

Yardtapes: History, Identity and Diaspora in a Dancehall Style

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Principal Charlie Chaplin croons over the stripped-down bass, drum and horn line of a faintly distorted rhythm track—accompanied by the dull hiss of rotating cassette. “*Me woulda never—never ever/cause natty woulda never hurt a girl like you/you coulda turn up in a green or a full suit a blue/whether you a laugh or a face of screw/I would-a never hurt ano-ther girl like you*” changing the cadence of his delivery, Chaplin transitions with ease into the next tune, bubbling on the microphone as the audience anticipates the next selection. Inspector Willie fades out the record with ease, gently lifting the stylus from the circular grooves in the wax. “*Now dreadlocks, I’n’I say got to remember the father in every likkle thing you do, ca I’n’I are brothers and sisters, right Coronel...*” Coronel Josie Wales steps up, answering his sparring partner’s call, “*Selassie I know Principal. Now give thanks and praise while the chalice blaze, here come a thing called ‘Rumor’. Man Carlton Livingston, come he haffi live long.*” The air is peppered with warm punches of static as the selector places the needle on the next record. Synthesized effects pang through the airspace as Carlton Livingston’s voice cascades over the opening melody of the infectious ‘*Boxing*’ rhythm—“*doon’t follow rumor*”—Josie Wales interjects, speaking over the opening chorus as the record continues to turn—“*ting called ‘Rumor’ ...dedicated to all chatty mouth people, seen? Gwaan!*”—his voice fades out just as Carlton Livingston’s opening lyric is delivered. “If you hear, something about me”—again, Josey interjects, this time with a rhythmic “*rub-ada-bang-bing*”. The record continues—“*come say it to meee, come say it*”—this time the Coronel’s formidable chain of “*ribbit*” noises drowns out Livingston’s voice—“*pull up mi selector, Selassie I know. Dreadlocks, I don’t like see you just stand up like suit yah you know*” Josey attempts to rouse the audience as Inspector Willie returns the needle to the beginning of the record. “*Just gwan rock up your neck and shake your body, seen?*” intertwines with Calton Livingston’s pleading “*doon’t follow rumor*”—Josey signs off, calling his spar back to attention—“*what the man say Principal?*”—“*Jah know Coronel*” responds Chaplin without missing a beat, “*you haffi feel the vibes people, yes.*” Again, Carlton Livingston’s opening line drops perfectly in time behind the performer’s voice as the Principal continues, “*good things come to those who wait. And not to them who bend up them face to the man with the cassette and tape, gwaan!*”¹

¹ *Stur Gav* – Toronto 1983

This excerpt is taken from a recording of Charlie Chaplin and Josey Wales performing at the Lacaverna Ballroom in Toronto on Christmas Eve of 1983 on the famed King Stur Gav sound system. A Jamaican set—founded and owned by groundbreaking deejay U-Roy—Stur Gav was visiting Canada for the first time, a few months after their debut tour of the United States.² The audio-extract above is an example of the content of a session-tape or sound system recording. Sound system recordings—yard-tapes (when recorded in Jamaica), session-tapes, or sound-tapes—are a unique example of a medium of communication that capture musical articulation and interaction in an unadulterated and unregulated fashion. Session-tapes are real-time recordings of sound system/dancehall performances captured on cassette—and today minidisk and CD. Sound system ‘dances’ and ‘clashes’—during the period of focus, 1980-1988—were events in which deejays and singers performed lyrics over pre-recorded instrumental ‘riddims’. These lyrics—sometimes improvised, sometimes borrowed, sometimes original—would interact with recorded songs—the A side of the record to which the instrumental ‘version’ is the B side. More than anything, the task of the deejay is to entertain and educate the audience-participants in an original fashion. Session-tapes contain unedited documentation of these performances, with audience reactions, distortion, speeches between songs, the frequent rewinding and replaying of particular records, the interactions and interjections of the deejays and singers in attendance. This is dancehall in a raw, organic form.

I approach the topic of session-tapes from a multi-disciplinary perspective. My research consists of lyrical analysis of a selection of recordings and a series of personal

² Brown, Dave. “King Sturgav on Tour History from 1983-2003.”

interviews as well scholarly and journalistic sources from book length studies to ‘fanzines’ to weblogs. It is my hope that through examining these recorded artifacts, this essay can begin to decipher some of the ways that specific individuals in varied—but connected—locations negotiated the struggles and pleasures of everyday life. In the words of Jalani Niaah,

Cultural studies in the Caribbean thus become the everyday stories, classifying and capturing our peoples’ popular and traditional survival modes, statuses and negotiated power dynamics, with an intention to determine the potential contribution these have brought to intellectual discourse.³

Keeping that ‘potential contribution’ in mind, I selected roughly fifty session tapes for my research. The particular recordings were chosen with the hope of capturing a diverse cross-section of viewpoints. I include larger sound system, and virtually unknown sets, famous deejays and singers, alongside obscure local performers—as well as recordings from locations beyond the main dance-hall hubs of Kingston, New York, London and Toronto. While focusing on a particular geographical region, sound system, deejay, or even recording may have provided a more complete analysis of the lyrical content and other signs and messages contained within these recordings, I chose to examine session-tapes in their Diasporic and transnational aspect. Therefore, the sounds contained within dances from Leeds, or Wolverhampton, Connecticut or Montreal, Yallas or Clarendon Jamaica provide a unique and relevant perspective on the questions at hand.

The first section examines the sound system as a cultural and social institution in Jamaica, and its spread to various outposts of Jamaican settlement in the Atlantic world. Having contextualized the sound system, the discussion turns to the yard-tape/session-

³ Niaah, Jalani A. “Poverty (Lab) Oratory: Rastafari and Cultural Studies.”

tape, its development, its audience, and its social significance. Next, the focus shifts to the lack of attention given to session-tapes in the majority of journalistic and scholarly accounts of Jamaican popular music, this omission is especially significant given their relative importance as unadulterated, unregulated sources of information. Section two turns to the lyrical content contained within the set of recordings under focus. Working in order from theme to theme, I discuss first references to historical and current events, arguing that the messages transmitted by deejays and singers represents a counter-hegemonic narrative that was circulated and disseminated throughout the Atlantic world. Next, I focus on references to Jamaican cultural and national identity, arguing that yard-tapes provided a connection to Jamaican culture that allowed second-generation Jamaicans living abroad to identify with the experience of others scattered around the Diaspora. Here I also discuss the way that sound system recordings provided these same second-generation youths with a platform to articulate and describe their own experience, and assert their difference within a network of listener-participants that they identified with. Finally, the focus shifts to the topics of located-ness and space, arguing that session-tapes trace an interconnected web of expression around the various outposts of Jamaican settlement. Session-tapes are inherently located artifacts, capturing the sonic geography of a particular set place and time. Furthermore, session tapes from different locations convey and communicate the different landscapes encountered by Jamaicans and their children as they traveled and settled in various locations around the Atlantic. I conclude with a brief discussion of some of the ways that session-tapes circulated, from the period of focus to today.

In this essay I discuss the content of a series of session-tapes, focusing on three topics of interest—history, identity, and Diaspora. I argue that yard-tapes/session-tapes provided a forum for the articulation of counter-narratives in a communicative and interactive manner. These recordings enabled Jamaicans and their descendents to interact and connect with one another across national borders. The utterances contained within these sound-artifacts provide a unique perspective on numerous topics, among them historical and current events, identity and ‘Jamaican-ness’, and Diaspora and space. Examining the lyrical content of a series of recordings, I show that yard-tapes fostered transnational communication and the development of counter-narratives regarding history, identity, and Diaspora.

[image withheld]
 “The sound was our church”
 - Robert “Ribs” Fearon⁴

A sound system is a portable entertainment apparatus consisting of equipment, music, and human actors—deejay, selector, operator, engineer, boxman/crew, owner etc. The equipment ranges from custom-built amplifiers, to massive specialized speaker boxes—Shinehead explains in further detail,

We don't have one that's a two changer/changer connected to the crossover/hear fi mi voice through the echo chamber/lets not forget about the pluraliser/lets not forget about preamplifier/that is connected to he phase linear/linear connected to the wire/wire connected to the bass speaker/yuh hear fi mi voice mid-range tweeter⁵

In essence, the sound system is a traveling party, capable of ‘stringing up’ wherever people are willing to listen.

The rise of the sound system in Jamaican can be traced back to technological advancements following the second-world war. Initially, equipment was either custom-

⁴ Fearon, Robert. “Ribs’ Story.”

⁵ *Leotone* – Brooklyn 1983.

built, or shipped into the island from the United States.⁶ Beginning during the forties with legendary sets like *Tom the Great Sebastian*, *Count Nick*, and *Doc's Thunderstorm*, sound systems became the central vehicle of entertainment for working-class Jamaicans. While the more affluent enjoyed jazz-performances at upscale Kingston performance-halls, sound systems amplified their music outside in lawns and street corners. At the dawn of Jamaican Independence in 1962 sound systems had become entrenched in the island's cultural and social landscape.

Sound systems took on a social function and significance beyond the initial role of a mobile entertainment unit. More than just a place to dance off a hard day's work or meet a lover, sound systems—and the physical space that they occupied—were a site of ritual affirmation of mutual shared beliefs and values.

Over the last 40 years, Reggae sound systems in Jamaica have become institutions on a par with the local churches and football teams. Sound systems also inspire loyalty and fervour in a similar manner. They employ large numbers of people and directly influence the lives of many others from the peanut vendors to the politicians who employ them to draw the crowds to their meetings.⁷ Especially after Jamaican independence in 1962, the dance-halls channeled the spirit, the contradictions, and the celebration of the nation while providing an internal and self-generated forum for the articulation of concerns with—and prescriptions for—the post-colonial state and society. According to Sonja Stanley-Niaah, -“the ‘dance’ provides physical, ideological, and spiritual shelter for generations of lower-class Jamaicans, particularly those who grew up around the country's 1962 independence”⁸

⁶ Katz, David. *Solid Foundation: An Oral History of Reggae*. 3-4.

⁷ Henriques, Julian. "Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session." 455.

⁸ Stanley-Niaah, Sonja. "Kingston's Dancehall: A Story of Space and Celebration." 107.

Beginning in the late 1940s with the ‘Windrush Generation’ of West Indian migration to Great Britain, Jamaicans began to leave the island in large numbers in search of work in foreign lands. Migration was not a new phenomena in the Anglophone Caribbean context, as West Indians had traveled to places like Panama, Eastern Cuba, and the Southern United States in significant numbers from at least the turn of the century. What was different about the ‘Windrush Generation’ and later waves of migration to North America was the relative volume of people leaving the island. While the particular desires, needs, and aspirations of individual migrants are impossible to generalize, the initial wave of migration into the United Kingdom was prompted by Britain’s shortage of labor in the period following the Second World War. Upon their arrival, Jamaicans were never fully accepted into English society, and faced social and cultural exclusion along with violent racism and xenophobia. Mainstream institutions of leisure like pubs and night-clubs did not welcome the new West Indian arrivals, creating an isolation and ghettoization of Black British/Caribbean cultural and social networks.⁹ In response to this exclusion, Jamaicans and other West Indians turned to private homes, where ‘shebeens’—a word of Irish origin, reputedly taken due to the large number of people that would ‘shove-in’ to the crowded basement or flat—or ‘blues dances’ would be kept clandestinely.¹⁰ The first sound system to be established in the United Kingdom was set up in West London by a Jamaican named Duke Vin—who before traveling to England had earned his stripes as the selector for *Tom the Great Sebastian* in Kingston. *Duke Vin* and other early sets paved the way for the next generation of English sound systems, keeping dances in any number of locations from basement-flats to churches to

⁹ Katz, David. “Steel Horns and Bass Bins in Blighty.”

¹⁰ Letts, Don. “The Blues Dance.”

town halls (the first sound system dance to take place in England was in Brixton Town Hall, 1955)¹¹. Brian Harris recalls the early sound system scene in Birmingham, England, “there were literally dozens of smaller sound systems in operation, because of all the blues parties or shebeens held in private houses. Every Friday, Saturday and bank holiday, people would book a sound, set up their little bar in their house.”¹² In later decades, the sound system tradition would become so popular and ubiquitous in England—not coincidentally one of the world’s leading locations for audio technology—that Charjan (founding member of London’s *Unity* sound) recalls a period when there were over a dozen sets operating on his street in Tottenham alone.¹³ Slowly but surely, sound systems moved out of the basement ‘shebeens’ and into proper night-spots and social-clubs around Britain’s urban centers. Clubs like the Ram Jam, Count Suckle’s Cue Club and the Flamingo now offered sound system entertainment in a legal above-ground fashion.¹⁴

As with the case of the Windrush Generation, large-scale Jamaican migration to North America began as a result in shifting immigration policies in Canada and the United States. With the passing of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965, Jamaicans migrated in steady numbers to places like Florida, New Jersey, Boston, and most of all New York. To the north, the Canadian Immigration Act of 1976 similarly prompted an influx of Jamaicans into the Toronto area and—in smaller numbers—to Montreal and other

¹¹ Katz, David. “Steel Horns and Bass Bins in Blighty.”

¹² Harris, Brian, quoted in de Koningh, Michael and Marc Griffiths. *Tighten Up! The History of Reggae in the UK*. 162.

¹³ Personal communication with Charjan, 2008.

¹⁴ De Koningh & Griffiths. 210

Canadian cities.¹⁵ Sound systems—by this point far more developed than they had been during their English debut—traveled into these locations and continued to function as a primary social institution within transplanted Jamaican communities across the continent. In both the United States and Canada, Jamaicans experienced social exclusion based on racialism and xenophobia. This exclusion served to further fortify the communicative and social bonds within migrant communities—bonds that were cemented and solidified in the dance-halls of North America’s cities.

Sound systems in Jamaica provided working class people with a uniquely Jamaican pastime and a much-needed release from the realities of a difficult life. In contrast, they took on a number of different or additional meanings and utilizations in their North American and English manifestations. For Jamaicans living in hostile and often unfamiliar societies abroad, sound systems provided an organic link to Jamaican-ness, while simultaneously creating an autonomous space for them to articulate their own concerns and feelings about the host society.

“When you play a Twelve Tribes’ Jah Love dance, you can feel inside you just like a magnet.”
-Cassetteman Paul Bennet

With the advent of recordable cassette technology, an army of resourceful and entrepreneurial individuals began recording live sound system sessions, often carrying bulky ‘ghetto blaster’ stereos into dances, and duplicating the recordings to make available to the public. Cassettes were a unique and empowering new form of recordable media. As Scott Marshall notes, “their reusability, long life-expectancy, and cheap cost encouraged the liberating D.I.Y. spirit better than any other format of self-publishing.”¹⁶ For the first time ever, listeners were able to hear the evidence of particular lyrics, storied

¹⁵ Conway, Dennis. "The Caribbean Diaspora." 344-345.

¹⁶ Marshall, Scott. “Long Live the Humble Audio Cassette: A Eulogy.” 212.

dub-plates, and controversial sound clashes.¹⁷ Not only could a person in Clarendon now have access the latest dance held in Kingston, but Jamaicans—and their children—living abroad could be transported to the lawns of Jamaica to experience their music in its raw, unadulterated form. “I have always felt that sound system was ‘the’ only way to hear reggae music properly” recalls *Who Cork the Dance?*’s Jayman, “and from the moment you press play on that tape, you are instantly transported back into the dance, it’s the next best thing to being in the session.”¹⁸ As sound quality on cassettes gradually improved towards the end of the seventies, it became evident that session-tapes would be around for a while, and had come to occupy a significant role in the landscape of Jamaican music.

Economically speaking, session-tapes provided employment for a number of actors in an international network of tape-men, distributors, and vendors. The tape-man—the person who physically records the session—is often allowed to record directly through the amplifier of a given set, as this provides a form of free promotion for established sound systems (not to mention the singers and deejays that perform with them) and a way for smaller sounds to build a name and reputation for themselves.¹⁹ Indeed, sound systems—and cassettes by extension—have been (and continue to be) the launching point for virtually every successful Jamaican recording artist in the last thirty years at least. In the words of ‘sound-tape veteran’ Jayman, “without the Sound Systems

¹⁷ ‘Dub plates’ or ‘specials’ are exclusively recorded—or mixed—songs unique to a particular sound system. They are used to distinguish one sound system from another, and to allure listeners by the exclusivity of particular songs or versions.

¹⁸ Personal communication with Jayman, 2008.

¹⁹ Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town and Tell The People: Dancehall Culture In Jamaica*. 200.

there would have been no Reggae music.”²⁰ Toronto-based producer and sound owner King Culture notes that session-tapes were a cheaper and more effective means of circulating reggae music than mainstream channels. Speaking about the difficulty of properly promoting and disseminating sound system music, he recalls,

A radio station will not take that, tv station will not take that, but another tape man will take it, play it, make copy and sell it. And then it keep passing like a seed with a bird, and it expands somewhere else. And gradually it will grow and grow and grow into what it is today.²¹

Live dancehall recordings served a critical role in the development of the reggae and dancehall industry from the late seventies onwards, providing employment and promotion for countless actors.

By the early 1980s, reggae had become a global phenomenon with a burgeoning international recording industry catering to the needs of followers on five continents. Small record labels continually surfaced, supplying a steady flow of 45s, 12” Disco’s and LPs to what was increasingly becoming a non-Jamaican clientele. Yet, regardless of how many songs were recorded, pressed, and sent to record stores in Jamaica, North America, and the United Kingdom, sound systems always managed to stay two steps ahead of the official releases. As a result, the true enthusiasts began looking to cassettes for the latest developments and trends in Jamaican music. Thus was born the tradition of collecting and trading session-tapes, initially from Jamaica, and then from places around the Jamaican Diaspora and beyond. As record-collecting became more and more a pastime of individual fans in overdeveloped countries in North America and Europe, tape collecting largely remained within Jamaican and West Indian circles.

²⁰ Personal communication with Jayman, 2008.

²¹ Personal communication with Everett “King Culture” Cooper, 2008.

“We was getting like Jamaicans now following what we’re doing.”
 -Trevor Sax²²

Session-tapes clearly had a significant impact on the reggae industry and development of rub-a-dub and dancehall style music. Nevertheless it is important to note the distinction between the Jamaican context, and that of North America or the United Kingdom. To what degree was there a mutual interest in session-tapes from different locations of the Diaspora? Was the transfer of cassettes a unidirectional movement? Or were tapes from England, Canada and the States relevant within Jamaica—as Jamaican tapes were relevant in these different locations? Much has been made of the famed ‘fastchat’ style of deejaying, originated in London by Saxon sound’s Peter King.²³ Many argue that the subsequent adoption of this style by Jamaican deejays like Papa San serves as proof that session-tapes from England were influential and highly regarded within Jamaica. The spread of the ‘fastchat’ style does indicate that artists in Jamaica were open to innovations that originated outside of the island, and this style was undoubtedly heard in Jamaica on Saxon cassettes before being taken up by deejays on the island—not to mention in North America. Indeed, this is not the only case of a *foreign* originated style being taken up in Jamaica: Toronto-based deejay Screecha Nice’s ‘twang’ style was adopted by Jamaican deejays like Brigadier Jerry, Toyman, and Tiger among others.²⁴ Nevertheless, it is important to note that the influence of session-tapes was most likely greater in England, the United States, and Canada, than it ever was in Jamaica. It is even possible to question the extent to which physical cassettes from England and North

²² Personal communication with Trevor Sax, 2008.

²³ See for instance, Henry, Lez Henry, William (Lez). *What the Deejay Said: A Critique From the Street!*; Back, Les. *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives*; Hebdige, Dick. *Cut 'N' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*.

²⁴ Lesser, Beth. “Screecha Nice.”

America were brought to Jamaica. As the author and reggae journalist David Katz states, “my understanding is the flow is more one-way from Jamaica outwards—like I don’t know of anyone in Jamaica, for instance, that would collect sound tapes of sound clashes in Birmingham, UK.”²⁵ Despite their perhaps over-stated impact on the development of Jamaican deejaying, session-tapes clearly represent an influential and intriguing phenomena, so why then have they been so absent from critical discourse about reggae and dancehall music?

[image withheld]

(“Skateland tapemen”²⁶)

More than any other Caribbean music form, reggae has been analyzed, studied, and discussed repeatedly both within the halls of Academia and in various popular press mediums. Outside of the realm of biographies, some of the important book length studies that have emerged in recent years include Norman Stolzoff’s *Wake the Town Tell the People*, a rigorous anthropological study that focuses on the intricacies of a Jamaican sound system during the decade of the nineties. Jamaican literary scholar Carolyn Cooper’s volume entitled *Soundclash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* has also made an impact and remains relevant as the first academic text to focus on dancehall music and culture (as opposed to the pre-digital reggae that has fascinated so many non-Jamaican scholars). Unlike Stolzoff, Cooper approaches the subject from a literary perspective, and places a firm emphasis on questions of gender and sexuality in reggae-dancehall culture. These texts are joined by more general volumes on the history of Jamaican music like David Katz’s *Solid Foundation: An Oral History of Reggae*, and Lloyd Bradley’s *Bass Culture*, both of which contain priceless interviews and rigorously

²⁵ Personal Communication with David Katz, 2008.

²⁶ Photo courtesy of Jayman (<http://whocorkthedance.blogspot.com/>)

researched narratives of the genre's development. Recent studies of note include Les Back's *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives*, which features an excellent section on deejaying and sound systems. As well as Donna Hope's *Inna Di Dancehall*, and William (Lez) Henry's groundbreaking publication *What the Deejay Said: A Critique from the Street!*

Aside from Stolzoff's study and Lez Henry's recent work, very few academic texts have genuinely addressed the social institution of the reggae sound system. A handful of essay length studies have analyzed various aspects of the sound system performance, and the narrative history of Jamaica's sound systems has been illuminated in studies such as *Solid Foundation*. Given the central role of sound systems to the development of Jamaican popular music, the relative silence surrounding this social institution is surprising and disturbing.

Even more glaringly absent from texts dealing with Jamaican music—or, for that matter, questions of communication, migration, and transnationalism—are the session-tapes that are the subject of the present study. This silence is particularly interesting given that session-tapes until recently have remained largely the domain of Jamaicans and their descendents abroad—as opposed to recorded reggae music, which has for at least three decades been immensely popular on the international stage.

Above all, the text that has opened the door for further studies considering session-tapes is William Henry's *What the Deejay Said*. Addressing the role of deejaying and sound systems in the context of 'crisis-period' South London, Henry provides a highly personalized account of his experience with racism, social exclusion, and his experience as a Deejay on the Lewisham-based *Ghettotone* sound system. Henry

discusses the importance of yard-tapes for him and his peers coming of age in Britain, scathingly questions the lack of acknowledgement given to the influence of yard-tapes in the work of authors like Stolzoff. He argues that these cassettes provided an alternative political education about events in Jamaica—which in turn influenced the way that he negotiated life as a Black man in a hostile alienating British society. On one level, the present study is guided by Henry's work in that it encouraged me to pay attention to the messages and articulations contained within these recordings. Yet, my own research approaches the topic of session-tapes from a more guarded, considerably less personal position. I am thus indebted to his valuable work, but hope that my own research can add to the discussion in a productive manner, and help to encourage further interest in the topic.

The present literature on Jamaican popular music—both scholarly and journalistic—has acknowledged the relevance of the sound system as a social institution without fully exploring the manifold dimensions and critically analyzing the sound system performance and the dance-hall space. Despite the limited attention given to sound systems, cassette recordings remain outside of the realm of critical discussions dealing with the history of reggae music, the experience of Jamaicans and their descendents abroad, and transnational communication. Only recently have new-media outlets like weblogs and message-boards began to document the storied career of the session-tape. At the forefront of this effort is the 'DHR' (dancehallreggae.com) message board named 'The Foundation Corner,' where users upload recordings of cassettes and videos that have been transferred to digital format, sharing memories and observations about the dances, as well as offering esoteric information about countless sound systems

and artists around the globe.²⁷ Taking a slightly different approach, the weblog ‘Who Cork The Dance?’ (whocorkthedance.blogspot.com) features detailed and thoughtful commentary and personnel information on rare session-tapes—some dating to as far back as 1974—which are also converted into digital format and provided for free download.²⁸

Yard-tapes/session-tapes are an example of an underappreciated and under-examined source for information about the development of Jamaican music in general, and specifically the numerous ways in which dancehall performances were enacted and consumed—both in physical and recorded form—within an unregulated network of individuals. This form of communication was simultaneously a highly localized and deeply transnational set of interactions occurring across time and space

[image withheld]

In this section I examine three frequently occurring thematic currents found within session-tape recordings from the period of 1980 to 1988. These themes are: history and current events, identity and ‘Jamaican-ness’, and location and diaspora. While these are by no means the only topics that can be found in the lyrics and commentary of the deejays and singers heard on session-tapes—indeed, entire studies could be devoted to lyrics about the ‘water-pumping’ dance or the ‘boops’ phenomenon—they are the lens through which this essay examines the communication and interaction within these sound-artifacts.

“The Dances of the 70’ & 80’s where like the musical newspapers to people who attended.”

²⁷<http://pegasus.dancehallreggae.com/forum//forumdisplay.php?f=14>

²⁸<http://whocorkthedance.blogspot.com/>

-Jayman²⁹

One common theme for deejays and singers on sound systems across the Atlantic is the telling and retelling of historical narratives. Whether recounting important events in Jamaican history, such as Haile Selassie's state visit in 1966, or detailing the tragic story of the Atlantic slave trade, sound system performers frequently returned to the topic of history during dances in the 1980s. These narratives often countered dominant (big H) Historical discourse surrounding a wide range of issues—presenting a world-view that offered a radical revision of formative events in Atlantic history. It can be assumed that these messages traveled—albeit in a mediated and distorted manner—back and forth across a Diasporic/Atlantic network of outposts in which they influenced and interacted with dominant historical narratives in these far-flung locations. As Lez Henry recounts, “in 1978-9, yard tapes, Jamaican tapes started coming over, and what they did was they gave us an alternative, and I would say political perspective on what was going on in Jamaica.”³⁰ This perspective would then be incorporated and negotiated within a British or North American context.

While visiting Toronto in May of 1984, the Jamaican deejay Peter Metro performed the following lyric on one of the more popular local sets, *Upsetter Hi Fi*,

Say long time ago in a country named Spain/when king Ferdinand and the queen did reign/say Christopher Columbus we learn them name/them sail inna sun and them sail inna rain/rob up Jamaican of a weh we shoulda gain/the way them did-a come then nobody coulda guess/and then them sight up Jamaican forest/him say it's a discovery man it a the best/they land in a point me say down a St. Annes/the discovery bay, a weh it name from/the first people were the Arawak Indian/and them and the Spaniard them start shake hand/them never know the Spaniard did have one plan/to work them like animal

²⁹ Personal communication with Jayman

³⁰ Henry, William (Lez) cited in Back, Les. “‘Chatting’ for Change!: Interview with William (Lez) Henry.” 435.

*and not a human/1655 English captured the land/and then them start the sugar plantation/and when them see that the cane start grow/they send back a Africa fe get some negro/that's how they get Josie and the Metro/fe come come be we national hero*³¹

This lyric exemplifies the way that historical events of the past were presented in a manner that connects their relevance to a current day setting. The assertion that English need for plantation labor is “how they get Josie [Wales] and the [Peter] Metro”—two popular entertainers performing in that particular dance—“fe come be we national hero” demonstrates an subaltern consciousness that posits two “ghetto” entertainers, the descendents of slaves, as Jamaica’s current day national heroes. Historical narratives often were extended to cover events or connections in Diaspora locations—placing points in Canada, the United States, and England within the web of Jamaica’s past. During a 1984 clash with the mighty *Saxon* sound, *Young Lion*’s Daddy Willie proclaims,

*Like the days of old when slavery began/ca down a Birmingham is where them bring the black man/Winston Churchill come to mash up we plan/say you put we together where we stand as one/every other day is a big rebellion/them scatter black people all over England—we have, black in a Wandsworth and in a Brixton/we have, black in a Darby and in a Nottingham...*³²

Again, this lyric connects the events of the Atlantic slave trade, with the policies of Winston Churchill, and the migration of Jamaicans and other West Indians to various points in England to rebuild the country in the wake of the Second World War. Along with narratives of Atlantic and Jamaican history, deejays and singers frequently retold events that are central to the various belief systems of Rastafari. New York-based deejay Sister Carol identifies Haile Selassie’s 1930 coronation as “the greatest event in history” during an *African Love* dance held at the Twelve Tribes of Israel headquarters in the

³¹*Upsetter Hi Fi* – Toronto 1984.

³²*Young Lion* (v *Saxon*) – High Wycombe 1984.

Bronx on the 23rd of July—Selassie’s birthday—1984.³³ And on the Twelve Tribes’ Brixton-based set *JahRevelationMuzik*’s ‘Joseph Dance’, held in Peckham during February of the same year, General T and Brother Culture can be heard chatting about the history of the TTI organization and Prophet Gad’s visit to England.³⁴

Along with historical events and narratives, session-tapes contain a plethora of lyrics about current events on a local and a global level. Lez Henry argues that “the Deejay’s lyric was based on a lived experience, which often spoke to black youth by combining current affairs with some poignantly ‘uplifting’ cultural criticism.”³⁵

Unlike much of the commentary available about events effecting the lives of Jamaicans—both on the island and abroad—during the 1980s, session-tapes contain internally-generated narratives dealing with events on local, international, Diasporic levels. In Jamaica, dominant narratives of events like the violence surrounding the elections 1980 or the Eventide fire incident recorded in news outlets like the Jamaica Gleaner often represent middle-class views and interests, and fail to capture a diverse cross section of perspectives.³⁶ Likewise, journalistic and academic accounts of the experience of Jamaicans living abroad have often emerged from outside of the communities themselves. For this reason, the accounts contained within session-tapes provide a unique perspective on a wide variety of events that have yet to be examined outside of an underground network of tape collectors and dancehall enthusiasts.

In Britain, cassettes tell and re-tell histories of discrimination and rebellion during the ‘crisis period’ of the 1980s which saw urban uprisings in Brixton, Handsworth,

³³ *African Love* – Brox 1984.

³⁴ *JahRevelationMuzik* – Peckham 1984.

³⁵ Henry, William (Lez). 131.

³⁶ Back, Les. (2003) 435.

Toxteth, Moss Side, Southall and Broadwater Farm. Tenor Fly—a deejay on Brixton’s *Sir Coxson Outernational* during the 1980s—recalls that

They used to call me the Reporterman, or Teletex—the Human Teletex, cause I used to always deejay about things that I saw on the street, like the Brixton riots, Police stop-and-search of Black people, and a lot of struggle we was going through [. . .] I used to deejay things that happened to me, and that was happening around the world.³⁷

They also feature commentary about general events in Britain, like the London Water Strike of January 1983, or the Brinks Mat Robbery later that year.³⁸ The perspectives contained within cassettes often provide political criticism that link corruption and injustice being carried out by governments around the world. While performing on Maverick Hi Fi in 1984, famed Birmingham deejay Macka B chats an incendiary lyric about Margaret Thatcher being sent to hell for being “*the biggest thief in the whole of England*”—he taunts: “*don’t worry Margaret Thatcher, you wont be alone/Ronald Reagan, President Botha, they’ll be around*”³⁹ Similarly connecting injustice and racism in the Americas, South Africa and Britain, General T delivers his “*it don’t go so*” lyric on the *Jamdown Rockers* set:

*Them claim say we a mugger me say—it don’t go so—that we thief people jobs me say—it don’t go so [. . .] me say white man in south Africa—it don’t go so—them a kill black youth and them a feel no sorrow...choh... and them kill, them have no mercy in Soweto—and they kill a black woman outside a Tesco—they rob we of we sugar cane, rum and tobacco*⁴⁰

Again, injustice and violence against Black people in Britain, South Africa, and Jamaica are intertwined the deejay’s proclamation.

³⁷ Personal communication with Tenor Fly, 2008.

³⁸ See *King Tubbys (v Nasty Rockers)* – London, 1982; *Unity Hi Power v Dread Diamonds* – London, 1987.

³⁹ *Maverick Hi Fi* –1986

⁴⁰ *Jamdown Rockers* – 1983.

Cassettes from North America similarly contain messages and narratives about current events, political affairs, and cultural trends on local and international levels. On a 1983 cassette of Brooklyn's *Leotone Hi Fi*, local deejay Shelley Thunder delivers a lyric about 'Reaganomics,' playing on a popular melodic theme: "*a yuh no hear/cause Reaganomics gone clear/a yuh no hear/cause Reaganomics gone clear/cause what is mashing up our economy/is Reagan and his military.*" She goes on, "*say Reaganomics is the key that run the country/say just the other day I seen it pon TV/Say all him a talk bout is the economy/and raising taxes pon you and me/to support up his dam military/him gone cut education every city*"⁴¹ Shelley Thunder articulates her viewpoint on Ronald Reagan's controversial policies—linking his aggressive, militarized foreign policy actions with the economic difficulties felt domestically by people like the audience-participants in the sound system dance. This form of criticism and reasoning resonated across national borders and across generations to have a profound effect on the ways the Jamaicans and their descendents perceived the events in question and the political/social/cultural moment in general. As Lez Henry argues in the opening section of his groundbreaking text, "people need to recognize that that was our autonomous space and a reasoning environment that was controlled by black youth. Most people dismiss them, say that we weren't educated or we weren't this or we weren't that."⁴² Thus, it must be grasped that the lyrics contained within these cassettes scattered across a trans-Atlantic network provide messages and testaments—albeit distorted through decades-old plastic ribbon—that begin to fill some of the silences that History has created around the

⁴¹ *Leotone Hi Fi* – Brooklyn 1983

⁴² Henry, William (Lez). 2.

lives and viewpoints of Jamaicans living in places Kingston, London, and Toronto during the decade of the 1980s.

These viewpoints are—by virtue of the context of their production, dissemination, and consumption—counter-hegemonic. Inasmuch as it can be established that sound system music, and the dancehall-space are profoundly working-class institutions in their Jamaican context, it is possible to view the voices and tales of Jamaican deejays and singers to represent a subaltern perspective. When removed from the context of Jamaica, and reformed in a North American or British environment, the added factor of xenophobia, and racism are thrown into the mix to create a music that is ‘ghettoized’ in the same way that its patrons and participants are excluded from mainstream cultural institutions. Thus, the voices of Jamaicans and their descendants living abroad represent an equally subaltern perspective as those captured in yard-tapes from Jamaica. We must also take into account the relevance of these voices to the wider Jamaican—and in many cases non-Jamaican—audience-participants and consumers of sound-system music. In his writings on the social power of the urban poor, Jamaican sociologist Obika Grey argues that

Outsiders of cultural defiance and moral tribunes of the urban poor whose ideological appeals through popular song, music and oral-kinetic dramaturgy critique power and rally the poor to subvert the moral grip of the society, while urging them to demand the right to equal identity, social justice and freedom to enjoy the aesthetic pleasures of a nonbourgeois identity.⁴³

Thus, the proclamations and perspectives of the sound system deejays and singers in Jamaica and abroad should be valued for their influence on working-class Jamaicans across the Atlantic world. “Musical culture and the elaborate social relations that eddied

⁴³Gray, Obika. “Rethinking Power: Political Subordination in Jamaica.” 227.

around it” writes Paul Gilroy, “created that locus and invested it with a precious democratic energy in which audiences and performers could interact and collaborate.”⁴⁴ This precious democratic energy is one of the unique features of session-tapes that differentiate them from other forms of recorded music. Within the session-tape is embedded not only the views of the performers, but also the affirmations and reactions of the audience-participants in the dance. If, for example, a lyric is delivered that does not resonate with the crowd, disgruntled responses can be heard on the cassette tape. In turn, if a particular lyric resonates with the crowd, the recording is overcome with cries of ‘forward’ and the tune may be re-started three or four times due to the exuberance of the audience-participants. As King Culture describes,

A record on a turntable is already edited, while a dance can’t be edited. You’re getting from the audience, to the deejay, the selector, to various things are there that you won’t hear on a record. You would never compare that, and you cannot compare that. In the cassette you will hear bike horn in the dance, people talking, the sound playing—if its not directly dubbed from the amplifier, you know what I mean? So you’re capturing stuff that you would be missing even with a record player.⁴⁵

Thus, on session-tapes, the dynamic interaction between patron, performer, and selector is reproduced and recorded—displaying the mutually re-affirming nature of the dancehall performance.⁴⁶

[image withheld]

(King Tubbys Hi Fi – Brixton 2008 © P. Balasundaram)

As we have seen, session-tapes contain much information about the way in which Jamaicans experienced and recollected historical narratives and current events during the

⁴⁴Gilroy, Paul. “Between the Blues and the Blues Dance: Some Soundscapes of the Black Atlantic.” 388.

⁴⁵Personal communication with Everett “King Culture” Cooper

⁴⁶Henry, William (Lez). 199; Stanley-Niaah, Sonja (2004). 110.

‘deejay era’ of the 1980s. In this section the topic of focus turns to questions of identity and ‘Jamaicanness’. Session-tapes—particularly those recorded outside of Jamaica—provide insight into the identity politics of working-class Jamaicans and their children born in England, the United States, and Canada. Not only did they provide a link to Jamaica in the sense of transcending space and entering into a sound system dance in another physical location, but they also frequently contained messages about how Jamaicans should and should not behave. In addition, for second generation Jamaicans coming of age abroad, cassettes served not only as a sort of link to Jamaican culture and sensibilities, but also as a forum for them to assert their uniquely non-Jamaican realities within an acceptable cultural format. I will first discuss the different contexts in which yard-tapes provided a forum for negotiating identity for Jamaicans, then I will examine the manner in which links to Jamaica and Jamaican-ness were forged in session-tapes. Next I will discuss the efforts of foreign-born Jamaicans to assert their uniqueness, and the manner in which session-tapes fostered the growth and self-awareness of unique Jamaican-American, Jamaican-Canadian, and British-Jamaican cultures.

The manner in which identity politics were negotiated using the medium of session-tapes differs greatly depending on the geographical and generational context. For example, in Jamaica, session-tapes—while they were very popular—arguably were not as influential on the development of musical styles or the formation of ideas about Jamaican identity as they were abroad. This is due in part to the fact that dances were held nightly around the island and especially in Kingston, and any of the leading singers or deejays could be found performing their latest lyrics live on one of Jamaica’s hundreds of sets. This is not to say that the dance-hall space was not formative in the creation and

negotiation of identity-discourse, but rather that the role of cassettes may have been overshadowed by the prevalence of sound system performances in Jamaica at that time. Furthermore, in the Jamaican context, identity politics are much more likely to revolve around social divisions existing in Jamaica like uptown/downtown, country/town Labourite/Socialist. For example the deejay Jim Brown's statement that "*rich man a Kingston a drink champagne—poor man a Clarendon just a cut sugar cane*"⁴⁷ displays a discussion of existing social divisions clearly. It follows that in a Diasporic context, questions of identity are likely to mold themselves to local conditions. Thus, conceptions of national identity or Jamaican-ness take on additional significance in the various distinct outposts of Jamaican settlement in the Atlantic world.

Tapes recorded in England provide a particularly unique case for a number of reasons. Because large scale Jamaican migration to England occurred significantly before that to the United States and then Canada, there existed in various locations across Britain a mature second generation by the onset of the deejay era—and coinciding with the period when cassette recordings became widely available. These British-born Jamaicans were raised in a hostile and racist society—excluded from mainstream British culture, yet often without any tangible connection to Jamaica or the Caribbean. This contradictory existence is captured poignantly in a harrowing scene of the film *Babylon*, in which the British-born soundman Beefy loses control in response to the harassment of racist neighbors. In a fit of rage he voices his pained discontent for the unwelcoming land of his birth.⁴⁸ In the British context, session-tapes took on added significance both

⁴⁷ *Black Ivory Hi Fi* – 1986.

⁴⁸ *Babylon*. DVD. Raro Video 2007.

as unadulterated links to Jamaica and as a platform through which British-born Jamaicans could participate in a dialogue that they were truly a part of.

The contexts of the United States and Canada were different still from England and Jamaica. Later periods of migration to places like New York, Miami, and Toronto meant that the second generation of Jamaicans born abroad had not come of age during the period of focus. During the 1980s, the number of Jamaicans—among them some of the top sound system entertainers—spending time in North America had grown to a new height. There were dances in New York on sets like *Downbeat International*, *Third World*, and *African Love* that boasted lineups of singers and deejays that rivaled those of Jamaica’s heavyweight sound systems. As Culture Bobby commented at the Savoy Manor in the Bronx, “*all of the entertainer dem left Jamaica, the whole of them deh America. That’s why we have the Jamaican vibes same way, seen?*”⁴⁹ Indeed, the style of deejaying and the general characteristics of session-tapes from North America do share much in common with the ‘Jamaican vibes’ to be found on yard-tapes. In the Canadian context, Beth Lesser suggests that

There was not a specifically Canadian style—it was really just whatever was going on in Jamaica. And I don’t think that was because it was a copy-cat thing particularly, but I think because the immigrants were so recent [. . .] most of the deejays here were born in Jamaica and came up here as kids.⁵⁰

While session-tapes from the United States and Canada were clearly an important part of the Jamaican cultural landscape in these places—as they were recorded, traded, and restored—it is unlikely that they played the same role in these locations as they did in

⁴⁹*Papa Moke Hi Fi* – Bronx, 1983.

⁵⁰Personal communication with Beth Lesser, 2008.

England. This is particularly true in relation to identity building and the relationships and interactions between Jamaicans living abroad and their country of origin or birth.

*“In Canada Yardman sell the best ganja/no work fi no bwoy we are we own manager/
in England I’n’I no take double-decker/ah simply BMW with full spoiler”*
-Johnny Ringo⁵¹

Some of the ways that messages about identity were transmitted through session-tapes include prescriptions, descriptions and prohibitions. Deejay lyrics containing prescriptions for behavior were quite common during the decade of the eighties. These prescriptive messages were often intertwined with descriptive lyrics that explained any number of mundane aspects of Jamaican life. For example, a common topic of discussion was Jamaican cuisine. From Early B’s ‘Sunday Dish’ to Super Cat’s ‘Vineyard party’—deejays repeatedly described the culinary arts of their homeland in vivid detail. ‘The Doctor’ Early B can be heard on *Downbeat International* in Queens chanting,

*Inna mi kitchen mi deh/a cook and listen reggae/inna mi kitchen mi deh/it name help me
cook my Sunday dish/it name help me cook my Sunday dish me call it rice and peas,
escovitch fish/to eat it every Sunday is the Doctor’s wish/see me Sunday morning when
mi go a market/mi buy two pound of the Red-Snapper fish/say one pint of peas, scallion
and garlic⁵²*

Early B’s recipe list is outdone only by Lieutenant Stitchie’s ‘*wedding of Sister Ackee and Bredda Saltfish*’ lyric, in which the two main proponents of Jamaica’s national dish are married in a glorious feast,

*Banana and dumpling walking hand in hand/also bredda yam and sister pum-pum
yam/dasheen and cocoa inna combination/miss breadfruit step in she never/have any
man/pon the kitchen table a whe the whole a them stand/everybody start to bawl
out/’lawd a wha dis/Sister Ackee wedding clothes was fantastic/she in red frock, black*

⁵¹ *Tippa Tone Hi Fi* – Toronto, 1984.

⁵² *Downbeat International* – Queens, 1985.

*veil, and yellow slip/she come inna a very criss straw basket/and where she coming from was country market/who walking beside her was Bredda Saltfish.*⁵³

On Hartford, Connecticut's *Rockertone Hi Fi*, Josey Wales performs 'nuh left Yard' with the help of Brigadier Jerry: "say I don't want no visa/fi come live inna no freezer/and I no see a Ackee tree/from I come into America/I gotta walk down the town like Jamaicans should/jump on a bus and them a push and shove".⁵⁴ This sense of behaving "like *Jamaicans should*" also comes across in Johnny Ringo's lyric that opens this paragraph—never mind riding the bus, do what you can to drive the BMW "with full spoiler." A lyric performed by Shadowman describes Jamaica's national attributes as they relate to foreign policy and international trade:

*When Jamaica was a dependent colony/we got support from England our mother country/but 1962 we got independence/Jamaica has become responsible for itself/we started to solve our own problem/the trade, travel among nation, and defense/that is how we gain our popularity/we started to trade with many country/the west Germany me say and England/the US of A, Canada and Japan/remember Shadowman him at the microphone stand/with lot of the style and a lotta fashion.*⁵⁵

Shadowman thus identifies characteristics of the Jamaican state that are upstanding: self-determination, popularity, economic-industry.

In a similar vein, messages about cultural and religious practice were transmitted through session-tape lyrics. On recordings of *JahRevelationMuzik*, or *Jah Love Muzik*, the English and Jamaican sound systems of the TTI organization, doctrinal messages pepper lyrics about Haile Selassie, the Prophet Gad, and the proper lifestyle of a Twelve Tribes member. Brother Culture chats—"throw way violence, throw way the

⁵³ *Bass Line* – 1986.

⁵⁴ *Rockertone Hi Fi* – Hartford, 1987.

⁵⁵ *Volcano Hi Power* – Cassava Piece, 1983.

gun/(repeats)/listen to the sound called Jah Revalation/where there is a calling for everyone/to build a one nation in Shashamane..”⁵⁶ As Lez Henry points out,

Our ‘cultural identities’, a mixture of British, Caribbean, and Afrikan influences, did in many ways allow us to identify with the position of the Jamaican sufferer through our exposure to Reggae music and Rastafari teachings about the white man’s system of head-decay-shun.⁵⁷

Along with these prescriptive and descriptive narratives were prohibitive instructions on how to behave and exist in society. Not only did deejays share their opinions on what was acceptable behavior, but also on what should not be done. These prohibitions range from humorous statements about mundane topics to serious pronouncements about moral or political issues.⁵⁸ Little Madoo croons during a dance in Regent Park, Canada “*everyone a talk bout McDonalds/me no talk bout it/me no buy no Big Mac/me no buy no fish fillet/me no buy no hamburger/me no buy no McChicken.*”⁵⁹ This jocular prohibition of corporate fast-food is an example, as is John Wayne’s “*dash weh belly*” lyric in which he argues that women should not have abortions because some day “*might be your baby come turn president.*”⁶⁰ Nicodemus’ “*cant leave me working class*”⁶¹ lyric is another fine example of prescriptive/condemnatory lyrics at play. Session-tapes provide listeners with an intricately woven series of templates for decisions and attributes that can broadly be described as identity. These include manners of speech, human relation, romantic interaction, dietary patterns, spiritual and religious beliefs, modes of leisure and codes of

⁵⁶*JahRevalationMuzik* – Peckham, 1984.

⁵⁷Henry, William (Lez). 244.

⁵⁸Joseph Farquan notes that “generally, threats are executed in a ‘to-whom-it-may-concern’ manner whereby the act only applies to the speaker if the speaker meets or fails to meet certain requirements or expectations of the speaker.”-- In “Faiya-bon: The socio-pragmatics of homophobia in Jamaican (Dancehall) culture.” 110.

⁵⁹*Tippa Tone Hi Fi* – Toronto 1984

⁶⁰*King Jammys* – Boston 1985.

⁶¹*Papa Moke Hi Fi* – Bronx, 1983.

behavior. While there is not a quantifiable link between attributes of a Jamaican national culture as discussed within yard-tapes and the identity formation of Jamaicans and their offspring living abroad, it can be argued that more than any other cultural form or institution, sound systems and session-tapes provided a tangible connection to a negotiable and transnational Jamaican identity.

“When Super Cat or whoever was deejaying about his story, we was deejaying about our story, you know, so everything had to be reality.”

-Tenor Fly⁶²

Session-tapes—and the dancehall-space in general—also provided Jamaicans and their descendents abroad with a platform to articulate their own cultural and ideological specificities within a culturally acceptable medium. In the words of Saxon’s Daddy Coronel: -“with the Saxon Posse now, we chat what’s happening here, not Jamaica, America, or Timbuktu.”⁶³ More than any other medium, recorded sound system performances could facilitate a transnational dialogue in which unique and disparate experiences could interact to create one multifaceted sound byte of a particular historical and cultural moment. For example, Macka B sheds light on the British issue of tension between the Indian and Caribbean communities in the midlands region: “*you might know the family from you was six/coulda nuff times yuh give Singh shop a visit/when him a take your money theres a lotta friendship/but from you check him daughter that is it/’she was going to get married but you have ruined it.*”⁶⁴ Finishing the lyric in a mock Indian accent, Macka B articulates one perspective on a pressing—and locally specific issue. Lez Henry recalls that “many British Deejays decided to recreate their own experiences

⁶² Personal communication with Tenor Fly, 2008.

⁶³ Daddy Coronel, quoted in Hebidge, Dick. 149.

⁶⁴ *Maverick Hi Fi* - 1986

in a more representative voice, drawing on the known social world in a language that described life as a black youth in Britain.”⁶⁵ He stresses the use of local words and vernacular in the delivery of these descriptions—another feature relatively (but not completely) unique to British recordings.⁶⁶ Part of what makes these lyrical interactions so interesting is the nature of the deejay performance. Since the deejay or singer on a sound system is performing over previously recorded rhythm tracks that are often well known by the audience-participants, there exists a sort of hidden, or obscured, dialogue between the lyrics contained on the original song and the lyrics being recorded on the cassette. One feature of this dialogue is the common reuse and recreation of particular melodic or lyrical memes. This echoing and recycling of patterns creates a template through which lyrics can easily be modified and messages can easily be embedded and codified within known melodic phrases. For example, Admiral Bailey’s “*who say the Admiral, who say the Admiral, thief the ballot box*” is transformed at the hands of Brigadier Jerry into “*who say the General, who say the General, lick the coke and crack*.”⁶⁷ Recreating their own narratives within established melodic—and technological—frameworks, the second generation of Jamaican deejays living in Britain drew out comparisons between home and homeland. It is important to note also that while this dialogue was occurring it was doing so in a self-aware fashion. As Saxon selector Trevor Sax puts it, “*you see tonight cassette and tape ago talk*”⁶⁸ The session-tape network was as far reaching as the network of Jamaican settlement, and these

⁶⁵ Henry, William (Lez). 187.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 190.

⁶⁷ *Rockertone Hi Fi* – Hartford, 1987.

⁶⁸ *Saxon* (v *Young Lion*) – High Wycombe, 1984.

deejays recorded their testaments and articulated their viewpoints well aware that their messages would be heard by unseen generations across different points of the Atlantic.

Whether or not the influence of session-tapes from England and North America every truly took hold in Jamaica during the 1980s, there were sure signs that notions of Jamaica itself were being taken apart and reassembled, modified and commodified, and above all transnationalized by the growing network of Jamaicans leaving and returning from points around the globe. As more and more people relocated—temporarily and permanently—to foreign locations, and more families existed in a space between physical and national borders, Jamaican identity itself could no longer be understood within national boundaries. During the 1980s, references to London, New York, Miami and Canada on yard-tapes are extremely prominent, and—as mentioned before—performers (and entire sound systems) frequently traveled between a network of cities around the Atlantic. In a humorous lyric about the perceived sexual mores of American women, Professor Nuts proclaims that “*New York fulla freak*”—informing his Jamaican audience crowd that “*freak*” was a new slang word he learned while visiting New York where-- “*Me deejay pon Third World and Downbeat/and every weekend enough dance them a keep*”⁶⁹ So while the influence of session-tapes on the formation and negotiation of identity in Jamaica is far from quantifiable, it must be acknowledged that the dialogue within and the transfer of these recorded texts was a part of the same process that was calling into question the very foundations of what it meant to be Jamaican during the penultimate decade of the twentieth century.

⁶⁹*Black Ivory Hi Fi* – 1986.

Session-tapes, as we have seen, represent an under-examined source of information about the way that disempowered youths both in Jamaica and abroad viewed their surroundings and their role in the world. In an interactive and malleable way, these cassettes served as a medium for the articulation and negotiation of questions of identity at a time when the formation of Jamaican society was being rapidly altered by economic, migratory, and political factors. While unique and distinct from each other in different geographical locations, the voices of deejays both in dancehalls and on cassette provide a valuable glimpse at the ways that Jamaicans envisioned and articulated their cultural and (trans)national identity,

[image withheld]

(“Colourman on *Youth Promotion*” ©Beth Lesser)

“The Reggae sound system session is [. . .] a diasporic apparatus – different places at the same time, it is also a syncretic apparatus – different times at the same place.”

-Julian Henriques⁷⁰

The focus of the following section shifts to the topics of place, space, and Diaspora. In this section I examine the some examples of how located-ness was articulated within different locations of the Jamaican Diaspora. For Jamaica, England, the United States, and Canada, different spaces were described and sonically occupied in distinct manners that can be deciphered through session-tape recordings. I examine the ways that different locations were described, characterized, and compared to different points of reference both near and far. As Paul Gilroy notes,

The highest value was to be placed on and invested in art that spoke to the immediate circumstances in which it appeared but relied upon processes of intermixture and

⁷⁰Henriques, Julian. 471.

combination that made elsewhere audible. Remote black communities became present to each other by these means.⁷¹

Through imagined-real audiences and peers in remote locations of the Atlantic world Jamaicans ‘became present to each other’ over cassette tapes, in a way that has yet to be truly grasped in critical discourse on Diaspora, migration and transnationalism.

Session-tapes themselves provide a uniquely located sound artifact that is grounded in a fixed physical space. Unlike vinyl records, which are pressed, recorded, mixed, and mastered in different places at different times, a session-tape captures the aural surroundings of one fixed location. Furthermore, the spaces that are contained within these cassettes are themselves transcendental locations that maintain an imaginary—or distorted—connection to myriad other points around the Atlantic. Collectors and listeners of session-tapes often place a high value on finding the correct venue and date information for a specific tape. For example, on the ‘Foundation Corner’ message boards, different members will often correct or add to location and date information on a particular recording that is being shared and discussed. This kind of information can also be learned through attentive listening to a given recording, as the name of the venue or space is occasionally referenced by the deejays or emcees performing. Brigadier Jerry conveniently reminds listeners “*In the Bronx, that’s where we deh*” on an *African Love* tape from 1984.⁷² Other events in the area are also advertised sporadically throughout the cassette, from upcoming dances and clashes to after parties at private homes— “*Mikey Asby and Bill from Connecticut proudly present*

⁷¹Gilroy, Paul (2003) 389.

⁷²*African Love* – Bronx, 1984.

*'Give the People What They Want' Social Entry club, 650 Blue Hills Avenue, Elks building, Hartford, Connecticut; on Friday June twelfth from 9 pm 'till you say when'*⁷³

The located-ness of session-tapes is extended to venues and locations that have become particularly storied within dancehall culture. In Jamaica, places like the legendary Skateland Roller-Disco in Half-Way Tree—home to some of the most notorious dances and clashes of the deejay era—are captured on yard-tapes, transmitting sound bytes of this particular location and space. The Four Aces club on Dalston Lane and the People's Club in Paddington are two of London's formative dance-hall venues captured on countless cassettes. *Unity* owner and selector Ribs recalls, "we played Four Aces for quite a few years, and you had to be bad. Only the best of the best sounds played in Four Aces. We had ten fights in the first ten weeks we were in there."⁷⁴ Likewise, the Biltmore Ballroom in Brooklyn would—some time later—become an immortalized location in the trans-Atlantic dancehall landscape. Thus, through references to various physically rooted spaces and places, session-tapes represent a uniquely located manner of communication. Even the dancehall-space itself maps out a sort-of imaginary Diaspora of locations, as records from Jamaica, North America, and England interact with the voices of performers and the murmurs of audience-participants in a cacophony of sonic bliss.

*"Them never hear me pon the New York cassette/them never hear me pon Canadian cassette/
man a Miami a kill man fe cassette eeeeh"*
-Little Briggys⁷⁵

For people listening to tapes around the Atlantic, locations in Jamaica like the notorious Waterhouse section of Kingston or the seaside village of Yallas in St. Thomas

⁷³*Rockertone Hi Fi* – Hartford, 1987.

⁷⁴Fearon, Robert "Ribs".

⁷⁵*Leotone Hi Fi* – Brookly, 1983.

become tangible through the sounds contained within the recordings. These tapes serve as a medium for people around the Diaspora to connect with and be a part of different physical locations and spaces in time. Within Jamaica, tapes enabled a temporary, or mediated transgression of physical and social boundaries and borders that divided communities from one another. Outdoor venues add a particular quality to yard-tapes that is rarely found in session-tapes from elsewhere. While dances in Jamaica from small to large were frequently held in outdoor spaces—normally referred to as lawns—in England and North America outdoor performances rarely occurred. The sonic qualities of outdoor sessions differ from those of recordings made inside of different sized halls and clubs. As a result, the outdoor atmosphere of a yard-tape from Standpipe lawn or Jack Ruby lawn carries a distinctly grounded quality. Kenny Knots recalled hearing yard-tapes recorded outdoors as a young man in London,

Even ‘bout the way how them throw down their lyrics you can hear [. . .] the weed that they’re smoking and the elements around them. You know what I’m saying, if its an outside session you can hear that like the man dem feel free outside [...] it was amazing to get them dance.⁷⁶

As we have seen, yard-tapes offered Jamaicans a way to transcend the borders of geographical and social division that separated country from town, uptown from downtown, laborite from socialist. Jamaican tapes also contained the unique quality of outdoor recordings, that adds another level of sound and gives a distinct and layered listening experience.

In the British context, session-tapes also transmit messages about locations and physical spaces. In cities around England sound systems small and large performed and recorded their stories as they unfolded in spaces around Britain’s urban geography.

⁷⁶ Personal communication with Kenny Knots, 2008.

Indeed, it is possible to trace the patters of Jamaican settlement around England's urban centers through the recordings of dances and clashes from around the country.

Performing on *Maverick Hi Fi*, Bonito Star puts his hometown on the dancehall map,

*Nobody inna the house no badda rush me/ca bad man live a every country – now me live inna the heart of the west country/where me come from that a Leeds city/Chapelton is divided inna two area/you have Grange avenue and you have Lesbera Chapelton road they come from the city center*⁷⁷

Cassettes from the midlands contain unique variants and specificities that differentiate them from dances from London or other English cities. In turn, recordings from North London sets like *Unity* or *Fatman*—to the trained ear—have a different aesthetic quality from those of South London sets like *Sir Coxson* or *Frontline* or West London's *Java Nuclear*. The association of particular sound systems with different locations of London was the cause of much rivalry and speculation, as sets battled for domination of different sections of the cityscape. Indeed, the idea of home-territory as opposed to neutral ground can be heard on many clashes—held in far-flung locales in order to ensure audience fairness. One example of such a cassette is the clash between *Saxon* and *Young Lion*—both South London sounds—held in the unlikely location of High Wycombe. In this dance, Saxon selector Trevor Ranks taunts that *Young Lion* sound had brought busloads of supporters with them for the clash.⁷⁸ Another interesting aspect of English session-tapes is the types of locations were dances and clashes were held. Aywhere from private homes to nightclubs, social clubs to town halls, and even a converted crypt are the

⁷⁷ *Maverick Hi Fi* - 1986

⁷⁸ *Saxon* (v *Young Lion*) – High Wycombe, 1984.

background for English session-tapes.⁷⁹ (This uniquely English feature is captured within the audio-texts shared then and now by participants and enthusiasts around the world.

Session tapes recorded in the United States and Canada—like those recorded in Jamaica and England—contain fragmented information about the way that the performers and audience-participants interacted with the geographical and spatial landscapes surrounding them. Connections to different locations around the United States and Canada, from Miami to New Jersey, to Montreal and Toronto presented themselves in the puzzle of narratives, speeches and shout outs that make up sound system recordings. One spatial and physically rooted aspect of cassettes from the United States and Canada is the prevalence of references to different ‘posses’. The different locations of cities like New York were inhabited by different posses for example the ‘90s *Posse*’ in Brooklyn and the ‘*Rainbow Massive*’ in Queens. Likewise, in Boston, the ‘*Dog Posse*’ seems to have been a dominant group in the area given the multiple references and praises of the posse on tapes recorded in the Dorchester and Mattapan neighborhoods. Other ways that deejays established connections to the physical locations around them included descriptions of the attributes of a specific locale. For example, New York deejay Coronel Desi describes life in his borough of New York: “*Brooklyn is a borough inna New York City/the Yankee youth them a act violently/them a rob Jamaican and thief the Yardie/I Puppa Desi flash it inna stylee/they rob young people and the old lady.*”⁸⁰ Another example featured prominently in Canadian sessions is descriptions and references to the weather. Josey Wales can be heard while in Toronto singing “*in Toronto a bare snow fall*” and “*inna*

⁷⁹ William (Lez) Henry recalls a popular venue being the Deptford Crypt, adding that “raving in the Crypt shows you how committed we were to supporting and promoting Reggae music.” 3.

⁸⁰ *Leotone Hi Fi* – Brooklyn, 1983.

*Canada man ah pure winter.*⁸¹ Comparisons between two locations are not uncommon either, for example between New York and Jamaica, or between England and the United States— “*now all Yardman, me respect unnu, becau dung a Yard rough! That mean we haffi come a Reagan country come mek some money seen? So nuff respect...*”⁸²

In these ways and others, locations became entrenched within the musical articulations being passed between individuals in different points around Jamaican Diaspora. Cassettes that represented specific and fixed physical locations—often locations that had significance within a Diasporic imagination—enabled Jamaicans in different physical locations to communicate and participate in a transnational and Diasporic community. This community was greatly facilitated by the ease with which dancehall sessions could be recorded and disseminated at relative speed across national borders and vast physical spaces. Thus, session-tapes can be said to have fostered a communicative and creative sense of Diaspora—located in real physical locations around the Atlantic—in which people articulated the particularities and commonalities of their experience.

[image withheld]

“It started with a friend passing a Killamanjaro in Skateland dance to me and mi did jus love di vibe and the live element. Then other kids would have other dances and we would trade in the playground and see who had the wickedest dances dem.”

-Mikey Glamour⁸³

Dancehall cassettes have always moved in an unauthorized and unregulated manner. Unlike Vinyl and Compact discs, cassettes are not distributed by established record companies or dealers, instead they find their way to and from different locations in

⁸¹ *Stur Gav* – Toronto, 1983

⁸² (Tonto Irie) *King Jammys* – Boston, 1985

⁸³ Personal communication with Mikey Glamour, 2008.

the gray areas of reggae's economic network. This fact has led in part to their lack of acknowledgement on an international level—outside of networks of Jamaican dancehall enthusiasts. It also leads to a culture of secrecy, and exclusivity among some collectors. More than anything, this unregulated nature allows for the creation and nourishment of layers of stories, legends, and disputed histories among listeners and enthusiasts.

Initially cassettes circulated in small numbers, solely to people 'in the know'. As Jayman recollects, "I got my first tapes from friends and started trading them with people. I never really had to buy a whole lot, I was just lucky in the fact that they seemed to just come my way."⁸⁴ The availability of these recordings was up to a certain point confined to a community of listeners and fans. David Katz agrees, "I think the way it started initially it was very much a community thing [...] it was Jamaican people making sound tapes at dances and then bringing them up—and then maybe some people like mailing it to their friends."⁸⁵ Sooner or later, the tapes reached more and more people, and eventually they became available through a handful of record shops and mail-order dealers. Today, the internet has dramatically altered the capacity for circulation of these recordings. Vintage yard-tapes and recordings from all over the world have been converted to digital format—sometimes even reworked and cleaned for sound quality—and shared on a number of websites. On *Who Cork The Dance?* Contributors Andrew and Jayman provide extensive information and feature 'specials' on top sound systems like *Metromedia*, *Stereophonic* and *Channel One*. On the 'Foundation Corner' message board, users share hundreds of recordings, contributing thoughtful commentary, and fostering a sense of community between participants signing on around the globe. The

⁸⁴ Personal communication with Jayman, 2008.

⁸⁵ Personal communication with David Katz, 2008.

unique history of reggae-sound systems in Jamaica and beyond is something that—today more than ever—is available to audiences with the click of a mouse.

[image withheld]
 (“Shinehead on *African Love*”⁸⁶)

While this essay has focused on the period of 1980-1988, the tradition of recording dances and clashes continues today. Somewhere around the end of the eighties sound systems shifted away from the ‘rub-a-dub’ style of dance in which artists performed live at the sets. As deejay records climbed to the charts, sound systems around the Atlantic began to revolve around the ‘juggling’ style that for the most part prevails today. In turn, sound clashes became a battle of dub plates and speeches rather than lyrical skills. These trends, combined with the lack of availability of venues and increased violence in some locations, led to the decline of the sound systems of yesterday. Even so, today clashes continue to be recorded and often videotaped, and are sold around the world soon after the events. The current sound clashing industry has become a truly international phenomenon, with sets from Germany, Japan and Italy participating alongside Jamaicans, British and Americans in well-promoted and publicized events.⁸⁷ This shift is also accompanied by a growth in the audience of sound system music around the world in general.

Session-tapes are a truly unique form of recorded media, and they represent a fascinating resource for anyone interested in the development of Jamaican music and popular culture. While much research has been conducted on various aspects of reggae-dancehall music, thorough and varied critical investigation of the lyrics and messages contained on session tapes has yet to have been undertaken. In this essay I focused on

⁸⁶ Courtesy of <http://www.myspace.com/originalshinehead>

⁸⁷ So well promoted in fact that the *UK Cup Clash*—an annual international sound clash—is now sponsored by the BBC.

three topics—history, identity, and Diaspora—within a series of recordings from locations across the Atlantic world within a set period of time. These themes are featured frequently, and allow for a glimpse into the way that young people experienced and articulated their realities in their own fashion. From the retelling of a recent event to a description of a certain neighborhood, the recitation of a recipe to the salutation of a local posse, these voices—captured on an antiquated form of recordable media—convey messages that are important testaments of their time. Session tapes were—during the period of focus—a medium through which counter-narratives were forged across national lines. The unregulated way that these recordings have circulated makes them particularly unique and valuable to listeners today. I hope that this study encourages others to engage the deejays and singers crystallized within the thousands of cassettes, and unravel more of the stories rolled up in a million disconnected miles of black ribbon.

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