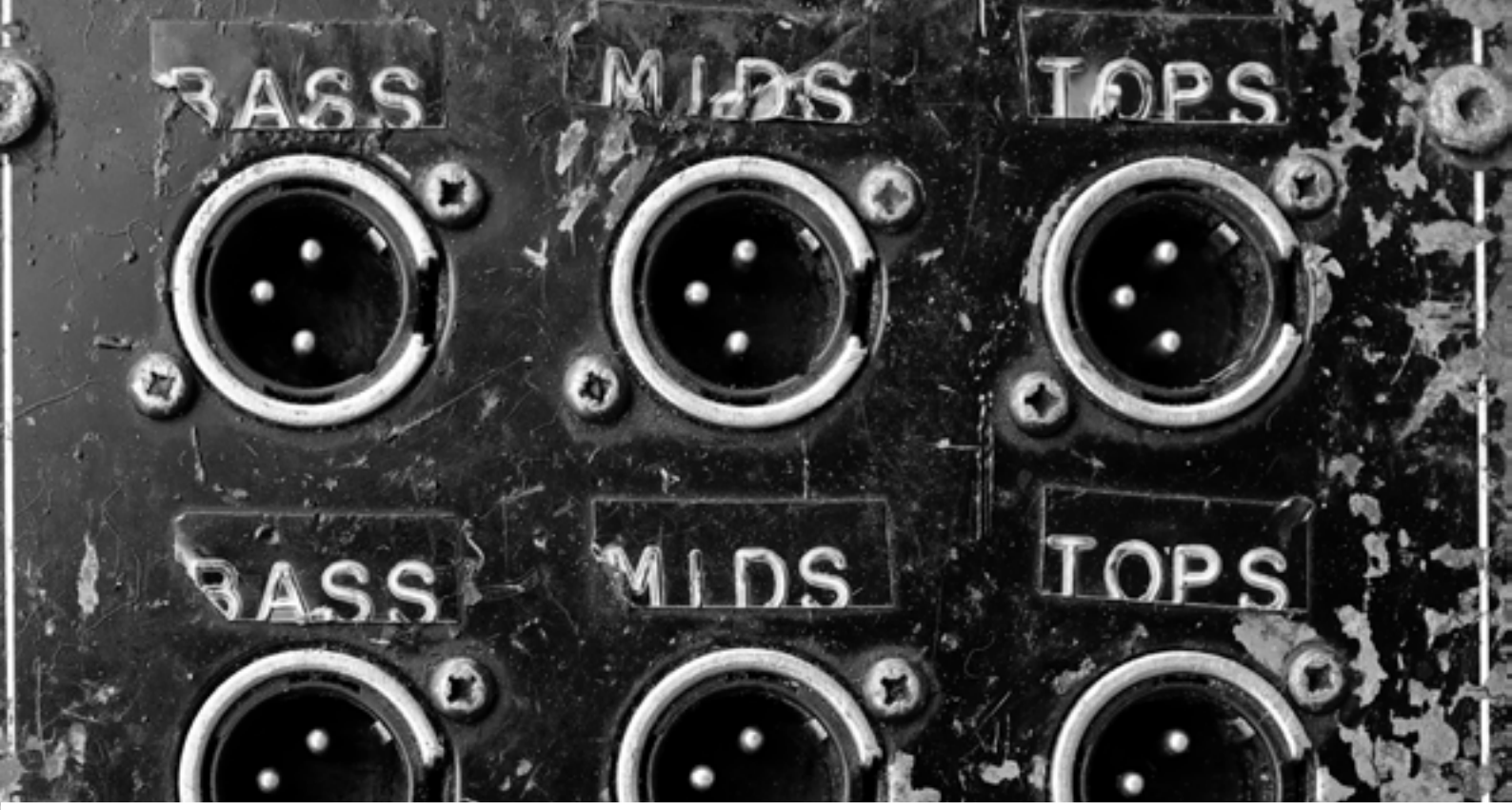

BASS CULTURE AND A VERY TANGLED ENGLISHNESS

JOE MUGGS

The book BASS MIDS TOPS, which I am producing with the photographer Brian David Stevens, is a story of soundsystem culture and the way it has infiltrated British clubs, radio and the pop charts over the past forty years. It's also a story of Englishness – in the sense that Peter Ackroyd paints it in Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination.

"Englishness," he says, "is the principle of appropriation." Our language and literature in this view is a tangled, meandering "line of beauty" stretching from Beowulf to today. It's an endlessly unfolding story that reflects its roots in an oral tradition and also in the nation's constantly refreshed hybrid, palimpsestic nature. It's characterised by tricksiness, absurdity, love of wordplay and shaggy dog stories; it tries to evade seriousness at every turn, yet is inexorably drawn to the mystical.
It's the Englishness of Chaucer, Sterne, Carroll, Tolkien, but also of costermongers, spivs, pub anecdotalists and bullshit artists through the centuries.

While Ackroyd was talking first about literary writers, this has also been my experience of modern underground culture, including British soundsystem culture. Skream (aka Oliver Jones, a globally famous DJ/musician, who was integral to the birth of the dubstep genre in Croydon from the age of 13) once told me that he regards what he does not as fitting into any genre but as "mongrel music".
The chaotic multicultural throng of people that have congregated around sound systems in recent decades makes for as baffling, babbling a lingo as any found anywhere.
I'm not just talking here about the lyricism of the MCs and singers, though we could and should certainly include Roots Manuva's "Taskmaster burst the bionic zit splitter", Tricky's "Monopoly improperly kissed", Wiley's "There's no set time I have my tea at" and Tinie Tempah's "I've got so many clothes I keep some at my aunt's house" – not to mention a whole armoury of "squid-dlywiddlywoioioi"s, "zoop zoop"s and "bluku bluku"s – in any history of our language's baroque adaptations.
Rather, I mean the conversations, rants and gibberings that form the glue of any hypersocial scene, in studios, raves, pubs, record shops, round kitchen tables, in the backs of taxis... this is the fabric of the culture just as much as anything committed to vinyl or paper, perhaps more so. That time someone used "Lembit" as an insult on dubstepforum is as important a memory to me in tracing the emergence of that particular scene as any given shift in bass modulation. And it's that culture that I've always wanted to be part of, to understand, to maybe explain... which is easier said than done. Conversations that roll from party to party to after-party, and on through weeks and months and scenes and generations, all the while being interrupted by brutally loud bass, aren't the easiest to transcribe. I spent most of my Creative & Life Writing M.A. in 2006-7 deliberating over whether and how it could be possible to capture the sprawling nature of subcultural communication on the written page.

It's no secret that I have taken issue in the past with Simon Reynolds' formulation of "the hardcore [or sometimes 'ardkore'] continuum", as delineated in a number of his blogs - for example: https://dj.dancecult.net/index.php/dancecult/article/view/289/268 - in the wake of his 1998 book Energy Flash. Not the theory itself – it remains a self-evidently valid and valuable tracing of forms and functions of specific sounds in the orbit of multicultural London-centric pirate radio culture of the 90s and 00s – but the way it has been treated by others as a new canon, a definitive delineation of boundaries, rather than the particular and personal syntagmatic slicing through history that it is. Ironically, at times it became devalued by this very canonisation: its more dogmatic adherents made it the continuum (or "nuum") rather than one among several cultural-aesthetic continuua (say of funk/b-boy, or psychedelic/industrial, or soul/jazz values) that ran through the same times and places. This could make it intensely frustrating when trying to discuss the place of sounds and people who were part of the same history yet were too pop, too jazz, too internationalist, too ostentatiously refined, not "dark" enough, not "tower block" enough to be certified as "nuum", yet were unquestionably part of the story. In fact, though, the continuum came to life precisely when its edges were loosened, when the existence of other co-existent lines

of influence and difference were acknowledged. Place it alongside, for example, the chapters in Lloyd Bradley's Sounds Like London or DJ Semtex's Hip Hop Raised Me focusing on the same time and same music but placing it specifically in a wider black music or specifically hip hop lineage and emphasising entirely different qualities, and the multifarious, multivalent aliveness of what's actually being described comes alight on the page. Appreciation of each continuum is only invigorated by understanding of those which feed into it.

It was my own discussions around this very issue of continuum vs continuua around the end of the 2000s and start of the 2010s – in forums, conferences, articles, reviews and blog comment sections, not to mention studios, raves, pubs, record shops etc etc – that in part led me to the format for BASS MIDS TOPS. I wanted to do something that captured an unfolding thread through history, but which acknowledged its own arbitrariness. Something that placed the participants in the culture front and centre, but without pretending that my editorialising was somehow neutral or non-existent. Something personal but not too proprietary. I love a good music oral history, but the best ones, like Please Kill Me (by Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain on the emergence of punk in the US), Yes Yes Y'all (on the first years of hip hop, by Jim Fricke), I Swear I Was There (on the Sex Pistols' Manchester Free Trade Hall show and its creative aftermath by David Nolan - Independent Music Press, 2006), and Once in a Lifetime (by Jar Bussman, on acid house in Britain - Virgin Books, 1998) seem to focus or a specific historical moment, rather than the longer-duration evolution I'd become fixated on. The constant interspersion of fragmented quotes works in that context, but it wasn't the format I was looking for. During this time, though, I was starting to have the chance to publish more and more lengthy verbatim Q&As, thanks to some indulgent editors (props to Tom Lea, Chal Ravens, Lauren Martin, Ryan Keeling) and my own indulgence of commissioning myself at Boiler Room and theartsdesk.com. Particularly important was a two hour, 10,000+ word ramble round the history of Bristol's electronica and dubstep history, but also all manner of other minutiae, digressions and jokes, with Nick "Ekoplekz" Edwards – himself a historian and documenter of scenes, via the Gutterbreakz blog. It made me realise that the conversation could be the thing: that the jokes, misunderstandings and ephemera were as important in telling the story as the actual story milestones (albums, raves, cultural

I had also started working periodically with Brian David Stevens on publishing such lengthy interviews on my own website, the now defunct veryverymuch.com, along with his own portraits of the subjects. Our focus at this point was a more generalised "underground" – something we defined at the time as: "Not underground in the sense of obscurity, or extremity, or drugginess; it can entail any of those things, but it can equally exist in mass movements, family weddings, at the top of the pop charts. It's occult social history, the underground in the almost literal sense of something that people live and move and exist within, in which, slightly hidden from view, our culture is transmitted: not national culture or racial culture or class culture (although, again, all these certainly come into it), but yours and mine, the sort where you can look around the people you're with and go 'yep, these are my people'." And something about the consistency of Brian's photos on that site, alongside the voices of the interviewed, gave a consistency to the Q&As that by simple facts of presentation made them feel like part of a greater whole. Then I saw Brian's photos of Notting Hill Soundsystems being set up in the morning – just the speaker stacks, without the crowds you're accustomed to seeing them surrounded by, isolated as pure architectural statements of sound and power – and finally the idea begun to coalesce, which became BASS MIDS TOPS. So much of the underground music that was most important to me, and had been through my life, was predicated on bass. So as we joined cultural dots through decades, the simplicity and directness of the bassline became the heartbeat that powered the project.

So, this is how we got to the format. Some 25 verbatim Q&As, beginning with Dennis Bovell, Adrian Sherwood and Norman Jay – the men who brought Caribbean soundsystem culture to the punks, the soul crews, the fashion world – and meandering through Bristol blues dances, Yorkshire breakdance battles, the birth of hardcore rave, jungle, garage, dubstep, grime and on to the new hybrids nobody has names for. Rambles upon rambles, digressions upon digressions, long conversations, the faces of the people having them, and photos of their loudspeakers: a microcosm of a history made up of thousands, millions of conversations, interactions, familiar faces and constant movement around those loudspeakers. It's the story of the participants, which of course overlap, and overlap with our own stories too: this is a small island, bass echoes through it freely, and reaches everywhere. Reggae – at proper volume anyway, not just UB40 on the radio – first reached me in Middle England in the early 80s thanks to my dad playing Sunday cricket with his colleagues at the Job Centre. Brian as a teenage goth in Yorkshire in the late 80s naturally had social circles that overlapped with the areas where techno, electro and dub sound systems met and created the first truly unmistakeable British rave sound, at The Warehouse in Leeds and FON Studios in Sheffield. And this entanglement is there way more so for the interviewees. Cooly G's dad and uncles ran reggae sound systems in Brixton, and her mum was an acid house DJ, and you can hear that running through her music. Skream was comfortable slotting into the birth of dubstep at thirteen because his brother was already deep in drum'n'bass, Yes, explosive moments like Yorkshire's bleep'n'bass of 1989-90, the eruption of jungle in 1993-94, or the emergence of dubstep from its long underground gestation to become a global movement in 2006-7, are predicated on youth movements. And yes, these were often about exclusion: about kids not allowed into the older folks' raves, or black artists marginalised by scenes they'd helped build. But this is also about a lengthy continuum, about knowledge passed down through those tangled lines of connection and communication. The "appropriation" that Ackroyd wrote of isn't the aggressive power-differential cultural appropriation we hear of so much now: a real thing, of course, where real lives are made into commodified jokes or tragedies for the consumption of an undifferentiated corporate culture. Rather, it's about a naturally absorbent and flexible vernacular, one within which Saxon pith is still resisting domination by haughty Latinised structures a thousand years on, and where of course the languages of every generation of immigrants since continue to writhe and interact just beneath the surface of our everyday conversation and culture. It's people appropriating from their own friends, their own families, their own neighbours, catching jokes and creating new sounds and styles with every twist they put on what they've seen and heard. When Brian and I were about halfway through the book, looking at the photographed faces so far, Brian said "this is the England I recognise". And I hope it is for people who see the book. I'm not particularly enamoured of nation states and even less so of nationalism, but I do like stories, and I like the stories I have grown up and grown older around. And the stories around soundsystem culture have developed over half a century into an Englishness we could believe in: not the bullshit archaic Albion of haircut rock bands' fantasies, but a living, breathing, skanking mass of people, constantly hungry for the new but still congregating around the most fundamental values: tricksiness, absurdity, mysticism, intoxication and BASS.

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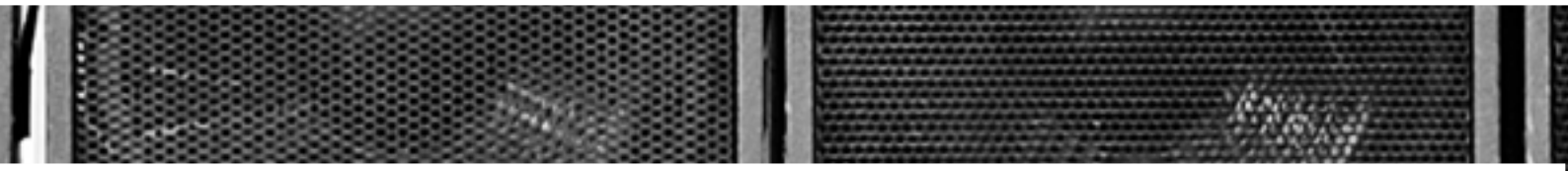

Joe Muggs is a journalist and part time DJ. He spent the bulk of the 1990s in the midst of Brighton's club scene, programming electronic beats for bands, writing lyrics for electronic artists and running a "techno cabaret" that featured early performances from the likes of Jamie Lidell, Cristian Vogel, Squarepusher and the playwright Sophie Woolley. From 2001 he turned professional writer, starting at The Face and The Daily Telegraph. He became particularly known for tracing the rise of dubstep and related forms of bass music for Mixmag and WIRE magazine, and later for launching editorial content on The Boiler Room platform, while his bylines have also appeared across the specialist and mainstream press. He has also worked in A&R and album compiling, notably on Ministry Of Sound's Adventures in Dubstep & Beyond series and Big Dada / Ninja Tune's Grime 2.0 compilation.

Brian David Stevens is a photographer based in London. He has work in The National Portrait Gallery and in the National Museums of Scotland. Brian's work has been published worldwide.

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