

Sonic Diaspora, Vibrations and Rhythm

Thinking through the sounding of the Jamaican dancehall session

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The propagation of vibrations may provide a better way of understanding diasporic spread than the conventional focus on the circulation of products (Hall 1980, Appadurai 1986, 1996, Gilroy 1993a, Brah 1996). Jamaican sound systems operate as a broadcast medium and a source of CDs, DVDs and other commercial products (Henriques 2007a). But the dancehall sound system session also propagates a broad spectrum of frequencies diffused through a range of media and activities - described as “sounding” (following Small’s 1998 concept of “musicking”). These include the material vibrations of the signature low-pitched auditory frequencies of Reggae as a bass culture (Johnson 1980), at the loudness of “sonic dominance” (Henriques 2003). Secondly a session propagates the corporeal vibrations of rituals, dance routines and bass-line “riddims” (Veal 2007). Thirdly it propagates the ethereal vibrations (Henriques 2007b), “vibes” or atmosphere of the sexually charged popular subculture by which the crowd (audience) appreciate each dancehall session as part of the Dancehall scene (Cooper 2004). The paper concludes that thinking through vibrating frequencies makes it easier to appreciate how audiences with no direct or inherited connection with a particular music genre can be energetically infected and affected - to form a sonic diaspora.

Keywords: sound system, bodies, bass

Diasporas are most commonly considered as the migration of peoples, often accompanied by their musicians, instruments or recordings. Mapping continents and centuries, sounds are the foot-loose bearers of musical culture. They carry feelings; they traffic the airwaves as signifiers of youth tribes and nations; they tour with DJs and sound systems; are exchanged as peer-to-peer MP3 downloads; and shuffle the musical associations and feelings of our personal play-lists. Sound’s outbound journey is also often accompanied by an inner journey “home” to a memory-laden and evocative imagined childhood. Diasporic spread has often been a forced scattering, rather than voluntary travel, such as the Old Testament Jewish exodus from Egypt (Cohen 1997).

With its Rastafarian-inspired lyrics, Reggae music for example, makes numerous references to the African diaspora's exile in Babylon; as with the Bob Marley line: "Exodus, movement of Jah people."¹

But the music itself also often spreads, even further afield than the people who might consider themselves its origin (see Sharma et al 1996). Rhythm is notoriously infectious (Browning 1998), with salsa, tango and "world music" each attracting a global following. These "sonic diaspora" are based entirely on "feeling," "taste" or the "vibes" of sound, rather than an inherited predisposition or cultural knowledge. Though members of such diaspora may be the keenest and most knowledgeable collectors of the music and associated paraphernalia, their chosen sound's appeal cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the distribution of products. Evidently sound moves as an affect, not only mechanically as an auditory vibration, or physically as the circulation of a recording. Sound moves people to feel that they have a connection with other people and other places. This, it is suggested here, is best thought through the diffusion of vibrations.

Reggae's popularity second only Hip Hop, for instance, can be heard from the huge number of Ska bands in the USA, and with the global following for different kinds of Jamaican music, such as Dub and Dancehall. There are also vibrant sound system scenes in many European countries, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Mexico, Canada and the USA. These Sounds are not crewed by Jamaicans, but by natives of those countries. Some of these, especially the Japanese and German sound systems, such as Sentinel, have the enthusiasm, skills and confidence to compete against Jamaican Sounds on their own island turf (see Figure 1, below) and take part in international competitions. Indeed in 2005 Sentinel won the World Cup Clash in New York (see Figure 2, below)² and their compatriot DJ Gentleman has also met with considerable success Jamaican radio airwaves. David Rodigan, from south London, has for several decades been a leading Reggae and Dancehall DJ in what has to be described as an extremely tough Jamaican industry. The acceptance and indeed professional success of such *aficionados* is taken here as an indication of the intensities and the spread of a Reggae "sonic diaspora."

Figure 1 Local Jamaican sound clash poster: Turbo Force and Sentinel, Cactus Lawn, Middleton, 20th September 2004 (detail)

Before exploring these vibrations, it is worth considering the way the apparatus of Jamaican sound systems function as a broadcast medium for the music and as a source of DVDs and other commercial products. This notes the importance of the distribution of music products in the conventional manner, rather than as the diffusion of vibrations, to which the remainder of the paper is devoted.

Sound systems

Without sound systems the open-air all-night Jamaican “dancehall sessions,” or “bashments” as they are called, could not take place.³ The term “dancehall” refers to the open-air venue for the session, and “Dancehall” as the current genre of Jamaican music, the successor to Mento, Ska, Raga, Reggae and Dub. Indeed Dancehall music is reputed to have got its name from the venue of the dancehall, as music initially regarded as inappropriate for radio play. Much of the popular musical, cultural and commercial life of Jamaica ripples out from the epicentre of these sessions and is felt across the Jamaican diaspora and in well beyond. As Veal puts it, “These sound systems have been more central to musical innovation in Jamaica than live performance, and the creative practice developed in the sound systems have in turn influenced the evolution of recording conventions” (Veal 2007: 51). So Reggae and Dancehall music in Jamaica has developed in tandem with the sound systems themselves (see also Bradley 2000, Stolzoff 2000). As well as spreading as a global music, Reggae has continued to develop as a genre at home, substantially increasing its hardcore following and recently broadening its appeal with its spread uptown encouraged by live local cable TV broadcast of sessions (see McMillan 2005).

Sound systems perform several roles. One is transmission. As a broadcast medium the peripatetic apparatuses take the latest music to audiences round the island. Winston “WeePow” Powell, owner of Jamaica’s longest established and most successful sound systems, Stone Love Movement, compared the function of his Sound with that of a radio station. “The sound system play a bigger part than the radio in the development of the music,” he told me,

‘Cos a radio station have its cut off point, whereas a sound system doesn’t have a cut off point... the frequency get lost, maybe cut off at May Pen, whereas Stone Love go

all around. We get to where the radio can't reach and it get across the world... especially when you've been established like Stone Love.⁴

For WeePow this makes a sound system a *better* broadcast medium than radio. Indeed the apparatus of the sound system has proved itself to be one the most efficient of musical distribution mechanisms spreading Jamaican music "outernationally" as would be said in the lingo, to achieve a global influence. This has been felt in Hip Hop, and in the UK, Jungle, Drum & Bass, Garage and currently Grime and Dubstep. As an instrument for enjoying music, sound systems have also shaped DJ performance technique, the studio practices of *versioning* and re-mixing as well as the pleasures of listening in raves, clubs and carnivals.

Secondly sound systems also serve as a sound source for music products such as compilation CDs, DVDs and most recently cable television programming that in turn facilitates their broadcast medium function (see Figure 2, below). Much of the research has concentrated on mapping how sound products traffic the world (see for example Connell and Gibson 2003). This is the case in every culture and not only with commercial products, but instruments, such as the accordion that arrived with sailors in La Boca of Buenos Aires to become the foundation of Tango, or artists, such as the wandering Ashkenazi Jewish klezmer players. Then there are the West African Nyabinghi burru rhythms on which Reggae is based, or Kumina rhythms at the heart of the current Dancehall "riddims," or the encounter of African traditions with modern American music technologies producing Jazz music, as just three examples of the infamous triangular trade whose repercussions Paul Gilroy (1993a) explores in *The Black Atlantic*. Such flows and circulations have inspired a substantial literature on the movement products and peoples (Appadurai 1986, 1996, Braidotti 1994). They also recall Hall's (1980) idea of the *circuit of culture*, as a critique of any simple linear cause and effect relationship between, for example, production and consumption (Henriques 2007b). The island of Jamaica has been a particularly powerful amplifying circuit in the global circulation of music products. One example would be the Studio One 45s that came in Daddy Pecking's suitcase from Jamaica to West London for example,⁵ not to mention the rhythmic flows south, as with R & B and Country & Western, and north with Ska and Reggae stimulating what became Hip Hop and Rap (Rose 1994).

Figure 2 DVD cover for 2005 World Cup clash, New York

There are limitations, however, to what can be understood about diaspora in terms of flows or circulations. One is that an emphasis on routes, while emphasising travel, reinforces essentialist ideas of identity a being founded in origins, authenticities, roots or retentions. Another is that an account in terms of flow dynamics, while less static than one that describes fixed structures, is restricted to quantitative measures of the distribution of objects. Circulation mechanisms are not concerned with *what* is circulated, or *why* it might have the effects it does, or the relationship between the sender and receiver of the goods. Why should lyrics about “sufferation” or “downpression,” for instance, resonate with audiences with virtually no knowledge of such realities in their own lives? (Similarly Hip Hop gangster rap sales in the USA are made largely to the white middle class “wigger” youth market). It is these issues with which thinking through vibrations seeks to engage, in terms of the qualities, values and meaning of *affective* transmission and the infection of intensities.

Sounding

To begin thinking through vibrations we have to disabuse ourselves of the commonplace assumption that sound is a thing. It is not; it is an activity, performance, or auditory vibration. Sound only ever becomes an object as a result of it being recorded (Eisenberg 1987). So the conception of sound itself has to be energised. In fact the verb *sounding*, as distinct from the noun *sound*, marks an important shift, which is political and theoretical, as well as linguistic. The verb *sounding* is expressive and has agency; it is a kinetic activity, a social and cultural practice, a making and becoming, as with for example, “sounding off” in anger, or the “sounding out” of an exploratory methodology. Sound is never static; it is only ever an effect, always transitory and ephemeral, requiring continual propagation to be sustained. Thus sound is so much re-produced as *re-presented*, as Lastra (1992: 72) points out. Moreover with Dub music specifically, sounding is re-verb, as well as verb, in the reverberating echoes of the track, resonating and re-sounding – to redouble the vibes, in what has become the sonic signature of the genre. As Nancy puts it: “Sonority necessarily *re-sounds*: it is in itself resonance” (Nancy 2008: x, emphasis in original).

The idea of sounding as a verb carries echoes of its past. It draws on Amari Baraka's (a.k.a. Leroi Jones, 1961) essay *Swing – From Verb to Noun*, where he states:

I speak of the *verb process*, the doing, the coming into being, the at-the-time-of. Which is why we think there is particular value in live music, contemplating the artefact as it arrives, listening to it emerge. *There* it is. And *there*" (Baraka 1961: 174, emphasis in original).

Commenting on this, Mackey states: "This movement from verb to noun is precisely a strategy of cultural and political 'containment.'" So it's not just that a verb is mistaken for a noun by a cultural industry that doesn't know any better; rather, the movement from verb to noun can be considered as a process of subjugation, if not oppression. "From verb to noun' means the erasure of black [sic] inventiveness..." (Mackey 1993: 266), he tells us. Against this, the Reggae music production technique of *versioning* provides a good example of precisely this kind of inventiveness, at the heart of every culture.

This idea of sounding as ongoing performance also has an ear for Small's (1998) concept of *musicking*, the term he coined to describe the assemblage of everything, everyone and all the activities that go into a music-making event:

The fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in object, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do. It is only by understanding what people do as they take part in a musical act that we can hope to understand its nature and the function it fulfils in human life... *To music* is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practising, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing. We might at times even extend its meaning to what the person is doing who takes the tickets at the door or the hefty men who shift the piano and the drums or the roadies... (Small 1998: 8-9, emphasis added).

The importance of this idea of *musicking*, besides its dynamic emphasis, is to provide a sounding with a more comprehensive remit, that makes it possible to embrace its physical, technological, cultural and social aspects (as is explored in terms of vibrations below). So the *musicking* of session includes the work of the maintenance crew,

speaker-box carpenters, amplifier-makers, dry roast peanut sellers, not to mention the crowd and all the instruments, props, processes, rituals, roles and performance techniques of the selector and MC, as well as the printing and fly-posting before the session, to selling its recording as a mix CD afterwards. The example Small takes for his fine-grained, textured, nuanced, detailed “thick” Geertzian account, is in fact a classical symphony concert, though his point remains the same:

Music should be viewed as an act instead of a thing. Who is doing it? where? and who is listening? then become the primary questions. By looking at music this way, we begin to understand the relationship between music, people, history and the larger culture.⁶

The practice of *musicking* generates meaning and feeling in the relationship of the activity of performance (see Butler 1990). To support this approach, Small (1987) also draws on Chernoff’s (1977) rich and detailed account of this social production and consumption of music in contemporary Western African music making.⁷

Sounding shares many of the characteristics of musicking, as both are concerned with the dynamic relationships between practices, and the objects and subjects they make, including listener’s impressions and performers’ expressions. But it is also important to distinguish between the two activities. In one respect, sounding is concerned with smaller detail than musicking, as sound is necessary component of music, one of the points made by John Cage’s famous 4’ 33” of “silence.” Also it is a component of a spectrum of auditory phenomenon, like noise, on the edge, or outside, music. At the same time, sounding specifies the unique character of musicking that differentiates it from similar areas of creative activity. Theatre or fine arts, for instance, could also benefit from being considered as scenes of multiple and various components, participants and activities. But sounding is not central to them in the way it is to the Dancehall scene. Thinking through the vibrations of sounding, rather than musicking, also acknowledges sound as having more disruptive and excessive potential than music. This is especially the case where this reaches the excesses of noise, or plumbs the depths of the lower frequencies, rather than the more easily recuperated mid-frequencies. In this way sounding can have interrogative or subversive qualities, against the more firmly theoretically constituted object that “music” is considered to be. Most

important, the range of practices required for sounding ensure that its dynamics are not restricted to diffusion through only a material medium alone.

The Propagation of Vibrations

In a similar manner to how sound has been energised by thinking through sounding, so the idea of vibration has to be broadened and recognised as occurring across a spectrum of frequencies, and through a range of media. Considering vibrations, as with sounding, it is best to start with movement, kinetics, dynamics and energies rather than the material matter or substance of the medium through which these diffuse - though each is equally necessary for the other. The dancehall session provides evidence of this spectrum of frequencies and range of materials. In this way it functions as an apparatus for the propagation of vibrations, in addition to its roles as broadcast medium and source of commercial products.⁸ Furthermore the dancehall session also serves as a model for diasporic propagation, that is how *all* diaspora are spread, not only those with a Reggae beat; and how diaspora are diffused through all kinds of media, not only the auditory medium. Sonic and musical fields are favoured only because these provide examples of accessible vibrations that are accessible - with a vocabulary of rhythm, polyrhythm, resonance, timbre, echo, syncopation, entrainment, reverberation and so on. These can be described not only as material vibrations of the auditory medium, but also with all the deeper affective resonances of the idiomatic term “vibes” – to include the corporeal and ethereal vibrations described below.

Material Vibrations: Sonic dominance and bass culture

In the first place there are vibrations in the material medium of air - without which there would be silence. These carry the signature high volume and low frequency auditory sound waves of what is described as a Jamaica’s *bass* culture. In the mechanics of auditory propagation the bass is the most ubiquitous and least directional of frequencies, compared to the mid range or top whose directional source can be identified much more easily.⁹ Amplitudes or loudness of volume on the one hand, and the pitch, wavelength or frequency of vibrations, on the other, are two of the defining attributes of sound waves (the third being *timbre*, or “sound colour,” as discussed below). For the crowd going out for the night, one of the distinctive features of a dancehall session is the loud volume of the music. This sounding out of the session acts as an auditory beacon, pulling in the crowd, as moths to a light, so to speak. A session

is easily heard from a distance of several city blocks, or many miles across country valleys.

What pushes the crowd towards the sonic event of the session is their anticipation of its visceral sensory pleasure - the most powerful music machines in the world vibrating every cell of every body. This is the visceral heart and soul of the Dancehall scene. The term *sonic dominance* (Henriques 2003) describes such immersive liminal intensities of sound, experienced as the sheer weight, force and substantive presence of the sounding of the session, resonating with the lingo of the “massive” for the dancehall crowd. This is impossible to escape or deny - the audible becomes haptic, and the intangible tangible. This makes the “bowl” between the stacks of speakers (see Figure 3, below), normally considered only as empty “space,” brim-full. Listening depends not only on the ears, but the entire haptic sensory skin surface of the body, as the hard-core Dancehall followers evidence by their donning ear-plugs and standing as near as possible, or even inside, the bass ports of the vast speaker cabinets. Such immersive whole-body listening may be contrasted with the inserting music into the body, via in-ear headphones.

Figure 3 Venus Disco Owner and maintenance crewmember washing the inside of the bass bin, before the session, Skateland, Half Way Tree, Kingston, July 2002

The other key characteristic of material vibrations in the dancehall is their pitch as a *bass culture*.¹⁰ These are the bottom end, low frequencies, as distinct from the top or mid-range of the listening spectrum (that is necessarily favoured by ipod and other personal earphone listening devices). As Dennis Rowe, owner of the long established UK Saxon sound system told me, the music being listened to in the 70's “was all treble and mid, it had no bass to it.”¹¹ These bass lines are literally the heartbeat of Reggae music, the “classic” ones being produced in a uniquely creative period of the late 1960's and early 70's (Veal 2007). Often described as “foundation riddims,” recognising yet another depth to the musical genre, they continue to re-animate the music as the basis of innumerable *versions*. An even earlier iteration of this idea of a bass culture comes in the introduction to *The Invisible Man* where novelist Ralph Ellison (1947) discusses the special significance of the bass vibrations or “the lower frequencies” for his hero's sense of identity.¹² The Invisible Man pumps his cellar not only with light, but also with sound,

delivered by five radiograms simultaneously playing Louis Armstrong. The record on the turntable? Famously it was (*Why Do I Always Feel So*) *Black and Blue* recorded in 1951. More recently the idea was referenced as *Bass Culture* by UK Jamaican Dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson's 1980 album of that name. Also Bradley's *Bass Culture* (2002) gives a very useful account of Jamaican sound systems culture and its history.

This idea of bass culture has also been accompanied with that of "low end" theory as a marketing theme on the current London Dubstep scene, with Burial's second album *Untrue*.¹³ The distinctive sound of Burial's music tracks explore the textures and colours of sound to achieve a particular late-night, after the club, urban feel, developing the distinctive London sounds of the 1990's Jungle and Drum & Bass, and more recently Grime. Dubstep, along with many forms of electronic music (see Eshun 1998, Veal 2007) is also inspired by Dub. This musical genre was invented in the late 1960's and early 70's by the sound engineers such as King Tubby and Lee "Scratch" Perry and others in Kingston recording studio and the dancehalls. Their techniques exploited recording and phonographic technologies to excavate the texture, timbres and resonating depths of sound itself. To dub is to copy, underlining what can be described as the actual *grain* of sound, as Barthes (1977) famously discusses with "the grain of the voice" at the limits of language.¹⁴ Similarly at the limits of music, the particular tone and tenor characteristic of the Jamaican sound are the cue for thinking through the vibrations of soundings.¹⁵ It does this without recourse to ideas about authenticities, origins or essentials, or referring to the structural features of melodies, harmonies or even rhythms, or attempting any musical homology with social and political structures (for example Willis 1978, Attali 1985, see also Shepherd and Wicke 1997). Instead it gives attention to the ebb, flow and flux of sound itself. These are the *diffusions of intensities* that the ancient Greek word *diaspora* for "dispersion... to sow, scatter" (OED) can be used to describe, as much as the *distribution* of bodies, or circulation of music products, it more commonly denotes.

The third characteristic of vibrations, in addition to their loudness and pitch, is their *timbre*, or sound colour, as it is also called (see Smith 1997).¹⁶ Timbre is a particular quality of a sound that make it distinctive – its harmonics, or mixing of amplitudes and frequencies described in terms of the dynamic characteristics of vibrato, attack-decay envelopes, overtones and so on. Each particular type of instrument has its own "tone"

(as distinct from frequency pitch), such that, at the same pitch and the same loudness the sound of a trumpet to a violin, for example, are experienced as completely different by a listener. Furthermore, to the expert discriminating ear, each individual example of each instrument is distinctive, as with different Stradivarius violins, for example, or indeed Kingston recording studio, as Reggae singer Berres Hammond pointed out to me.¹⁷ In same manner, the prosody of each person's voice has a distinctive tone, recognised, for instance, every time we say, "It's me." Lower pitch bass frequencies, for example, carry a particular authority associated with the power of the male voice, as against the higher pitch of the female. This by contrast has been associated with hysteria, which historically has been considered to need male control, as Carson (1995) explores with reference to ancient Greek literature and society. So bass is always already specifically embodied and gendered.

Corporeal Vibrations: Bass-line and "riddim"

The second frequency band is that of the corporeal vibrations of the crowd in the dancehall session – diffused through the fleshly medium of their bodies. Without these there would be no hearing or dancing. While a dancehall session is a specifically auditory sensory experience, at the same time it groups together a range senses including vision, touch, smell, taste, temperature, kinetics and so on. So the sound system is little short of a multi-media apparatus in which live video projection and dancing have become increasingly important as rhythms spread by "jumping" from one medium to another. With corporeal vibrations a session becomes a particular kinetic space and shared social *place* (see Figure 4, below), with a specific geographic location where the individuals come together as a crowd, or audience, for the duration of the *event*. Listening on ipods provides an example of the importance of such locating and scheduling. The phenomenon of flash mob raves in the UK and USA evidences the appetite for such a shared social listening environment, where this is juxtaposed with private hearing.¹⁸ For these events ipod listeners arrange to meet at a particular public venue, such as a railway station, in order to dance together - but without anyone necessarily knowing what music others there are listening to.

Figure 4 Dancers, ChuChu Benz session, August Town, June 2004

In the dancehall session corporeal vibrations are embodied in the patterns of the crowd's kinetic movement, the choreography of their dance, and the style, skills and techniques of the MC and selector and other sound system crewmembers (who are the subject of further research).¹⁹ These corporeal vibrations resonate with material auditory vibrations, where the bass becomes the *bass-line* patterning of the amplitudes of accented and unaccented moments. In Reggae these drum and bass rhythms have become the signature "riddim" tracks on which the Dancehall music scene flows (see Marshall and Manuel 2006). Furthermore this resonating pattern between sound and embodied movement becomes that of a *base* culture (as discussed below), as carrier frequency, as it were, for Africa's musical gifts to its diaspora. So vibrations are not only those of auditory propagation itself, but also include a spectrum of rhythms, whose frequencies (or pitches or speeds) and amplitudes (or loudness or intensities) are diffused through an equally broad range of media.

The transitory ephemeral nature of auditory propagation makes it an almost non-material form of expression, compared with visual arts. Rhythmic patterning is highly mobile and easily transported with the most minimal of material requirements, to an even greater extent than non-percussive musical instrumentation. This makes bass culture particularly important for diasporic spread, as the engine room of a culture, to use term for the bass steel drums on the floor of a traditional Trinidad Carnival float. Virtually any physical object can be purposed as a percussive instrument, from steel oil drums in Trinidad, to miners' rubber boots in South Africa, to the eight beat *clave* samba rhythm - taking its name from the wooden boat pegs with which it was originally beaten. The bass, as distinct from basic, characteristic of African musical cultures also directs attention to the mechanisms and processes of auditory propagation itself. Sounds are longitudinal compression waves that diffuse intensities through a medium, rather than circulate in the way that objects are distributed.²⁰ So rhythms can be expressed through both auditory and non-auditory material, as Turetzky (2002: 124) points out (see Henriques 2007b). For Lefebvre (2004) rhythms give pattern to heterogeneous materials with routines, rituals and the cycles of daily life, which he explores in his *rhythmanalysis* of Mediterranean cities. Another way of considering the patterning of a rhythm is as a *gestalt*, in the tradition of the school of psychology of that name, which were first investigated as an *auditory* gestalt, rather than the visual patterns by which they became known (Bregman 1990). One of the values of the gestalt approach is its

conception of identity as pattern, rather than component materials or parts. Furthermore a gestalt occurs as a *relationship* between the measure of such objective quantities and the value of subject qualities. The gestalt flip between “duck” and “rabbit” shapes, in the classic example, pinpoints this.²¹ This emphasises the importance of the framework through which data or materials can “makes sense,” rather than merely accumulate.

The high volumes, low frequencies and distinctive rhythmic pattering make material and corporeal vibrations memorable, quickly becoming culturally laden, or “fully loaded,” as would be said. There are resonances, entrainments and syncopations between auditory vibrations and the breaths, pulses and heartbeats of the crowd’s corporeal vibrations. This makes a phonetic connection - where none exists etymologically - between bass frequency and *base* matter, as the substantive embodiment of the crowd. This is the bass and base of the flesh-and-blood body that finds expression in Cooper’s (1993) *Noises in the Blood* title. It further reverberates through Linton Kwesi Johnson’s *Bass Culture* lyric:

muzik of blood
black reared
pain rooted
heart geared...
it is the beat of the heart,
this pulsing of blood
that is a bublin bass,
a bad bad beat
pushin gainst the wall
whey bar black blood²²

As well as bodily being, heartbeat and blood pulse, this idea of base further extends to the body politic. In Marxism the means of production is the base on which society’s ideological superstructure is founded. Indeed the sound system sub-culture has itself been described as a “cultural apparatus” (Chude-Sokei 1997:4), with “its own aesthetics and a unique mode of consumption” (Gilroy 1987: 164), escaping and even reversing dominant *political* ideologies. Reggae music forges such resistance out of the intensities and dynamics of the material vibrations of sound itself at about the same historical

moment of the 1960's and early 70's as it was being rendered verbally as "black power," drawing on a political history that began with Marcus Garvey in Jamaica the 1920's. This is bass and base as the bottom line of sound, from which the "vibes" bass culture has been "built," to use the studio producer's phrase.

The rhythmic patterning of the bass frequencies give a percussive structure, rather than the melodic or harmonic ones that often feature in classical European musical traditions.²³ With its forte in rhythm, polyrhythms and syncopation, the drum used in African musical traditions, only requires a limited tonal range (Chernoff 1979). At the height of European Imperialism, Hegel's idealistic philosophy took the issue of repetition as the stick to beat non-European civilisation, so to say. Hegel's project, according to James Snead's (1981) seminal essay *Repetition in Black Culture*, was to measure European civilisation as superior to all others. He did this by the benchmark of progress, against its opposite, which for Hegel was Africa. According to Hegel in *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* (1955) Africa lacked everything that characterised European civilisation. The entire continent was without logic, lost in the immediacy of the moment, and thus, most damning of all, outside history:

In this main portion of Africa there can really be no history. There is a succession of *accidents and surprises*...What we actually understand by 'Africa,' is that which is without history and resolution, which is *still* fully caught up in the natural spirit, and which here must be mentioned as being on the threshold of world history (Hegel 1955, trans. Snead 1981: 146, emphasis in translation).

According to Snead's account of Hegel, Africa's "natural spirit" is defined by its association with the accidents and surprises of the rhythmic "cut" (as in cut and mix) of repetition (Snead 1981: 150), as against the uninterrupted accumulating line of progress, said to define European civilisation. Such is the polemical value of the beat, taking us to the final frequency band.

Ethereal Vibrations: Base culture and "making sense"

Thirdly there are the ethereal vibrations of the Dancehall scene's customs and practices, seasonal calendar, cycles of style and fashion, lingo and so on. These describe the "vibes" that is the ambiance, atmosphere and feelings generated in and by

the session. Without ethereal vibrations there would be no listening, understanding, valuing or “making sense” of the session as part of the culture of dancehall scene - nobody would come. Ethereal vibrations concern *listening*, rather than the *hearing* with which corporeal vibrations are occupied. While listening requires hearing, there is little that is automatic or natural about it. Listening is a mental, social and cultural process, a distinctive *technique* as such, that has to be distinguished from the physiological facility of hearing. As Roland Barthes points out: “*Hearing* is a physiological phenomenon; *listening* is a psychological act” (Barthes 1976/1985: 245), (see also Henriques 2007b). The Jamaican sensibility gives an ethereal value to sounding, not only for the material power its amplitudes and low frequencies, but also as “an attitude,” as would be said in the lingo. As Charlie B a DJ on my local London pirate radio station (which happens to be called Vibes FM) puts it: “Tune in, pump up the volume, and rip off the knob. We just don’t care.” This indicates how the ethereality of ethereal vibrations concerns the subtleties of meaning, significance and “making sense,” rather than being rarefied or removed from the actual world.

Figure 5 Flyers on the mixing decks for the MC to announce future events, Weddi Weddi Wednesday, Stone Love HQ, June 2004

These ethereal “vibes” are “built” from the crowd’s knowledge, understanding, appreciation, sensitivity, expectations and so on, often accumulated from years of attending dancehall sessions. Each crowd-member has their tastes, loyalties, memories, associations and expectations depending on their knowledge of the selectors on the bill, sound system, venue and so on. So for ethereal vibrations the “body” can be the *esprit de corps* of the ensemble crew, the Sound’s followers, the crowd composed of different sub-groups of dance crews, such as Dancehall Queens and others. This crowd makes the session an event, as well as a space and place. Top selectors, such as Stone Loves’ Rory or Tony Matterhorn, are each known for the particular styles of music they play, from “Rare Groove” and “Golden Oldies,” to the bespoke “dubpate specials” (see Veal 2007), to the latest hits. Indeed the intensities of material vibrations make multiple connections with and within the corporeal vibrations of the crowd, between them and the ethereal ones of the dancehall. These are expressed, for example, in the different ancestral and utopian temporalities of the session (Henriques 2007a). These

ethereal vibrations of sounding also resonate with different folk and West African social and cultural traditions.

The Jamaican sensibilities can also be described as a *base* culture, drawing attention to the social grounding of the culture. This is expressed through the Dancehall choreography and its African inspired folk traditions (see Lewin 2000). The baseness of the culture is literally the ground of the earth, soil, dirt or “dutty,” as is it called in the lingo. With their flat-footed stamp the dancer emphasises their earthly connection, as a distinct contrast to the pirouettes and leaps of the European classical tradition, that aspire to have as little contact with the ground for as long as possible.²⁴ Furthermore the dancing is literally bottom-up with its signature “bumper-grinding” sexually explicit choreography, where the bass note is struck by the body itself - displaying its fecundity and celebrating its fertility. Such an aesthetic has always been volubly criticised by Jamaican middle class opinion. For them base denotes crude, debased, unrefined, vulgar and even animal, and is condemned in the register of sexuality as “slackness” (as Cooper 1993 discusses). Such basic lower frequencies and embodied resonances are distinctly inferior to the higher notes only the mind is considered capable of striking - with the refined sophistication of “high” culture. So what radiates from a session are not only the material vibrations of sound itself, and the corporeal vibrations of a new “riddim” or dance step, but also the word of mouth on the next session (see Figure 5, above), not to mention all the gossip about who was there, with whom, what they were wearing and generally “what-a-go-on.” All this, as well the cable TV broadcasts, DVD videos and compilation CDs, serve as a medium for the expression of the style, fashion and values of the dancehall scene.

The popular working class subculture of Dancehall can also be described as a *base* culture. It is a bottom-up popular, street culture, generated by an urban underclass surviving almost entirely outside the formal economy. The dancehall scene is working class - or *lumpen*, given the levels of unemployment - and marginal, given its involvement in the black or grey economies and criminal activities, as for example with “The British Link-up Crew” (Hope 2004). Kingston’s urban geography reflects what has long been acknowledged to be a society sharply divided along colour and class lines (see Henriques, F., 1953). In terms of entertainment, as well as everything else, the poor downtown Kingston areas and other ghetto communities consider themselves

excluded from mainstream civil society (see Levi and Chevannes 1996, Clarke 2005, Amnesty International 2008). Once prosperous middle class districts, many of the downtown inner city areas in West Kingston, are now much like favelas or shantytowns in other parts of the world. This is the Dancehall heartland, an example of what can be described as a result of Raymond Williams' (1958) conceptual opening-up of "culture" to what ordinary people actually do, rather than the traditionally privileged artistic "high" culture (initiating the entire cultural studies tradition). Dancehall is a *subculture* then, similar in the type to those so named by Hebdige's (1979) monograph of that title, not necessarily small, but rather *underneath* the official one.

This makes base culture quite distinct from either avant garde or commercial cultures, though in fact the widespread influence of 1970's Jamaican Dub gives it a close connection to the former, as the current spread of Dancehall does with the later (see Henriques 2007b). Thinking through these ethereal vibrations, further to *The Black Atlantic*, a black *Atlantis* can be imagined - as lost source civilisation built on rhythm, resonance and reverberation, as an *afroancientism*, rather the more common *afrofuturism*, as it were. This might find value, as Dub does, in the subtleties of the tones, timbres, textures and qualities of the material vibrations of auditory propagation itself. In fact this has been described in various ways, as for example a rich multi-dimensional "percussive field" to use Mowitt's (2002) phrase, or Lefebvre's (2004) *rhythmanalysis*, or the particular Caribbean sensibility that Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996) describes in his instructively entitled *The Repeating Island*, or Bibi Bakare-Yusuf's (2001) *The Sea of Memory*.²⁵ Rhythms pattern the vibration of bass amplitudes to move a beat, rather than a bit of anything.

In this way the propagation range of sounding reaches well beyond earshot, as it also diffuses with corporeal and ethereal vibrations of a sonic diaspora. This promotes an energetic transmission of affect, rather than one of spatial or temporal connection. The experience of listening to music can create a home away from home, or an aspirational future home (see also Gilroy 2000). For a sonic diaspora a dance, dancehall, rave or club may evoke participants' feelings for a land of which they have no first hand knowledge, as with, for example, the virtually entirely English following for the traditional valve-powered old style single-turntable sound systems such as Jah Shaka (see Figure 6, below). Equally the music may evoke a mythical homeland of "Africa" away from

Babylon; or may create a deterritorialised “Zulu Nation” as Afrika Bambaata raised out of the Bronx. These are just a few examples of how material bass beat and corporeal heartbeat of the bass-line, embodied through ethereal vibrations, build nothing less than a nation state of the musical imagination. In fact the ethereal, corporeal and material frequency bands form a continuous spectrum of vibrations from the fastest of visible light, to the slowest of seasonal and even generational cycles, in terms of measure. But in terms of value, the scale of human embodiment and its sensitivities place each vibration band on a different scale, order of magnitude, or medium. These determine that we have a particular stake, orientation and position in this spectrum. In African traditions as well as ancient European philosophy, the qualitative values and proportional relationships these frequency bands would be described in terms of the correspondences between the *micro*, *meso* and *macro* parts of the whole cosmos (see van Dyk 2001).

Figure 6 Jah Shaka sound system dance, London 2003

Conclusions: the dynamics of sonic diaspora

Thinking through the vibrations of sounding suggests that identity itself, especially those of diaspora, can be considered as dynamically multiple, variable and extrinsically constituted. This offers opportunities to understand the emotional intensities and affective associations of diasporic transmission, in a way that conventional accounts relying on the identity of objects or traffic of music products, fail to capture. Music’s gestural, evocative and expressive nature, while facilitating communication across cultural barriers, also makes its affective appeal almost impossible to pin down (Middleton 1990, Shepherd and Wicke 1997). Recognising this challenge, the paper has taken the example of the dancehall sound system session to try to consider music from the standpoint of the dynamics of its vibrations, rather than as an object or product that somehow “carries” meanings, feelings and associations. In short, *sounds carry people, as much as people carry sounds*; “vibes” find bodies to move - as when a track “makes you want to dance,” for instance. Bodies have no musical burden to bear; rather they are borne along, even berthed, by music. This might appear to be a case of the tail wagging the dog; but in fact this is much the same conceit as Richard Dawkins proposed in his hugely influential *The Selfish Gene* in 1976. While thinking through “vibes” and vibrations has absolutely nothing to do with genetics or evolutionary theory,

two of its key features of can be underlined by contrasting them with Dawkins' genetic focus, to conclude this paper.

In the first place frequency vibrations take place outside the corporeal medium of an individual body - in the surrounding kinetic field of the environment that it inhabits. This identifies explanations in *external relationships*.²⁶ Dawkins also makes a similar gestalt shift away from bodies, but in the opposite direction. He states his central idea in his preface: "We are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes." The book and books that followed pursued this gene eye-view for which bodies serve only as vehicles. His focus is thus entirely on genetic material *within* the organism, as the determinant of behaviour, in a manner that many would argue was reductionist. To account for cultural continuities, but avoid any possible role for external relationships, Dawkins is forced to introduce the idea of the "meme," as the unit for mimetic cultural replication.²⁷ So favoring vibrations – rather than genes - over the material bodies of the medium, through which they are transmitted, orientates the present investigation to a rather different path to Dawkins'.

This is the second key point. Vibrations start with movement. They are transitory and energetic, rather than the comparatively stable codes that genes are said to be. It was the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who championed change, rather than stasis, as the ultimate reality, an emphasis Karl Marx takes up in his critique of capitalism when he states: "all that's solid melts to air" (see Berman 1983). Vibrations are a way to explore the variable and contingent character of diasporic identities. This is what Stuart Hall captures by considering identity, "as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation... Cultural identities are... unstable points of identification or suture... Not an essence but a *positioning*" (Hall 1989: 222, 226, emphasis in original). Hall (1992, 1996), and Bhabha (1990, 1994) with his concept of hybridity, have since developed this as critique of identity as a static or fixed category. In this vain diasporic identities are routinely considered as unstable, in-process, multiple, plural, simultaneous, fractured and "post" both colonial and modern formations (Brah 1996, Lavie and Swedenburg 1996, Van Hear 1998, Banerjea 1998).²⁸ Thinking through the rhythmic field of vibrations attempts to recognise the extrinsically influenced and dynamic character of all identities, especially those of diaspora, as well as the energetic transmission of affect. But just as

genes and bodies, or genotype and phenotype, or replicators and their vehicles, are in fact mutually dependent on each other, so kinetic energy or movement is dependent on the materials or objects of its medium of expression. Movement cannot be expressed without matter, and as philosophers such as Bergson would add, matter is always animate. The next stage for the research is to specify the propagation mechanisms for each of the frequency bands - to begin an account of the energetic transmission of affect through sonic diaspora.

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¹ This paper is derived from my PhD research, *Sonic Bodies: The Skills and Performance Techniques of the Reggae Sound System Crew*. This is based on observation and in depth interviews with owners, engineers, selectors, MCs, crowd (audience) and followers (dedicated fans) mainly of the Stone Love Movement sound system, in downtown Kingston, Jamaica, all of whom I would like to thank for their time and support.

² <http://www.claat.com/article/articleview/1032/1/25/> accessed 8th February 2006.

³ Contemporary research interest in Reggae and Dancehall as a popular culture has been pioneered by Carolyn Copper who founded the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica. Cooper's (1993) *Noises in the Blood* and more recently *Sound Clash* (2004) take a literary textual approach to investigate the lyrical content of the music, which has attracted some criticism (Hippolyte 2006). Debate has been encouraged and important issues raised in *Small Axe*, a journal focused on Caribbean arts and politics (for example, Scott 2000, see also Scott 2004). The field of study is now being broadened with approaches stemming from social geography and with a new generation of scholars, notably Stanley-Niaah (2004a and 2004b) and Donna Hope (2006). Further Bibi Bakare-Yusif (2001 and 2006) brings some very welcome theoretical rigour with a phenomenologically-inspired consideration of the dancehall session and Dancehall fashion. Sound systems have also featured in contemporary research and there is useful descriptive material to be found in Norman Stolzoff (2000) Lloyd Bradley (2000) and the very few studies of the Reggae genre, such as Kwame Dawes' (1999) monograph. Then there are the more popular guides to the music such as Chang and Wayne (1998) and Barrow and Dalton (1997) and Salewicz et al (2001), David Katz (2000 and 2003). On the musical front this includes Marshall and Manuel (2006) journal article, Michael Veal's (2007) monograph devoted to the subject and Chude-Sokei (1997) and Andrew Campbell's (1997) very useful account of sound system crew practices in, as well as John Constantinides (2002). The recent documentary film *Dub Echoes* by Bruno Natal also makes an important contribution to the research field, see <http://www.dubechoes.com/> [Accessed 23 December 2007].

⁴ Interview with Mr Winston "WeePow" Powell, 30th July 2002 at Stone Love HQ, Burlington Avenue, Kingston.

⁵ For many years "Daddy Pecking" sold these records for his shop in West London, see <http://www.downbeat-special.co.uk/tributetopecking.html>, accessed 15th April 2008.

⁶ See <http://sunsite.queensu.ca/memorypalace/parlour/Small02/> accessed 19th September 2005

⁷ Moreover, Small has a philosophical debt to Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology in two respects. The idea of musicking involves the kind of immersion in the phenomenon for which the *being-in-the-world*, or *dasein*, of phenomenology is named. Furthermore musicking has a helpful emphasis on action and the relationship between the agent and the world, where he describes the intimacies and intensities of this

relationship as a *chiasm* or intertwining (Merleau-Ponty 1968), or a *doing-in-the-world*, to gloss Merleau-Ponty's term.

⁸ Describing this apparatus of the sound system session, that is how it propagates vibrations, is one of the subjects of ongoing research.

⁹ For this reason many domestic music systems only need a single bass speaker, but retain stereo for the mid and top.

¹⁰ I would like to acknowledge the impetus to reconsider this idea of bass culture as being Linton Kwesi Johnson and Paul Gilroy's talk at Goldsmiths Centre for Arts and Learning, *African Consciousness, Reggae and the Diaspora*, 20th November 2007.

¹¹ Interview with Dennis Rowe, Burgess Park, London, October 2005.

¹² Ellison's appreciation of music, Jazz and technology has been comparatively well documented, see Weheliye (2005) and Maxwell (2004).

¹³ Visit <http://www.hyperdub.com/>. *The Low End Theory* was also the title of A Tribe Called Quest's 1991 album.

¹⁴ Indeed Roads (2002) develops theory of musical sounds based on granules.

¹⁵ The French classical composer Claude Debussy is said to have made a similar such discover of new tonal and harmonic qualities on hearing a Javanese Gamelan ensemble at the Paris Exposition of 1889.

¹⁶ See <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/Hbase/sound/timbre.html>, accessed 15th April 2008.

¹⁷ Personal communication while he was composing some of the music tracks for my film feature *Babymother*.

¹⁸ Visit for example <http://www.geocities.com/londonmobs/>

¹⁹ See note 1, above.

²⁰ The metal coil of a "slinky" toy provides a model of compression waves: when a section of the coil is compressed, and then released, the intensity of a compression wave travels along its length. These compression waves are distinct and different from both the transverse of the electromagnetic spectrum, which in the case of light waves require no medium, as well as from the flow of objects suspended in a medium, as with silt particles in a river, or the distribution of commercial products.

²¹ It also provided Thomas Kuhn's (1962) with his metaphor for now widely accepted concept of *paradigm* shifts in science.

²² Johnson (1980).

²³ Within Europe musical and social issues are framed in the relationship between melody and harmony, instrumentalised in classical antiquity in the tension between lyre and flute. The several-stringed lyre was Apollo's choice representing social harmony, that for Bacchus, the satyrs or Pan, was the flute or pipe, capable only of a single melodic line, and therefore considered as a disruptive influence (Connor 2001). Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*, a satyr, shows graphically who was victorious.

²⁴ As I was informed by choreographer L'Antoinette Oshu Ide Stines.

²⁵ Another approach that have attempted to forge a relationship between Jamaican research material and European philosophical traditions of enquiry is Huon Wardle's *An Ethnography of Cosmopolitanism in Kingston, Jamaica*, (2000) where he describes the inner-city dwellers as acting out the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

²⁶ The importance of vibrations can also be located a broader research tradition that includes the Gestalt school of psychology from which Kurt Lewin (1952) developed his field theory and Fritz Heider (1926) his concept of the connective tissue of a medium; the pressures and intensities that animate Deleuze and Guattari (1988) concepts of the Body without Organs and the refrain; Michel Serres' (1982) concept of milieu as that which is always *in medias res*, in the middle of things; current work on social and emotional contagion (see Hatfield *et al* 1994) such as ripple effects, copy-cat behaviour, word of mouth and Web.2 social networking and the transmission of affect (Brennan 2004).

²⁷ This idea of "memes" has more recently been developed by Blakemore (1999) and Dennett (2007).

²⁸ It could be added that is coming at a time when, as a result of these global trends Britain, for example, is going through what has been described as a crisis of identity.