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Julian Henriques

Sonic Media: the Street Technology of the Jamaican Sound System

Abstract, July 2018

Sonic Media investigates the protean street technology and culture Jamaica sound system. It has based on long-term research amongst the sound system engineers and producers, including the legendary producer King Jammy and the Stone Love Movement sound system. This book takes us inside the boxes of the sound system to understand how this instrument actually works, how its been modified and developed over the last fifty years and why it remains at the epicenter of Jamaica's compulsive and ever-inventive popular culture. The book focuses on the sound system as the audio-mechanical-electrical means of production for vibrations, as well as on what these vibrations themselves generate – the dancehall *hyperculture*.

Identified as a *street technology*, *Sonic Media* gives an account of the practice and techniques of the audio engineers and their ways-of-making with trial and error, DIY, re-purposing and re-assembling components, not to mention their own finely-tuned ears. The techniques and phonographic processes by which the engineers and equipment handle the frequencies and amplitudes is analyzed in terms of a proposed Vibration Theory. Further to a rhythm analysis, Vibration Theory addresses of the periodic motion whether rhythmically inflected or not – across a spectrum from the supra auditory GHz of a hard drive, through audible bass, the b.p.m. of tempo, the r.p.m. of a 7 inch, to the DJs set in a session, to the season cycle of dancehall activities. As against Information Theory, Vibration Theory provides an understanding of the process of communication based on meaning, rather than engineering of probability and signal to noise ratios. Vibration Theory is underpinned with a critique of the *technocentric fallacy* that bestows power to machines in isolation from their historical and cultural location and as independent of human embodied practices. It argues for the energetic *propagation* across a vibrational field, rather linear *transmission* from sender to receiver, as the most adequate situated, embodied, multi-sensory and multi-media model of communication.

Prior to *Sonic Media*, Henriques' sound system research in Jamaica has been basis for his feature film *Babymother*, his sound sculpture *Knots & Donuts*, his book *Sonic Bodies* and the organization Sound System Outernational.