

Sista Culcha

Donna Moore

Donna Moore, as Sista Culcha, is significant in the history of sound system culture in the UK, because she led what many acknowledge as the first female sound system in the early 1980s. As a selector, we heard her Guyanese and eclectic Black British musical heritage, and listened to her ethical approach to DeeJaying that used counter-lyrics to challenge the misogyny, homophobia and paedophilia that was/is sometimes found in reggae dancehall. — Michael McMillan

In Jamaica, they say that 'music is the beat of your heart', and my love of music goes back to my childhood in Guyana. There was no electricity in the villages, so we would listen to the battery-powered wireless for a couple of hours each day. In the evening there would be the death announcement, followed by music. I heard Nat King Cole and Sam Cooke on the radio as we stood on the railway platform awaiting the train. As a child, standing or sitting in the hot sun, listening to the radio, I found music very emotive. I didn't know what the words meant, but the way they were married together and the construction, made me feel woozy. It was more of a sensation which felt like I should dance to this tune.

My late Uncle's name was George Halley, but they called him 'Paul Whiteman', which I found out years later was the name of an American band conductor from the USA. Uncle George would lead the singing at festivals, one such event was that which proceeded a wedding celebration, where the women cooked outside. They had a guitar, a basic drum, and

they would sing and dance [the pre-wedding ritual] Kweh Kweh – and the people would sing songs like; ‘Sancho lick he lover pon de dam and de gal a halla murder. Brip brap, police ah come and de gal a halla murder’.

But there was none of that culture when I came to England. I was usurped into a lower middle class British culture, in a nice house, in Enoch Powell’s constituency in Wolverhampton. There were skinheads on the street, racism at school, so I had to be a chameleon to survive, as there was a lack of identity for me. There was a culture clash because anybody that wasn’t Jamaican was a ‘smallie’. We became ‘ja-fake-ans’; playing another chameleon for currency on the street. Jamaican music was perhaps the most dominant music from the Caribbean; it covered a range of situations and reflected what was happening in that society. I came to respect the Jamaicans because they wouldn’t tolerate the racism, and violent attacks against them from the teddy boys. They would fight back.

I learnt about classical music and English folk music through doing ballet and piano lessons, jazz through doing tap dance and of course there was church music, I went to the local Anglian Church of England school, which again has influenced me. There are a lot of tunes I could tell you where I was when I first heard it, and how it made me feel. I may not have had a Pentecostal or gospel background, but when I listen to Jah Shaka it has a spiritual affect on me, this along with the ‘Cumfa drums’ played at carnival in Guyana, brings out the African in me.

We had a ‘blue spot’ radiogram, and at nine I was tall enough to place records on the turntable. We had loads of parties with Mighty Sparrow, the griot and story teller being played, and everything else from Tom Jones and Engelbert Humperdinck, soul classics from North America, as well as Doctor Bird, Bluebeat and ska. Then I discovered that my parents could sing also. My Dad’s name is Donald, but they called him Danny, and he would sing ‘Danny Boy’ and they’d record it on their reel-to-reel that they

occasionally brought out on a Sunday. My Mum told me that she used to sing live on the radio in Guyana, and apparently when she came to England, some people who she had been working with were looking for her to make films back there. She had a cousin called Singing Verbena, who may have recorded a track with Lord Kitchener. She and my Mum were planning to run away and join vaudeville. I was very surprised by my Mum's revelations, as she is a quiet reserved individual with conservative Victorian values, such as I had to sit down if I wanted to talk to her, because standing over her was considered rude.

I always wanted to sing, though I have a husky voice and can't really carry a tune, but I understand rhythm and that was my musical intelligence, which is how I started playing music at school as a DJ. I had a lot of records, so with the backing of teachers, I started doing 'penny discos' at lunchtime, with the money going to the school funds. They had a very noisy PA system with one deck that sat about two feet off the ground. The kids would bring in their 45s to school; the white kids brought Slade, Bowie and the Jamaican kids reggae, whereas I was into Motown and Northern Soul. I loved going to the funfair, not for rides because they made me feel dizzy, but to listen to Motown and soul records. At my first penny disco I made about five pounds which meant there were five hundred kids in my disco, this was some pulling power for a fifteen-year-old!

In 1980, a group of young women were at the Black Women's Centre in Brixton, they had a sound system called Sister Culture. I was very excited to meet them, and told them that I had loads of records and had been DJing since school. I went along to some of their gigs and they had female selectors and DJs, but the equipment belonged to the guys who were there to help with speakers, etc. I got involved, but some of them began to leave the sound, and eventually it was just me and the original Sister Culture, Elizabeth Fajemisin, who played out for maybe a year or so. I

wanted to play music, but my principal interest was the lyrics. At that time the records were predominantly coming from Jamaica. Apart from the lyrics which reflected the everyday lives of Jamaican people, there were very slack lyrics that were sexist and derogatory to women. There might have been an element of that in calypso and soca, however, it was more tongue in cheek, ribbing someone, or making a social comment, with these other genres. And coming from a different culture, I was trying to understand, as a Black female living in London who loved music, how to fit in. To this day, sound system culture is a very male bastion. Going to record shops was something else, with men looking at you weirdly, and asking you why you want to be involved in sound system.

At the time, I – my DJ name – was ‘Mumma Cutty’, which affirmed my Guyanese identity, because Mumma is one way in which we address our mothers. We used to go to St Giles, a Church of England youth club between Camberwell and Peckham, with the big sound systems coming down like Sir Coxson and Soferno B on a Friday night. They would put on Tappa Zukie’s Phensic and the girls would go mad, but I found the lyrics offensive. ‘I tried so hard just to make her satisfied, but no matter how hard I try she is still unsatisfied. Wey do the chick she mus’e sick she mus’e want a phensic’. So I used to counterattack that with ‘wey do deh guy he mus’e shy he mus’e want ah cold pie’. That was an example of the gimmicks I used, because I didn’t have time to chat a whole lyric, but I would make an infliction to let the people know that I was not happy with the track. In fact, I would put on a tune like Phensic and flip it over to the dub just to make my point. Sometimes, people didn’t get it or they thought I was being too radical. For me, it just felt organic coming from an oral tradition of storytelling like the griots who communicate what is going on socially that people could

then pick up and maybe question.

Soul may have melodies, but reggae made especially for the dancehall is very raw and its rawness makes it what it is, like when Big Youth says 'Every nigger is a star', he's using that word we hate to make a point about Black individual power. He would use soul tracks like Diana Ross's *Touch Me in The Morning*, but he was raw with it. He was producing this music when Black British people were looking towards Black Power in America during the 1970s, rather than seeing the world through our own Caribbean lenses. It wasn't until bands like Matumbi, the era of lovers' rock, and then in the 1980s with Smiley Culture's *Cockney Translation* saying I'm born here, and this is my expression, that we started to assert ourselves musically in the UK.

In the natural progression from Sister Culture, I deliberately changed the name to Sista Culcha to create distance from Elizabeth Fajemisin who was still using the original name. Being a writer, poet, storyteller, and mic chanter, as we used to call it, I was able to take these skills into the youth clubs in Islington, Lambeth and elsewhere, because I was also a youth worker. Over maybe four sessions, I would ask the young people about why a particular song appealed to them. I showed them how to write lyrics which didn't have negative images – whether it was sexist, homophobic or racist. I would take a mobile music unit with two decks and set it up, and they would be surprised that a woman could do that. I taught them how to scratch and mix records, write lyrics, how to chat on the mic – which is basically microphone technique– and how to present what they had produced. There were a lot of talented young people coming through those youth clubs.

I became a member of Artists Against Apartheid and DJ'd for Nelson

Mandela's birthday party on Clapham Common. I met several ANC activists, and I also played at functions to raise money for and awareness about Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, who were incarcerated. I met a couple of their wives, when I played for the ANC's Women's Committee at Islington Library. I also DJ'd in support of the miners' strike, and met Ann Scargill, the wife of Arthur Scargill, the leader of the miners' union.

It was interesting, playing across the country, because on some occasions I had with me Lorna Gee, who sang *Gotta Find A Way*, along with Elayne and Judith Ellis. Judith and her sister Elayne 'sing-jayed', which is a cross between DJ-ing and singing. They did a wonderful version of Randy Crawford's *Rio de Janeiro Blues*. You could put a reggae beat behind what was originally a soul, country and western or pop tune. The singing may not be brilliant, but that reggae beat changes the tune completely. Sir John Holt is a great exponent of taking a song and changing it; take *The Last Farewell* for instance, which was originally recorded by Roger Whittaker. If you listen to his version and John Holt's version with the orchestration behind it, they're poles apart. Equally, The Beatles' *Blackbird* ('singing in the dead of night') compared with John Holt's version, his voice becomes another instrument accompanied with the orchestra. And that's the musical culture and legacy which I share with my children and grandchildren.

There was so much macho posturing in sound system culture back then, and sound clash was not really a place for ladies to rave. Take a sound clash between three big sound systems, like Sir Coxsone versus Soferno B versus Fatman, was a clash of the titans with each sound trying to down cry the next sound. It can be very entertaining, but it's not a dance with music to dance to. They wouldn't play Marcia Griffiths unless it's a dub at a big sound system dance, even though her music makes you want to dance.

When my son began to DJ, I told him to play for the women, because where women go, the men will follow. With my background in ballet, watching James Brown, Michael Jackson, and being a soul-head, I could beat many of the guys in a skanking competition.

DJs today may play just twenty seconds of a track and mix in another, however back in the day, we played the whole tune. With Dennis Brown's *How Could I Leave*, we didn't end the track after he finished singing, because it was a 12-inch, and we wanted to let the music 'bubble' by playing the whole track. Playing the beginning of a track was also the anthem that the crowd wanted to hear, and we had a 'beat the intro' game with people guessing who sang a tune and what the title was. We also learnt visually how to set up our record box with our reggae, soul or pop selections; with tunes like Chaka Khan's *I'm Every Woman*, which is an anthem for the ladies.

I had both male and female followers, and while I had a supportive crew or posse to watch my back, I played alone. Sometimes my friend Angie Ranks would help me to select and as the kids grew older they would too. I wouldn't be drinking or smoking, because I had thousands of pounds worth of equipment and records that belonged to me, so I had to remain alert and sober. I had to get to the venue an hour before the dance to set up, and besides the caretaker cleaning up, I would be last person there when the dance finished. But it was good fun.

During the analogue period of reggae, musicians would go into the studio to record a tune, but with the arrival of digital technology that all changed with reggae dancehall. We now had Buju Banton, Beenie Man, Shabba Ranks. I was conflicted, because some music I could not get away with playing as Sista Culcha. So rather than asking for the thirty latest vinyl pre-releases at the record shop, I would have to be censorial in the music

I selected because of its lyrical content. Ninja Man, for instance, was too gangster for me and often threatened gun violence in his recordings. I could understand that some tunes may provide social commentary about lives that I have not experienced myself, but there was no discussions about those issues in our communities or in our families. One of the most controversial tunes of the period was Buju Banton's *Boom Bye Bye*, which wasn't even a reggae dancehall tune, but it was raw homophobia. I wasn't going to promote that, because the killing of someone over of their sexuality really didn't sit well with me. Buju has since explained that he was in no way advocating that any one's life should be taken.

For me, reggae music at that time was not tackling the real issues at the core of our society, such as paedophilia. If I spoke to ten women in a week, six would tell me that they had been sexually abused, so I wrote a track called *Child Molester*. It was about a man who meets a woman in a dance, forms a relationship with her and eventually sexually abuses her daughter and son. The mother takes revenge, but is arrested, and it becomes a big court case. When I chatted those lyrics in at Yaa Asantewaa Art Centre, they cut off the mic and sound, because they couldn't handle the subject matter. But I continued to chat it as a poem in spaces like Apples and Snakes, amongst people who wanted to engage in an open conversation about the issue. The question for me is how do we break damaging negative cycles, I believe that music has a significant role in that challenge.

Edited transcription by Michael McMillan in collaboration with Donna Moore (Sista Culcha) of oral history interview (April 2015) – October 2020.

Donna Moore was born in Guyana in 1959 and came to the UK in 1967 as a young girl, travelling with an older brother to join the family. In the early 1980s, her passion for, and eclectic knowledge of, music provided a solid foundation for her to join the already established all-female sound system Sister Culture. As a selector, she incorporated her Guyanese and eclectic Black British and diasporic musical heritage, and as a DeeJay, she took an ethical and moral position, challenging with counter-lyrics the misogyny, homophobia and paedophilia sometimes found in reggae dancehall. Donna took this approach in her work with the Black Ink Collective, who published many Black British and Caribbean writers, as well as music workshops with young people. For Donna, who sees herself as a music historian, with a large vinyl reference collection, documenting factual history in the oral, traditional way is an extremely skilful craft. The Griots are the true storytellers.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

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