hint of racism in both my parents' attitudes and although on the surface they were friendly to my friend's family, I'm fairly sure they never took to them. Sadly and shamefully I can't think of any

reason other than the obvious. Think how they must have felt years later when I set up home with an adorable mixed-race woman, although by this time mater and pater had long since gone their separate ways and I left home at a young age – more about that later.

I continued to enjoy ska and went round to Harry's house any time I could. His family always made me feel welcome and they were also grateful for the fact that I helped their son with his maths, which he was crap at and I excelled in. At the age of eleven, Harry and I ended up in the same secondary school, Hackney Downs, and also in the same class. We also both supported Tottenham. Hackney Downs was a great old school which had once been a grammar and was the beneficiary of funds from the worshipful Company of Grocers who had set up the school in the late 1800s to provide free education for the offspring of people in the grocery trade. This was a typical act shown by many of the Worshipful Companies, or Livery Guild Companies of the City of London. To my knowledge, the only people of any note who had been educated at the school were Harold Pinter, Eric Bristow and David East. David was a particular hero of mine because he went on to become wicket keeper for Essex County Cricket Club, for whom I, the fast bowler, went on to have an unsuccessful trial, a trial that was something of a pivotal moment in my life.

Back then, the district of Hackney was a relatively high crime area, burglaries, violence and, yes, even several murders, but I'm sure in traditional east

end manner they all loved their mother! I first witnessed a murder at a very young age, about thirteen, and strangely whenever I think back to it it's not the horror of what happened (a shooting with screaming, loads of blood, etc) but more the fact that there was loud music playing... reggae! Our school was also a bit of a crime area and it all culminated in a visit from the local boys in blue who gave the whole school a bit of a talking to, and a serious warning – which in them days we took very seriously as we knew they'd get nasty if they wanted. But they did make some good suggestions and they managed to get funding sorted out for a school social club to be established. Quite naturally, it soon became simply a music club where we'd all sit around, listen to music, and have a chat, or a fight over football, especially if we'd just 'done' the other mob from North London (as I said earlier I'm a Tottenham fan and all the school was either Tottenham or Ar\*\*nal).

By the time I was around thirteen or fourteen, ours was the class that seemed to lead the way in terms of music. Even though many of us had started to enjoy the local legendary band T.Rex (Marc Bolan was from Stoke Newington), it was still ska and reggae that ruled and we had many wonderful early evenings listening to the great sounds. By this time my family had split up and I was still in the council flat with my dad and my older brother. The fact that neither of them liked my music made me like it even more, partly to be stroppy but mainly because I really did like it. Every evening after school, I would spend a

couple of hours with friends and music, then head home and get some grub ready for when dad got home, and then I'd sit myself down with a book and some music. There was the classic case of when my dad got home and his first words were 'are you listening to that effing reggie music again?' I had to explain that it was reggae, not reggie. Reggie by now was safely locked up, as was Ronnie! Dad's response was to call me 'a piss-taking little bleeder'. John Keats, eat your heart out!

Things went from bad to worse at home, and I had to do something about it. In the end, with evening after evening of squabbles, I'd just had enough and bugged off. I was fourteen with no idea where I was going, but I just couldn't stay there any longer. I won't go into details but my dad had some unsavoury friends and there was always some sort of dodgy dealing going on, or something being planned. Whenever something was being organised, I was politely asked to leave the room even though I knew something very un-kosher was happening. Just for the record, everything was either legal or not. If it was illegal it was dodgy, if it was legal it was kosher! It was nothing religious, just our way of talking. By this time (at fourteen) I was working weekends on my uncle's stall in Kingsland Road market selling dodgy tom ('tomfoolery' - jewellery) and it earned me a couple of quid a week for which I was very grateful. It meant I could pay my way a little bit and I made good use of it. I kept on turning up at school so no-one there ever asked any questions. I was able to stay with friends

a few nights here and there and somehow I got through to sixteen when I left school. These couple of years were when my love affair with music was at its greatest, and most of the people I knew (most of my friends) were also very much reggae people, so whenever I stayed at a friend's place I was always listening to the same sort of sounds. Music became my escape. Reggae was at this time becoming far more commercial, but I was lucky being able to hear more of the roots music, more of the original ska sounds. Because of my circle of friends and this music, life was bearable.

At this time, I also started going to gigs and enjoying some of the local bands that were being formed. Some were outstanding and they were as good as the recorded sound, even better because they were real and not manufactured sounding. Some, though, were really rough and once in a while would be booed off stage, which nearly always ended up in fights. A really good venue was the Four Aces club right by Dalston Junction. On the nights when there was no live music on, the place was simply a local bar, and because of dodgy dealings going on there at the time (probably no more than anywhere else) the place was regularly raided by the bill. The fact that a number of the clientele were black also made them a target for the police, much more than other similar places in the borough.

Through this snapshot of my life, it is clear that reggae, and the people that I shared this music with, formed a stabilising element for someone who had a somewhat unstable family

background, lived in one of London's less favourable districts and had a liking for music out of the ordinary. Since I first discovered it, my love of music has been the constant in my life: to this day I'm still a reggae fan, I still listen to ska all the time and these days I'm into people such as Eek-A-Mouse who speaks to the audience as if he's having a chat. I first 'discovered' his music in 1982 at Chat's Palace in Hackney (a great venue for new artists to get their first experience of live performing). Along with the likes of Yellowman and the geezer with the dodgy lyrics, Max Romeo, these are the people who still influence my musical tastes. Music is the constant in my life, when people I should have

been able to rely on have let me down badly, when circumstances haven't been good, music has always been there. And it's thanks to my old friend Harry Nichols and his eighth birthday party that my love of ska and reggae goes on.

**Tony Cordell** is employed by a Birmingham-based university in a student support role. Tony's background is almost entirely in the public sector as he was previously employed in local government for many years and (certainly in his earlier days) he was a highly active trades unionist, fighting for workers' rights and for social justice. He organised many public campaigns and encouraged thousands of people out onto the streets in support of ambulance workers and nurses, and he led a successful campaign to fight the closure of a wing of the historic St Bartholomew's Hospital in the City of London – a campaign supported by local MPs Diane Abbott and Jeremy Corbyn. Tony Cordell was born and raised in the East End of London and moved to Birmingham in 2012 for a variety of personal reasons. At the age of sixteen, an unsuccessful trial to play professional cricket led him to make career choices which resulted in him moving into administrative and finance roles and eventually into the public sector. His long-held belief in social justice and equality of opportunity for all helped him develop his socialist views and led to his trades union activities.

Tony has a love of travelling and enjoys experiencing different cultures and it is this love of all things different that ultimately led to his love of reggae and his other passion – cooking.