

“Playing music, for me right, it gets some heads together. Get a little tribal thing going on, you know. Get the frequency up... Everybody’s on that frequency. It’s always been about that...and exciting people, and changing their frequency.”

Robbo Dread, Hockley, Birmingham, 2017 (Jones and Pinnock 2018: 120)

EDITORIAL

As early as 1947, Hedley Jones, the legendary Jamaican sound engineer, was building bespoke, hi-fi quality amplifiers for Kingston’s formative sound systems, along with bass reflex, mid-range and tweeter speakers (Lesser 2012: 10). The Jamaican reggae sound system remains the most celebrated example of a communal entertainment institution centred around the re-performance of recorded music. It was in the Jamaican context that the creative possibilities of this process were first realised. Jamaican sound system culture has a rich heritage that extends deep into the roots of Jamaican popular culture. But its lineage also feeds forward into multiple facets of contemporary popular music. Its profound legacies can be heard in countless genres, from jungle and UK garage to dubstep and grime. Sound system culture prefigures the DIY, anti-commercial ethic of rave and dance music in the 1980s and 90s. Its methodologies and performance practices have provided blueprints for numerous non-reggae sound system cultures, from underground soul to hip-hop.

Until recently, however, these legacies have remained largely unacknowledged or ignored. After decades of being maligned as a public nuisance and a source of criminality, of being regulated, suppressed

and undervalued – the sound system is now finally getting its dues. This current issue of *Riffs* is part of this long overdue recognition.

While the Jamaican variant of sound system culture is the most recognisable, it is far from the only instance of this culture. Parallel examples have evolved elsewhere in the world, most notably in Colombia (in the form of the picós) and other parts of Latin America. Exported by Jamaican migrants, sound system culture took root in communities throughout the black Atlantic diaspora, in North America and Europe. The most celebrated connection within this diaspora was the formative influence of reggae sound system culture on the nascent hip-hop movement of the 1970s in the South Bronx.

While the sound system has been adapted to the varying social geographies of these different contexts, these cultures share a number of underlying structural and aesthetic similarities. They have been forged out of similar historical experiences, of displacement, disempowerment and economic marginalisation. They have emerged out of contexts where the needs of mainly black working-class communities were ignored by mainstream media and leisure industries. They evolved as peripatetic institutions

providing accessible entertainment in response to racialised forms of exclusion and segregation in the public leisure sphere. Driven by these necessities and by the desire for autonomy from mainstream leisure venues, they have existed largely in a network of municipal buildings (such as town halls, school gyms, community centres and youth clubs) and private dwellings (flats, houses, backyards). These spaces have also been carved out of an underground network of unauthorised leisure spaces and commandeered premises, such as warehouses and industrial buildings, and outdoor spaces, such as public parks and open fields.

Sound system cultures are powered by craft technologies. They are underpinned by a DIY ethic of making do, in which sound technologies are customized and made answerable to sound system aesthetics. Turntables, vinyl records, microphones, amplifiers, speakers and sound effects units are made oral and tactile. Key items of equipment, like speaker cabinets and record boxes, become cherished artefacts and are accordingly adorned with hand-painted graphics and artwork. These technologies are made responsive to the particular cultural and musical priorities of sound system culture, most notably the central prominence and

signifying power of bass. Wardrobe-sized speaker cabinets are thus designed and handmade in order to deliver this most crucial dimension of bass culture. Audio signals are processed to achieve fidelity and harmony between the major sound frequencies of bass, mid-range and “tops”.

The engineers and operators who practice these craft technologies represent the true “scientists of sound” within sound system culture. In their hands, these technologies are transformed into performance instruments that are used to embellish the delivery of recorded music. The dub process is recreated live through an array of sound effects, sonic sculpting and performance practices. The rewinding of a popular tune or revered classic, versioning, exclusivity, selection and sequencing of music – these practices all serve to embellish and enrich the live re-performance of recorded music.

By far the most significant of these performance practices are the forms of “musical talking” that are superimposed over recorded music. Toasting, rapping, deejaying, MCing – these and other forms of orality lie at the heart of sound system cultures. These forms remain at the heart of black British musicking, their legacies audible in the oral stylings of jungle, UK rap and grime. These practices remain a site of prodigious artistry. Their enduring appeal and populist power are rooted in their democratic character, and their adaptability, as modes of expression.

While these oral practices have assumed different stylistic forms, they are founded on similar aesthetic principles. Central to all of these forms is the principle of delivering improvised, rhymed lyrics over stripped-down rhythm tracks with sparse instrumentation, yet memorable drum and basslines. These provide the foundation for spontaneous, original lyrics, part spoken, part sung, delivered in non-stop streams of consciousness.

The sound system provides a platform for these latter-day griots, from which to articulate their own alternative viewpoints, and dissect the realities and predicaments affecting the lives of their primary audience. The sound system is an arena in which grievances can be openly aired and truths about power uttered in ways that would be impossible through mainstream media channels. In these spaces, knowledges are shared, wisdom dispensed and political insights imparted. Local, national and international events are mythologised and deconstructed. A rich reservoir of dramatic techniques is drawn upon to deliver morality tales and parables from the microphone. The mission of the conscious deejay has a didactic, educational dimension, to enlighten and uplift. Through the microphone, the deejay engages directly with the audience through interactional exchanges, and call and response routines. The audience itself becomes a major source of inspiration and thematic material, frequently

improvised on the spot in “headtop” style.

Centrally important too in these forms of orality is the practice of naming. The adoption of aliases and nicknames by deejays and sound system personnel, the praising and “bigging up” of audience members through salutations and dedications – these naming practices create alternative forms of status and social recognition. But they also serve to confer respect and grace on their recipients.

Sound system cultures operate as micro-economies with their own revenue-generating activities and autonomous promotion channels. These are tied into wider cultural economies on a local and international scale. They interface with networks of record shops, studios, independent labels, musician-producers and sound engineers that exist autonomously from the mainstream music industry.

Sound systems have always been a crucible for musical innovation, and a wellspring of distinctive genres which have been produced in response to the needs of their audiences. Think of champeta (in the case of picó culture), or the succession of genres that were shaped by Jamaican sound systems, from the 1950s onwards. Through the tight, dynamic relationships that exist between sound system and crowd, audience responses have constantly fed back into the creative production process, to musicians, producers and sound engineers.

S T I M O N J O N S

Sound systems have also been the focus of social networks which have crystallized around them. Sounds have their own internal division of labour with identifiable roles and responsibilities (engineer, operator, selector, etc). These networks radiate outwards from the core members to embrace larger posses of helpers and supporters. This collaborative ethic has been widely emulated in the various “crews” and “tribes” of other multi-genre sound systems, around soul, hip-hop and dance music, for example. The sound system has proved to be a flexible configuration that has been put to use in varied multi-ethnic contexts.

In Britain, sound systems have been an integral part of the fabric of African-Caribbean community and cultural life. They have provided the accompaniment to a range of social functions and family celebrations (from birthday parties, christenings and wedding receptions to bank holiday outings and cricket socials). The sound system dance represented a physical and psychological sanctuary from the pressures of a racist society, and a defensive enclave against the dominant culture. It was both a space of cathartic relief and a source of spiritual nourishment that gave people the strength to survive and resist in challenging times. It is hard to overestimate the importance of sound systems to a whole generation of black youth in Britain in the 1970s and 80s. Some sense of this is conveyed in *Scientists of Sound* in the overwhelming sense of unity and camaraderie that sound system culture

embodied for this particular generation (Jones and Pinnock 2018). For those we interviewed in the book, their involvement in sound systems offered a sense of belonging and togetherness, and a focus of purposeful activity into which creative energies were channelled.

Through its unique practices the sound system summoned into being an alternative public sphere. It had the power to temporarily transform the spaces in which it played for the duration of an event, whether a flat in a tower block or a church hall. It did so, first and foremost at a material level by literally vibrating the walls and architectural structures of those spaces through its powerful basslines. These resonated through the bodies of the participants within them, enveloping and immersing the dancing crowd. But these affects were also materialised through all the channels and frequencies on which the sound system broadcast. Live singing and deejay lyricism, the interjections of MCs, sound effects and live sound sculpting; all were interwoven with recorded melodies, voices and sounds. These combined to form a multi-layered, polyvocal soundscape, heard together as an ensemble performance. The overall effect was to create a rich sonic tapestry and auditory environment in which the spatial and temporary relations of the dominant culture were briefly suspended.

It is these features of sound systems which explain their cultural drawing power during their heyday in the UK. The space of the sound system signified symbolic and physical territory won through struggle. The all-night operating hours of sound system events, such as blues parties, represented an unregulated, autonomous realm of leisure activity that was the antithesis of mainstream leisure venues like commercial nightclubs. These features made the space of the sound system an ongoing focus of struggle, viewed by the powers-that-be as a threat to public order, to the discipline of leisure-work boundaries, and an unacceptable level of autonomy.

Sound systems, as a result, have faced constant threats to their existence in form of systematic suppression and intrusion by police, and racial violence and intimidation by far-right nationalist groups. These spaces were targeted by an onslaught of disciplinary and legal measures which attempted to police and regulate them. New, expanded local authority and police powers were introduced in the early 90s, restricting sound system events and the freedoms of assembly and movement associated with them. Tighter licensing laws, stricter environmental protection and noise abatement regulations, as well as new risk assessment procedures and surveillance systems – these combined to shrink the number of spaces where sound system dances could take place.

These measures were part of a

wider trend to confine musical entertainment to particular venues and narrow models of orderly consumption. These have occurred against the backdrop of broader, underlying shifts. These include the gradual erosion and privatization of public leisure space, the segregation of those spaces along racialised and class lines, the rising cost of public leisure for working-class young people, and the professionalization and commodification of dance music and club culture.

Sound system cultures represent one point of resistance to these trends. But they also provide a counterpoint to the rise of screen-based, digital entertainment technologies, and mobile personal communication devices. These forms of mobile privatization represent listening experiences that tend to be shallower and impoverished when stood against the sound system. They entail atomised, solipsist modes of in-ear listening which compress the amplitude and dynamic range of sound frequencies. These stand in marked contrast to the intense, whole-body modes of listening of sound system culture, where musical experiences are turned outwards into shared expressions of sociability and collective awareness. What seems to have been lost in these developments, and what sound systems continue to offer are the core ethical values transmitted through its multifarious frequencies, in the form of communal sensibilities and alternative, more human ways of knowing, being and living together.

References

Jones, S. and Pinnock, P. (2018) *Scientists of Sound: Portraits of a UK Reggae Sound System*, Bassline Books.

Lesser, B. (2012) *Rub-a-Dub Style: The Roots of Modern Dancehall*, Beth Kingston.

Dr Simon Jones is a senior lecturer at Middlesex University. He is the co-author of *Scientists of Sound: Portraits of a UK reggae sound system* (2018) and author of *Black Culture, White Youth: The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK* (1998).

Notes from the Riffs Editors

Sarah Raine & Craig Hamilton

This sound system and reggae issue of *Riffs* provides a space for a consideration of sound system culture – from personal reflections to the importance of reggae sound system for whole communities. As with other *Riffs* issues, we include here a range of voices: academic researchers, music journalists, sound system operators, and reggae fans. While they celebrate sound system culture, they do so through a critical and analytical lens, reflecting on what it has meant to them and to others. Some frame these through the work of theorists, some through the words of others to demonstrate that which has become communal. And at points, these insights can only be expressed through the visual and the aural.

In focusing on sound system culture, the *Riffs* editorial team built upon relationships and networks created through reggae-focused projects that have taken place at Birmingham City University over the past year, to include the Birmingham leg of the Let's Play Vinyl touring exhibition and Reggae Innovation, an international conference held at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire in April. Through conversations and collaborations, the strands between the journal and individuals, collectives and sounds have been woven together to give a varied snapshot of a complex and important music culture. We want to thank the writers, photographers, sound men and women, promoters and venue owners, radio stations, editors, musicians and curators for their essential and thought provoking contributions.

We hope that what we have brought together here in some way changes your frequency.



Riffs sound system issue playlist (created by our contributors)