Dancehall Dreams

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Anyone keeping an eye on patterns of youth style in Britain over the last ten years cannot fail to have been struck by the increasing profile of Black music and its spinoffs in the media, advertising, fashion and leisure sectors, and, indeed, in spoken idiom and worldviews. Current styles were to some extent carried in from America with hip-hop—now by far the biggest-selling popular music genre in the world—and have blended with local vernaculars, steadily spreading into and irrevocably changing all youth cultural fields. The most obvious marker of the strength of influence is the degree of commercial appropriation—where all manner of celebrities have scrambled to affiliate; pop superstars copy the format to bolster their street-cred; and any number of crassly manufactured boy/girl band and pop idol-type embarrassments flood the teenybop market.

Major grass-roots impacts, however, have been in pirate radio and especially on dance culture—where UK garage[1] and now R&B/hip hop have severely eroded the hegemony of house, techno and other 'rave' forms in superclubs and dance bars in many UK cities. The new marketing category of 'urban music'[2] approximates this demographic well enough, reflecting both the multicultural atmosphere of urban centres and the generic hybridity of sounds which variously blend rap, soul, reggae, calypso and bhangra (among others). Under such pressure from consumers and MTV, and from a rising tide of home-grown production and performing talent, the mainstream UK industry is finally failing to sustain its historic policy of granting only periodic novelty value to urban music, which now dominates the Top 20 and provides most of those hits not manipulated into place through media hype and the complicity between record companies and retail cartels.

Most of the biggest chart successes of the past couple of years in the urban music field focus on the twin themes of the local club and neighbourhood environment, and sexual play and relationships. In terms of the latter, while heterosexual romance has been a core element of teenage pop culture since the 1950s, never before has there been such consistent questioning of sexual conduct and motivation and such sustained foregrounding of women's empowerment. The intensity of the hypersexualisation of young women in all mainstream media makes these issues particularly problematic, so that pictures of seductive passive bimbos often win out in productions where the record company's commercial agenda and the (not inconsiderable) misogyny of artists or producers are paramount. But, as with the censorship debates among feminists in the 1970s and '80s,[3] the implications of women's sexual expression and autonomy, and their representation in a pornographic era, are by no means simple. Urban music is therefore one compelling forum in which the practical translation of these issues into the daily real and mediated lives of our younger generations is taking place.[4]

Furthermore, the fact that the disco, nightclub, house- and street-party are so often the representational sites for reflection on and negotiation of these matters implies that the dance context is standing for society in general—a functional, public, community space, hedged in by institutional constraints and social conflict, to be sure, but where collective cultural expression and personal fulfilment is still possible. When commercial pressures dictate the erasure of any realistic specificity of social class and geography, the outcome tends to be laughable yuppie fantasies of upmarket havens populated by vacuous fashion clothes-horses. Even then, as above, the lyrical and thematic content of urban music performance, along with its assertive bravura, can usually be relied upon to shine through the glossy sheen. Better still, more openly political commentary regularly creeps into the material. And far from meeting resistance from consumers preoccupied with their privatised hedonistic pleasures—as presupposed by the industry and most critics—such content may be embraced if it is perceived as relevant and true to the lives of both performers and audiences. In effect, the ethics of our intimate lives are socialised in the public sphere of the dance, so that wider questions of social power and control may be woven in—provided that the setting is felt to be sufficiently local, communal and (hence) personal.

The everyday ordinariness of place and the joint involvement of audience and musicians as performers in the urban dance event recall the community, dialogic, participative nature of many Black musical traditions.[5] These elements appear to have survived even into today's over-commodified pop music, especially in those niche markets which have the most direct antecedents in the 'original', 'authentic' grass-roots forms of R&B, reggae and hip hop—musics developed and produced by and for lower class people for the express purpose of dancing. What follows discusses some important aspects of this history so as to sketch out their significance now that these marginal cultural forms have migrated, on the surface at least, to the centre of the popular mainstream—starting with a well-known recent example.

Where Is The Love?

A dramatic index of the profile of urban music appeared during the height of the UK's mass mobilisations against war in Iraq in 2003.

Notes

1. A relatively downtempo drum & bass derivative focusing on dance rather than, say, the manic raves of junglism, or avant garde taste and pretensions to being 'the new jazz'. Note that UK garage is primarily a southern British phenomenon with sparse interest elsewhere.
2. A US euphemism coined to avoid all reference to race and class; the more forthright British 'Music of Black Origins' (MOBO) being questionable for, among other reasons, seeming somewhat backward-looking as well as racially essentialist.
3. A comprehensive analysis of which can be found in Lynne Segal & Mary McIntosh (eds.), *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* (Virago, 1992).
4. For varying blends of intelligence, self-possession and conformity to sexual objectification, see, for instance, current young UK urban artists Floetry, Ms Dynamite, Jamelia and Mis-teeq; as against pure product like Sugababes, Girls Aloud, Liberty X, etc.
5. See, for example, Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (University of Illinois Press, 2002).
6. For excellent accounts of their activity, see: 'A Phenomenal Anti-War Movement?' *Aufheben*, No. 12, 2004, pp.28-35 [www.geocities.com/aufheben2]; and 'The Anti-War Movement in the North East', *Organise!*, No. 61, 2003, pp.7-10 http://www.afed.org.uk
7. Placing them in the jazzy, bluesy, Black consciousness, 'alternative' tradition—represented most famously by De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest—which developed alongside hardcore and gangsta rap in the late 1980s.
8. A small selection of such bestselling hitmakers in the past year are: the soul/funk of Blu Cantrell; R. Kelly's loverman anthems; Beyoncè Knowles' hip-hop-disco; Sean Paul's 'sing-jay' reggae dancehall/lover's rock; Fatman Scoop's party perennials; Dr Dre's trademark funk under 50 Cent; the Neptunes' electronica, e.g. in Kelis' 'Milkshake'; Kevin Lyttle's carnival hits; Jamelia's ironic pop-R&B; the 'dirty South' hip-hop rhythm of Usher's 'Yeah'; Alicia Keys' evocations of classic soul; and the latter's exuberant sampling by Kanye West, e.g. in Twista's 'Slow Jamz'.
9. So, in political as well as personal preference, I wholeheartedly agree that: "If I can't dance; it's not *my* revolution!" (Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, Knopf, 1931; see also Alix Kates Shulman (ed.), *Red Emma Speaks*, Wildwood House, 1979).
10. There is very little useful attention to these matters in the music literature, apart from the selective elitism of fandom and subcultures. Jacques Attali's fascinating *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (trans. Brian Massumi, University of Manchester Press, 1985), first published in 1976, anticipates the rise of hip-hop rituals and their grass-roots flouting of traditional expertise. Similarly, Simon Frith tentatively questions the demarcation of production and consumption in *Performance Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, 1996), though seeming not to notice that hip-hop praxis had long since transcended such theory.
11. A recent account of R&B history can be found in: Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm & Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (UCL Press, 1998). Craig Werner discusses the social and political interactions of 'white' and 'Black' music in *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (Payback Press, 2000); and Paul Gilroy decisively strips the interpretive paradigm of its US blinkers in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Verso, 1993).
12. For excellent writing on classic and contemporary soul and R&B see Mark Anthony Neal's *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (Routledge, 1998) and *Songs in the Key of Black Life: A Rhythm & Blues Nation* (Routledge, 2003). Perspectives on the development of hip-hop can be found in Alan Light (ed.), *The Vibe History of Hip Hop* (Plexus, 1999).
13. Bakari Kitwana gives an unflinching account of the contemporary pressures on US inner city Black communities, and their reflection in cultural patterns, in *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African Culture* (Basic Civitas Books, 2002); and Todd Boyd's illuminating *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip-Hop* (New York University Press, 2003) discusses the political and cultural disillusionments and renaissances associated with rap music. Meanwhile, an important corrective to romantic notions of 'street' authenticity can be found in Keith Negus, 'The Music Business and Rap: Between the Streets and the Executive Suite' (*Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1999).
14. Mento was a creolisation, dating from the slavery period, of European folk dance with African rhythms and vocals, as originally were merengue, calypso, and mambo—all of which regularly cross-fertilised with newer latin and jazz styles.
15. Grant Fared's 'Wailin' Soul: Reggae's Debt to Black American Music' (in: Monique Guillory & Richard C. Green (eds.) *Soul: Black Power,*

Alongside the public debate and media frenzy, the pop music chart, commercial radio and MTV were all dominated for several months by the Black Eyed Peas' breakthrough single, 'Where Is The Love?'. Although such a phenomenon may not be a conventional measure of the depth of political feeling in society, the success of this song raises a number of questions—not least because a notable feature of the protests throughout the UK was the widespread presence of schoolchildren on demonstrations and other actions. While their involvement was a complete surprise to the established groups who organised the set-piece events, the kids also showed through their autonomy, determination and imagination that they had no intention of conforming to the usual, drearily predictable and aimless marching, vaguely liberal sloganeering and applauding of celebrity speakers.[6] Given that the mainstream singles market caters largely to teenagers and younger children, 'Where Is The Love' can thus be interpreted as a kind of 'anthem' to the concerns that led them to bunk off school and disrupt the public daily life of urban centres around the country (as well as spending pocket money on this particular cultural commodity).

In terms of musical content the song combines rather undistinguished R&B and hip-hop sensibilities, resembling the by-now routine radio-friendly muzak production intended to appeal to the widest audience while offending the fewest advertisers. However, the lyrics hark back to the golden era of soul as musical accompaniment to 1960s/'70s social consciousness concerning war and the state of society and the world (Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield et al), and the video's narratives highlight poverty, police repression and inner city blight. Combining its catchy chorus with protest, lament, nostalgia and all-round righteous feelgood positivity, the resulting melange evidently struck chords with listeners of several generations and perspectives. It even reached DJ playlists in urban club environments where the prevailing 'cool' might have been expected to rule it out on the grounds of sheer naffness alone.

In fact, the Black Eyed Peas are a good example of rap's progress into the pop music mainstream. Comprising Will.I.Am, Taboo and Apl.de.ap, the group originated in the LA underground scene. Their early recordings and energetic live shows were well-received by the specialist press,[7] and their second album (*Bridging the Gap*, 2000) cemented their reputation with guest appearances by established R&B/hip-hop artists. The aspirations to greater commercial crossover have been amply fulfilled by the latest release, *Elephunk* (2003), and its three hit singles so far. Now with a female vocalist (Fergie) adding melody and harmony to musical forays into reggae and rock as well as the funk, R&B and hip hop influences, the performative styles have also expanded into a frenetic pantomime clowning in the video and stage acts (possibly trying to appeal to even younger children). The two follow-up singles ('Shut Up' and 'Hey Mama') tackle themes more familiar to contemporary R&B and hip hop than the generalised fluffy humanism of 'Where Is The Love?'—namely, sexual relations and the aesthetics of the party—but retain the explicit ethical and political inflections characteristic of all BEP's work.

The Life and Soul of the Party

Such concerns aren't necessarily so clear or up front in other major urban hit singles in 2003/4. But scratching the surface of the lyrical narratives reveals the same organising metaphors around love, pain and hope, tied specifically to public sociality.[8] Simultaneously, the slick and apparently seamless musical textures juxtapose and integrate dense sonic references from at least six decades of Black cultural innovations, along with the more recent production devices of pop music manufacture. A genealogy through which to understand these distinctive current sounds of gangsta rap, R&B, ragga, nu-soul and neo-soca should have the capacity to do justice to all of this. Fortunately, the mutually interacting resonance of (material) locality and (bodily) pleasure—where neither can be taken for granted—provide the grounds for glimpsing the past, present and future role of lower class dance; not as a corollary, or addendum, to some intrinsic aesthetic sublime, but at the centre of musical creation and practice.[9]

This is a subject almost universally scorned (on paper): not only in the orthodox snobbery of elite scholars and their high cultures and canons, but also in the faithful dissent of avant gardes, and the revisionism of rock criticism and its subcultures, as well as the supposedly subversive fields of media and cultural studies. The genius (or otherwise) of musicians and recording artists and their travails in the petit bourgeois and corporate marketplaces are, here, the fools gold of interpretation. Whereas what the art means in the corporeal consciousness of the dancehall—where both mind-body boundaries and distinctions between performers and audiences are blurred, rather than rigidly enforced by disciplinary discourse—is ignored or treated merely as 'effect'; as 'reception'. By extension, the significance of the lives of ordinary people, culture as active practice, and politics as the development of potential in particular material circumstances, are all obscured—allowing the conclusion to be drawn that the entire field must therefore be left to 'experts'; to forge and then to decipher.[10]

Returning to the development of contemporary urban music, a sensible anchor would seem to be the American folk tradition of the blues, which became transformed into an urban dance form during the great migrations of Black people into the industrial areas of the West, Midwest and Northern USA after the Second World War. Taking advantage of the dissemination of technological and infrastructural changes in sound production and distribution (electrification, media, recording, etc.), 1950s R&B quickly became 'classic'. Spreading inexorably into all geographical and cultural areas, mutually influencing and melding with jazz, latin, gospel and country styles, it then provided a foundation for virtually all subsequent pop and rock genres in the 'Black Atlantic' regions.[11]

The incredible fertility of R&B was a mixed blessing, however, in a period when possibilities and mechanisms for the mass commercial exploitation of organic culture were perfected. Its trajectory into rock, and those of soul into the pop mainstream and funk into upmarket disco, to some degree paralleled the liberal promises of the civil rights era for assimilation, aspiration and respectability; but utterly dislocated the musical expression from its core lower class bases. The legendary status of Michael Jackson and Prince just about kept 1980s pulses beating amid the bloodless middle-of-the-road showbiz balladeering that soul had sunk to. Meanwhile the new, and compositionally even more promiscuous, hip-hop underground re-energised the hearts and minds (and dancing shoes) of inner city youth struggling to adapt to the emerging patterns of post-industrial decline and oppression.[12]

But as hip-hop's entrepreneurs took on the

Politics and Pleasure, New York University Press, 1998) stresses the R&B connection. Meanwhile, Norman Stolzoff's magnificent *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (Duke University Press, 2000) is practically unique in understanding popular culture in terms of those it is most popular amongst. Note also that from the continuous Jamaican diaspora came the New York cohort at the forefront of early hip-hop (see: Cheryl Keyes, note 5); and that the Jamaican 'DJ' is equivalent to a hip-hop 'MC' or rapper.

16. Louis Chude-Sokei's 'The Sound of Culture: Dread Discourse and Jamaican Sound Systems' (in Joseph K. Adjaye & Adrianne R. Andrews (eds.) *Language, Rhythm and Sound: Black Popular Cultures into the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997) details how the discourses of race, class and geography were pivotal in the development of contemporary dancehall—showing how the compromise formations of roots reggae were increasingly unable to keep up with the lived experience of lower class Jamaicans (wherever they had moved to). Today's global hybridity and mobility of digital production, soundwaves and personnel mean that dancehall can thrive in and satisfy local reggae scenes, speak to current socio-cultural conditions, and cross over national and commercial borders. Concluding that this modern history shows how: "[R]ace is deconstructed as a universal principle and is fragmented by culture and differential histories of colonialism" (p.201)—Chude-Sokei thus reinforces Paul Gilroy's profound critique of the philosophy and politics of all racial(ist) essentialisms (in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Harvard University Press, 2000).
17. Rocksteady was a somewhat downtempo and upmarket verion of ska giving space for love songs and laments as well as the energy, anger and bombast. Likewise, lovers rock was a (mainly UK-conceived) 1970s form using roots music but allowing romantic balladeers back into the dance. Ragga is the UK term for modern reggae dancehall music.
18. While raunchy sexual chatter is nothing new (see Stephen Nye's sleeve notes to the classic reggae collected in the *Trojan X-Rated Box Set*, Sanctuary Records, 2002), its ragga expression raises the stakes far beyond prurience or coy, 'seaside postcard' naughtiness. Moreover, the direct and deliberate assertion by both men and women of working class and Black women's beauty, strength, pride and sexual autonomy resonates much further afield than do the perhaps rather more parochial socio-political references of the other lyrical styles.
19. From 'Virginity Revamped: Representations of Female Sexuality in the Lyrics of Bob Marley and Shabba Ranks' (in Kwesi Owusu (ed.) *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*. Routledge, 2000, p.351). Shabba Ranks is notorious for abandoning his grass-roots support to 'sell out' for Grammy Awards and million-selling crossover albums; and for naively proclaiming on prime-time UK youf TV ('The Word') a version of the horrific West Indian fundamentalist homophobia. This blunder was seized upon as an excuse to excoriate and excommunicate all modern reggae by rock critics more comfortable with the idealisation of roots reggae. All cultural and historical context was ignored; not least the allusive utility of sexualised hatred encapsulating the disgust felt by the rich towards the 'emasculated' poor, who tragically displace this into attacks on their own 'others'. A discussion of homophobia in rap can be found in Farai Chideya, 'Homophobia: Hip Hop's Black Eye' (in Kevin Powell (ed.) *Step Into A World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature*, Wiley, 2000).
20. In: *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (Macmillan Caribbean, 1993)—a landmark text situating sound system technique, DJ vocals and audience involvement not only as intrinsic to dancehall's social fabric, but also as a significant, sophisticated, logical progression from all prior Jamaican lower-class cultural patterns and literary/poetic traditions.
21. Warwick University, Centre for Caribbean Studies seminar, 21 January 2003 [www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ccs/events/seminars/lyrics/]. Grant also emphasises that many dancehall lyrics do simply repeat and reinforce misogyny; while Stolzoff (note 15) cautions that in many dancehalls only glimpses (at best) of the potential for female autonomy are realised in practice. Interestingly, the UK scene tends to be better represented in terms of both women's empowerment and DJ 'Queens'—a current example on the recording side of things being Trinidad-born Queen Omega's excellent *Away From Babylon* (Greenhouse, 2004) with its blend of conscious roots and ragga styles. The feature film *Babymother* (dir. Julian Henriques, 1998) effectively explores many of the above themes as played out in the diasporan setting of North London (see: Rachel Moseley-Wood, 'Colonizin Englan in Reverse', *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2004).
22. Although the suppression of women's involvement in rap still is a corporate commonplace, the specialist subcultural press and other ancillary industry sectors are, if anything, even more culpable—particularly in the UK. As for the disciplines of hip-hop, girls' games, for example, were part of the first national 'Fresh Fest' US concert tours before being repressed from the collective hip-hop memory (see Kyra D. Gaunt, 'Translating Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop: The Musical Vernacular of Black Girls' Play', in Adjaye & Andrews, note 16). Finally, the community orientation of commercial rap has been difficult to track, partly because the biographies of the thousands of urban areas where hip hop is substantially embraced vary so wildly. Murray Forman provides a scrupulous analysis of the importance of local markers of the ghetto, in *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Wesleyan University Press, 2002).
23. To considerable effect, for example with Roxanne Shante's legendary dissing of all comers (male and female) setting the scene for youthful

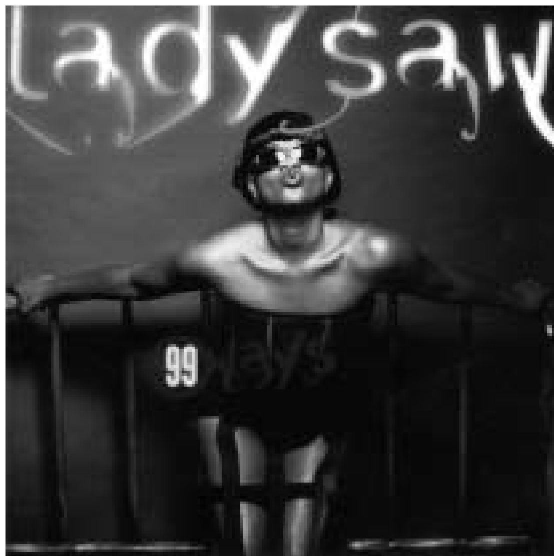
media and music industry and marched into radio stations, rock venue stadia and recording contracts, their attention shifted away from the almost insurmountable difficulties in maintaining a neighbourhood presence in embattled urban environments suffering the government withdrawal of public service to coincide with influxes of guns, drugs and ever more vicious paramilitary policing. Nevertheless, as rap matured it gradually reincorporated all manner of Black traditions which seemed to have been thoroughly 'lost' from the ghetto.[13] It was only a matter of time before the new crop of producers colonising the pop mainstream underpinned R&B vocals with rap's infectious, bass-heavy beats to cater to new club spaces in which to throw parties. And so, since the end of the 1980s, the local grass roots have increasingly come out again across the globe to dance. Mind you, in Kingston, Jamaica, they'd been rocking more or less non-stop since the fifties.

Routes and Cultures

Jamaica's indigenous 'mento' styles had been increasingly tinged with other Caribbean and American musics in the first half of the twentieth century.[14] But R&B took over, just as in the US, among the burgeoning urban poor in the fifties; whereas DJs and sound systems, rather than live shows, fed the dancehalls as Jamaican performers either emigrated or staffed the fledgling tourist industry. So, the exclusively 'downtown' sound system 'blues dances' were built musically, infrastructurally and demographically on R&B, and, with uptempo percussion and jazz flourishes, they nurtured the 1960s dance revelation of ska. This was both the first purely Jamaican popular form and an openly political expression of the new 'rude boy' working-/underclass faced with the suffocating postcolonial legacy of a feudal ruling autocracy and fundamentalist christianity. These cultural developments driven by the lower classes thus not only birthed the embryonic expressions of all reggae and the major performative innovations of hip-hop, but crystallised a series of overarching social and political struggles too.[15]

The subsequent broadening of Jamaican music from ska and rocksteady to roots reggae quickly enlisted the Rastafari religion brought by the rural poor, along with 'burru' (African drumming) and ganja, into the Kingston ghettoes. As class segregation faltered, and Garveyite Black nationalists and middle class urban youth became involved, the lyrics presented an increasingly powerful critique of class, race and nation as articulated by the conservative elites—whose political/criminal factions have persistently co-opted and manipulated the reggae industry ever since. Then—while the phenomenal international success of Bob Marley led the transitional phase of roots to be misinterpreted abroad as the culmination of Jamaican lower class expression—the Kingston producers and DJs beat something of a retreat to the studios as street violence shut many of the main dancehalls, temporarily muting the sound systems. The remarkable creativity of the 1970s evolution of dub, mixing, juggling, toasting and other production innovations—often for smaller parties as well as radio and recording purposes, and always with their effectivity in the dancehall in mind—nourished the home market and exile communities in North America and the UK; etched templates for hip-hop and ragga experimentation; and set the scene for the reggae dancehall renaissance.[16]

If anything, the political turmoil was even more brutal into the 1980s. But enough of an equilibrium developed for the dancehalls to reassert their central role in the lives of ordinary Jamaicans—while infrastructural and technological change, political (=gang) affiliations, and cash earned from reggae's overseas outposts all gave the sound systems even more clout. The spectrum of musical styles for selectors to choose from encompassed rocksteady, roots, lovers rock, dub and the new synthesised dance rhythms of ragga, along with all the new US imports.[17] Perhaps reflecting greater



cosmopolitanism as well as confidence, the dancehall event could now express more openly than ever before—including in the wider public realms of the media—its own class-specific preoccupations and desires. Ever since, modern gangster 'gun-talk', the neo-Rasta Bobo DJs' insurrectionary spiritualism, and the extreme sexual licence of slackness, have jostled for the engagement of crowds showing no concern for, or interest in, traditional bourgeois and religious standards and sensitivities.[18]

The redoubled focus on sexuality was the prime key to dancehall's effortless intimacy with its increasingly secular communities—not least those overseas where the baleful grip of Old Testament morality had ceased to hold so much sway. A revealing comparison of Shabba Ranks and Bob Marley by Jamaican scholar Carolyn Cooper exposes the archaic and reactionary gender politics coexisting with otherwise revolutionary material in roots. Noting that most male lyricists of all reggae generations tend to indulge in the patriarchal objectification of woman as property, Cooper nevertheless emphasises that—despite being rare in privileging mature sexual love as a necessary feature of any truly radical Rasta project—Marley's outlook also confirms the traditional chauvinism of the nigh-on ubiquitous madonna-versus-whore dichotomy. Whereas the obscenities of ragga, far from being "a devaluation of female sexuality ... [are] a reclamation of active, adult female sexuality from the entrapping passivity of sexless Victorian virtue".[19]

Nor should there be any suspicion that women merely 'receive' this attention passively in the dancehall. Although reggae's sidelining of women as stage performers or recording artists has often amounted to outright exclusion, during the dance event women are actively central—indeed, slack lyrics make little sense without their and the DJs' fully mutual call and response. Carolyn Cooper's crucial 'Slackness Hiding from Culture: Erotic Play in the Dancehall'[20] illuminates the complementary rhetorical—and literal—functions of dirty talk in the DJ's oral stage art and dirty movement in the cauldron of the dance. Temporarily escaping their (more or less) embittering daily grind, local women dress up for the party and conduct themselves wholly on their own terms—deciding when, to what and with whom to 'grind' (i.e. dance), setting the tone for the success of the entire night. Parading the sexiest gear and most gymnastic contortions, the haughtily intimidating 'dancehall divas' clear space for all the women present to enjoy themselves without feeling beseiged by men.

Better yet, these relatively subtle and implicit subversions of masculinist privilege perpetrated by women in the dancehall are openly and loudly celebrated in the raw power and lyrics of female DJs and their full frontal assaults on the hypocrisy, double dealing and everyday oppression enacted by men, money and society. Though regrettably few in number, artists such as Patra, Lady Saw and Tanya Stephens have always been among the most popular with Jamaican dancehall participants. In '"Gyal You Body Good!": The Dynamics of Female Empowerment in Jamaican Dancehall Lyrics', Kala Grant argues that the lyrical negotiations of class and gender fashioned by

womanists like Salt 'N' Pepa to dismiss male adolescent arrogance, assert their own desires and re-emphasise the dance interaction as the most appropriate venue for such activities.

24. Building understanding of wider social and political issues from responses to the most dramatic or immediately felt constraints, women classic jazz and blues singers as well as rappers were more likely to start from love and relationships (see Tricia Rose, 'Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music', in: *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Wesleyan University Press, 1994). This compares to the police and economic violence perceived as dominant in their lives by men, whose treatment of women in terms of refuge from and defence against this experience then has its own repercussions (see Ch. 4 in Kitwana, note 13). For details of the establishment by women of their positions as rap artists, see 'First Ladies' by Cristina Veran (in *Vibe Hip Hop Divas* , Plexus, 2001—which also contains short essays on many of the most famous women MCs).
25. Bell Hooks writes clearly on the poison of the commercial agendas, for example in 'Selling Hot Pussy' (in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Turnaround Press, 1992) and 'Spending Culture: Marketing the Black Underclass' (in Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations, Routledge, 1995). Gaunt (note 22) discusses the deployment of heterosexual discourse for purposes of autosexuality in dance and in women's dialogue; and discussions of lower-class feminism in rap can be found in Imani Perry's 'It's my thang and I'll swing it the way that I feel!' (in Gail Dines & Jean M. Humez (eds.), *Gender, Race and Class in Media*, Sage, 1995); Ch. 7 in Keyes (note 5); and Rose (note 24).
26. A demographic well known to be the most attracted to cultural commodities combining violent and sexist imagery in rap and elsewhere. For more on gangsta rap and misogyny, see: bell hooks, 'Gangsta Culture' (in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, Routledge, 1995); Ch. 4 in Russell Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (State University of New York Press, 1995); and my 'Br(other) Rabbit's Tale' (in Variant, no. 17, 2003).
27. Concerning the risks of recuperation into traditional sexism, see, for example: Imani Perry's 'Who(se) am I: Ownership, Identity and Multitextual Readings of Women in Hip Hop' (in: Dines & Humez (eds.), *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, 2nd ed., Sage, 2002; and Joan Morgan's autobiographical *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist* (Simon & Schuster, 1999). Examples from hip-hop influenced cinema include *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (dir. Leslie Harris, 1992, see: Andrè Willis, 'A Womanist Turn on the Hip-Hop Theme', in Adjaye & Andrews, note 16; and Tricia Rose, 'Rewriting the Pleasure/Danger Dialectic: Black Female Teenage Sexuality in the Popular Imagination', in Elizabeth Long (ed.), *From Sociology to Cultural Studies: New Perspectives*, Blackwell, 1997), and to a lesser extent Girl 6 (dir. Spike Lee, 1996) and *Player's Club* (dir. Ice Cube, 1998).
28. Who thus arrogantly dismiss the far more sophisticated arguments of their lower class Black sisters. In a famous example, young R&B/rap group TLC's hit 'Ain't Too Proud To Beg' openly advocated sexual self-possession and control. However the parts of their message demanding safe sex (including explicit lyrics and wearing monster condom hats in the video) were barred from broadcasting, replaced in the radio version by the usual narcissistic froth (see Tricia Rose, '2 Inches and a Yard: Censoring TLC', in Ella Sholhat (ed.), *Cross Talk: Anthology of Multicultural Feminism*, MIT Press, 1999).
29. And, *in extremis*, to the ludicrous hypersexual amazonia of, for example, Lil Kim and Foxy Brown. Despite their peripheral membership of rap crews, Eve (Ruff Ryders) and Rah Digga (Flipmode Squad) are arguably more talented rappers than their male peers, who fail to acknowledge (let alone support) their specifically woman-centred themes in return for their beautification of collective efforts.
30. So 'common sense' tells critics that outrageous sexual licence panders to male consumers' pornographic fantasies. However, for example, men stand sheepishly by as women clubgoers dance in delight to the rap inversions of social and carnal control implicit and explicit in Lil' Kim's, 'How Many Licks', Khia's 'My Neck, My Back', and Jackie O's 'Nookie'. For strategies used to circumvent sexist commercial packaging see, for example, Perry (note 27), and Suzanne Bost's excellent '"Be deceived if ya wanna be foolish": (Re)constructing Body, Genre and Gender in Feminist Rap', *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2001 [http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc]. Finally, the success of women MCs has initiated persistent debates about the limits of the expression of femininity as strength, and a consequent questioning of sexual identity—often in terms of lesbianism, starting with Queen Latifah. See: Venise T. Berry, 'Feminine or Masculine? The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music' (in: Susan C. Cook & Judy S. Tsou (eds.), *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, University of Illinois Press, 1994).
31. With the NY 'New Jack Swing' of Teddy Riley, Puff Daddy's promiscuous mixing of state of the art rhythms with either rapping, singing, or both, and the transfer of the West Coast G-Funk sound to vocal styles other than hardcore gangsta rap, the beats and textures of R&B/hip-hop fit the convivial dancing requirements of clubbers better than many contemporary developments in rap—for example the Wu Tang Clan, which although vastly more innovative in purely sonic terms was more suited to recorded formats.
32. Instances would include Mary J. Blige and Faith Evans; whereas many of the recent generation of manufactured stars have either scant musical talent (for example, Ashanti) or any apparent interest in socially conscious themes (such as Beyoncè Knowles of Destiny's

Lady Saw and others articulate in complex ways with wider socio-political issues—thus striving for "the paradigm shifts necessary to critically analyse ... society from the grassroots up. The marginalised working class, the oppressed, the socially ostracised, will always be able to find an empowering voice through the dynamics of this ghetto born sound".[21] And with a far greater (and growing) number and range of strong women rapping and singing, glowering and flowering, the same can certainly be said of the current hip-hop generations.

The 'Real' Sex and the City

In its early days hip-hop was all about neighbourhood dances at which the whole range of locals enjoyed themselves. This is why the parties were so successful and why word of mouth, circulation of homemade mixtapes and other forms of grassroots communication spread the news so quickly. As organisers planned successive evenings of entertainment, they chose blends of the most reliably successful activities, which became shaped into the artforms now seen as integral to the genre. Obviously it was crucial to attract as many women as possible to the dance in the first place, but they were also present in numbers as performers, promoters, etc. However, the forging of a recording and concert industry from the late 1970s narrowed the marketing focus to a subculture for young men. The women integral to hip-hop's community presence seemed to evaporate from its public profile, only gradually re-emerging later on record and on stage.[22]

After several years of hearing voiceless women insulted on bragging records by their male peers, women rappers began to answer back in the same vernacular.[23] At this stage much of the lyrical content and orientation of women's raps tended to correspond to the formula of the 'female complaint', whereby the interplay and cross-referencing in the lyrics matched aspects of the real-life frustrations and conflicts of the artists and their audiences.[24] Then space was steadily carved out for a greater range of women's points of view, stories and attitudes, where commercial success set a series of thematic precedents—as in the sheer ghetto storytelling prowess of MC Lyte and the explicit programmatic social consciousness of Queen Latifah. This access to the mainstream massively accelerated with the 1990s embrace of soul traditions back into the music, so that today every conceivable permutation of views on life, relationships and the world—as articulated by men and women—can be found on rap record.

The simple presence of so many female MCs as successful, self-possessed musical artists in a surrounding miasma of sexual objectification indicates a level of personal autonomy that belies the ostensible message coming from much of commercial rap and R&B that women are merely sexual commodities. When their active physical presence is celebrated with pride and pleasure, presented as born from a ghetto upbringing and in explicit defiance of control by men—and yet showing solidarity both with other lower class women and those same men—the two-dimensional view as the property of pimps and playthings of playboys is

quickly undermined. There is clearly a series of class, sex and race dialogues underway in this field of media representations—not least using discourses of sexuality to symbolise a passionate engagement with life in general—that the preferred critical interpretation of the hopeless nihilism of the black underclass cannot contain.[25]

As in 1970s 'blaxploitation', the violence of gangsta mythology comes from wider US traditions rather than specifically Black culture, and can thus be seen as a response to respectable patriarchal gangsterism (i.e. capitalism) as well as to society's racism. Similarly, male dominative sexual fantasies in lyrics and videos are modulated by thoroughly mainstream pornographic tropes and attitudes towards lower class black women's bodies and sexuality. Both are also reinforced by the music corporations' relentless quest for white male suburban youth consumers.[26] However, women MCs persistently expose the double standards both of their own communities and of mainstream society, and use sex-talk and dance to get their points across—just as the Black traditions always have—although this claiming of the body and its desires necessarily flirts with an acceptance of the framework of internalised sexism historically enforced by the status quo. Even though none of these tensions can be resolved in culture alone, a variety of liberatory possibilities are reasserted and kept open through the experimental expressions of women's rap.[27]

Of course, the commercial power of major media and music companies operates directly by attempting to stifle more openly subversive assertions of women's sexual autonomy. Precedents for the media censorship of rap developed in conjunction with the moralising efforts of some feminists,[28] others of the dreary middle class political correctness brigade and their government, Black church and religious right allies. More subtle forms of corporate subversion include isolating individual women artists in all-male crews, or merely demanding that they play up their sexpot trappings irrespective of their lyrics or beliefs—the latter leading to artists with much more serious intent confusing themselves and their audiences as glamourpusses.[29] Even then, affirming messages about women's sexual and social desire and capability still result, because audiences—being rather media-literate themselves—can discriminate between, and go beyond, attempts to dominate them through narcotising imagery, hysterical hype and the lowest commercial denominator.[30]

Soul Survivors

Meanwhile, as R&B and rap intermingled in the 1990s the new hybrid form quickly became successful in club environments as well as commercially, due to production interventions aimed at reinvigorating dance culture.[31] As the renown grew of a crop of new producers and studios with their own corporate empire-building in mind, this combination of circumstances unfortunately encouraged musical design purely for stereotypical commercial acceptability rather than for purposes of originality and expression. Thematic concerns in lyrics and video portrayals followed suit, stressing the acquisition of wealth and displays of conspicuous consumption (including of

Child). In terms of aspiration, in the hands of the same producers gangsta rap swiftly became a postmodern cartoon caricature of blaxploitation, exchanging the urban grit for 'bling bling' fantasies of infinite throwaway riches—equally nihilistic, maybe, but by now frankly ridiculous.

33. Which is ironic, given that songs such as 'No Scrubs' by TLC and several from Destiny's Child ('Bills, Bills, Bills', 'Independent Woman', etc.) were written by Kandi Burruss (formerly of girl group Xscape) in angry response to her perceptions of R&B/hip-hop's repeated denigration of the moral integrity of lower class women as 'gold-diggers' and 'hoes'.
34. Suzanne Bost (note 30) presents a comprehensive analysis of Da Brat—among the most successful women MCs in R&B/rap (allied to Atlanta producer Jermaine Dupri, himself one of the super-producers responsible for the genre). Bost details how the self-fashioning of Da Brat's image, presentation, lyrics and narratives appears on the surface to conform to traditional and contemporary expectations—but actually slyly complicates, questions, trangresses and exceeds all the limits placed on her, both as a commercial artist under pressure from the industry and media and as a Black woman from a lower-class background struggling to make her way in a hostile world.
35. In the same alternative tradition that the early Black Eyed Peas came up in. See Bost (note 30) for a discussion of rap poets such as Ursula Rucker, Dana Bryant and Sarah Jones (most famous for her riff on Scott Heron's 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised': Your revolution / Will not take place between *these* thighs).
36. As often resulted in the liberal civil rights era, with its classic soul backing seen as expressing a generalised human spirit (hence the term 'soul'); or the response to such naivetè/duplicity in the Black nationalist faith in racial essence again common currency in late 1980s rap. See Gilroy (note 16) for an account of the ramifications of this problematic.
37. The nu-soul pioneers were Maxwell, Erykah Badu and D'Angelo—who mentored many new voices, including those of Angie Stone (an original old school MC), Bilal, Jill Scott, Musiq, Jaguar Wright and Dwele. Now the UK also has the sublime Floetry, singer-songwriter Terri Walker, and the impressive nu-soul/R&B/rap/ragga/garage collective NSM (New Sector Movement).
38. This includes outspoken political rap—for example by Dead Prez, Paris, the Coup, and the sophisticated cultural politics of Talib Kweli, Mos Def and the Roots (plus spoken word artists such as Saul Williams and those cited in note 35). In *Songs in the Key of Black Life* (note 12), Mark Anthony Neal shows how the gender subversions of "soul outlaws" Meshell Ndegeocello, Macy Gray and Res allow commercial R&B/hip-hop stars like Missy Elliott and Tweet to question sexual identity and fixity in specifically dance-oriented music.
39. So house and rave appear now to represent little more than drug-based weekend and package holiday hedonism, despite the utopian desires and energetic grass-roots organisation nurtured by their pioneers (see George McKay (ed.), *DiY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, Verso, 1998; Sean Bidder, *Pump Up The Volume: A History of House*, Channel 4 Books, 2001; and Sara Thornton's thoughtful *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, Polity Press, 1995).
40. The UK trajectory has been usefully sketched in BBC Radio 1 R&B DJ Trevor Nelson's *Soul Nation* TV series (Channel 4, 2003). Note that until the current resurgence of club-based urban music, UK R&B has largely depended on two decades-worth of strong female artists for commercial visibility—most of whom chose ordinary 'round-the-way-girl' stances from which to launch their powerful voices and exceptional songwriting skills (for example Gabrielle, Mica Paris and the wonderful Beverley Knight; Sade being far more upmarket).
41. For discussions of recent UK Asian styles, see Sanjay Sharma, John Jutnyk & Ashwari Sharma (eds.), *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music* (Zed Books, 1996). While ragga is strong and self-contained in its communities (e.g. in London, Bristol, Birmingham and Nottingham), UK hip-hop has stubborny clung to a rabid defensive purism in the face of industry indifference (although frustrated artists often break out of the rigidly-enforced subcultural boundaries). Local hip-hop, such as in my city of Newcastle, often contains a wealth of talent but complete disregard for the dancehall—so its parties merely showcase performers for passive audiences (also see Andy Bennett, 'Hip hop am Main, Rappin' on the Tyne: Hip Hop Culture as a Local Construct in Two European Cities', in *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place*, Macmillan, 2000).
42. For example Chris Wells, editor of UK Black music magazine *Echoes*, informed readers in April 2001 'Why R&B Has No Soul'.
43. From *Club Cultures* (note 39, p.76)—a study which contains excellent analyses of the class, race and gender biases which make up the ideology of recent popular UK dance cultures, despite being hampered by the relentlessly petit bourgeois delusions and agendas of the promoters who were her informants. Angela McRobbie also discusses the class and gender elitisms informing well-established UK attitudes to dancing and clubs in: 'Shut Up And Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity' (*Cultural Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1993) and 'Dance and Social Fantasy' (in: McRobbie & Mica Nava (eds.) Gender and Generation, Macmillan, 1994).
44. See, for example: Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, (Methuen, 1986); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (trans. Richard Nice, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); and Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Open University Press, 1998). My observations on contemporary urban music clubs come from many

women as objects both of the male gaze and physical proprietorship)—and a new breed of R&B divas now found their ghettocentric stories translated into smug middle class tales of upward mobility.[32]

The trend peaked with a series of late '90s hits which appeared to insult men simply for being short of cash. Though actually insisting on financial and sexual autonomy for women, the lyrics floated in a marketing environment where such freedom was touted as a luxury for sale. With sanitised visual styles emphasising expensive grooming and yuppie accoutrements, any socially aware messages risked being completely swamped—transformed into simple class-based contempt.[33] However, the crossover commercial strategy means that different audiences do not respond uniformly to the music. The superficial confections and showbiz celebrity blather of pop appear to coexist with a strong affinity among urban listeners for those artists with more to say, thanks in particular to the lower class-specific pitch of their lyrics—and to some extent irrespective of the media packaging (which is understood for what it is).[34]

In the mid-1990s the subgenre of nu-soul also brought R&B back into play using a different route—hip-hop's reinscription of jazz and blues idiom and the spoken word commentary of Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets.[35] Confident in using hip-hop beats from the pace at which the R&B/rap hybrid flourished, the more mature nu-soul stance weaves in the ethical and spiritual musings of soul. Young adults reflect honestly on their problems, yearn for positive solutions and regularly pay respect to their working class neighbourboods and social networks. The intricate effects of class, gender and race interact and inform the deliberations of the men as well as the women, with difference and conflict no longer wished away in bourgeois fictions of universal equality.[36] Nu-soul consistently delivers far more complex notions of what might be needed for personal and collective well-being—without being preachy and moralistic and alienating the youth.[37]

So, understood broadly, hip-hop now reflects a rich, diverse tapestry of musical and lyrical styles—expansive and generous rather than inward-looking and exclusive—justifying its characterisation as culture rather than subculture. Thanks to rap's intense class consciousness and the abiding emphasis on lived experience, locality and dance, there is also room for more revolutionary and radical themes to be voiced without instant recuperation into the consumerist lifestyle type of ghetto.[38] And while commercial success enhances the breadth of R&B/hip-hop's appeal, the risks of superficial populism are tempered by the rough edges and echoes of the music's links in the Signifyin' chain of Black traditions—reminders of all the forms of social domination suffered from historic slavery up to our present and future versions.

Urban music's connections to a history of struggles shaping its musical and cultural foundations, and the politics thus facilitated and (sometimes) nourished, give it a progressive potential absent from other contemporary UK dance styles—which have little explicit content to counteract and complicate commercial takeover and neutralisation.[39] The pathways followed by classic R&B in Britain, moreover, have always straddled popular, serious and dance-based perspectives, winding from the 60s Mods through Northern Soul, tacky and posh variants of '70s disco and later smooth jazz and funk styles and 'rare grooves'.[40] With the late 1980s Soul II Soul production renaissance, club nights devoted to the new crossovers with reggae, hip-hop and soul began to appear in many UK cities, maintaining a faltering presence ever since—until youthful infusions of equally open-minded UK garage, hip-hop and bhangra afficionados have recently cemented the scene.[41]

Many Nations Under A Groove

As urban music booms through the limited, liminal spaces of nightclubs and parties worldwide as well as above ground on radio and TV, it is easy to draw conclusions based on a homogenisation of commercial popular culture and the neo-imperialism of globalisation. Likewise, no one evangelises the genre in the kinds of 'taste war' waged by journalists, critics and the entrepreneurial marketers of new musical subcultures in the public forums of student unions and trendy fashion and style magazines. All serious opinion seems to concur that urban music is supremely fake: 'hip-pop' and 'rhythm & bullshit' (modern reggae being hardly worth mentioning at all).[42] However, as Sara Thornton emphasises, such concerns really only preoccupy those guarding their own accumulation of 'cultural capital', whereas: "the authenticities of dance music are complex and contradictory. They waver between an ancestral world of real bodies and city places and the new high-tech order of faceless machines and global dislocation".[43]

In practice, urban music dance participation openly embraces its multiple antecedents, conflicts and futurisms—both in bodily appreciation of the hybrid processing in the music, and in its social resonances and repercussions—without feeling any need to justify or explain itself. Due to the open expressive vulgarity of musical call and dance response, social prestige, stratification and snobbery get short shrift among crowds so heterogeneous in age, race, background and dress code—where it is middle class slummers with noses in the air, besuited after-party businessmen, and rhythm-free pub-circuit punters who stand out like sore thumbs. In sociological provenance we are in the realms simultaneously of the feudal parodies and transgressions of carnival, the modern excesses of display of those for whom hardship recurs randomly according to the whims of the world, and the newly globalising peripheral working classes who consume so as to partake of postmodern human essence.[44]

The treatment of difference in the 'temporary autonomous zones' of urban dancehall is a final element to draw attention to. Of course this is no utopia, and tensions of various kinds regularly simmer and boil over in overt conflict. But there is an overriding sense of respect for the conviviality of place and occasion, even in the presence of the kinds of antagonisms which—in other contexts even in the same city and time—seem irreconcilable. This is the 'respect' that hip-hop is famous for flogging like a dead horse, but as an empathetic burgeoning of tentative practical solidarity it is no mean feat in the new 'refugee camps' which the planet's urban regions are becoming.[45] In particular, the space carved out by women to exist, enjoy, express and experiment—despite the pressures and temptations to retreat to the disco's cattle-market mentality—seems to me to be a significant precedent to set if matched in the thousands of new urban dancehalls in the New World's menacing Order, where communities will need the ability to mobilise and draw on the capacities of all our people in the grassroots struggles ahead.[46] Dancehall dreams indeed.

years of participation on Tyneside and the comparable experiences of others here and elsewhere.

45. 1990s Rap/R&B group the Fugees popularised this concept in their juxtaposition of hip-hop, soul and Caribbean styles. Tyneside, for example, is still an overwhelmingly 'white' area—with extremes of ugly racism still prevalent in everyday life. But in no other setting here have I ever witnessed even the peaceful co-presence of—let alone such fraternal relations among—British and foreign people from all conceivable lines of descent and ethnicity (as well as age) that can be found at urban dance events.

46. Few writers tackle the kinds of themes brought together in this essay. Those that do tend to draw provisional and cautious conclusions along remotely similar lines. See for example Tricia Rose, 'Cultural Survivalisms and Marketplace Subversions: Black Popular Culture and Politics into the 21st Century' (in: Adjaye & Andrews, note 16), and George Lipsitz, 'Facing Up to What's Killing Us: Artistic Practice and Grassroots Social Theory' (in: Long, note 27).

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