

Sounding the Nation: Martin Rennalls and the Jamaica Film Unit, 1951–1961

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“If a certain kind of camera, yet to be invented, achieved the capacity to record the instantaneous give-and-take between two black people meeting in the street, looking at the artifact this ‘camera’ produces you would see the shared sense of identity, the bloody secrets linking us and setting us apart”

– John Edgar Wideman, *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 145.

In early to mid-twentieth century rural Jamaica, when the Jamaica Film Unit’s mobile cinema arrived, they brought electricity. Their films screened in city theaters too, but the Unit carried film shows to the country where their intended audiences resided. In this environment, before cinema would serve as a medium of communication or a visual teacher, it was an experience and spectacle of electric light.

The background of the Unit’s director Martin Alexander Rennalls provides a rich context for understanding what motion pictures would or could mean in Jamaica in the middle of the last century. Moreover, Rennalls’s indispensable interpretation of the Unit in his unpublished manuscript, *A Career Making a Difference: Autobiography by Martin Rennalls* (1991), provides a history of the Unit and its films, along with the story of his career, how he came to see film as an educational medium, and why it was so important to develop Jamaican film production in the manner that he did. Rennalls frames the Unit as a largely self-directed film group and offers readers

a unique opportunity to view a colonial-era cinema through the eyes of one of its authors.¹

Born in the hills of Glengoffe, St. Catherine parish in Jamaica in 1915, Rennalls was one of seven children; he was raised in a rural village in the Jamaican countryside in which the staple crop was bananas.² His father was Albert Rennalls, “Planter and Contractor” and his mother was a homemaker.³ Describing his early education at Grateful Hill School (1922–1933), a good distance from Glengoffe, Rennalls writes,

The school was physically, experientially, and intellectually bounded by the four walls of the building. Learning by rote was the dominant method, and education of the senses through experience was severely limited. There was no time given to learning about the realities of the world around us, to feel, smell, listen to and taste nature in the raw, which was in such abundance.⁴

Rennalls found his classes culturally irrelevant, writing, “Too major a part of the curriculum, in those days, was directed to learning about other countries, Great Britain in particular”.⁵

Rennalls’s exposure to media, or to film especially, was quite limited. The family did not own a

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radio, for instance, and the first photograph of Rennalls was taken in college for the annual record. He writes that a businessman in the community showed silent westerns once per month in an area set up at his coffee mill, constituting his film culture. Other materials of popular culture had a presence in his life, including detective novels and fashion magazines from abroad, he wrote. Yet one aesthetic experience stands out above the others: a magic lantern show.

Sponsored by an unnamed missionary society, the projection of light through glass slides captured Rennalls's imagination. He writes, "Although the slides did not show physical movement and did not deal with entertainment but pure information, all of us were spellbound." Likely, it was then that his desire to make motion pictures, and bring film shows to country people, like the folks who raised him, took hold. Rennalls continues, "I was, as it were, looking through windows into other parts of the world I had never seen; the pictures were the next best thing to reality".⁶ As much as Rennalls was committed to investigating the everyday in his films, he also appreciated the way pictures could enable viewers to imagine a world beyond the village, beyond their immediate circumstances. The movies were a tool to escape or interpret the restrictions of daily life and for unveiling a deeper experience of lived daily local life.

From 1933 to 1936 Rennalls studied at Mico Teachers Training College in Kingston, which prepared male teachers to be headmasters. Afterward, he served as headmaster at Arthur's Seat, Woodside and Belfield elementary schools. While teaching in these rural areas, Rennalls became fascinated with the potential of films as a means of reaching his students. When on one occasion he saw how film-strip images of an erupting volcano captivated them, he decided to find ways of bringing the world into the classroom through film.⁷ He built a rear-projection screen so that he could show films and filmstrips during the school day, and he often projected instructional films in the evenings for the parents.⁸

Of Woodside in St. Mary parish, Rennalls writes, "There were no electric sources within some 20 miles of Woodside", a village that grew up around former coffee plantations set high in the hills above Port Maria on the northeastern coast of the island.⁹ For much of the early twentieth century and beyond, services such as electricity and piped water (instead of a tank that caught rainwater) were unevenly distributed between the commercial areas within the capital city of Kingston and the rural areas well be-

yond them. Indeed, the residents of Glengoffe, where Rennalls was born, only started the process to acquire basic telephone service in 1998. Even today, to walk in Woodside after dark on many roads is to walk by moonlight.

In 1948 Rennalls received a scholarship for a year of study at the Institute of Education at London University.¹⁰ From 1950 to 1951, after returning to Jamaica, he participated together with Trevor Welsh and Milton Weller in a class of six trainees in the Colonial Film Unit's (CFU) West Indies Training School.¹¹ This twelve-month film instruction program took place at University College of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, drawing its students from Trinidad, British Guiana, Barbados and Jamaica.

The West Indies Film Training School in Kingston was the second of several such programs the CFU established around the British Empire, after the one at Accra, Ghana. The instructors R. W. Harris and Gareth Evans were responsible for technical training and the creative aspects of filmmaking, respectively; both men had taught the Accra course in 1948–1949, and the CFU invited them to restage it in Kingston. Before the CFU started teaching film production in the colonies,

[R]epresentatives from the Caribbean territories visiting England came to the CFU to take courses in connection with the Raw Stock Scheme. The enthusiasm and capability of these visitors made it clear that, when opportunity offered, workers in these islands could be brought to a high standard of technical ability in a short time.¹²

William Sellers, head of the CFU, made a preliminary visit to Jamaica, British Guiana, Trinidad, Barbados and the Bahamas in November 1949 to assess the infrastructure for film.¹³ "In these five territories are nine cinema vans, 74 sub-standard sound projectors and 25 silent projectors. Of the cinema vans four are operating in Jamaica, four in Trinidad, one sound projector in Barbados and two sound projectors in Bahamas." A "keen and efficient" staff arranged film showings, lasting from 90 to 120 minutes. "In each territory there is a library of several hundred educational and informational 16mm films which ... almost without exception have either British or American backgrounds."¹⁴ Such cultural incongruity served as a major frustration to Rennalls, and was a key factor in the government's decision to facilitate local film production.

The London-based CFU chose to build up film production in the Caribbean, in Jamaica particularly, essentially because of its unique geo-historical and cultural location on routes between Africa, Europe and the Americas. It was felt that,

[T]he Caribbean territories, partly owing to their important geographical position in regard to world trade, are amongst the most cosmopolitan in the world. Both these factors have helped to create in the Caribbean a sophisticated society and one that is particularly suited to adapt itself to new ideas.¹⁵

Kingston, Jamaica was chosen as the central hub for Caribbean filmmaking, with half the students in the CFU's film school coming from Jamaica.

The Kingston course culminated in the participants' production of films on subjects chosen by their own governments. The Jamaican students produced a public health film on tuberculosis called *Delay Means Death* and this film

... was shown in Trinidad and is now being used there in conjunction with a T.B. campaign organized by the Medical Department. In Jamaica the D.M.S. (Director of Medical Services), after reviewing the film, warmly congratulated all concerned on the production of a valuable film and immediately decided to arrange for the film to be shown at a Conference of Medical people with a view to using the film as widely as possible.¹⁶

Additionally, they produced the following three titles: *Citrus Harvesting Methods*, *West Indies News Reel, no. 1* and *The University College of the West Indies*, which featured the activities of the University's various faculties rendered in an observational non-narrative style. Rennalls wrote of the course in his autobiography: "My dream of the introduction of audiovisual aids in education as viable in the struggle against illiteracy and ignorance among children and adults was gradually becoming realized".¹⁷

After the program, Sellers visited the four participating countries, apparently bringing with him the trainees' films (which had been processed in London) to screen there:

Cocoa Rehabilitation made by Wilfred Lee in Trinidad; *Give Your Child a Chance*, a two-reeler on the care of mother and infant made by Isaac Car-

michael in Barbados; *The Bush Lot Rice Co-operative Farming*, made by R. H. Young in British Guiana, and a film on the University College of the West Indies made by the trainees during their training in Jamaica. One other film, *Farmer Brown Learns Good Dairying*, made by the trainees Rennalls, Welch and Weller in Jamaica, was awaiting the recording sound track at the time I left for the West Indies and so was not available to show during my tour.¹⁸

The CFU course offered Rennalls a chance to sharpen his ideas about film and visual education, even if it was a somewhat antagonistic environment. For although the film school was a means of bringing production to Jamaica, the instructors sought to control and limit the scope of the trainees' ambitions and determine their aesthetics. Rennalls recalled:

In film production my exercise began to veer away a bit from what I perceived as the possibility of too much emphasis on a "dry as bones" approach to documentary or instructional filmmaking. I believed that the presentations could be entertaining and dramatic while at the same time be informational. ... At first I did not receive the full support of my instructor who felt that I might be going too much "Hollywood" style and this direction was not acceptable. As the report on the School says, "any inclination either of producers or the Dept for whom production is being undertaken, to aspire to the heights of Hollywood production must be instantly checked. There is no glamour in documentary film production, no film premieres with radiant stars, glittering cars and publicity stunts".¹⁹

The CFU's preferred style was not suited to Rennalls's goals and sensibilities; he valued experiential learning and his filmmaking concept was likewise characterized by emotion, dramatic structure, and immersion in local everyday issues.

Rennalls's notion of filmmaking was actually based on his own teaching practice. "I always tried to do rote learning, which was the standard, as little as possible", he wrote. Instead, he used experiments and demonstrations whenever he could in order to connect his students with the world outside the classroom in a direct and sensory manner. Similarly, Rennalls believed that "Jamaicans would appreciate dramatic presentations".²⁰

Rennalls emerged from the course as the first director of the Unit and Assistant Education Officer

in the Department of Education. In this position, he took charge of writing and directing scripts as well as assembling the crew, which would be composed of his fellow Jamaican trainees Welsh (cameraman) and Weller (editor). In 1955 he was appointed Films Officer, where “his duties include[d] responsibility for all Government film services in Jamaica – production, distribution and projection. He [was] also in charge of the visual education programme in schools and elsewhere”.²¹ Rennalls innovated on the technical aspects of film wherever he worked and sought to find ways to bring images into public education and social development programs.

As much as the Unit was a unique project in forming Jamaica’s new emerging identity, and the touchstone of Rennalls’s career, it was an historical phenomenon that came out of volatile and complicated forces.

Throughout the 1930s, workers in the Caribbean – including Jamaica, Trinidad, Martinique and Cuba – staged a series of strikes and rebellions. To give a sense of scale, the 1938 sugar workers’ and laborers’ strikes resulted in 46 deaths and 429 injured persons. Such uprisings occurred in areas across the country over almost ten years, involving cane-cutters, dock workers, banana workers, laborers on sugar estates, and city laborers in Kingston, such as street sweepers. There was widespread dissatisfaction among the people, with their economic marginality due to high unemployment on one hand and low wages on the other. The 1938 labor riots generated the atmosphere and infrastructure that would ultimately lead to the Unit’s formation in the 1950s.²²

In the late 1930s, in the wake of the regional protests, the Crown had convened the Moyne Commission to study the situation, and this group made a number of recommendations, some of which were cultural. In 1938, before the Unit was established, “[the] Jamaica Welfare Commission launched the first mobile documentary film service in connection with the community advancement program in rural areas”.²³ This documentary film exhibition practice was founded through the Raw Stock Scheme, which was initiated by the CFU and operated by officers from the Colonial Office who were working in such colonial areas as Jamaica. In addition to exhibition equipment, including a generator, they had 16mm cameras, a tripod, a light meter, and film stock for making one-shot films. Although Woodside had a school, it was not among the sites the Jamaica Welfare Commission (JWC) chose when it organized

its mobile cinema unit shows.²⁴ Instead, Carron Hall, two miles from Woodside, was one of the sites selected. The Unit would later prefer informal outdoor screenings whenever possible, which allowed viewers greater and more casual access to the films than if they were held indoors.²⁵

Rennalls dismissed the content of the films made through the Raw Stock scheme because they lacked contextual immediacy, but he recognized the potential model offered by the mobile film unit.

Their goal was primarily adult education and their activities were directed to the development of better standards and values among the people of the country. One of their main tools for achieving their goals was the use of documentary films. They instituted the use of mobile film units, which were self-contained in that they were equipped with a generator to provide the necessary electricity where it did not already exist; self-supported screens; sound systems for amplifications; music for record changers; and lecturers. They selected centrally located schools throughout the island to give one show per month. . . . The lecturers answered questions from the audiences and allowed comments to be made Recordings of classical and popular music were played on the arrival of the Unit . . . diversional shorts were exhibited first, then were followed by two or more educational films. The lecturer gave a running commentary to silent films. He tried to apply these films where possible to the local problems, but by and large their value was in the provision of background info.²⁶

Yet screenings fueled his hopes for pertinent visual education materials. At the administrative level, the inadequacy of these programs motivated the formation of the CFU and their mission of encouraging locally produced films in colonial territories, alongside the mobile film exhibition practices of the JWC.²⁷ The CFU sought to facilitate local and relevant (if not entirely independent) filmmaking in the colonies.

However, the CFU was formed at a time when the Crown was already seriously considering letting the colonies go, and, in response to unrest among Jamaican laborers, seeking to institute a range of social reforms and controls. The cinema-related activities of the CFU and the JWC are best viewed, then, as part of sweeping reforms in the social sectors,

including health, education and agriculture. The mobile film units brought information and a sense of connection to isolated areas; further reform came in the form of self-help instruction, albeit derived from a British rather than a Jamaican context. With the 1938 riots and Jamaica's political culture in perspective, the 1939 formation of the CFU and the development of autonomous film production in the Caribbean territories takes on a strategic cast.

The JWC and the CFU targeted rural areas where much of the rioting had taken place. Rural-based citizens represented authentic culture, political power and economic resources but, with the flames of rioting as a backdrop, they represented a potentially threatening force as well. Inasmuch as the mobile unit scheme served, therefore, to bring light and information into outlying territories, it also probably served as a surveillance mechanism and a device of distraction in areas where folks were potentially ready for political foment and insurgent collectivity.

Perhaps in response to the class-based animosity unleashed by the uprisings of the 1930s, which occurred during the formative years of his career, Rennalls sought unity, consensus and community action focused on everyday problems in a pragmatic way. In February 1948, for instance, he was involved in the formation of a Manager-Teachers Association. It was declared "in the interest of Jamaica that the managers and teachers should work harmoniously. If this is not done [one] could visualize a tottering of the social structures of Jamaica".²⁸ Film, particularly documentary formats, could be a vehicle of information that formed the basis for community participation and preservation, and this is where the Unit sought to define its role. Rennalls wrote,

As a contribution to this national image building, the Film Unit was playing its part. A positive effort was made to represent the various types of people in the films in ways that were compatible with their respective roles in society. . . . The people were encouraged to work toward the goal of a united, viable and cohesive Jamaican society.²⁹

There was a great deal of unrest, but the optimistic elements of the country's spirit of Independence were certainly manifest in the ethics and aesthetics of the Unit's early films: they stressed community participation, volunteerism and self-help,

focused on Jamaican people and locations, used Jamaican language and references such as proverbs and musical forms, and took their themes from local issues and contexts.

The Unit's films resulted from collaborations with such entities as the Department of Agriculture, the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Institute of Jamaica. Such partnerships were not at all unusual, as "throughout the Caribbean, documentary films were produced by national film units, government departments, tourist boards, commercial firms, educational bodies, and television companies".³⁰ In Jamaica, Rennalls brought together resources to build and situate the Unit: JWC and the British Council contributed stock films, projectors and personnel to the Central Film Organization (CFO). The CFO, under the umbrella of the Department of Education, ran the Unit. Rennalls had hoped that the Unit could operate independently, with the CFO performing roles similar to the National Film Board of Canada or the British Broadcasting Corporation. That is, the CFO would vet proposals for films and serve as a funding arm for the production units in a variety of media including, but not limited to, film. But this possibility did not materialize.

Ideas did not originate with Rennalls, nor with any specific individual. Within the CFO, an advisory committee composed of members representing various governmental departments was formed in order to consider applications for film productions. These proposals came principally from other governmental bodies, such as the Department of Agriculture and the Health Department. The advisory committee effectively formed a buffer between the Unit and the threat of overt control by any one agency or individual. When the CFO and the advisory committee completed their process of selecting and prioritizing the films, the Unit produced a budget and went about creating the movie. Many films were done in collaboration with the sponsoring organization, which supplied facts and data, Rennalls writes, while the Unit was responsible for the film's format and presentation.³¹ "Expenditures were met from an annual block vote for productions. The amount of the block vote was based on the approximate number of films that could be produced per year at an average cost for each production".³² Through the CFO, Rennalls arranged the Unit's agenda, production schedule and funding sources, and protected its values.

While each of the colonial film units that developed around the British Empire had its own trajec-

tory, that of the Jamaica Film Unit stands apart in special ways. In Jamaica, the Unit was largely left to its own devices once it was established, so it operated independently with little to no colonial restriction. Nor, at least initially, was there extensive local governmental control.³³ The educational thrust of Rennalls's documentary filmmaking initiative was critical to his and the Unit's success and, for a time, it doubtless helped to ensure its somewhat fortunate (yet limited) insulation from direct political control.

Meanwhile, educational films were thought of as separate from or even antithetical to the entertainment feature film industry, which the government and private enterprise, to some degree, would support much later. Indeed, unexpectedly perhaps, the transitional government between colonialism and Independence, not Independence itself, provided Rennalls and the Unit a generative context for building a noncommercial cinema. For in the absence of a feature film industry, the Jamaican government's educational and social welfare agenda of the 1940s and 1950s, coming out of the response to the labor riots, catalyzed the production, distribution and exhibition of motion pictures in Jamaica.

British influences on – and control over – the Unit were present, however, and they are particularly apparent in the production of news films showing visits by prominent British officials. While such occasions were opportunities for the Unit to depict Jamaica as a centrally important site within a broader international scene, we may safely infer from them that Britain still determined to some degree who and what was important enough to film. The idea of operating mobile cinema units in Jamaica also likely originated in England and was brought to Jamaica through the JWC and the British Council. But more than all of these influences, the Unit's core problem was the fact that in its first decade it had to rely on London laboratories run by the CFU to process their 16mm and 35mm film prints.³⁴

Typically, sound was added to the Unit's films during the post-production editing phase in London, due to the lack of sound recording and processing equipment in Jamaica.³⁵ Rennalls wrote that, "valuable time was lost in the completion of the films and the Unit was not able to carry out what was usually regarded as the most sensitive, vital, and creative aspects of film production – namely the editing of sound and picture and the dubbing of the sound".³⁶ For instance, in the Unit's first film, *Farmer Brown Learns Good Dairying* (1951), they used voice-over



narration instead of sync sound; but on later films they also used post-production dubbing for certain lines of dialogue, in addition to narration or commentary. The result was that in most cases spectators did not hear the actual voices of the people pictured on the screen. In terms of a theoretical "voice of the people", farmers literally could not hear themselves talk, although they could see a version of themselves on the screen. Because the communities in which the films were shown knew the participants in the films, the question of voice and representation was not at all a theoretical component of reception.

In a recent interview, Rennalls explained that the Unit had wanted to make realistic films that would hopefully influence their audiences to "improve their way of life".³⁷ Aimed at farmers, during a period when

Figs. 1 and 2.
Farmer Brown Learns Good Dairying (1951).
The community as participant.



the majority of Jamaicans were involved in agriculture on some level, many films concerned the use of better farming methods and other lifestyle issues. Film reception was essential for the Unit. Rennalls said, "the more [that] audiences can identify with the story on the screen – it's as if it's coming from themselves, and the more impact it would have. We wanted to make the films as realistic as possible so that when the audiences are looking at the film they identify with the situations ... as if it is truth".³⁸ Rennalls's choices in visual style – together with modes of address and uses of framing, which will be discussed later – all contributed to the film's desired realism. But the sound, the relationship between the sound and image, was the most critical, complex and problematic element inhibiting the persuasiveness of the Unit's films.

The Unit's motto was to make movies "in Jamaica, for Jamaicans, by Jamaicans, about Jamaicans".³⁹ Fueled by such a passionate statement of purpose, the Unit's films represent government's efforts to reach out to farmers and develop the agricultural sector, a major source of Jamaica's economic growth at that time. As the titles indicate, some of the Unit's films concerned farming directly while others addressed lifestyle and Jamaican culture generally.

The Unit's films fall into four basic categories: instructional films that focus on a practical skill such as *Farmer Brown Learns Good Dairying*; history films that anthologize highlights from Jamaica's past, such as *Historic Jamaica* (1956); news films focused on a prominent visitor, such as *Churchill Visits Jamaica* (1953) and *Princess Margaret Visits Jamaica* (1955); and story films that used narrative to convey a specific message, such as *Let's Stop Them* (1953) and *It Can Happen to You* (1956). The Unit's use of film as an educational medium varied, sometimes cutting across or combining the categories outlined here. But, when viewed chronologically, the films illustrate significant changes in both technology and story format that came into play over time.

Farmer Brown Learns Good Dairying, *Let's Stop Them*, and *It Can Happen to You* address farmers and others living in the countryside. Beginning with a simple good farmer/ bad farmer comparison in *Farmer Brown*, the films gradually take on more representational and narrative complexity. For instance, *Let's Stop Them* portrays community organizing, through the presentation of archetypal characters and the use of close-ups. *It Can Happen*

to You draws upon melodramatic rhetoric – such as high emotion, stark contrasts between simplistic characters, and tragic endings – while it also relies on the inherent realism of sync sound (in certain places) in order to drive home its message that "syphilis is no respecter of persons. It can happen to you!"

These three films teach, respectively, the need of dairy farmers to improve their techniques in order to be more efficient; the adage that "crime doesn't pay", along with the urgency of community vigilance against praedial larceny (crop stealing); and the danger of relying on herbal medicines to treat Syphilis and other venereal diseases. Above all, these films are practical and grounded in the presentation of solutions to everyday and common problems.

Farmer Brown exemplifies the way Rennalls first learned to use film to convey information and instruct. That is, it was "straight narrative without any attempt at a dramatic structure and was primarily informational. It portrayed a small country farmer having weak results from his dairy stock but who decided to change the bad practices for good ones resulting in improved milk output".⁴⁰ *Farmer Brown* uses the "bad-becoming-good" formula, likely the preferred format of Rennalls's instructors at the film school as it was common to colonial government cinema across the British Empire. In the Unit's film a real farmer (Charles Brown) plays the part of the bad farmer and an officer of the Agricultural Department plays the good farmer (Stanley Francis). The Unit produced the twenty minute black-and-white 16mm movie with the cooperation of the Department of Agriculture and the Livestock Association of Jamaica. Editing credit went to the CFU.

When filming was completed, the CFU and the Unit engaged in a complex transatlantic post-production process, with prints transported between Kingston and London. Tom Rice, writing for the website *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*, reports that

[T]he unit was forced to send all post-production work to England. This not only delayed the release of "news" films as all film processing took place overseas, but also ensured that the productions retained a strong colonial influence. For example, initially the soundtrack was prepared and recorded in England, prompting some critics to label the music and voiceover as "inauthentic".⁴¹

Farmer Brown has an orchestral score that was added to it during post-production in England. Typically, someone in London provided commentary as “it ha[d] become customary to add an English commentary to Colonial Film Unit films Mr. Lionel Marson of the British Broadcasting Corporation ... must now be quite familiar to overseas audiences”.⁴² But in this case, Michael Manley (who would become a Jamaican Prime Minister) apparently provided the voiceover, which was recorded in Kingston and forwarded to London.

Yet voice remains an issue in *Farmer Brown*. The film presents an awkward portrait because of the disconnection between the images of the people pictured and their voices. For instance, several shots show a small group of farmers discussing their disappointment in the yields from their dairy cows, audiences are told. The specifics of their conversation, their voices and inflections, the pace of their exchange – everything is elided by an intrusive voiceover commentary. Neither a silent nor a sync-sound film, *Farmer Brown* is silenced. Without being able to hear these voices, today’s audiences must mentally (or by pressing mute) remove the soundtrack in order to “see” the images: the farmers’ comportment, posture, gestures, and sartorial choices, the ways they convey a physical presence – a bodily voice. The sound masks the image today, but at the time such onerous commentary, symbolic of the Imperial Voice, was the convention in filmic pedagogy.

Farmer Brown demonstrates how sound can complicate the film’s qualities of “picturing us”, or community portraiture.⁴³ The photography of locations, people and themes in *Farmer Brown* forms a portrait of Jamaica at a specific point in its history, on the cusp of Independence. Similar to characterizations in American race films, the characters in the Unit’s films represent social types or forces, and their flatness or lack of subtlety allows the audience to project the nuances of their own experiences into these representations. The Unit’s films portray issues being worked out in community-oriented scenarios rather than personalities and individual dramas, and this ethic is the basis for its aesthetic forms.

When the Unit was making a film, the crew would introduce the project to a community and show the participants how to perform – as themselves – in front of the camera.⁴⁴ In the screening, they see their actual neighbors, or even themselves or people very similar to themselves. They see the conversations happening on the screen but they

hear a summary of the exchange in the voiceover commentary. There is an immediate disconnect and distance. Individual voices are elided and that full sense of recognition is compromised.

However, in some (not all) of the Unit’s films, such an alienating sound effect could be ameliorated, somewhat, in four critical ways: the use of local and original music; the employ of Jamaican voices in the commentary (and some local proverbs, though not colloquial speech, typically); the practice of filming in Jamaican locations; and the participation of real farmers, real members of government and other non-actors. Rennalls drew upon one or all of these techniques in his films in order to draw his audiences into them so that they could connect with their themes and messages.

Yet even when a film was visually successful overall, sound could still be a problem. *Together We Build* (1953) was the Unit’s twelfth film, but *The Daily Gleaner* reports that it was the “first film entirely produced in Jamaica by the Jamaica Film Unit”, possibly suggesting that its image and sound were both recorded in Jamaica (at the studios of Radio Jamaica). The article goes on to assess the film’s 21 December preview at the Institute of Jamaica positively, but there is a critical note about sound:

[T]he acting in these main roles as well as in the supplementary scenes where crowds are used is free, natural and of a high standard. The photography, too, is well conceived but these really good efforts are somewhat diminished by indistinct commentary. This flaw the film’s director, Mr. M. Rennalls, lays at the door of the technical inadequacies.

It goes on to say that although the film was recorded in a professional radio studio, “this is manifestly not the perfect place for the complexities of co-ordinating and laying a sound track”.⁴⁵

Due to technical flaws and flat characters, the Unit received harsh criticism for *Let’s Stop Them* from Sean Graham, a UNESCO fellow sent to observe the production and use of film in fundamental education in the West Indies and in Mexico. Graham travelled for a period of just over three months, between 6 February and 13 May 1955, but in 1949 he had been director of the Gold Coast Film Unit. With a background in the CFU, he was not someone from the outside or from a mainstream film industry who would not understand the challenges of making motion pictures in this context.

Graham is known for having gone against the "Specialized Technique" that had been advanced by William Sellers, director of the CFU. Writing on the Gold Coast Film Unit for *Colonial Film*, Tom Rice notes that

This technique was based on a notion that African audiences did not possess the cognitive capabilities to understand established western film techniques (such as close-ups, camera movement, cross-cutting and excessive activity within the frame) Graham viewed himself "as a storyteller", in contrast to Sellers and Lionel Snazelle, the head of the neighbouring Nigerian Film Unit, who were "educators really" (Personal interview, 5 March 2010). "If so many of the films made for and about technologically backward people have failed in their power of impact", Graham wrote in 1952, "it has been because the missionary, the teacher and the 'uplift' influence have tended to oust the story-teller".⁴⁶

G.B. Odunton concurred, saying the CFU rejected anything more "intricate than a rudimentary and simple plot".⁴⁷ Graham put storytellers against educators, where the former were supposedly more artistically motivated, morally complex and stylistically sophisticated. In his report on the Unit, he attempted to depict Rennalls as an isolated and incompetent rube. In fact, *The Daily Gleaner* covered Rennalls's travels, reporting that "he [had] left the island in June last year and went to Berlin where he represented Jamaica as a delegate at the International Film Festival". But Graham was incredulous that Rennalls had entered the film in a festival at all.⁴⁸ Graham wrote of the Unit:

It has not achieved professional standards, least of all in its scripts. The Asst Education officer in charge is primarily an Asst Education Officer and does not pretend to be a film-technician, let alone a writer or director. Its junior staff are still trainees and need experiences. – It is against this background that their most ambitious film must be placed. The film runs a half hour and it is a story film on praedial larceny called *Stop It/Let's Stop Them*. I was amazed to learn that the Unit considered it good enough to enter it for the Berlin Festival last year. Indeed the director accompanied the film there. ... By professional standards, this

film would come nowhere. Its craftsmanship is negligible, and the acting is pure caricature....yet I am bound to report that I found no dissatisfaction with the quality of the films the Unit has so far produced among the local film-users.⁴⁹

Let's Stop Them was the Unit's signature film, and it "was the film that opened us to the world stage. We were able to get an entry into the world film festival at Berlin [1954]. And I represented Jamaica there", said Rennalls.⁵⁰ The film was subsequently shown in Edinburgh and elsewhere. Rennalls said the film's success meant that, "a little country like Jamaica, was, I wouldn't say competing, as much as participating in the world film stage".⁵¹ Graham had to concede that the film worked for its audiences and was appreciated in the immediate contexts for which it was intended.

Images of farmers mobilizing to protect their livelihoods and filmmakers asserting authorship constitute an independent ethic of filmmaking. These films are scripted, photographed and directed in Jamaica by Jamaicans; they are directed toward Jamaican audiences and they use local non-actors and professional actors to embody scenarios illustrative of Jamaican social issues.

Let's Stop Them begins with a credit sequence accompanied by a short, original song by Ranny Williams, one of Jamaica's most prominent comedic entertainers:

Tell Me Cousin Jane
If you hear the news
Of the big banana Cousin Thomas lose
Im leave it pon the tree ready to cut
Come in the morning to reap it but
Tief gone with it long long time
What a shame
Tief gone with it long long time
What a shame.

The lyrics give the film's plot – which is that a thief steals a farmer's crop overnight – and they emphasize the moment when the farmer discovers that his crops have been stolen: "Come in the morning to reap it but/Tief gone with it long, long time." Williams goes on to draw our attention to the sense of, not just loss of property, but powerlessness and loss of control, as the repetition of "long long" doubles our sense of the time that has elapsed between the committing of the crime and its discovery. The

crime could have occurred minutes or hours earlier and the stolen crops and the thieves could be a few miles or even a day's journey away, what a shame.

Let's Stop Them is not merely about the single event of the theft referenced in the song or even what is depicted in the film. Rather, it concerns the wider phenomenon of praedial larceny (or crop stealing) in the area, referred to as "New Grove" in the film, and even models a community response to it. Cousin Thomas represents victimized farmers as a whole. And the singer figuratively voices both Cousin Thomas's feelings and the community's collective empathy. Further, the song foreshadows the film's cooperative ethic in the opening line, "Tell me Cousin Jane". Paired with Cousin Thomas, who appears in the third line, Cousin Jane becomes not merely a specific character but a generic term of both affection and belonging between the speaker and the addressee. Cousin Jane can be anyone who hears the song, or a member of the community that is pictured in the film. As we look more closely at *Let's Stop Them*, its implied intimate public, made up of neighbors sharing a commonly held problem, becomes more apparent. The song's explicit content is supported by its underlying expression of empathy, heard in the lines "what a shame", which is tied to a broad, collective condemnation of the theft.

Williams's song introduces the film's themes, settings and images through its lyrics, but its rhythm and musicality are expressive, too. The song is an example of mento, which is a commercialized form of a rural Jamaican folk music that was based on acoustic instruments. Predating ska and reggae, mento featured bawdy lyrics, like its cousin calypso, but here Williams has adapted the form to the Unit's educational and community-organizing purpose. Its use marks a departure from the canned orchestral music used in *Farmer Brown*.

Farmer Brown's score is not necessarily inauthentic because it is orchestral, but Williams's tune signifies within the film's local discourse in a meaningful way because it is immediately recognizable to intended local audiences. The song is part of the film's use of colloquial language, resonating with the two Jamaican proverbs quoted in the film: "What sweet nanny goat run im belly" (or What delights the goat can make him sick) and "fire deh a mus-mus tail and im tink a cool breeze" (or When fire is at the mouse's tail, he think's it's a cool breeze).⁵² The use of proverbs is an informal, colloquial but ritualized form of address that communicates shared under-



Fig. 3. *Let's Stop Them* (1953). Main title.

standing of life's truths. The manner of incorporating the proverbs along with the mento song creates a circle of identification, an implied intimate public, between the Jamaican audience and the film; for the audience, the music and proverbs are presumably as familiar and local as the locations, manner of dress, body types and other factors of the film's mise-en-scène. The singer's voice in the song, moreover, is collective as well as individual; indeed, a chorus joins him to repeat and underscore the song's emotional refrain, "what a shame, what a shame".

The text of the opening credit sequence signifies community and nationhood. During Williams's song the text on the screen reads "Jamaican

Fig. 4. *Let's Stop Them*. Credit title.

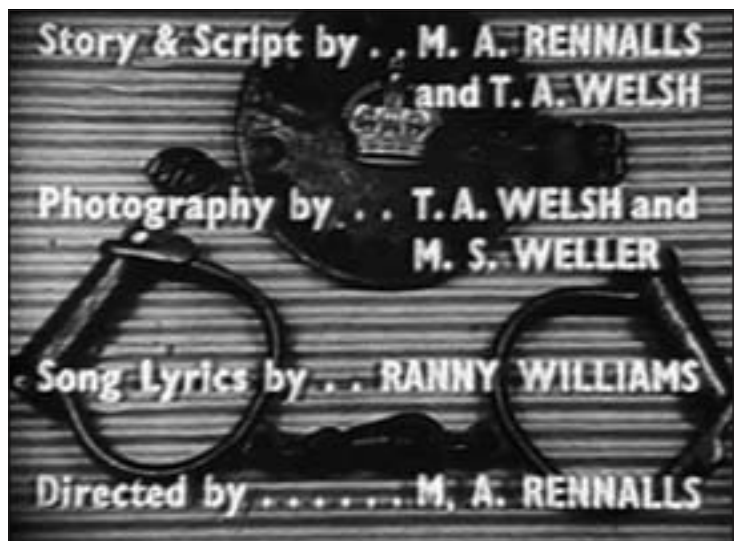




Fig. 5. *Let's Stop Them.* The farmers choose a leader.

Film Unit presents *Let's Stop Them*, produced in collaboration with the Jamaica Agricultural Society". Clearly, the titles are meant simply to announce the title of the movie and the producers; however, within a colonial-era context, it seems much more expressive and significant. As they announce what here seems intended to be read as two major national institutions and the collaboration between them, which has resulted in bringing the film to the screen, the words Jamaica Film Unit and the Jamaica Agricultural Society suggest the purpose of the film and its local, internal focus. Within the colonial film context, the repetition of "Jamaica" seems almost to assert independence, claiming the film for and of Jamaica. Given that the Unit was left to its own devices (we have seen their sense of mission through

Fig. 6. *Let's Stop Them.* Filling the frame with Jamaican bodies and faces.



the motto they chose), plus the fact that there is no indication that they had to have their scripts approved by Britain, then it is safe to say that the Jamaican crew was able to create and sustain its own independent ethos and sense of purpose for their work. Their sense of purpose, to make films for and by Jamaicans, can be seen in the tiniest details, such as the credits, that were under their control.

In the second set of titles, we see individual credits for the actors and the individual ambitions and aesthetic goals they can indicate. Two police patrolmen apparently play themselves, alongside five other participants who may be professional actors or amateurs.⁵³ The Unit often used both to represent constituencies within the intended audience, aiding their sympathy and identification with the film and its message.

Finally, the credits for writer, song writer, photographer and director appear, telling us the names of the particular individuals involved as well as the scope of the production. Although the Unit was an institutional entity, the credits to individual participants are assertions and signs of ownership and authorship. The film is clearly produced by a combination of institutional and individual authorships: the unit, the Agricultural department, and Rennalls and the other participants in the production each represent a means of authorship. Rennalls revealed ambitions for himself and the Unit by submitting and then accompanying the film to the annual Berlin Film Festival in 1954, as mentioned earlier. While Rennalls emphasized the film's local relevance, his actions exposed the film to wider audiences.

Images from *Let's Stop Them* speak for themselves as they illustrate the film's ethic of community participation and portraiture. We see shots of an outdoor meeting of farmers where a leader is chosen who will organize protection for the farmers' crops. A number of shots show individual farmers standing up to show their support for the measures adopted in the meeting, and particularly striking is a shot of the community members voting by raising their hands, as they lean forward in to the frame. For the audience, the film's participants model self-representation in action – the film is like a morality pageant of participation. Later we see a pan across members of the community as they raise their hands and smile in support of the resolution against crop stealing. The next shot shows Farmer Thomas leading a meeting. He is standing, at times framed in a monumentalizing or heroic way, filmed at a low angle. Again, in the

context of colonial cinema, we see images here, separated from the voiceover (which in this case is neighborly rather than superior), that fill the frame with Jamaican bodies and faces. The images picture Jamaican collectivity, which is in turn suggestive of leadership and participation among the farmers, largely without outside or colonial interference.

The community here is largely self-contained and it is organizing against its own members: Slippery Sam and three young people. *Farmer Brown Learns Good Dairying* and *It Can Happen to You* involve individuals of the same age and have a non-antagonistic relationship between generations. In *It Can Happen to You*, for instance, the father and the wise son agree on the course of treatment but the foolish sporting son, with his dancehall women and good times, chooses his own way. However, *Let's Stop Them* involves genuine conflict between youthful community members, who happen to be thieves, and older folks. Already the film is pedagogical, aimed from the Education department down toward the peasantry, but intergenerational tension adds another telling layer in which the youth are not aligned with the community's wider agenda. Rather than positing the viewing audience as innocent and the enemy as an outsider or taking a superior colonialist stance, the film addresses the fact that within the society, our society, there are potentially destructive elements, and the film depicts varied groups of people in the area and how they work together against the thieves.

Let's Stop Them concludes with direct address. One of the thieves speaks into the camera, addressing other potential thieves: "My advice to you is to stop now." He drops his head as he and his accomplices are carted off into prison. A.T. Henry reads the commentary in this and later Unit films. A Jamaican living in London, he could provide a voice Rennalls felt that viewers would identify with. And Henry's location allowed him to offer a solution to the Unit's problem of finding a Jamaican voice for Jamaican films.⁵⁴

The Daily Gleaner gave a positive review to the no longer extant film *She Shows the Way* (1956), but did not mention sound issues. This short film "is the story of Eudora Davis the first small land-owner in the island to have been granted a Certificate of Compliance under the Facilities for the Title Law", with Davis playing herself, apparently. The film's Carib Theater premiere was attended by dignitaries, including John V. Hepler, head of the United States Operations

Mission in Jamaica. The reporter noted that, "what strikes the viewer is the highly improved technique which the Film Unit (under Mr. Martin Rennalls) was able to bring to bear in producing the film".⁵⁵ The improved technique here could refer to acting or photography, but since sound was the most vexing issue the Unit faced, that is likely what the article means to point out.

The problem of synchronizing sound to the film image was of major concern to Rennalls and when in the mid-1950s he visited Canada he took the opportunity to consider potential solutions. He did organize important showings of *Historic Jamaica* and *It Can Happen to You* as well, but *The Daily Gleaner* reported, "The main purpose of Mr. Rennalls's visit to Canada was to observe the progress being made there in the use of direct synchronized sound films [and] which system may be used in productions by the Film Unit." Rennalls went on to say, according to the article, "Canada like Jamaica was faced with the same problem of developing synchronized sound with films at low cost." It explained that

One of the things he discovered which would cut down the overhead cost of film production was the use of magnetic tape which was relatively inexpensive and did not require processing as was the case when film was used for recording sounds. The magnetic tape could be edited until the stage was reached where it could be incorporated with the visual film in the final production.⁵⁶

Rennalls further considered how to adapt what he was learning in Canada to the specific working conditions he had in Jamaica: "In Canada they were also using sound equipment operated with batteries. Those were reasonably light and could be carried about conveniently for use in places where there was no regular electric supply available."⁵⁷ This type of international investigation into the problem of sound shows how important and multi-faceted it was, not only to Rennalls but also to filmmakers working in a much larger country such as Canada, which presumably had better financial and technological resources.

The story portrays Rennalls as a serious and ambitious technician of film as well as a worldly and sophisticated leader who sought practical solutions for building film production in Jamaica.

As he gained knowledge through his travels, he passed it on to employees at the Unit. In the Unit's



Figs. 7 and 8.
It Can Happen to You (1956). The wise brother is acclaimed as he leaves for America.

Kingston offices, Rennalls held Monday sessions that focused on particular aspects of film production so that new members of the crew could be trained on-the-job, and this way the Unit expanded while the level of film knowledge was raised for everyone.⁵⁸

In *It Can Happen to You*, Rennalls experimented with post-production dubbing for some of the dialogue while using commentary to summarize the rest of the story. In this film we see a mix of non-professional and professional actors on the screen speaking, but we do not always hear their particular voices, as was the norm, and the sound quality is uneven. This film is basically the story of the foolish Joe and the wise Charlie, young men who, the narrator tells us, “lived not far from my home. In fact,

they were my neighbors”. As in *Let’s Stop Them*, Rennalls uses a rhetorical strategy of neighborliness that places the narrator within the community being pictured. This is a marked contrast to the majority of typical colonial films, in which the narrator represents the master/colonial voice of supremacy. Such a rhetorical strategy pictures “us”.

The film *It Can Happen to You* illustrates its points with the wise and foolish paradigm that governed much of colonial cinema’s instructional films.⁵⁹ This particular production is aimed at improving what it figuratively refers to as the health of the national body, through sustaining personal health. For instance, the film begins with images and voiceover narration that describe Jamaica’s athletic strength and productive industry in order to impress viewers with the vitality and modernity of the country. The omniscient narrator, Henry, says, “Jamaica is my country and I’m proud of it”, over paradisiacal or touristic images of palm trees and a woman in a bathing suit standing in front of a waterfall. He continues, “And proud am I of her many sons, many of whom have achieved worldwide fame and recognition”, while viewers see an image of athletes. He concludes: “These achievements can only be upheld if everyone is ready to give of his or her best at all times”. Note that the narrator places himself within Jamaica as an insider rather than an outsider and that Jamaica is being referred to as an independent country rather than as a location in the Empire. A narrator who speaks from a position inside the colony, and moreover proudly claims it as his country, is a total departure from the mainstream of colonial cinema. The film’s health concern is characterized as a threat, not just to individuals, but also to the national Jamaican body as a whole.

As the story continues, Joe and Charlie apply for work visas that would allow them to join the US farm workers program. They pass all the various examinations but they do test positive for syphilis, which they inherited at birth. One brother, the wise one, goes to the doctor and follows a recommended course of medical treatment. Meanwhile, the other foolish one takes “bush medicine” and generally ignores the illness. He watches his “sensible” brother cured of the illness, and eventually succeeding in getting the visa/clearance to go to the US. Viewers are shown a dramatic sequence in which the wise brother boards a plane at the airport before taking off for America. Well-wishers wave as if congratulating him, making it clear that his choices are right.



In the contrasting scenes that follow, the foolish brother begins to go blind – represented by blurry point of view shots. His realization that his sight is deteriorating is punctuated by musical exclamation points, in the melodramatic style. Finally, in his despair, he shoots and fatally wounds himself. The film closes with the Minister of Health looking into the camera and addressing viewers in a direct way, restating the film's basic message that venereal disease "is no respecter of persons" and repeating the film's title: "it can happen to you".

The Unit's independence came into question around the controversial family planning film *Too Late* (1957).⁶⁰ Around the time of the film's release, Rennalls writes, the Jamaica Labour Party

began a campaign against family planning, arguing that the plan was a plot to reduce and control the size of the poorer segments of the population, which were the main supporters of that party. Faced with such a campaign to smear the governing party before another general election, the government opted to shelve the release. The extent of our disappointment could be better imagined than expressed.⁶¹

The suppression of *Too Late* sharply underscores how the currents of independence and authorship, contingent as they were, had shifted away from Rennalls and the Unit. For although he was an author, his filmmaking was dependent on the cooperation of his crew, the various government entities, and their individual members who aligned themselves with him. As the Unit's director and writer, Rennalls seems very much like the professor he would become, carving his own intellectual paths and drawing resources and attention to his work. But the nature of the government's changes, and the Unit's ineffectualness at a tough moment, reveal the fragility and isolation of his and their tenuous positions.⁶²

The first six years of the Unit's existence constitute what now appears, especially through Rennalls's eyes, to be a golden era, but the year 1957 brought significant shifts in how the Jamaican Film Unit functioned. These changes affected both its access to resources and the integrity of its ideology. Between the elections of 1955 and 1959, when Manley's PNP was in power, having taken the reigns of government from the JLP, officials created a public relations office. Rennalls describes it as "a complete departure from the policy of the CFO in the previous



government." The Unit was relocated from an education context to a PR context. In its new iteration, according to Rennalls, "the Unit's activities were brought closer to propaganda than ever before. And so more careful planning and strategy were required of us to prevent the Unit from being perceived as a partisan and political tool."⁶³ The government's changes went against Rennalls's vision of national unity – the mobile units having made connections among disparate and isolated rural communities, between the country and the city.

The use of 35mm was increased. Generally viewed as an improvement, it was used primarily for film exhibitions in the city while 16mm was reserved for the mobile units and rural community centers.

Figs. 9 and 10. *It Can Happen to You*. The foolish brother comes to an avoidable bad end.





Fig. 11. *It Can Happen to You.*
The voice of authority.

Rennalls found such policies to be “polarizing.” Further, the public relations office was to be called the Jamaica Information Service, and it was moved to the Ministry of Development and Welfare. Here, despite the name, film production was no longer viewed as a visual aid in education, as Rennalls had imagined. The advisory committee of the CFO, which had been the Unit’s buffer, was dissolved, and the Unit’s name was changed to the Film Unit of the Jamaica Information Service.⁶⁴ It no longer, even nominally, embodied the for-by-and-about Jamaicans ethos that Rennalls and his peers represented; instead, the new name indicated its position as a reporter for the activities of the government. The dissolution of the advisory committee meant that the film production unit was much easier to control and, although it was never a freestanding self-financed wholly independent group, it was now much less independent.

On taking office in 1962, the JLP issued a five-year plan which in part addressed the role of information and education. They blurred the potential of film to be used as either an educational tool or as a vehicle of propaganda. Moreover, with the rise of television, relatively new to Jamaica in the 1960s (and doubtless addressing the desire of Jamaicans who could afford them to have televisions in their homes), the government began to use television as the medium of choice for government outreach initiatives. A speaker appearing on television would seem more modern than the same speaker, and his message, would seem on film. As a consumer item and a new media technology that advertised and cultivated desire for other consumer items, television communi-

cated prosperity and cultivated desire for more of the same. The 16mm format would be used to record material for inserts on television programs.

Production of story and documentary films was being phased out and was now restricted to 16mm. Television would now be the main pathway of representation between citizens and the government. The change in film format was accompanied by changes in content as well. First, the subjects would be determined for the Unit. Quoting from the JLP plan: “The film content of the government activity should feature agricultural and industrial development, artistic life, Jamaican history and scenery, sports, crafts, social work, youth activities, homecraft and news”.⁶⁵ Such subjects, cast in a celebratory light, tended to reflect more positively on the government’s image than the exploration of the nitty-gritty (or even mundane) problems of everyday life that Rennalls had done.

The Unit’s new filmmaking focus was now less concerned with creating original pieces for educational purposes. Examples of the Unit’s works after the 1957 changes include *United Nations Day* (1959), *Towards Independence* (1960), *Government by the People* (1961), and *A Nation is Born* (1962). These documentaries are celebratory compilations of landscape scenes, special events, and notable people. They are made with posterity in mind and they address audiences in Jamaica, but they are promotional and paradisiacal in tone, seeming to appeal to potential foreign viewers and visitors while presenting Jamaicans with an idealized view of their own country. By contrast, Rennalls’s films were like visual versions of the informational pamphlets issued by particular agencies within the administration – not messages of achievement, whether by the nation or by a specific party/government. Ironically, the Unit actually enjoyed greater autonomy *before* Independence.

The Unit sustained a relatively independent filmmaking practice even under the British colonial regime. Without an explicitly nationalist agenda as such (beyond its motto), the Unit expressed and cultivated a sense of national collectivity in its viewers while providing instruction on everyday matters, a sense of history, information about current events, and story/message films. Despite the problems with sound, by focusing on images of Jamaican people and Jamaican locations, drawing scenarios from everyday life in Jamaica, Rennalls’s films offered a counter to the colonialist erasure of the Jamaican

subject, which was apparent in the British Council films and would have been the model in other colonial film units. Since the Unit further framed their films in terms of public service and education, representing lessons and information from a variety of entities within the government, regardless of which political interests were in charge, their films were generally nonpartisan. Naturally, they were optimistic about Jamaica's future. As the Unit created materials that shifted spectators' gazes from England to Jamaica, the organization was, at its core, a phenomenon of identity – identity and place, as in “us” and “our place”.

In their commentaries, the Unit's films explicitly addressed Jamaica as “my country” before it was officially an independent nation.⁶⁶ Its mobile cinema unit linked disparate locations in the dense, mountainous, and vast Jamaican countryside, and as it did so it offered audiences an occasion to gather en masse and to imagine themselves as part of a larger social formation beyond their specific village or town. Films like *Farmer Brown*, *Let's Stop Them* and *It Can Happen to You*, in their themes, settings and characters, indicate a nascent counter-colonial, sometimes condescending, sense of “us” as a nation, even under colonialism.

Since many of the Unit's films are no longer extant, traceable so far only through *The Daily Gleaner*, its archive is fragmented by a number of gaps. Rennalls's autobiography, however, provides a unifying and detailed record of early or pre-independence Jamaican film culture, filling in what were mostly blank years before the well-known feature film *The Harder They Come* (Perry Henzell, 1972) premiered. Henzell's film defined Jamaican cinema for anyone at all familiar with the region, and helped to establish fictional tales of the city and of crime as primary sites of Jamaican cinematic representation.

Rennalls and the Unit offered a different model of Jamaican film. The roots of Jamaican filmmaking are twisted, and include travelogues, newsreels, fictional films set in Jamaica or the Caribbean, pirate and other sea adventure films, and even those Hollywood, cowboy, and British Council films that were shown on the island. The production and exhibition of all these different kinds of movies resulted in a way of understanding what film spectacle and film production could be and would mean, and they ultimately informed Rennalls's ideas and the context for his ideas about what the Unit should be doing.

Entertainment was a part of the environment of



expectation that surrounded Rennalls's films, but he also departed from its ethos and its conventions in his own work. He wanted to humanize what he felt was necessary information with realistic, straightforward films, but he deliberately left Hollywood to Hollywood. Whether they were shown in Kingston cinemas or in the country by the mobile units, the Unit's films often shared the bill with a western or “cowboy film” (which presumably appealed to farmers), and the Unit's mobile unit would program an educational film along with it.⁶⁷ Audiences gathered together “to see a film show”, as Rennalls recalled. Thus, Jamaican film production was not situated or grounded in the commercial feature (fiction) film industry, but instead used the spectacle of film, of electric light and moving pictures to draw audiences toward its lessons.

Rennalls directed the Unit officially from 1951 to 1970, but in the late 1960s he left to pursue his Master of Science degree in Boston University's School of Public Communication, submitting a thesis on “Development of the Documentary Film in Jamaica” (1967).⁶⁸ When Rennalls graduated from BU, he retired from the Unit and joined the faculty of the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences, at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he taught courses in film production.⁶⁹ He says that he has not made any films since leaving the Unit. Beginning at RIT as an assistant professor, he retired as full professor and department chair in 1985 when he was 70 years old.⁷⁰ Rennalls then moved to Florida with his wife Ivy Rennalls, where his community spirit took the form of improving curb appeal in his neighborhood.⁷¹

Though residing in the United States, Rennalls has been honored for the work he did to cultivate

Fig. 12. Martin and Ivy Rennalls (2011). [Photograph by the author.]

filmmaking in Jamaica. Three awards stand out, notably the Jamaican Film Worker's Guild award given to him 1978. The Guild offered him a painting with the inscription, "in recognition of outstanding pioneer work in Jamaican film".⁷² Just over a decade later, on 5 August 1991, the Jamaican government conferred upon Rennalls one of its highest national honors, the Order of Distinction at the rank of Commander, for "distinction through service" to the nation. In the late 1990s the Jamaica Doctor Bird Awards Foundation, chaired by the late Rex Nettleford, Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, was established to recognize achievements in media. Rennalls received the Foundation's first Doctor Bird Award for Lifetime Achievement in Television and Film in 1998.⁷³

Filmography: Martin Rennalls and the Jamaica Film Unit, 1951–1962

The following four films were made as part of film school activities under the supervision of R. W. Harris and Gareth Evans:

Delay Means Death (1951). *Citrus Harvesting Methods*. *West Indies News Reel*, no. 1. The University College of the West Indies.

The following were produced by the Jamaica Film Unit (JFU) under Martin Rennalls's leadership as producer-director-writer. Rennalls's collaborators were Trevor Welsh and Milton Weller:

Farmer Brown Learns Good Dairying (1951). *Let's Stop Them* ("Governor sees big development in farming publicity", *The Daily Gleaner*, 16 January 1953).

Churchill Visits Jamaica (January 1953; first shown 5 July 1953). *University College of the West Indies* (October 1953; "Educationists at Film on Life at UCWI", *The Daily Gleaner*, 20

October 1953; "Color Film for Early Screening", *The Daily Gleaner*, 5 October 1953. Possibly a delayed formal release of the 1951 film, or a new "Color Film" version?). *Together We Build* (December 1953. Described as the first film made entirely by the JFU, but also its twelfth production; see A.W., "'Together We Build,' Gets Second Preview", *The Daily Gleaner*, 28 December 1953, 12).

Princess Margaret Visits Jamaica (April 1955).

Jamaica Welcomes Puerto Rico (Premiere on 2 November 1955 at Tropical Theater).

It Can Happen to You (see Odeon Theatre ad, 10 February 1956, *The Daily Gleaner*).

Historic Jamaica (1956; "'Historic Jamaica' likely for showing in Canada", *The Daily Gleaner*, 1 May 1956, 12).

Jamaica Celebrates 300 – Highlights of Float Parade, Beauty Contest, etc. (First shown at Carib Theater; see *The Daily Gleaner* 21 May 1956; see also Ritz Theatre ad, *The Daily Gleaner*, 26 August 1956).

She Shows the Way (Shown at the Carib Theater; see ad in *The Daily Gleaner*, 21 October 1956).

Health Centres (Shown at the Odeon Theatre; see ad in *The Daily Gleaner*, 1 February 1959).

United Nations Day (Shown at the Palace Theatre; see ad in *The Daily Gleaner*, 1 February 1959).

Government by the People (Eastman Color; featured the opening of Gordon House. See Tropical Theatre ad, *The Daily Gleaner*, 26 July 1961).

A Nation Is Born (1962).

Notes

1. Martin Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference: Autobiography by Martin Rennalls* (1991), a 285 page unpublished manuscript held in the National Library of Jamaica in Kingston.
2. Glengoffe is not an ordinary place. In 2008 the Glengoffe Community Development Committee won a prize for best community out of 180 entrants.
3. *The Daily Gleaner*, 9 February 1973. In an interview on 25 March 2011, Mr. Rennalls described his father as a farmer and a mason.
4. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 9.

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20080301/lead/lead7.html> (Accessed 25 April 2011).

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 36.
7. Martin Rennalls, Personal Interview, 25 March 2011.
8. Michael L. Hayes, "A Pioneer in Jamaica Film-making", *The Gleaner* (20 February 1967): 6.
9. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 61. Woodside is the current home of Dr. Erna Brodber. Born in Woodside in 1940, Dr. Brodber is a Jamaican writer and sociologist. She won the Caribbean and Canadian Regional Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1989 for her novel *Myal*. In 2007 she published *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, which was short-listed for the 2008 Commonwealth Writer's Prize.
10. "Elected to UK Kinematograph Society", *The Gleaner* (16 June 1960): 3; Hayes, "A Pioneer in Jamaica Film-making", 6.
11. "Colonial Film Unit Training School in the West Indies", *Colonial Cinema* (June 1951): 40–44. The other students were Isaac Carmichael, Barbados, Wilfred Lee, Trinidad, R.L. (or H.) Young, British Guiana.
12. "West Indies", *Colonial Cinema* (March 1950): 19–21.
13. "Colonial Film Unit Man from London on Survey", *Daily Gleaner* (4 November 1949): 12.
14. "West Indies", *Colonial Cinema* (March 1950): 19–21.
15. "The West Indies Film Training School", *Colonial Cinema* (September 1950): 67.
16. William Sellers, "Film Production in the West Indies", *Colonial Cinema* (December 1951): 91.
17. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 108.
18. Sellers, "Film Production in the West Indies", 91–93.
19. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 106–107.
20. Ibid., 107–108.
21. "Named Film Officer", *The Daily Gleaner* (26 October 1955): 14.
22. Alexander Bustamante, who was Jamaica's first prime minister, organized many of the strikes, for which he was imprisoned in 1938 and again from September 1940 to 1942. In 1943 he formed the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), which overwhelmingly won the island's first parliamentary election in 1944 in opposition to the People's National Party (PNP), founded by his cousin and political rival, Norman Manley (the father of Michael Manley, who would profoundly shape Jamaican politics and economics of the 1970s and beyond, a prominent lawyer who had played a role in negotiating an end to the strikes).
23. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 67–68.
24. A commercial cinema at Highgate, the main market square closest to Woodside, served this area. This cinema has since closed, as have all the country cinemas. There are five commercial cinemas in the whole of Jamaica, operating under the name Palace Amusements, and these are located in the capital city of Kingston and the three largest and most cosmopolitan towns: Mandeville, Montego Bay and Ocho Rios.
25. Martin Rennalls. Personal Interview, 19 March 2011.
26. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 60–61, 74–75.
27. Also known as Social Welfare Commission.
28. "Manager Teachers Form Association", *The Gleaner* (14 February 1948): 16.
29. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 149.
30. Valerie Bloomfield, "Caribbean Films", *Journal of Librarianship* 9.4 (October 1977): 278–311.
31. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 114–117.
32. Ibid., 116–117.
33. Comments of Franklyn St. Juste, "Roundtable on Archives", *Film and the End of Empire*, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 24–26 September 2010.
34. The negatives mostly remained in London, as well as many prints.
35. In Kingston, the Unit's facilities consisted of cutting room, screening room, dark room and library.
36. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 167.
37. Martin Rennalls, Personal Interview, 19 March 2011.
38. Martin Rennalls, Personal Interview, 25 March 2011.
39. Mr. Rennalls reiterated the core values and goals of the Jamaica Film Unit in an interview with the author, 19 March 2011.
40. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 114.
41. <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/production-company/jamaica-film-unit> (accessed 8 January 2011).
42. "Sound Track: Colonial Film Unit Films", *Colonial Cinema* (March 1950): 18.
43. I borrow the term "picturing us" from Deborah Willis, *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: New Press, 1994). Willis's term "picturing us" describes the ways in which identity and image are tied to broad notions of cultural or national identity, resonating far beyond the individual portrayed in a particular painting, photograph or film.
44. Martin Rennalls, Personal Interview, 25 March 2011.
45. A.W. "Together We Build," Gets Second Preview", *The Daily Gleaner* (28 December 1953).
46. Tom Rice, "Gold Coast Film Unit." <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/production-company/gold-coast-film-unit> (accessed 18 March 2011).
47. Ibid.
48. How the film was received in Berlin and what it might have meant to a whole new audience remains to be fully understood.
49. Sean Graham, "The Use of Film in the West Indies

- and Mexico: An Inquiry into Techniques of Film Production for Fundamental Education." 27–29. Pamphlet. West Indies Collection, University of the West Indies, Mona.
50. Martin Rennalls, Personal Interview, 19 March 2011.
51. Ibid.
52. Both of these Jamaican proverbs are cautionary: What sweet nanny goat run im belly = what seems good now might hurt later. Fire deh a mus-mus tail and im tink a cool breeze = Not seeing that one is heading for trouble.
53. Main cast: Slippery Sam (V.O. Powell), Three Accomplices (H.E. Durrant, C.F. Miller and R. Pinnock), Farmer Thomas (R. McKenley), Patrolmen (Sgt. F.E. Palmer and Sgt. J.C. Bryan).
54. Martin Rennalls, Personal Interview, 19 March 2011.
55. "Good Technique, Lively Acting Marks Farm Film: 'She Shows the Way' Earns Praise as Pretty Good All Around", *The Jamaica Gleaner/The Farmer's Weekly* (27 October, 1956).
56. "'Historic Jamaica' likely for showing in Canada", *The Gleaner* (1 May 1956): 12.
57. Ibid.
58. Martin Rennalls, Personal Interview, 25 March 2011.
59. Cast: Joseph (Slade Hopkinson), Charles (Al Cotterall) and Father (Vere Johns). These participants were professional actors. Johns was a journalist and actor.
60. Rennalls does not offer much information on this film's exhibition except to say that it was shelved in Jamaica and eventually shown by Planned Parenthood.
61. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 166.
62. Martin Rennalls is professor emeritus at the Rochester Institute of Technology.
63. Rennalls, *A Career Making a Difference*, 171.
64. Ibid., 185.
65. Ibid., 182. Excerpt from the *JLP Five-Year Plan, 1963–1968*.
66. For example, the commentary in *It Can Happen To You* says, "Jamaica is my country and I am proud of it".
67. Martin Rennalls, Personal Interview, 19 March 2011.
68. Martin Rennalls, "Development of the Documentary Film in Jamaica" (unpublished thesis, Boston University, School of Public Division of Broadcasting and Film, 1967), 199 pages. Degree awarded 1968.
69. Before Rennalls left for Boston, Franklyn St. Juste joined the Unit in the middle to late 1960s as the Unit's director of photography, but he went on to direct short newsreels as well, such as the poetic *Festival '68*. As director of photogaphy, St. Juste brought a new look to the Unit's work in such films as *Rivers: Rio Grande* (circa mid-1960s), a collaboration with Rennalls His later films provide an important counterpoint to Rennalls's approach, possibly even a third option to reading the post-independence Unit films as either non-educational or propagandistic. St. Juste is a Trinidadian-born filmmaker residing in Jamaica and is best known as cinematographer on Perry Henzell's *The Harder They Come* (1972). Currently a lecturer in film and television at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, he joined the Jamaica Film Unit after it had been moved from the Department of Education. Rennalls, St. Juste and Welsh appear to be the three major directors of the Unit, although there were also contributions by Dudley Harrison, Stanley Iton, Errol Haughton and others who served with the post-1957 and post-independence Unit as writers, photographers or editors into the late 1970s.
70. Rennalls received a 1981–82 Eisenhart Outstanding Teaching Award from Rochester Institute of Technology.
71. http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2000-05-12/news/0005100670_1_first-place-emerald-hills-homes-homes-and-gardens (accessed 25 April 2011).
72. Private collection. Martin Rennalls.
73. http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1999-03-28/community/9904010327_1_film-documentaries-unit (accessed 19 March 2011).

Abstract: Sounding the Nation: Martin Rennalls and the Jamaica Film Unit, 1951–1961, by Terri Francis

Under the direction of Martin Rennalls, the Jamaica Film Unit aimed to make educational films for, by and about Jamaicans. Drawing upon close analysis of selected films, an interview with Rennalls, and press reports in *The Daily Gleaner*, this essay shows how available sound technology challenged the Unit's goals during Jamaica's pre-independence years, 1951–1961.

Key words: Jamaica, West Indies; Colonial Film Unit; Jamaica Film Unit; Martin Rennalls; Colonial cinema; *It Can Happen to You* (1956); *Farmer Brown Learns Good Dairying* (1951); *Let's Stop Them* (1953).

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