Identity Making in Jamaican Dancehall Culture

by

Steven Le
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Jamaica has always had a music industry way out of proportion with its size and small population. Kingston's recording industry is probably the third largest in the world. There are no exact figures on records released, but a reasonable guestimate would be that between 40-50 45rpm records are released each week in the peak season of July-August and December- January, and during major international and national events... The figure does not include records released by independent artists or producers.

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-The Jamaica Daily Gleaner, April 11, 1978

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These words hark back to a time when music inundated Jamaica's landscape. Roots reggae was at the height of its popularity and the tunes, much of them brought to you by Jamaica's self-made recording industry, were being heard internationally, transforming some of Jamaica's most

impoverished entertainers into ghetto superstars practically overnight. At the frontlines of Jamaica's burgeoning music industry were the sound systems, massive mobile discos that utilized unsophisticated sound technology to blare their[1] tunes late into the night, and straight on into the morning.

In a country such as Jamaica where, in the 1940s, owning even a radio was beyond the financial expenses of most, Jamaica's poor had to find alternative forms of

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[1] A sound system referred to both the sound producing apparatus, and those working or performing behind it. Along with their equipment, sound "systems" were composed of a network of individuals ranging from singers and deejays to sound technicians (Stolzoff, 2000). For this reason, in reference to the sound systems, I will use pronouns and verbs normally ascribed to human beings,

entertainment in order to satisfy their musical appetites. Jamaicans were divided by distinct social classifications known as "uptown" and "downtown". This binary speaks to social difference, one "carved in the social imagination"[2] rather than a literal depiction of a landmark divided into two polar opposites. Moreover, this distinction was applied so comprehensibly to Kingston's ghettos that the term "downtown" was transmitted to poor Jamaicans regardless of where they lived.[3] While uptown Jamaicans could afford to frequent big ballrooms and large orchestras, expensive entertainment was usually out of reach of the common downtown man. Back in the 1940s, the person who owned a turntable and a few records was the most popular guy around town, and people would flock to him just to hear the music. Crude and improvised "sound systems" like these appeared all over Kingston's ghettos to fill the void of inexpensive entertainment.[4]

In discussing the sound systems, it would be impossible to ignore the dancehalls in which they performed. A dancehall was, and still is, a large plot of land that is rented out by various musicians, promoters, etc. to hold mass dances. Dancehalls were vital to the sound system business because they were the site of "sound clashes", competitions between two or more systems that ended in the metaphorical destruction of an opposing sound system.[5] Tenor Saw, a prominent dancehall singer and former member of the acclaimed Youth Promotion sound system,

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e.g., "They performed…Their business …They operated…" Furthermore, doing this is not a step away from the more traditional literature pertaining to my subject (see Stolzoff, 2000).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Lesser, Beth. *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture*. London: Soul Jazz, 2008.

[5] Henriques, Julian. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*. New York: Continuum, 2011.

described the symbolic death of a defeated sound system in his 1980s hit song *Ring the Alarm*: "Rock up the white and rock up the black, sweet reggae music pon de attack…sweet reggae music gaan straight nonstop. Ring de alarm, another sound is dying. Ring de alarm, another sound is suffering".[6] Sound systems operators fervently believed that they were waging warfare in the battle to become "champion sound (sound system)", and Tenor Saw's words speak to how the lines between death and symbolic death were often blurred during sound clashes. These clashes were the main events in the dancehalls and the winners were determined by the audience, granting the prevailing sound system a strong reputation among the crowd. Not every sound system succeeded in the dancehall business, so the element of competition was a crucial process in which sound systems' reputations were made, and just as quickly dismantled.

One's reputation remains a contentious topic in Jamaica to this day. Because a variety of symbols and traits such as skin tone, dress, and manner of speech carry deep sociopolitical meanings[7], these social "markers" could often be the basis of extreme judgment ranging from outright scorn to reserved approval.

Identity, the ways in which it was formed and related in Jamaica, was especially important for Jamaica's urban poor given the political atmosphere of the 1940s. Due to exploitative policies instituted by Jamaica's government during this time, the urban poor's[8] partisan affiliation was equated to their moral character. Identity and political

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[6] "TENOR SAW RING THE ALARM LYRICS." *JUST SOME LYRICS*. Web. 5 Apr. 2012. <http://www.justsomelyrics.com/1206865/Tenor-Saw-Ring-The-Alarm-Lyrics>.

[7] Hope, Donna P. *Inna Di Dancehall: Popular Culture and the Politics of Identity in Jamaica*. Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 2006.

[8] I use Obika Gray's, author of *Demeaned and Empowered*, term "urban poor" to describe disenfranchised Jamaicans living in and around Kingston's ghettos who were directly affected by

associations were problematically linked pigeonholing the majority of the urban poor into categories based on personal political support. On top of this, the fact that debilitating poverty forced many into becoming "clients" of the state through the adoption of strategic political affiliations in order to receive special favors by the empowered ruling party. This political environment restricted the urban poor's ability to freely form identities by using political spoils as incentive for them to settle for the status quo while the government exploited its ghetto communities.

Contrary to the exploitative political structures of Jamaica at this time, the dancehall represented an alternative sphere in which individual identity formations were encouraged. This was most prominent at the site of a sound clash, where opposing sound systems "debated" not just with their competitors, but also with their audience. To respective sound systems, winning a sound clash meant potential fame or even a ticket out of the ghettos. Each sound system also had its own unique message or lesson it would attempt to impart to the audience in the form of their "specials". These were exclusive records edited or "cut" from a master copy for use by that sound system during a sound clash. If a particular song motivated the massive enough, they would holler "forward" ordering the sound system to repeat the record from the top. Audiences were engaged in an active dialogue with the sound systems, so winning a sound clash often kept the sound systems' one-of-a-kind tunes fresh in listeners' ears. This way, their messages could be dissected and freely contested by the dancehall attendee long after the clash. Hence, the sound clash was a musical debate that sought ideological along with musical dominance. Given Jamaica's political structures that

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state parasitism. I do this because urban poor is more accurate than "downtown man/woman/etc." for reasons mentioned in the introduction.

inhibited identity formation, it was the sound systems' capacity for moral leadership that allowed them to transform the dancehall into a setting in which the symbolic distinctions and social hierarchies of class, gender, race, political affiliations, and sexuality were formed, disputed, reinforced, or dissolved.

Although this work focuses on the rise of the sound systems following the Second World War, I begin my analysis by relaying the history of Jamaican music from the slavery era up until the dawn of the 20th century. This period covers a substantive amount of history, much of which I will have to skim due to other priorities relevant to this paper. In structuring this work, I had to include this piece of history in order to show that the sound systems did not manifest themselves in an empty vacuum, but were a product of a tumultuous human history that should not be omitted. Moreover, I do not mean to suggest that the sound systems were merely a consequence of this estranged past, but that conditions following the end of World War II were ripe for them to form, develop, and ultimately succeed.

Section two presents a critical framework of the Jamaican political climate in the 1940s. Here, I identify the "problem" which I use as basis for my argument. This section describes the limiting factors which hindered identity formation among Jamaica's urban poor, and how they responded to it.

Section three introduces the rise of the sound systems, the development of the "modern" dancehall following their advent, and how WWII unintentionally aided the sound system business. As the sound systems appeared more in the mainstream, I show that music became an inescapable part of everyday life. In doing this, I demonstrate the sound systems' role as a medium through which alternative forms of communication were possible for Jamaica's urban poor.

Section four describes the sound system business' employment of ghetto youths creating an informal sector of income for some of Jamaica's disenfranchised poor. The sound system business empowered ghetto youths by granting them a sense social validity in the face of stark unemployment. Given these opportunities, Jamaica's ghetto led the charge in creating a "national youth culture"[9] that helped to broaden the narrow scope of identity politics in Jamaica.

In section five I introduce how the sound systems kick started the local Jamaican recording industry, today one of Jamaica's most vital economic sectors, by producing their own records for use in the dancehall. Although the Jamaican recording industry acted as a formal economy, informal elements still offered opportunities for the urban poor.

Having laid down the groundwork for the local recording industry, the sound systems in section six later produced "specials", exclusive records used as musical ammo during sound clashes. Specials allowed the sound systems exclusive rights to alter an existing tune, catering it to their personal needs. During a sound clash, specials were used as "sound boy killers" meaning they had the potential to overthrow their opponents during a clash. Specials provided the sound systems with distinct voice, moral position, and attitude which they carried to the dancehall.

In section seven, I explore the moral trajectory of the dancehall artist and introduce the primary opposition in the dancehall field between "slackness" and "culture, terms I will later define. Because a dancehall performer's intentions were often subject to gross misinterpretation by the Jamaican media, I wanted to highlight

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[9] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.

the entertainer and seek their perspectives on the role of morality in the dancehall. I use the words of dancehall entertainers Lady Saw and Tony Rebel as example.

Finally, section eights brings the reader to the scene of the sound clash. I describe the clash as a musical debate, suggesting that sound systems competed with a conscious sense of direction and that the clash itself was a battle for ideological dominance. The site of the sound clash represented a forum in which ideas were exchanged between audience and performer. Given that each sound system represented certain moral trajectories, I argue that this dialogue between sound system and audience was where social and political issues could be contested.

The Development of Mento and Jamaican Music in the Slavery Era

Before the development of popular musical genres such as Jamaican ska, rock steady, and reggae, mento was the most popular form of social dance music before the 1940s. Mento is a mixture of African and European musical forms that incorporated musical instruments from both traditions such as the fiddle, banjo, flute and drums.[10] Although the beginnings of mento are contested, I support anthropologist Kenneth Bilby's position in his work *The Caribbean as a Musical Region* that the mento country dance practiced by Jamaican slaves was the progenitor to the modern dancehall. [11]

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Bilby, Kenneth M. *The Caribbean as a Musical Region*. Washington, D.C.: Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1985.

The mento country dance was a product of an even earlier musical form known as the quadrille which the English brought to Jamaica following its conquest in 1655.[12] The quadrille was a form of music and dance popular among Europeans at the time.[13] As Norman Stolzoff, senior research fellow at the University of California, Irvine and author of *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*, suggests, it was possible that slaves first encountered the quadrille when they were brought along to the plantation balls frequented by their owners.[14] Here, they were able to observe the quadrille dance and musical accompaniment. Because skilled musicianship was associated with great social power and economic wealth, masters gradually introduced their slaves to musical instruments believing it would benefit their own reputation. [15]

Stolzoff asserts that the slaves not only played for their masters, but also for fellow slaves during their free time. By performing in informal settings, the slaves created a space in which they were allowed to improvise and experiment with their melodies. Versatility was important in a musician's growth, and by incorporating elements from African traditions, slaves invented stylistic nuances in the quadrille gradually transforming its musical structure. [16]

Demonstrating their abilities to remain versatile, slaves added lyrics to their rhythms. Their words, "delivered in a highly coded manner, using double entendres to disguise subversive messages",[17] disguised true feelings of anguish. Along with this,

[12] Ibid.
[13] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

Stolzoff notes that the "lyrics of the songs were very topical, filled with news and gossip about the incidents of local interest, protests against oppressive conditions, and satirical commentary aimed at both slaveholders and slave themselves."[18] Although Stolzoff suggests that the slaves' lyrics were usually "topical" in that they often relayed current events, he fails to expand on this notion of musical time keeping.

Because slaves were forbidden from education and rarely educated by their masters, many were illiterate. By preserving their lyrics in a catchy song, the slaves gained the ability to remember not only what happened the day before, but potentially weeks and years into the past.[19] The songs of old could be recalled when a slave reproduced the corresponding melody, and beyond just topical affairs, slaves were able to make decisions based on historical precedence. [20]

Jamaican slaves' ability to encode messages and events may explain why much of what informs the history of Jamaican slave culture came from planter's diaries and passing traveler's journals rather than African oral histories. These journals gave unique insight into the psyche of Europeans as they reacted to the slave festivities. An excerpt taken from J.B Moreton's book *Manners and Customs in the West India Islands* reads,

> Notwithstanding all their hardships, they are fond of play and merriment; and if not prevented by whites…they will on Saturday nights, hundreds of them in gangs, and dance and sing till morning. I have gone, out of curiosity, to such meetings, and was highly diverted…" (Moreton, 1790).

Moreton's words suggest the slaves' dance practices were not sporadic passing interests, but routine events involving hundreds within the slave community. At these

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Barrett, Leonard E. *The Sun and the Drum: African Roots in Jamaican Folk Tradition*. Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's Book Stores, 1976.

dance sessions, Jamaican slaves were temporarily free to express uninhibited desires, communicate fears, and ridicule their masters. It was from these mass slave dances that mento and the modern dancehall evolved. [21] Moreover, Jamaican slaves continued to alter mento's musical structures in order to cater to Jamaican musical tastes, allowing it to dominate the Jamaican music scene almost one hundred years following the abolishment of slavery in 1834.[22]

Although mento was still being played in the dancehalls up until the early 20th century, by the 1920s American jazz had flooded the Jamaican music scene, and big bands became Kingston's main musical attraction.[23] Following the big band invasion, mento was finally supplanted by jazz making it Jamaica's top musical act.[24]

The sudden shift of Jamaican musical tastes from mento to jazz seems alarming given mento's lasting dominance before jazz was imported to Jamaica. This phenomenon may have been in part due to Jamaicans associating jazz with the changing times. Following World War I, America was rising to superpower status and jazz, a product of black America, was also being associated with black modernity.[25] This notion was reinforced when jazz later became available on vinyl, a major innovation in sound recording technology at the time. Moreover, because local music was not being recorded in Jamaica, American vinyl was a hot commodity to a

[20] Ibid.
[21] Bilby, Kenneth M. *The Caribbean as a Musical Region*. Washington, D.C.: Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1985.
[22] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[23] Chang, Kevin O'Brien., and Wayne Chen. *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

Jamaican populace that found modernity by emulating black America.[26] Jamaicans were entranced by the new wave of American jazz music, making it the frontrunner in the Jamaican music scene for over three decades following its arrival.

The Formation of the People's National Party
And the Jamaican Labor Party

By the 1930s, power relations in Jamaica drastically changed as the British government acknowledged the need to transfer power to local governors.[27] Two candidates, Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley, emerged on to the Jamaican political scene.[28] By 1938, both men had established their names in the political race with Bustamante forming the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) and Manley forming the People's National Party (PNP).[29] Although each political organization was founded on similar platforms and political trajectories, that of improving the lives of Jamaica's laboring class, their unity was quickly dissolved when Bustamante accused Manley's PNP of attempting to take control of the BITU. Afterwards, Bustamante formed the Jamaican Labor Party (JLP) in 1943. [30]

Following the aftermath of Jamaica's 1944 elections that were held for the first time under universal adult suffrage, the JLP won with an overwhelming majority of the votes. Bustamante's JLP would then usher in to Jamaica a new wave of exploitative politics which Obika Gray, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin

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[26] Ibid.
[27] Gray, Obika. *Demeaned but Empowered: The Social Power of the Urban Poor in Jamaica*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 2004
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

and author of *Demeaned but Empowered,* refers to as state "parasitism".[31] Parasitism

pertains to Jamaica's political leaders who straddled both law and criminality for their

personal political gain. As Gray writes,

> One unmistakable feature of the Jamaican state is its shifting definition of law, morality, and crime. Despite an official rhetoric of 'law and order' and affirmations of allegiance to democratic values, established political parties and their agents have systematically contravened law, order, and democracy in the quest for political dominance. In specific conjunctures, what is regarded by the state as 'criminal', 'illegal', and 'morally right' get redefined as acceptable or unacceptable depending on exigencies faced by rival parties and their competing interests…Rather than making such distinctions as a method of establishing itself a lawful and legitimate power, parasitic rule blurs the political boundaries between the formal-constitutional and the covert-illegal (Gray, 2004).

Bustamante's JLP operated by using an adaptive political strategy. This tactic allowed

for a broad interpretation of the law by the Jamaican government on what it deemed

legal, and therefore what it would ultimately enforce. State parasitism only reinforced

notions of government corruption among the urban poor who, without proper insight

to which laws may be undermined next, were left most vulnerable in the face of

arbitrary police crack downs.[32] State parasitism was responsible for an overwhelming

amount of distrust in the government by Jamaica's working class.[33]

Growing skepticism towards Jamaica's political leaders among the urban poor

did little to help the JLP's campaign as it fought to maintain its dominance over

Manley's PNP. Owing to this distrust, Bustamante quickly began to cement ties

between supporters by "…using the levers of state power to reward JLP and BITU

supporters with jobs, political favors, and other benefits" and introducing the practice

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[30] Ibid
[31] Ibid
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

of "…political unionism which linked recruitment for government jobs to union membership."[34] This indicates that political ties to the JLP during this time meant that supporters were poised to gain both monetarily and socially for their continued contributions to Bustamante's campaign. This system of the urban poor swearing party allegiance in exchange for political spoils was known as clientalism.[35] This relationship was grounded not on actual partisan alignment, but individual welfare.

Confronted with the prospects of JLP discrimination, Manley and the PNP fought back by stamping out Bustamante's efforts to halt PNP recruitment and levying to gain fair access to government jobs.[36] Political confrontations reached their climax as both PNP and JLP mobilized gangs of loyalists, most of them from Kingston's ghettos, to carry out the parties' dirty work. Between the years of 1945 and 1947, the PNP "increasingly drew workers, politically mobilized section of the urban poor and gangs of toughs from the Kingston lumpenproletariat into confronting JLP violence in the Kingston streets…the war for political spoils had begun". [37] The PNP and JLP began to transform entire neighborhoods of Kingston's ghettos into party affiliated proto-nations that fought and died for their respective parties. The worst part of all the political in-fighting was that although poor Jamaicans knew they were being exploited into doing the government's bidding, the political incentives dependent on party support required that JLP supporters maintain the status quo. Moreover, the larger issue of poverty faced by the urban poor, and the fact that there was little to no social

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

mobility between classes gave adequate reason for many to continue partisan grunt work.

Adding to the tensions, pressure to conform to a political faction resulted in the urban poor associating party affiliation with moral character. Gray writes,

> Depending on which side of the social divide the combatants stood, the assumption of a partisan identity became either a badge of honor or a stigma of devilry. Party and union affiliation had therefore become not unlike an ethnic identity in these early years of contestation... (Gray, 2004).

Gray mentions that partisan affiliation in Jamaica had morphed into a palpable social marker; it was not only akin to but also as evident as one's "ethnic identity". Under these constraining circumstances, the urban poor were restricted to form an identity free of stigmatization by their peers. On top of this, many born into PNP/ JLP designated communities did not freely choose their political associations, but were instead given a political position at birth.[38]

Ultimately, clientalism succeeded on the basis that the poor offered their support in exchange for fleeting short term benefits. Supporters were patrons of their respective parties and, as the name suggests, had to return once those benefits dissipated eventually turning into "clients" of the party. While some were able to gain employment opportunities,[39] political instability during times of election meant that job security was hard to find given the volatile favoritism inherent in clientalism's principles.

Unable to gain an equal footing in securing long term benefits, much of the urban poor preferred to take advantage of the fleeting political spoils instead of

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[38] Lesser, Beth. *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture*. London: Soul Jazz, 2008.

addressing the deeply entrenched social obstacles of the community. Obika Gray writes,

> In this war between the parties in Jamaica, and for the majority of the urban poor, what was at stake, however, was not the defense of religious rights, racial or ethnic identities, or even opposing class interests. Rather, the black poor and working people hurled epithets at one another, killed and maimed each other over party-and-union pejoratives, and fought over the perceived benefits that the poor associated with winning these exclusive rights…Indeed, they began, in these days of early partisanship, to associate the political stakes with their very social existence (Gray, 2004).

In essence, the exploitative mechanisms of clientalism distorted the urban poor's prospects by giving them the false pretense that they were working for a higher "exclusive" good, which they came to associate with their very livelihood. Under these socially crippling conditions, the urban poor prioritized their survival. Because issues such as "religious rights, racial or ethnic identities…and class interest" did not draw attention to the immediacy of their situation, they were understated for the more pressing issues stemming from poverty such as hunger.

Jamaica's urban poor would require a setting in which identities could be freely formed, expressed and contested. This forum of free expression, open to all, would need to be an alternative sphere through which the poor could ideologically challenge both the hegemonic power of the ruling elites and the state's mechanisms of control. Most of all, it would need to be a space of lower class social empowerment.

The Development of the Modern Dancehall and the Rise of the Jamaican Sound System

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[39] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.

Section one pointed out that precursors of the modern dancehall have been around since the slavery era. To clarify its usage, the term "dancehall" is often used in a modern context to describe Jamaica's current musical trend, dancehall (music). However, this term is misleading in that it describes a particular musical genre that arose in the 1980s rather than the type of music heard in a typical dancehall.[40] For insight, we should look to the words of one of Jamaica's musical pioneers. Errol, a.k.a "Flabba" Holt, a Jamaican bass guitarist for the famous Roots Radics Band, asserts that "Dancehall is just like a yard—you put a sound there, that's a dancehall"[41] (Lesser, 9). Hence, the word dancehall only pertains to a space where people danced. Furthermore, while modern "dancehalls" have existed in Jamaica since the proliferation of the sound system in the 1940s and 1950s, dancehalls were not limited to any defined space or boundary.

Errol Holt's definition epitomizes the essence of what dancehalls should represent. The undefined space of a dancehall suggested in Holt's words highlight the dancehall's element of bodily spontaneity; wherever you were, when the music hits your ear you simply had to dance. Gather enough people in any setting, and the impromptu jamboree transforms itself into a dancehall session. A dancehall would not be legitimate without the music though: "…you put a sound there, that's a dancehall". Like any dancehall event, the "jams" were prerequisite to the dance event itself. During the 1940s though, sound equipment was far too expensive for Jamaica's urban poor. Following World War II when new sound technologies were imported to

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[40] Chang, Kevin O'Brien., and Wayne Chen. *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.

[41] Lesser, Beth. *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture*. London: Soul Jazz, 2008.

Jamaica, music producing equipment steadily became more accessible to Jamaica's lower class.[42]

The importation of communication technologies vital to building sound systems started to appear in Kingston. Phonographs, public address systems, and records were among a few of the many sound producing goods imported into Jamaica at this time.[43] As a result of the war, population displacement brought on by job opportunities abroad helped to create an international bridge linking Jamaica to foreign cultures.[44] Kevin O'Brien Chang, contributor to the *Jamaica Daily Gleaner*, and Wayne Chen, current vice president of the Jamaican Employer's Federation, write in their collaborative work *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music*,

> The demand for sound systems stemmed from the escalation in temporary migration from Jamaica to the U.S. in the late 1940s. Migrant sugar cane cutters, contracted for six months to a year in the American south, introduced rhythm and blues to Jamaica and it proved highly popular with the local public (Change and Chen, 1998).

Although Jamaicans also migrated to other countries besides the United States, American influences, specifically its music, left the most lasting impression in Jamaican popular culture.[45] The breaching of foreign borders by Jamaicans and the exchange of cultures between nations became vital to developing Jamaica's diverse musical styles.

It was not only the subsequent return of Jamaicans abroad that helped to launch the sound systems, but also Jamaicans that permanently settled across seas. Hedley Jones, soundman and one of the early originators of the sound system, says

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Chang, Kevin O'Brien., and Wayne Chen. *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.

that because 160,000 or so people migrated to Britain to assist in reconstruction

efforts, many of whom were trained musicians, there was a "dearth of music"[46] when

he returned to Jamaica. The scarcity of music coupled with a "burgeoning north coast

tourist industry" that employed the rest of Jamaica's trained musicians left little live

music to be found in Kingston's ghettos.

As Hedley Jones suggests, conditions at this time were not conducive for a

musician to make money unless they were professionally trained. Therefore, it would

follow that ghetto musicians were unable to fully take advantage of the sound system

technologies at this time. Stolzoff, writes that

> Even though the sound systems were a cheap source of musical entertainment,
> they were not easily obtained by the average working person. As a result, most
> of the early sound system owners were men who straddled the lower-
> class/middle-class social divide. For the most part, these men were members of
> the petite bourgeoisie: government clerks, merchants, and owners of small
> downtown shops (Stolzoff, 2000).

Instead, those who breached the lower class ceiling were the ones with the financial

means to purchase the sound system equipment. In their immediate positions, these

people were not thought of as outsiders in the downtown scene because many of them

lived and worked there.[47] Moreover, because these people "straddled the lower-

class/middle-class social divide" and had connections outside of the ghettos, they were

in a position that allowed them to translate and transmit cultural ambiguities between

social classes.[48]

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[46] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

The sound system business coalesced as a result of semi-successful merchants using their sound equipment to attract people to their small businesses.[49] According to Beth Lesser, former publisher of the *Reggae Quarterly*, reggae photographer, and author of *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture*, "Sound system sessions were community events, open to all, young and old. That was the whole point"[50]. Unlike Jamaica's political environment at this time which used exclusivity as a political weapon to divide the urban poor, sound system sessions were public events that catered to all regardless of political affiliation. Sound systems first appeared in public spaces like this not to push a political agenda; it was not about politics for them. Rather, early sound system sessions centered on the music and its uncontested ability to lull outsiders to a particular location.

The early sound system certainly understood the capacity of sound systems to hypnotize and draw audiences. Julian Henriques, senior lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications the University of London, refers to this phenomenon as "sound dominance". He says in his book *Sonic Bodies*,

> It hits you, but you feel no pain—instead pleasure. This is the visceral experience of audition, immersed in auditory volumes, swimming in a sea of sound, between cliffs of speakers towering almost to the sky, sound stacked upon sound…There is no escape, not even thinking about it, just being there alive, in and as the excess of sound[51] (Henriques, 2011).

The early sound systems took advantage of the music's captivating potential. Curious interlocutors would come for the music and were inclined to stay—the music was that powerful. On top of this, the ingredients necessary for a dancehall found in these

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[49] Lesser, Beth. *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture*. London: Soul Jazz, 2008.

[50] Ibid

[51] Henriques, Julian. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*. New York: Continuum, 2011.

sessions, the tunes played by the sound systems and the large crowd, spawned the formal spaces recognized as the modern dancehalls of today. Among some of the most popular dancehalls that arose in the 1950s and 1960s were Forrester's Hall, Jubilee Garden, King's Lawn, and Chocomo Lawn.[52]

Music was a vital form of communication for many poor Jamaicans during this time and it was nearly impossible to escape its grasp.[53] Attesting to the music's ubiquity in Jamaica during this time, Lesser says that Jamaicans "…lived and breathed music. It was everywhere, an inescapable part of everyday life".[54] The music was pervasive and, owing to its unique mode of delivery by way of the early sound systems, had a profound influence on many ghetto youths who looked to the sound systems for moral guidance.[55]

The proliferation of the dancehall came as sound systems became independent from their store fronts. Sound system owners, seeing the money generating potential of the sound system business, turned them into the main event in the dancehalls.[56]

The Sound System Business as an Informal Sector of Income

Although the sound systems were owned by those straddling the lower and middle classes, they were mainly operated by those from Jamaica's lower class.[57]

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[52] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.

[53] Lesser, Beth. *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture*. London: Soul Jazz, 2008.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.

[56] Lesser, Beth. *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture*. London: Soul Jazz, 2008.

There were positions to fill in both the performative elements of the sound system where deejays and singers "worked the mic", and behind the scenes where sound technicians and the setup/breakdown crew worked.[58] New employment opportunities were opened once the sound systems move to the dancehall. With larger venues that were well publicized came promoters, videographers, photographers, and small vendors.[59]

These positions became a small part of what is known as Jamaica's informal economy. Donna P. Hope, author of *Inna Di Dancehall*, says that the informal economy refers to "income-generating activities that are unregulated by the institutions of a society within a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated".[60] Given that formal employment drops drastically during 1970s Jamaica by nearly ten percent,[61] Jamaica's poor needed alternative paths for generating income. The lure of the informal economy in the dancehall and sound system business was especially prevalent in ghetto youths who gained a fresh sense of self-confidence and social validity from their involvement in the sound system business. Stolzoff asserts that for ghetto youths, the dancehall

> …offered a fresh sense of possibility and identity and novel modes of social interaction through the expressive codes of dance, language, and fashion. Through the dancehall, the black ghetto youth were becoming leaders, not only in the ghetto, but of national youth culture as well (Stolzoff, 2000).

The informal economy created by the dancehall industry gave new hope to ghetto youths by establishing an exit strategy from routine unemployment. Beyond the

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[57] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Hope, Donna P. *Inna Di Dancehall: Popular Culture and the Politics of Identity in Jamaica*. Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 2006.
[60] Ibid.

employment opportunities in its many sectors, the dancehall business engendered romanticized possibilities of wealth and fame for ghetto youths. Moreover, many ghetto youths seeking to become entertainers even created alternative personas in the dancehall challenging Jamaica's identity politics that served to stigmatize them.[62]

When performing, an entertainer's stage name and the role play they engaged was meant to allude to particular philosophies the entertainer would attempt to embody.[63] While there are a wide range of categories distinguishing entertainers, their stage name usually hints to their underlying moral positions. For instance, deejays of the 1970s and 1980s often utilized stage names that provoked notions of "good" outlawry such as that found in Robin Hood who stole from the rich and gave to the poor.[64] The romanticization of gangsters was not a peculiar phenomenon in the dancehall given that violence was often a part of everyday life in Kingston's ghettos.[65] From my own knowledge of deejays who assumed outlaw identities, Lone Ranger, Clint Eastwood, and Dillinger are among my personal favorites.

The Jamaican Recording Industry: From Informal to Formal Economy

Stepping aside from the informal economy, the Jamaican recording industry proliferated by the sound systems demonstrated how the informal sector had a direct hand in shaping one of Jamaica's formal economic sectors.[66]

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[61] Ibid.
[62] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Cooper, Carolyn. *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
[65] Lesser, Beth. *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture*. London: Soul Jazz, 2008.
[66] Ibid.

On August 6th, 1962, Jamaica became an independent nation.[67] All over the island people hoisted the new national flag in celebration. Dances and concerts erupted in Jamaica's streets, and a sense of national pride was felt in the air. Jamaicans were in the mood to party, and they needed records to do so.

In the 1950s and into the early 1960s, American music tastes were changing, shifting away from jazz and r&b to rock and roll.[68] As a result, the supply of American jazz and r&b imported to Jamaica dwindled while rock and roll records increased.[69] However, the dancehall crowd was not as eager as their American counterparts to embrace the change. Adding to the weak supply of good records, sound systems were multiplying and each set wanted to get their hands on the most exclusive records of the time.[70] According to Chang and Chen, as the golden of jazz and r&b was ending, "Black American records became increasingly soft in an attempt to 'cross over' and appeal to white audiences. The driving beat which moved the sound session dancers was weakening"[71] Although Jamaican's preferred jazz and r&b over rock and roll, the American musical forms were softening their sound and could therefore no longer be used in the dancehalls where crowds demanded a harder sound. These circumstances coupled with the sense of national pride spurred by Jamaican independence paved the

[67] Ibid.
[68] Chang, Kevin O'Brien., and Wayne Chen. *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.
[69] Chang, Kevin O'Brien., and Wayne Chen. *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.
[70] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[71] Chang, Kevin O'Brien., and Wayne Chen. *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.

way for a local recording scene that could tailor itself to the tastes of the dancehall audience.[72]

The sound systems, realizing the need for good music to fuel the dance, began to record their own music.[73] While this was happening, small record producers realizing that they needed to be self reliant began to buy locally instead of oversees.[74] Clive Chin, famous Chinese Jamaican record producer, remembers how his father Vincent Chin used to do business:

> The motivation that he had was to supply the music to the masses of people who wanted it. Jamaica used to gravitate a lot to American music—rhythm and blues, country, and western jazz; so when we couldn't get enough of the American music, we had to turn to our own (Lesser, 2008).

Turning to their own music, sound systems raced to record and produce the most premium records to play at the sound clashes. This had the effect of launching a fierce record producing competition between the opposing systems.[75] However, because more records were being produced, this competition actually helped to kick start the local recording industry.

Specials: The Role of Exclusives

The sound system's ammunition at the site of a sound clash was their special. In Lesser's words, specials were "songs, instrumentals, or dubs that were cut directly from the master tape onto a single acetate thus creation a unique, one-of-a-kind record

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[72] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.

that could never again be reproduced exactly."[76] Thus, the specials were records made one-of-a-kind by editing an original work. Through heavy editing or "cutting", sound systems were able to both add and subtract elements from the original including lyrics, rhythm, and audio effects.[77]

The process of creating specials was made possible due to Jamaica's infant recording industry which did not give an artist exclusive rights to a tune.[78] Sound systems would bring in eager singers for a one time recording session.. According to Lesser, "The singer could get paid a few hundred dollars by the sound men to voice a special, or he might be offer such a recording to the sound for the promotion it would bring."[79] As evidenced by Lesser's words, Jamaica's recording industry, although formally regulated by the state, still contained trace elements of the informal as well.

The special's purpose was to give each sound system a distinctive voice through which they could lay down their beliefs and values in musical style. In a sense, the special symbolized the very identity of the sound system because it was both exclusive to that system, and its contents were representative of their ideals. Furthermore, although sound systems tried not to affiliate themselves with politics, it was inevitable given the entrenched political mechanisms still at work within the 1960s and 1970s.[80] According to U Brown, legendary deejay who began his career with the renowned Silver Bullet sound system,

> When you go to a dance, the dance always shot up by members of a political gang…So people respect them life and afraid to go to dance anymore and sound system owners losing money and the promoter not making any money

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[76] Lesser, Beth. *Dancehall: The Rise of Jamaican Dancehall Culture*. London: Soul Jazz, 2008.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

so them hardly keeping any dance. A lot of them say they going to pack up them set cause they don't wan' fe (want to) involve in politics…the Socialist Roots sound system is not a political set but every sound system in Jamaica that come from ghetto area automatically becomes a political set that a proportion of rebels, or bad men, ghetto people, love to follow; it just happen because you are from the ghetto (Lesser, 2008).

The innocence of the early sound systems was lost once competition between the systems intensified during the 1960s as Jamaica's recording industry gained ground. Although many sound systems were not "political sets' per se, U Brown's words show that politics were unavoidable because it affected those from the ghettos wherever they were, and the previously established designations of PNP and JLP communities still carried much weight in the dancehalls. Observing the political violence that took place in both the dancehalls and their community, the sound systems started to adopt positions of moral leadership. This served to further politicize the dancehalls because it drew in many differing sentiments and opinions.

Utilizing music as the universal language of the dancehall, the sound systems transformed themselves into the speaker boxes of and for the community. Given that their exclusive specials could not be heard anywhere else, the sound systems became a unique mode of communication through which social empowerment and action could be disseminated. In doing so, the sound systems would challenge the established social mores associated with identity such as gender, sexuality, religion, and political affiliations.

Slackness vs. Culture: The Moral Trajectory of Dancehall Artists

Before I move on to the site of a sound clash, I think it would be important to analyze what I call the moral trajectory of the dancehall performer. That is, given the tensions mentioned before, what reasons led entertainers to adopt certain positions of moral leadership if any at all. Moreover, what is the underlying message of their performance, and how do they want their audience to receive it? An artist's moral trajectory may prove useful in highlighting the humanity behind a dancehall performance where intentions can sometimes be muddled by misinterpretation.

In addition to this, I also want to mention that while the dancehall was often a place of dispute, some performances were not always a battle for moral and ideological dominance. Often times, the crowd's vote will go to something much less contentious such as sheer noise levels—how much louder a sound system could play than their opponents. With the debate between culture vs. slackness, the primary opposition in dancehall culture[81], that arose in dancehalls during the late 1970s and early 1980s, many dancehall artists did adopt certain positions of leadership against what they saw was a moral decay in the dancehall.

Slackness represented everything culture was not. The term was first used by dancehall audiences to describe the deejays of the 1980s, referring specifically to their lyrical use of subject matter regarded as overtly sexual or taboo in Jamaican society. [82] Slackness was about giving the people "what they want".[83] The slackness artist rejected the thought of being a moral leader, and some performers even leaned towards amorality. Most slackness artists believed their music was only entertainment

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[81] Ibid.
[82] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[83] Ibid.

rather than a medium through which social reform was possible. Another definition is given to us by Carolyn Cooper, professor of literary and cultural studies at the University of the West Indies and author of *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*, "…not mere sexual looseness, though it certainly is that. Slackness is a contestation of conventional definitions of law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency."[84] Cooper touches on the subversive potential of slackness in its many forms on and off the stage. In defining slackness, Cooper actually offers a defense for it against its critics hinting at its demeaned status in Jamaican high society. Given that slackness was supposedly devoid of proper morality, why does Cooper suggest the subversive potential of slackness performers and their music?

One answer may be found in the case of Lady Saw, one of Jamaica's most controversial slackness artists. By giving the people what they wanted, Lady Saw demonstrates how the slackness performer can undermine norms of gender, sexuality, and identity. In an interview asking, "Some people are saying you are vulgar on stage and your lyrics are indecent. Do you think they are justified?" To which Lady Saw responds, "I think critics are there do their job and I am here to do my job…To entertain and please my fans…Lady Saw is an act"[85]. Lady Saw asserts that she is simply doing her job, drawing a firm distinction between her life on and off the stage. Furthermore, she reserves the right to not practice what she preaches challenging the notion of a rigid identity and people's forthrightness in instilling judgment before meeting her beyond the context of her role play. By giving the people what they

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[84] Cooper, Carolyn. *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

wanted, Lady Saw continues to perpetuate the dancehall's underlining principle of having free, contested expression. Therefore, critics who would rather see her removed from stage undermine the legitimacy of dancehall fans in deciding for themselves what they want to see.

Contrary to slackness, culture music accepts its role as a mode of moral leadership. According to Stolzoff,

> Culture is thought to promote all things positive and progressive, such as anti-colonialism, black consciousness, moral uprightness, prophetic leadership, communal sharing, the valorization of Africa, pride in the Afro-Jamaican cultural heritage, and rebellious opposition to the Babylon system of oppression" (Stolzoff, 2000).

Whereas Lady Saw attempts to please her audience, culture entertainers are supposed to strive for more than mere fan approval. Moreover, their lyrics should also reflect their commitment to a certain moral code.[86] Due to this, many culture artists have been associated with the Rastafarian movement, known especially in Jamaica for its strict religious principles.[87] Tony Rebel, a popular culture deejay, Rastafarian, and former member of the acclaimed Youth Promotion sound system, says,

> You have to take some stand and know what you going to do. The artist is like the watchman of the city and if him see the danger and him don't warn the people, then the whole other danger going to rest upon the watchman's soldier. So you can't talk about the audience want this, so you give it to them. Give the audience what you intend to give them or what you know is right to give them (Stolzoff, 2000).

As Tony Rebel's words express, the moral trajectory in the culture performer is much more evident than in that of the slackness performer. Rebel's words also hint at not a

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[85] Cooper, Carolyn. *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

passive desire, but an almost unshaken duty to reform his audience. Fundamentally, the culture artist denies the crowd of the excesses inherent in giving the people what they wanted, and instead delivers their version of the cold hard truth.

For dancehall enthusiasts, the opposition between slackness and culture represented the two extremes in the dancehall field. This suggests that by the 1980s, the dancehall had become a space in which a wide range of discussions were able to take place. Even so, the sound clash presented a different set of performative rules not seen elsewhere. With the element of winner vs. loser, audiences actively decided which discussions prevailed, and which were lost to obscurity.

The Sound Clash: A Musical Debate

The sound clash is one of the most prolific forces in the dancehall; it generates stylistic nuances by generating immense record sales for the use in upcoming dancehall events, and it is pivotal in maintaining the hierarchies between competing sound systems. Furthermore, the clash is an arena for the symbolic warfare of competing ideologies represented by individual sound systems. Therefore, the site of a clash is where contentious issues are brought to the public sphere, contested, and dissolved or reinforced by the audience.

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[86] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[87] Ibid.

The sound system versus crowd dynamic is held to the highest standard during a clash.[88] It is the audience that must become inspired by the sound systems' performance if they are to form new modes of thought or adopt differing positions, and thereby contest or rework their own identities when confronted by the systems.

On their turn to play, the sound system kicks off the sound clash by steering the crowd, having them take a moral position even before the clash starts. The sound system then outlines their argument and expresses their intended musical trajectory.[89] Henriques tells the role of the selector in the sound system:

> The selector's major responsibility is to steer the crowd by giving a musical shape and direction to the evening as a whole along the groove of their musical vibes. They are choosing a circuit…he has to win their (the crowd's) respect, coaxing them along and getting them to participate (Henriques, 2011).

Without a sense of a direction, an audience can easily misinterpret a sound system's intention, so the crowd requires a guide. A sense of musical flow must also be established, and a sound system's music, technique, and message must correspond to their beliefs. Stolzoff writes,

> …a time comes after a certain degree of success has been attained when an artist must choose a path with which to identity. People want to know "what an artist defends". Failure to be seen as maturing is harmful to one's career…on the other hand, those who make the reverse movement from culture to slackness, from dreadlocks Rasta to baldhead, often lose their standing as credible performers (Stolzoff, 2000).

An illegitimate entertainer is quickly dismissed by the crowd, who demand that the sound systems defend a moral position. A sound system's values represent their very essence; it is the moral basis to which the audiences can relate or ignore entirely. All

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[88] Henriques, Julian. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*. New York: Continuum, 2011.
[89] STOLZ

sound systems carried with them a set of moral markers, two examples being the highly acclaimed Kilimanjaro and Stone Love sound systems.

Having been around since 1969 just before the rise of roots reggae,[90] a genre usually tied to Rastafarianism, Kilimanjaro is a strict culture sound system and much of their music is grounded in this particular era. In contrast, Stone Love, legendary in their own rights, affiliates themselves more with slackness culture. Often times when lines are drawn between philosophical, moral, and political ideologies, the sound clash intensifies. For sound clash fans, these sound systems' extreme positions represented a war where the terms were all or nothing.[91] If Kilimanjaro defeats Stone Love, the slackness enthusiasts leave empty handed. On the other hand, moral binaries such as this also have the effect of producing stronger arguments. For audience members who did not take a side in the slackness versus culture war, binary clashes were often the deciding factor because they would incite individual moral growth, or along with that, degeneration.

As Henrique suggests, audience participation goes beyond voting for their favorite sound system. Audiences are also engaged in the rhetoric of the clash as well. If a tune is so potent that it captivates the minds and hearts of the crowd, they have the ability to shout "forward", "rewind", or "pull up"[92], all meaning to take it from the top. This dialogue between sound system and audience creates a forum within the clash where audiences are speak directly to the sound system. When the "forward" is

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[90] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Henriques, Julian. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*. New York: Continuum, 2011.

expressed, the audience becomes empowered because they exchange roles with the sound systems as "teachers", and they are no longer passive consumers of the dance. Instead, the crowds have a direct role in how the clash functions and, more importantly, how the music affects them. Hence, the dancehall sound clash serves as a place of dialogue where social, political, and ideological positions are continually being posited by the sound systems and contested by the crowd.

The sound clash has the potential to produce an abundance of ideologies and social dynamics. While some of these have the capacity to rally the crowd against Jamaica's hegemonic powers, such as when the entertainer conveys criticisms of the Jamaican social structures, others may divide the audience into warring factions, such as when the performer reinforces hegemonic structures of gender, sexuality, religion, and violence. I am not suggesting that prevailing ideologies in a sound clash are always "good", only offering my position that the dancehall is a space in which discussion is able to take place, something that was far less ubiquitous in 1940s Jamaica.

Conclusion

The dancehall session takes on many forms; it is protean by principle although the degree to which cultural movements come and go depends ultimately on dancehall goers who "vote" for prevailing ideals. As an alternative sphere, it is a setting in which poor Jamaican's have become empowered since the proliferation of the sound systems in the 1940s where political structures, some of which are still at work today in Jamaica today, stifled the means of personal identity formation by forbidding discussion among Jamaica's urban poor. Instead of promoting dialogue between

political leaders and the disenfranchised, partisan politics was used to stigmatize and swiftly write others, silencing the urban poor into obscurity.

The sound system operation, what I believe embodies the most subversive force to early Jamaican hegemonic powers, represents how music became a viable alternative for many Jamaicans both economically and socially. Carrying moral trajectories, early Jamaican sound systems helped to promote a wide range of perspectives and ideologies beyond the common rhetoric of JLP and PNP affiliation, and undermined how those artificial relationships defined identity among Jamaica's urban poor.

The sound systems began as a reactive rather than a deliberately provocative force, and responded to the same social issues as many of their listeners. The sound clash, for example, inspired and was inspired by many of Jamaica's political tensions such as the arbitrary police crack downs of dancehall events.[93] Believing that they were subjected to the violence of their political leaders, dancehall entertainers glorified gangsters and guns playing into the same rationale of violence.

The 21st century dancehall is still fraught with much of this reactionary tension between politicians and dancehall aficionados; perhaps even more so given what Carolyn Cooper asserts about the so-called "progressive" zeitgeist of the modern age: "The homogenizing imperative of global political correctness effaces cultural differences in a new imperialism of 'liberal' ideology."[94] Furthermore, she asserts that ideology such as this tends to "make little allowance for culture-specific definitions of

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[93] Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
[94] Cooper, Carolyn. *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

norms…"[95] Cooper is speaking directly to dancehall critics who disguise their discriminatory assertions as progressive rhetoric. The only problem is that if the dancehall surrendered to foreign demands so easily, it would no longer be a place of lower class empowerment and the powerful culture generating force it is today.

Contentious as dancehall is, it really could be no other way. It is undeniable that topics of violence and misogyny may engender scathing attitudes among foreign audiences, but the denial of polemic issues has the potential to breed even more ignorance. The dancehall should remain a space where polemic issues like these are brought up again and again. At least then it can be subjected to scrutiny by those who have power to dissolve the status quo.

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[95] Ibid.

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