

‘Who can’t hear must feel’: The sonic vibrations of sound system culture, lovers rock and dub

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Dedicated to U Roy aka Ewart Beckford, deejay/toaster, born 21 September 1942 – transitioned 17 February 2021

‘Wake the town and tell the people!’ U Roy

First Track

[B]ringing together a set of people who shares the same habit and have the same way of life, the same movements, the same beliefs, the same heritage from that time to this... It brings a oneness, it brings together a people in one surrounding... it generates a vibes that brings one generation to the other generation, breaking down social barriers. There is nothing in this world that can contest that level of the Sound System that brings so much components together... (Henriques, 2007:4)

The communal spirit conveyed by Louise Fraser Bennett¹ in this opening quote could take place in a dancehall in Jamaica, a soca fete in Trinidad, a shebeen in Brixton, a warehouse rave in rural Somerset, a hip hop club in Brooklyn, an Afrobeat club in Lagos. In re-performing recorded music, the sound system calls and the crowd ‘massive’ responds on the dancefloor with their hands and lighters in the air as if they just don’t care. Custom-

¹ Julian Henriques interview with Louise Fraser Bennett, Press Secretary for the Sound System Association of Jamaica, on 26 July 2002, Kingston.

made mobile hi-fis, or sound systems (known as 'sounds') provided entertainment for poor Black communities in Jamaica and, through post-war Caribbean migration, sounds were established wherever there was Black settlement in British urban spaces, which at one point had at least five hundred sounds. A similar phenomenon kicked off when the Jamaican migrant, DJ Kool Herc started 'playing out' his sound at house parties in the Bronx, New York, and hip hop was born. Against the terror and trauma of a racist British society, sounds created alternative, racially mixed and equitable spaces where Black workers could free up themselves, drink a stout, Long Life beer or bottle of Babycham, 'nyam' (eat) a Jamaican pattie, and dance with each other to music that they were familiar with.

Colonialism, at home and abroad, meant that sites of Black congregation, especially dancing Black bodies, have been policed – from eighteenth-century underground Black balls in London to nineteenth-century Carnival festivals in Trinidad to the sound system dances of twentieth-century post-imperial Britain. Complaints from neighbours about 'noise' gave the police an excuse to raid and shut down house and blues parties. This Eurocentric aurality recycles a colonial 'phantasy' (Mercer, 1994) involving fear and desire of Black bodies and of the orality, music and dance they create, unless it is performed in white-prescribed spaces such as blackface minstrelsy. The phantasy gets re-ignited in response to the sonic vibrations propagated by sound system, particularly at the lower frequencies of bass. At one end of this infrasonic spectrum is the power to destroy buildings and the human body, hence its military use as a sonic weapon, and at the other end are the embodied reverberations in the solar plexus, heart and hips that emerge as movement. As my mum used to say, 'who can't hear, must feel' or, as Keith Antar Mason² of the Hittite Empire performance ensemble says, in African tradition 'the magic happens in the journey *to* the drum.

² African-American writer, director and performer of The Hittite Empire, a Black male performance ensemble.

It's not the music that comes from the drum, the drum actually takes you into it' (Mason cited by McMillan, 1995: 191). The rhythmic, polyrhythmic and syncopated power of the drum is at the heart of sound system's sonic vibrations in its re-performing of pre-recorded music, which in its primal, bacchanalian affect on the body, is echoed by Funkadelic's George Clinton as, 'free your [Cartesian] mind and your arse will follow!'

In Stuart Hall's seminal essay 'Reconstruction Work' (1984), he looks again at images of post-war Black settlement featured in the *Picture Post's* 1956 pictorial essay, 'Thirty Thousand Colour Problems'. The Black subjects are portrayed as 'social problems', as code in the British popular imaginary for the racial problem of immigration. Coming from St Vincent, both my parents were part of the Windrush generation, and born in the UK, and growing up and living Black in Britain, I am by extension one of those 'social problems'. I seek to unpack this trope through the reconstruction work of my practice as a writer and artist, because as Stuart Hall and others remind us, 'we are here, because you were there'.

In this *WritersMosaic* edition, *Sonic Vibrations: Sound system culture, lovers rock and dub*, I share a diasporic cultural heritage and generational gaze with many of the sound practitioners, visual and sound artists, choreographers, scholars, poets and writers who as fellow travellers have contributed short essays, short stories, oral history testimonies, commentaries and poetry. These have been read and performed live as audio podcasts alongside the online texts. This body of work is complemented by a photographic essay and an immersive soundscape that together provide a multimedia journey for the reader, listener and viewer. To steal Louis Chude-Sokei's phrase, 'black technopoetics' (2016), this body of work integrates discursive insights, alternative knowledge and creative interventions about lived experience, the sonic vibrations and technologies of an often overlooked area of Black British and diasporic culture. *Sonic Vibrations* also

draws on material from *Rockers, Soulheads & Lovers: Sound systems back in the day*, an installation-based exhibition that I curated in collaboration with Dubmorphology in 2015-16. The title alludes to the music subcultures of young Black ravers during the 1970s, in which I was a 'rocker' and followed roots dub sounds, such as Jah Shaka, whereas the more racially mixed 'soulheads', raved at London soul and funk clubs such as The Lyceum Ballroom, Global Village, Gossips and lunchtime sessions at Crackers. And then there was lovers rock.

Second Track

Post-war Caribbean migrants often experienced a colour bar around pubs and clubs, and so they entertained themselves at home with imported vinyl records, with jazz, calypso, bebop, country & western, ska, reggae, soul, gospel music and British pop all played on the radiogram. Nicknamed the 'blue spot' after its German manufacturer, Blaupunkt (though ours was made by Garrard), the radiogram took pride of place in the front room like a religious object. Its wooden veneer cabinet housed a phono turntable and a radio, and the glass valve circuitry would buzz as it warmed up and glowed, giving a warm mellow bass from the speakers. Doctor, who started Count Lynwoodee, one of the first sound systems, began playing imported jazz on the radiogram in house parties in areas of Black settlement.

I started the first sound system in Nottingham in 1957 to bring Black people together, because things was hard for us in those days. The teddy boys were bad attacking Black people. There were riots in St Ann's in 1958, but we wasn't going to run from anybody (Doctor, 2015).

Paradoxically, white working-class teddy boys and girls loved R & B, but hated immigrants, and during the white race riots of summer 1958, which began in Nottingham and spread to London's Notting Hill, an Antiguan carpenter, Kelso Cochrane, was murdered. In response to this racist murder, the exiled Trinidadian journalist and political activist, Claudia Jones, mobilised a demonstration to celebrate Caribbean culture, which eventually became the Notting Hill Carnival, the largest street festival in Europe. In this annual Black reclamation of the street, traditional carnival mas, steel pan, soca and sound system provide a bacchanalian space to 'jump up' in confrontation with the neoliberal commodification of Black culture as the spicy Other.

My parents had an eclectic vinyl collection that included Millie Small's *My Boy Lollipop* (1965), Mighty Sparrow's *Mr Walker* (1959), Elvis Presley's *Return to Sender* (1962), Tom Jones' *Please Release Me* (1967), Bob and Marcia's *Young, Gifted and Black* (1970), and anything by the country & western crooner Jim Reeves on a Sunday. My mum spent six years in Curaçao off the coast of Venezuela working as a maid for a Dutch family before coming to England, and so there were also the Latin sounds of merengue. Apart from a faint signal from Radio Luxembourg, we rarely heard Black music on BBC Radio, and very few reggae artists on BBC Television's *Top of the Pops*, which is why Janet Kay's televised performance of her iconic 1979 lovers rock hit *Silly Games* was such a watershed moment. The tune had already been a hit in the Black communities for some time.

On a Saturday night, I would tune into Greg Edwards' *Soul Spectrum* and David Rodigan's *Roots Rockers* reggae programme on Capital Radio, and on Sunday afternoons, Tony Williams and Steve Bernard's reggae programmes on BBC Radio London. I would place the microphone of my portable tape

cassette recorder right up the radiogram's speakers to record music for my collection. I dreamt of raving in the places where this music was being played, only to be awoken by my Dad cussing from some part of the house, 'Turn down dat buff buff music, no rasta's livin' here'. When he acquired a new Hi Fi system, I repurposed the old radiogram as Jah Mikey's Hi Fi in my bedroom. Building a sound system was a cottage industry, which involved collectives of young Black young men sharing their giro cheques to buy records and equipment to build their music collection and 'sets', cannibalising the radiogram's technology to build amps and sourcing found materials to build speaker boxes.

In a cultural circuit of supply and demand, as sound systems became more competitive, technology became more sophisticated, using more specialised custom-made equipment such as pre-amps, powerful amps and wardrobe-sized 'house of joy' speaker boxes. Transported by trucks, the 'box boys' would move the 'set' into the venue and 'string it up', to be fine-tuned by the engineer for the selector to 'drop' tunes from exclusive blank label 'dub-plates' and 'specials'. The emcee/toaster would then perform their lyrical gymnastics to move the crowd, especially in clashes between sound systems where each would drop their 'weight' of bass power. This vitality is invoked in this anthology through Khadijah Ibrahiim's poem 'Sound Vibration' and Levi Tafari's 'Blues Dance Sufferers Style', with their audio recorded performances soundscaped by Dubmorphology.

A-side

In the Western masculinist fetishisation of Black music we find an obsession with the mechanics of sound system, rather than its vitality. What this fixation tends to ignore is that sound is not simply a product, but a process,

a 'sounding' (Henriques, 2010). Take for instance, a vinyl record of Dawn Penn's Studio One reggae tune *You Don't Love Me* produced by the legendary Coxsone Dodd. It has had innumerable 'versionings' and remixes as *No, No, No*. In repetition, something new is always discovered, and repetition is a ritual element of Black music and culture. In the repeated travel of the turntable needle over the grooves of that vinyl record, accumulated minute scratches have created sonic crackles adding to its analogue capital. And in Studio One's rudimentary but sophisticated music production system, this becomes what Louis Chude-Sokei calls the 'informatics' of sound in the music (2016). We can hear Jamaican Kumina drumming in the slower rock-steady tempo of the original version of *You Don't Love Me*, and in the faster downbeat tempo of later reggae versions. At the top of the tune, when we just hear Dawn Penn's voice, the drums, piano and guitar lick, there is a split-second sonic space before the bass drops in, which together provide the rhythm for us to dance to. It is also, paradoxically, a painful song about the loss of love with a pleasurable catchy rhythm that says much about the beauty through pain signified in Black music. For Cornell West, Black music is the most powerful gift we have given to human culture, because against a backdrop of racial catastrophe, they have created a universal language that soothes the mind, body and soul with sweetness, love and freedom.

As a mutable culture, sound system always embraces new sound technology, such as the upgrading of equipment from transistor to digital and shifts in music production from analog to computer-based electronic sound and new music genres. The syncopated beats of reggae dancehall, hip hop, house, garage, jungle, drum & bass, dubstep, break beats, grime and drill, all share in sound system, similar sonic roots, but different aesthetic routes. In a time of restrictive, some would say racist, licensing laws around sound

system spaces, minaturised digital sound technology enabled sounds to become mobile and invisible – like Anancy the trickster spider – by broadcasting via pirate radio stations. These were often based in secret locations, often on council estates, and their signals were hunted down by radio license enforcers and equipment confiscated. But they would always resurface, because their loyal listeners were now multiracial, which further signified the sonic disruption of Britain’s airwaves, in which pirates instead of mainstream radio stations were now carrying the goods. London’s Choice FM was given a licence; as a Black-run radio station it broadcast Black music and Black-orientated magazine programmes to a niche and growing audience that the mainstream Capital Radio was jealous to possess. They dangled the carrot, and Choice FM was eventually sold to Capital Radio and repackaged as Capital Xtra. It’s a familiar story. Black cultural institutions becoming victims of their own success, only to be appropriated, commodified and bleached white in global capitalism’s erasure of the Black presence.

B-side: Dub

Louis Chude-Sokei’s fascinating contribution to this anthology, ‘Dr Satan’s Echo Chamber’, meditates on the relationship between race, the machine and technology. The Enlightenment, he argues, was effectively a crisis in Western identity about what it meant to be human in response to the replacement of people by machines through industrialisation. The slave plantation system was the first machine, and slaves like machines were considered to lack a soul – a crisis of disembodiment and loss of selfhood which remains at the root of cybernetic theory and cybernetics. The only and early machine technology that Black people had access to was sound recording, which spoke to the future in what Chude-Sokei calls ‘Black tech-

nopoetics'. The nexus of Blackness and technology is fused through sound, as echoed in his quotation of the writer Erik Davis:

[D]ub music, reggae's great technological mutant, is a pure artifact of the machine, and has little to do with earth, flesh, or authenticity. To create dub, producers and engineers manipulate pre[-]existing tracks of music recorded in an analog – as opposed to digital – fashion on magnetic tape (today's high-end studios encode music as distinct digital bits rather than magnetic "waves"). Dubmasters saturate individual instruments with reverb, phase, and delay; abruptly drop voices, drums, and guitars in and out of the mix; strip the music down to the bare bones of rhythm and then build it up again through layers of inhuman echoes, electric ectoplasm, cosmic rays. Good dub sounds like the recording studio itself has begun to hallucinate. (Davis 1997 cited in Chude-Sokei:164).

The posthuman nature of dub speaks to the future, and speaks in 'Sonic Vibrations' through the oral history testimony of Gary Stewart and Trevor Mathison who, as the duo behind Dubmorphology, recall how shared music and sonic heritage informed the development of their international practice as sonic and video artists. From a stream of running water, the dissonant crackle of a vinyl record, the cacophony of a party, sound bites of politicians, they use sonic technology to experiment, following in the tradition of pioneer Black avant garde musicians and producers such as Lee 'Scratch' Perry in dub, George Clinton in funk and Sun Ra in jazz.

Ravers, Raving and the Rave

Post-war Caribbean migrant men, such as the 'saga boys' in tropical coloured bespoke suits and their 'sweet boy' persona, as portrayed in Sam Selvon's seminal novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), ignited colonial tropes in the British press about sex and miscegenation between Black men and white women. The ground-breaking film *The Harder They Come* (1972) captures the plight of the downtrodden sufferers of Kingston, Jamaica which Ivor Martin, played by Jimmy Cliff, struggles to escape. Inspired by the outlaw of Western films, he cuts a ska tune and becomes a fugitive 'rude boy'. This 'rude boy' from Jamaica had already landed in Britain by the 1960s. He strutted the streets with a faux limp as if to the rhythm of a ska tune playing in his head, dapperly dressed in an Italian-styled two-tone suit made by an East End Jewish tailor, and with a Jamaican patois as sharp as the blades he carried. This 'bad boy' styling idolised by white working-class young men gave rise to hard mod and first wave skinhead subcultures. Moreover, the punk affinity for reggae and sound system culture reflected a parity between Black and white working-class youth alienated from a society they saw no future in.

Through the lens of a young boy, Courttia Newland's short story 'Natal' recalls the father's dressing up and grooming ritual: the smell of aftershave, fresh white shirt, crisp slacks, gleaming shoes, and an Afro-pick passing through his hair. The mother and father take him and his brother by car to a blues party and, as he follows his parents into the blues, the sensation of darkness, smell of curry goat and ganja, and the elemental force of the bass become the grounding on which he builds his culture as a Black person growing and living in the UK.

Becoming Black during the 1970s was also about facing racist attacks,

police brutality, the sus law (stop and search), high youth unemployment, and the criminalisation of Black youth (read male) in the media. It was a time of resistance, riot and revolt, with the militancy of radical Black politics from Pan-Africanism to Rastafari coming through the lyrics sung and toasted on reggae records that we Black youth listened and danced to in sound system dances. Othered in British society, we were alienated from God-fearing and socially compliant Caribbean migrant parents as from the police, poor schooling and unemployment, and the message coming from the speaker box spoke to our struggle living in Babylon. And yet in our search for an identity, in a society that we felt disenfranchised from, it was our parents' creole or 'nation language' as described by Kamau Brathwaite (1984), their sartorial style and their musical culture that we creatively bricolaged in our rebellious step forward into Britain's streets, as if we ourselves designed the place.

Raving always requires meticulous preparation and includes finding the exclusive outfit and accessories to match, along with grooming rituals like visits to the barbers or hairdressers. Young Black ravers were under 'heavy manners' at home, yet they found ingenious ways to subvert parental prohibitions and unrealistic curfews, such as climbing out of the bedroom window fully clothed, as portrayed in the *Lovers Rock* film (Small Axe, 2020) co-scripted by Courttia Newland and Steve McQueen. On the street, the Black body is always on view, so in their 'promenade' ravers gave surveillance something to gaze at, looking 'criss', elegant and glamorous. Embedded and embodied in this 'smart casual style' was a commodity fetish for luxury designer brands reserved for the socially privileged, and the sensual opulent pleasures of fabrics like silk, mohair and cashmere close to the skin, as ravers strode like Black dandies onto the street and the dancefloor.

The development of what Paul Gilroy calls 'Black leisure institutions' began with 'house' parties in the front room, followed by 'blues' parties and 'shebeens' in basements and abandoned buildings (Gilroy 1987: 215). One raver, Veronica Barnes, remembers the police arriving at a blues party after the neighbours complained about loud music being played:

The funniest thing is that when the police came to tell us to turn down the music the women would give them some curry goat and they would turn red because they weren't used to the pepper. Then ... women would take the police hat put it on their own head and wine-up with them (Barnes 2015).

It was often Black women who managed blues parties, where they sold their cooked food to supplement incomes, as well as financially support their spouses' passion for sound systems. Josephine Taylor recalls running a series of blues parties during the 1980s to raise funds to decorate and furnish her home. Neighbours eventually complained, and she came home to find that the council had padlocked her house. Josephine occupied the housing office reception with her children until she regained access to her property, which she did, and continued her series of blues parties (Taylor 2016). As Black-run clubs spread across the UK, my 'manor' Hackney, in north-east London, became a beacon for ravers with All Nations, Cubies, Phobies, Mingles, Dougies, Night Moves, Club Noreik, and the legendary Four Aces where Mick Jagger hung out, and Bob Marley, Stevie Wonder and Jimmy Cliff performed, as shown in the documentary film *Legacy in the Dust: The Four Aces Story* (Whitter 2008).

H Patten's evocative essay 'Dancing identity in a strange land: Visibility

and symbolism', uses King Alpha's Song as a metaphor for exploring how 'Neo-African' bodies in the African diaspora have used dance as embodied resistance to oppression. His commentary is interspersed with detailed descriptions of dance moves and styles that would be seen on the dancefloor in blues parties, clubs and sound system dances. At some point during a sound system dance, the selector might drop a roots tune like Aswad's 1980 hit *Warrior Charge*, and 'brethren' and some 'sistren' adorned in red, gold and green garments, and Clarks' iconic 'earth-man steppers' desert boots, would engage in an energetic 'skank' with each other, exchanging stylised steps, moves and gestures – similar to the 'throw-down'/'dance-off' competitions in soul and funk clubs.

Sistas in Sound

The mash-up musical taste of ravers included soul, R & B, funk, soca and reggae, of course. Though Jamaican reggae artists Alton Ellis, Dennis Brown and Gregory Isaacs always sang about love, lovers rock, as the first British-born reggae genre, introduced female singers. They sang about love and relationships from a female perspective, which brought Black women alienated by the militancy of roots reggae, and the aggressive, masculinist nature of sound system clashes, back onto the dancefloor. Where women go men follow, and Menelik Shabazz's documentary film, *The Story of Lovers Rock* (Shabazz 2011) captures the erotics of the dancefloor. As Heather Dolphin recalls:

There were codes about who you danced with in a party. Someone would be eyeing you up, and the next thing they're standing beside you asking for a dance. If they couldn't dance, then you'd signal to

your friends to avoid them or we'd disappear to the toilets (Dolphin 2015).

Black women's absence from and presence in sound system space is interrogated in 'Sistas in Sound', a conversation between artists, performers, sound women and scholars Sonia Boyce, Carol Leeming, Yassmin Foster, Denise Noble and Lisa Palmer. They look critically at patriarchy and misogyny in the dancehall space, sound system culture and lovers rock, with a focused exploration of Susan Cadogan's iconic 1975 tune *Hurt So Good*. How women dress, and waiting to be asked for a dance when a tune like this is played in the dancehall space, the pain and pleasure of its lyrics, with Cadogan's high pitched vocal performance, all signify how their bodies have been regulated as performers and consumers in lovers rock.

Sound system culture as a male domain of boys playing with sonic toys has been challenged and disrupted by women's creative agency as DJs and MCs, their sound engineering knowledge and practice in recording studios, and the operation of their own sound systems. This includes Valerie Robinson, aka Lady V, as the first woman to manage a sound system, V Rocket, in Nottingham; female DJs, like Ranking Merva; Elayne Smith, aka DJ Elayne, with her own radio programme, and Lorna Gee, aka Sutara Ji, with her 1985 lovers rock hit, *Gotta Find A Way*; as well as MCs like Sister Nancy.

These themes are developed in Denise Noble's essay "'Give Me That Touch": Couple-Dancing and the Erotic Gender Politics of Reggae', a critique of the complex gender and sexual politics in reggae dancehall across the African diaspora. She sees complex emotional attachments and non-erotic

love amongst men as a form of 'homolatency', which absents Black women. Black women's presence has now become increasingly signified by dance styles that emphasise a form of commodified Black hyper-sexuality for a younger generation, who have no interest in the close couple dancing of lovers rock.

As the first woman to lead a sound system, Donna Moore, in her oral history account, 'Sista Culcha', remembers both traditional and modern musical cultures she grew up with in Guyana and then Britain, and how these shaped her practice as a sound woman. Sista Culcha emerged during the era of reggae dancehall, which became notorious for its misogynist and homophobic lyrics, and which she challenged with her own counter-lyrics. She would also share this ethical approach towards making music in DJ workshops with young people.

Sound women June Reid, aka Junie Rankin, and Lynda Rosenior-Patten, aka DJ Ade, pick up the baton passed on by Sista Culcha in their oral history of Nzinga Soundz. Their openness to playing anything from Rod Stewart to Baaba Maal reflected the eclectic music culture they grew up with in Jamaican and Sierra Leonean immigrant households, and the tastes they acquired playing at family gatherings. Their in-depth knowledge of African music and political activism made sound system's clichéd playlist more inclusive, and challenged its patriarchal culture.

Keeping it in the family, as it were, sound system practice has been passed onto the next generation. Young Warrior, the son of Jah Shaka, runs his own sound. This is also Yassmin Foster's story in '1000 Volts of Lullabies' about how she and her sisters established their own sound, Legs Eleven, after inheriting their father's record collection, built up when he was selector on his own sound, Joe 90 Hi Power. She also remembers the music on

tape cassettes that her mother played as sonic lullabies to send her sleep which would resurface in later years.

Afrobeat and Funk

Mikael Calandra Achode's full-on appetite for sonic culture and its tributaries in 'Beyond the Days of Fasting' describes an African music that is often misunderstood in the diaspora – something seen in the mock sound clash between the similar yet different performance styles of Vybz Kartel in reggae dancehall and Wizkid in Afrobeat. His observations are interspersed with textured action tracks, reflecting on the sounds of the city in his wanderings from Benin to Italy to London.

Selecting images that would form the basis of a photographic essay in this anthology, I consciously chose images taken by photographer Franklyn Rogers on the dancefloor of The Vox, a funk and jazz-funk club in London. He brings into view the dynamic movement and freedom of expression of sound system's dancing Black bodies, which is the thematic core of 'Sonic Vibrations'.

The Last Tune

The diasporic success of Saxon Sound System and Soul II Soul signified the global 'outernationalisation' of sound system culture, with roots dub sounds like Jah Shaka acquiring international cult status, and the sounds Mighty Crown (Japan) and Sentinel (Germany) winning World Sound Clashes. In the neoliberal privatisation of public space, gone are the mobile 'boom boxes' on the street; music is now consumed in a miniaturised individuated space, or barricaded into music festivals as cultural theme parks. *Sonic Vibrations* does not attempt to be a definitive account of sound system culture, lovers

rock and dub, but rather an inclusive gathering of practitioners whose contributions give voice to its ongoing development. In so doing, these vibrations seek to contribute fresh insights and perspectives, alternative paradigms and ways of thinking, and new knowledge in an area where more and divergent practice is emerging every day. And once a raver, always a raver; I still follow Jah Shaka, who sends out the call as the crowd responds with chants, hands and lighters in the air. I hope you have as much fun reading, listening, looking and experiencing, as I had in compiling it.

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

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