



**“DIS ONE IS
FOR ALLA THE
JUNGLISTS”:**

**From Rebel MC
to Conquering
Lion and
beyond.**

**The journeying
of Michael West**

MATT GRIMES

Taking a broadly historical and socio-cultural approach, this article presents the development of Jungle, a unique Black British musical form, through the musical lifecourse of one of Jungle's originators and innovators Michael West aka Congo Natty. With its roots in Reggae soundsystem culture, British Hip-Hop, Soul and Rastafarian philosophy, Jungle emerged from various previous manifestations of Black British music since the 1970's. With his ongoing development of and contribution to Jungle music and its culture, West presents a Black British identity that reflects the multicultural society he grew up in, and continues to inhabit.

Establishing a British Black Identity

Born in Islington London in 1965 to a Jamaican father and Welsh white mother, as a young man Michael West often frequented north London Reggae soundsystem clashes, immersing himself in soundsystem culture. When he was 20 years old, he and some friends started their own soundsystem called Beat Freaks in which they would play a mixture of Hip-Hop, Reggae and the New York and Chicago house records that were just starting to infiltrate UK record shops. Influenced by these diverse sounds, West's first foray into music production was through his 1985 untitled release under the name of Micron, followed by the tune Solar Rock, which was heavily influenced by the style of Hip-Hop/Electro style that was developing in the USA through artists such as Afrika Bambaataa and Soul Sonic Force. The title itself was perhaps homage to Afrika Bambaataa

and the Soul Sonic Force's 1982 release Planet Rock.

Rather than continuing to emulate American Electro, Hip-Hop and House, which spoke of the African American experience, the release of his next tune Cockney Rhythm was an attempt at trying to establish a UK manifestation of American Hip-Hop. What set this aside from his American counterparts was the use of a sampled Reggae bass line

PLAYLIST



from Mikey Dread's 1979 tune Operators Choice. West drew on a number of Jamaican influences for his music productions as a homage to the music he had experienced, and continued to experience, at the Reggae soundclashes. It could be argued that West's combination of Hip-Hop and Reggae, was also a way of expressing Black British youth experience and identity for his generation. So whilst Jamaican Reggae music played a part in his local culture, through the Caribbean diaspora of his father's generation, being born in England created a distance between his father's experience of Jamaican culture and West's own experiences of growing up in North London. As noted by both Paul Gilroy (1987) and Simon Jones (1988), young

blacks in 1970's Britain also sought to establish a Black British identity that was reflective of their localised experiences. Lloyd Bradley (2002) suggests that in the 1970's, the older generation of Caribbean immigrants used American Civil rights and Black Power as a revolutionary template. For British Reggae bands, such as Steel Pulse and Aswad, this did not resonate entirely with their experiences of being young and black in 1970's/80's Britain. As Bradley notes:

"To the new young bands, roots Reggae was a particularly relevant expression of blackness [...] Oddly, Rastafari's notions of displacement actually made greater sense in the UK than it did in Jamaica [...] It was easy to brood on the idea that if you were born in England or arrived as a child, it wasn't by choice and the Caribbean was where you should be. Thus it wasn't a quantum leap to mentally translate the Africa/Jamaica theme to a West Indies/Great Britain forced exodus." (2001: 430-431)

This referential harking back to a sense of 'homeland' to establish a unique Black British identity would be a trope that West himself would draw upon later in his life.

Street tuff rebel music

Through soundsystems like Unity, Heatwave and Jah Tubbys, alongside emerging young UK toasters such as Tenor Fly who cut his teeth MC'ing on Lloyd Coxson's Sound System, West was also exposed to ragga music, a subgenre of dancehall that was originating in Jamaica at that time. Unlike previous incarnations of Jamaican Reggae music, Ragga was instrumentally

driven by electronic forms where, like Hip-Hop, sampling served a prominent role in its production, something that West was already familiar with by using sampling techniques and electronic instrumentation in his early productions. 1988 saw West form the group Double Trouble who had major chart success with the single Street Tuff, the use of the spelling 'tuff' perhaps referencing Bob Marley's nickname and business empire Tuff Gong.

Again, as a nod to Jamaican and London soundsystem culture, he sampled the bassline from The Maytals 1968 hit '54-46 That's My Number' and combined this with self-produced synth stabs and syncopated breaks, frenetic patterns of cut up and rearranged sampled drum breaks from US Funk and Soul records. When Double Trouble split after their chart success, West continued his contractual relationship with Desire Records, and during 1990, released a number of singles and an album titled Rebel Music:



It could be argued that Rebel Music was a nod to Bob Marley and Reggae/Rastafarian cultural heritage. The album single Culture samples Jimmy Cliff and Dennis Alcapone and lyrically references Bob Marley, with West asking that people should study their culture. For the first time on record, West also used the term Jungle music and Junglist in his lyrics, suggesting that this term was linked to the Jamaican

culture that West suggested people should seek to understand and engage with. Whilst the historical factuality of the time of such musical developments and introductions are always going to be contested, it's worth noting that West and a few other producers such as DJ Hype, who was part of the Heatwave Soundsystem, and his friend Scientist, had already been experimenting with Ragga and Dub basslines since early 1990. As pirate radio station Kool FM's MC Navigator explains the term jungle comes from junglist and was first heard in raves as a Rebel MC sample:

Rebel got this chant — 'alla the junglists' — from a yard-tape [ie, a sound system mix-tape from Jamaica]. There's a place in Kingston called Tivoli Gardens, and the people call it the jungle. When you hear on a yard-tape the MC sending a big-up to 'alla the junglists', they're calling out to a posse from Tivoli. When Rebel sampled that, people cottoned on, and soon they started to call the music 'Jungle' (Mc Navigator cited in Reynolds 1994)

In Jamaica, a Junglist is a slang term which refers to a person living in Jungle, an area of West Kingston, Jamaica. However, the term further developed into slang for people who operated outside of the law, or according to the 'law of the jungle' such as rudeboys and gangsters. This co-option of the term Junglist in the UK seemed to resonate with the activities of UK Soundsystem culture that also operated outside of the law in terms of the legality of the soundclashes that at times took place in unlicensed premises, along with the unlicensed selling of alcohol and the illegal drug culture that existed in and around soundsystems; practices which would often bring the soundsystem operators into direct conflict with the authorities.

A similar situation simultaneously existed in the UK acid house/ techno scene, where warehouse parties and the popular use of ecstasy, attracted the attention

of the authorities. From this UK acid house/ techno rave scene a particular sound was emerging in the early 90's. The electronic instruments that spawned techno, such as the Roland 909 and 808 drum machines and the use of rudimentary samplers in early US Hip-Hop were being repurposed by UK producers in the early 1990's as they produced a sped-up form of techno called hardcore. As Simon Reynolds (1994) notes, the hardcore techno tunes of 1991 that were based around looped hip hop beats became hugely popular and "the gritty funky syncopation drew more black British kids

into hardcore rave. In turn they brought new musical inputs, Ragga and Dub in 92 and Soul in 93"

Whilst previously sampling Reggae, Ska and Ragga and infusing his music with audio samples of gunshots, rewinds, sirens, air horns and lyrical references to soundboys, rudeboys, badboys and gangsters, West's use of visual references to Jamaican and Rasta culture became prominent during and beyond this period.

BLACK MEANING GOOD

His 1991 follow up album Black Meaning Good (<https://www.discogs.com/Rebel-MC-Black-Meaning-Good/master/20284>) continued to draw musical reference from ragga and Hip-Hop but visually referenced Jamaican and Rastafarian culture in a more

direct way than Rebel Music had previously done with red, gold and green being the only colours on an otherwise black and white cover.

What is particularly visually striking is the illustration of what it seems are black slaves carrying texts that show how the word black has always been linked to a negative expression created and perpetrated by white people. The illustration suggests that the slaves are having to shoulder and carry around with them the burden of those negative connotations, as West and his Black British counterparts continued to do in contemporary UK society. As a challenge to this, West reclaims that word as something that has positive connotations and meanings and the lyrical content of a number of the songs suggest a move towards the expression of more conscious lyrics.

Rebel MC's late 1990 release *Wickedest Sound* sampled Barrington Levy's *Under The Sensi*, along with Mikey Dread and Cutty Ranks and live Reggae toasting by employing the skills of UK Reggae MC Tenor Fly. These vocals were layered over a rhythm of infectious breaks, chopped up and rearranged versions of the now eponymous *Amen Break*, a sample from GC Coleman's drum solo from the 1969 funk soul song *Amen Brother* by The Winstons, that is the foundation of any Jungle and early Drum and Bass tune. Not only did West strip down the *Amen Break* to single drum hits he innovatively rearranged them in a hyper syncopated way that was a presage of the Jungle drum rhythm that would later emerge. West and others at the early inception of Jungle took inspiration and production values from the likes of Lee Scratch Perry who as Wall (2012) suggests, pushed the boundaries of

dub production through innovative uses of the mixing desk as a form of instrumentation as well as production. As West Explains;

“..when you have a certain way of making music, it's a lot to do with the technology that is available at the time. Jungle music was at the cutting edge of technology [.....] The technology was already here. Akai made the samplers but nobody was doing what we were doing with the breakbeats. [...] Were going to use the desk and sampler and any other bit of equipment we can, in the way we wanna use it.”
(West cited in Clay 2013)

This innovative use of technology and approach, to pushing the technical capabilities of both the machinery and the sonic boundaries of the bass frequencies, propelled the development of Jungle as a musical form. Wall (2012) warns against seeing technology as deterministic in the development of musical sounds. In this sense he suggests that whilst technology can enable, it should not be seen as the sole driving force of a society's culture and history. As Anderton et al (2013:17) argue “technology ‘affords’ us with a certain range of possibilities and we have agency in choosing our responses within that process” (17). So whilst technology can contribute towards a shift in culture we have to be mindful that it is also social, cultural and economic forces that also shape a particular sound. For West, the possibilities technology played in the development of Jungle as a musical form, also afforded him a way of gaining independence from the mainstream music industries. However, West's approach to the production and distribution of Jungle was not just technology driven. It was

also influenced by cultural, social and economic forces, such as the relative affordability of the technology, the Jamaican and Rastafarian cultural and musical references he drew upon for his productions, and the multicultural society in which he grew up in, reflected in the uniqueness of the sound he was creating. As West succinctly puts it:

Jungle wasn't just about the music it was about the way of life. Jungle was about supporting yourself; making and producing your own tune, having your own label, distributing your own music. Suddenly becoming your own boss and having that mindset of “I don't need anyone, all I need is my studio, where I can build my tunes, and then I can get them pressed up and I'll sell em”. And that in itself is influential”
(West cited in Clay 2013)

WORD, SOUND, POWER

The importance of West gaining his independence was brought to the fore when he parted company with Desire Records towards the end of 1991, over differences of musical direction. Inspired by Bob Marley's Tuff Gong label West set up his own label, Tribal Bass Records, supported by the independent label Big Life and released *Word Sound Power*, an album that demonstrated a clear influence of and debt to Reggae and Rastafarian culture:



The very title of the album draws heavily on Rastafarian philosophy where the idea that the vibrations of speech and music impact the world, both physically and socially. As Stephens (1999: 294-295) notes the relationship between Word/Sound/Power is recognised in Rastafarian philosophy and religious practices as a holy trinity, where the repetitive use of the combination of conscious words and appropriate sounds equals power. West's cultural knowledge and understanding of this Rastafarian holy trinity easily transposed onto his experiences of Reggae sound system culture that would often reference Rastafarian philosophy through the Reggae records that were played out on the sound systems

Behold the Conquering Lion

After the relative mediocre success of the album, West retired the Rebel MC moniker and retreated to his studio to work on a number of DiY projects. As a homage to sound system culture, he released a number of dub plates during 1993 and 1994 under the pseudonyms of X Project and most significantly Blackstar and 'Conquering Lion.' The release of Inahsound, Lion of Judah and the ground breaking Code Red/Phenomenon 1 under the latter monikers cemented the now recognisable hyper-syncopated Jungle breaks and tempo whilst combining samples of basslines and vocals from old roots and dub Reggae productions and

We were born in a sound system culture, and the sound system culture was about sound, word and power. The words would be the man on the mic, the sound was the sound of the riddim and the power was the amplification through the speakers. I wanted to be around that trinity (West cited in Beaumont-Thomas 2013)

Song titles referencing Rastafarianism and African heritage such as Let Jah Light Shine, African Descendant, Jahovia and Creation Rebel alongside salutations to Jah seem to suggest that the Reggae and Rastafarian motifs previously sampled by West, had been replaced by a deeper philosophical interest in Rastafarianism, which is reinforced in the conscious lyrical content of the songs penned for this album. Musically, the album also saw West move away from Hip-Hop rhythms and samples and more towards dub basslines and more syncopated Jungle drum breaks.

repurposing them for a more contemporary British youth. This innovative approach created music that was made for the club and sound system; music that was produced to dance to.

This innovative new approach that combined historically located Reggae tropes with hyper syncopated breaks gave West and his fellow Jungle producers a distinctive sound of their own. It could be argued that just as early roots Reggae enabled Steel Pulse and Aswad to establish a sense of black British identity, Jungle seemed to suggest a similar journey for many young black and ethnic youth in 1990's multi-cultural Britain. "Jungle was a revolution. Jungle was the first time we'd got our own music, our own way of talking, our own way of dressing. Everything." (West

cited in Clay 2013)

By 1994 the term Jungle and Junglist had become common parlance amongst those who attended raves and the emerging musical form garnered interest from mainstream media including a 1994 BBC 2 documentary Jungle Fever about the scene and its protagonists. In the BBC's particular historiography of Jungle, West's presence was strangely absent, which may have been an oversight on the BBC's part or a result of West converting to Rastafarianism, taking on his spiritual name Mikail Tafari, and not wanting to engage with the Babylon media.

At this time, West set up his independent recording and distribution operation from his house in Tottenham; "My Yard was full of tune-like a warehouse! We'd broken away from the whole machine. We were running our own mechanism, our own threads" (West 2012 cited in Resident Advisor) Whilst developing and building his independent label and productions, West made a number of visits to Jamaica playing his Jungle music back to the culture that it took its references and influences from and meeting with Jamaican and Rastafarian communities, where he amassed a number of field recordings. His many trips led him to release his first album on the newly formed Congo Natty label, Tribute to Emperor Haile Selassie I, under the pseudonym of Blackstar-



This album drew heavily on Rastafarian motifs such as niabynghi drumming, recordings of Rastafarian prayers, hymns and chants, old news recordings and speeches from Emperor Haile Selassie. It also included the sounds of the foghorns of the Black Star Line and Windrush steamboat carriers, which were synonymous with the African and Caribbean diaspora and their quest for economic independence, but which also connoted the historical transportation of African slaves. The inner sleeve of the record contained a number of quotes from Revelations and the Psalms of the Bible. These cultural and religious references were cut and pasted onto bass heavy riddims, hyper syncopated breaks patterns and toasting from a wealth of UK and International MC's and Reggae/dancehall artists, creating a hyperkinetic sound. West's religious beliefs and practices, combined with his highly valued production skills, resulted in him becoming seen as representative of a unique form of UK Jungle that included ragga/Rasta motifs supplemented by a deep sense of spirituality that other Jungle producers and tunes seemed to lack.

BORN AGAIN

From 1995- 2007 the Congo Natty label grew and produced a number of sub-labels such as Congo Natty Bass and Congo Natty Dub and an increasing catalogue of productions, under a number of pseudonyms such as Blackstar, Lion of Judah, Tribe of Isaachar and Congo Natty, the name by which he has become better and more commonly known. In Rastafarian culture The term Natty refers to the idea of natural or with nature whilst similarly the term Congo (sometimes used

synonymously with the word Bongo) is a positive reclamation by Rastafarians of a colonial derogatory term for black Africans (Price 2009). This idea of living a life as a natural black African suggests that there is a connection with Africa's/Ethiopia's tribal past. In contemporary Jamaican culture, the term Congo Natty is a name given to a Rastafarian (predominantly rural) who is self-sufficient, grows their own food and lives outside of mainstream society and its trappings (Clay 2013). West's decision to choose this name could suggest a reference to his independent production and distribution practices that sat outside of the mainstream music industries but could also indicate how seriously he took his religious beliefs. Some of his releases during this period include remixes and re-issues of other tunes from West's earlier productions, including a return to the Rebel MC moniker with the release of the Born Again album in 2004. The cover depicts a baby West with his mother and the face of Haile Selassie I in the background. The album's name suggests a momentary return of his Rebel MC identity but also recognition of how far he had travelled and how his Rastafarian spirituality and beliefs emerged from that earliest West musical identity -



By 2007, despite his continuing success, the music business started to become less important to him. Spurred on by his religious

beliefs, West uprooted his whole family and moved to Shashamane in Ethiopia, an area of land that Emperor Haile Selassie I left for the settlement of Rasta's, Jamaicans and other Caribbean citizens who wanted to return to Africa, and which contains the largest Rastafarian community in the world.

“My aim was always to get to Ethiopia and get out of Babylon. Getting Out of Babylon meant gathering the family, getting rid of all the things that tie us down. And that was the point of my journey”
(West cited in Resident Advisor 2012)

West suggested that this was a life changing transformation, a rebirth "It was like being born again. My spirit was there. I felt like I had returned home" (West cited in Clay 2013). West's dream of living a pure Rastafarian life in Shashamane, with a focussed commitment to his religion, supported by an income from his back catalogue as his means of living, seemed to override his desire to follow his own musical career. But in late 2008 the manager of his business affairs in the UK became seriously ill and things started to go wrong. Eventually, he had to return to the uk with "three little ones and two bigger ones and my wife. And thirteen pound. That's not a good look. So, at that point I started again" (West cited in Resident Advisor 2012)

Ever philosophical about his situation, he attributed his return as a spiritual calling from the most holy Jah Rastafari to continue on his journey to make music and create a better world for the youth of the UK. Central to the Congo Natty label was a sense of a Congo Natty family. Members

of his immediate family, relatives and friends that worked in and around the label were encouraged to develop their own musical productions and careers. A number of releases propelled West towards making the album *Jungle Revolution* in 2013 on Big Dada Recordings. Out of respect for the country that spawned his musical career, he brought together a line-up of UK toasters and MC's and released the single *UK Allstars*, as a reinforcement of the place of origination and a unique and defining sound that, while including ingredients of Jamaican sounds and culture, could only have been made in the social, cultural and political milieu of the UK.

Junglist Souljah

Since then West, has continued to produce Jungle music as Congo Natty, always pushing sonic boundaries and technology to its limits, defining what UK Jungle represents. As a self-appointed ambassador for Jungle he has taken its sound around the world, appearing at small clubs as well as major international festivals and even curating his own Jungle events. In a similar way that West acknowledged the influence of Reggae and Rasta culture on his musical practices, it could be argued that a number of more recent musical forms such as Garage, Dubstep and Grime owe a debt to West and other Jungle pioneers. Without Jungle, those musical forms may never have emerged.

West remains deeply political and for him, the donning of army greens is recognition of the fact that he sees himself as a soldier fighting a revolution against all injustices. He sees music as the way to break down barriers and bring people together. At the same time, he remains deeply spiritual. Reinforcing his Rastafarian beliefs, West's productions continue to reference Rastafarian culture. Where ragga seemed to err towards the darker sounds and lyrics of Jamaican culture, West's sound also embraces the African diaspora and presents a multitude of expositions of blackness from multiple perspectives and multiple voices that seek to embrace love, peace and unity and reflect the multicultural society he grew up in and continues to inhabit.

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Conquering Lion (1993)

Inahsound. X Project (DUB PLATE 2)

Conquering Lion (1993) *Lion of Judah*. X Project (DUB PLATE 3)

Conquering Lion (1994) *Code*

"Grime is soundsystem culture, it's from the yards. The DiY approach, 'dubplates', pirate radio promoting it, the passing of the mic, the toasting and dissing your vocal opponent, this is a soundsystem thing for today's generation of youth" (West 2013).

Red/Phenomenon 1. X Project (DUB PLATE 4)
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Prior to joining the Birmingham School of Media and the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research (BCMCR), Matt worked extensively in the UK as a freelance radio trainer/producer, bringing radio production to marginalised groups such as Romany and Gypsy Travellers, prison inmates, drug and alcohol dependents, victims of domestic violence, young adults in rural areas and community groups. His rationale behind the training is using radio production as a vehicle for social inclusion, skills acquisition, empowerment, personal development, and social/cultural bridge building by giving a voice to the marginalised.

Matt cut his music industries teeth at the tender of age of 15 when he dropped out of school and began work as a roadie and later a sound engineer, tour manager and promoter in the UK DiY punk scene. He has also previously worked as an independent music and creative industries consultant, radio producer, broadcast journalist and art technician.

Matt is currently working on his PhD research degree within the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural research where he is investigating British anarcho-punk and its construction as a cultural object, and its ideological significance in the life courses of ageing fans. He has published on the subject of anarcho-punk in a number of books and academic journals

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