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# **Assembling the Dance: Reggae Sound System Practices in the UK and France**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Reggae sound systems are assemblages of speakers, record decks and amplifiers that permit sound to be reproduced at very powerful levels. Sound systems crews, alongside an extended affinity group, build their own systems and organise and engineer the space of the dance. Interviews with crews from the United Kingdom and France reveal differences in how they each draw from the history of Jamaican musical experimentation when making spaces to collectively immerse the crew and crowd in sound. Yet in both cases, their approach to sound design communicates a commitment to inclusivity, maintaining an emphasis on the ‘vibe’ which progressively alters participants’ somatic experience and perceptions. In contrast to ‘dancehall’ in Jamaica, such sound systems disrupt understandings of a ‘standard’ setup that reinforces hierarchical relationships between performers and audience. Crews also downplay the visual aspects of the ‘dance’ and dancing, and are consciously non-consumerist. Thus, crews’ histories and associations alter how they enact, feel and understand similar conventions.

Keywords: sound systems, reggae, performance, listening, vibes, music

## **Introducing the dance**

Reggae music is often played, aside from live bands, through ‘sound systems’. The sound system apparatus is a collection of speakers, record decks and amplifiers; when played, they emphasise low frequency sound, the bass and sub-bass, communicating strong vibrations to the listeners’ bodies. Yet the sound system is more than just this collection of technical objects. It also consists of the making, skilled arrangement and operation of these elements within specific contexts by the crewmembers and their broader affinity group or ‘band’. This arrangement, in tandem with the interaction between performance and audience, forms the space of the ‘dancehall’.

Sound systems came into being in early 1950s Jamaica (Partridge 2010; Henriques 2011) and were the main source of entertainment in Kingston’s inner city where limited access to radio or record players meant they were often people’s only opportunity to hear recorded music (Bradley 2001; 2002). Reggae music itself emerged from Jamaican musical experimentation and innovation as well as various geographical displacements and interactions (Bradley 2001; Cruse 2010; Partridge 2010): the movement of large numbers of people and their practices from Africa to the West Indies as a result of the slave trade.

As Huxtable (2014) notes, sound system culture in Jamaica and the UK developed in parallel. Post World War II, many people were drawn to Britain from Jamaica and other (soon to be former) parts of the British Empire ‘in search of work and new beginnings’ (Ward 2014,10). The hostility faced by many in this largely white urban Britain stimulated the recreation and adaptation of existing Caribbean traditions, making ‘something familiar in the new and very different setting’ (Ward 2014, 10). ‘The scene in Jamaica heavily influenced the

gatherings in the UK' with a rapid transfer of 'innovations and new styles from Jamaica' (Huxtable 2014, 54).

Sound systems culture is constantly changing and adapting; for example, the growth of rasta in the 1970s infused the music with spirituality (Spiker 1998; Partridge 2010). Through the Rasta movement, the tradition of popular resistance became integral to reggae (Campbell 1980; King 2007). The linkage between belief and music stems from the Rasta philosophy 'that word-sound is power' (Niaah 2005, 23), where 'dread talk' or the modification of Jamaican slang used by Rastas 'express their heightened consciousness and profound awareness of the true nature and power of the spoken word' (Savishinsky 1994, 21). The presence of an MC (Master of Ceremony) and singers 'toasting' at dances continues this tradition.

Importantly, a difference has emerged between the dancehall (as space of the dance) in roots-dub events, and the setting of the dancehall at dancehall (genre) events. Indeed, Jamaican sound systems have since the late 1980s embraced dancehall, an offshoot of reggae heavily influenced by American hip-hop, digital music, street politics, and fashion (Henriques 2010). Morgan (2012), writing in the North American context, claims that by the end of the 1990s dancehall, both as a genre and as a culture, overshadowed 'the combined influence of the church, politicians, and the educational system.'

By the late 1970s and into the '80s the UK scene had largely receded, with another 'new beginning' in the 1990s with Leeds based Iration Steppas, and London's Aba Shati-I attracting new audiences with their up tempo 'steppas' (Huxtable 2014,116). The rise of the internet fostered further awareness of the UK scene and of the associated traditions and performance practices. The international network of sound system culture today allows this

music, knowledge, history and practice to be shared and exchanged across countries, becoming what D'Aquino, Henriques and Vidigal (2017) refer to as 'outernational'.

The examination of sound systems and dub music tends to focus on rave culture and alternative politics (such as: Halfacree and Kitchin 1996; Gibson 1999; Ingham, Purvis and Clarke 1999; Bey 2003; Partridge 2006; Riley, Griffin and Morey 2010), or reggae and dub's links with soundscapes, discourse and identity (such as Hebdige 1987; Gilroy 1993; Chude-Sokei 1994; Gilroy 2005; Veal 2007; Baker 2009). While some authors do provide a geographical perspective of the reggae-dub sound system (such as: Maysles 2002; Henriques 2003, 2010, 2011; Partridge 2010), all of these have taken an Afro-Caribbean focus.

This article draws from interviews with sound system crews active in the UK and France. The UK has been identified, following Jamaica, as a second home for sound systems (Partridge 2010), while in the last ten years dub and reggae have become popular in France leading to the expansion of the sound system scene. Nine members of six sound systems from France and the United Kingdom (predominantly Scotland) were interviewed in 2013 and 2014. Albah (Welders Hifi), Benoit (After All Sound System), Lion Roots Sound System and OBF Sound System were interviewed in Aix-en-Provence and Nice. Earl Gateshead, Jerome (Bass Alliance Sound System), Tom & Doug (Mungo's Hifi) and Wayne (Argonaut Sounds) were interviewed in Scotland (please see 'Interviews').

Some are well-known outfits active for over 30 years, while others are smaller, emerging within the last six. Participants were chosen based on geographical location and their availability during the time of research. Following an approach drawn from ethnomethodology these social scenes are regarded as composed of the practical accomplishments of their members (Coulon 1995). I (the first author) am fluent in French and

English and have been embedded in these scenes since 2009, attending sessions and maintaining friendships and an affinity with several sound system crews.

Firstly, this article explores how European reggae-dub sound systems have assimilated and now maintain sound system practices; how they build the sound-space of the dancehall using ways of knowing that Henriques (2011) refers to as *technés*. Crews tend to identify with a common set of technical, aesthetic and idealistic preoccupations despite most having no direct experience of the economic, ethnic or political inequalities that defined the early Jamaican reggae and sound system scene. Secondly, this article relates crews' understandings of what these practices make happen, how they can serve to alter participants' bodily understandings of experience and space, enabling a transcendence produced through practice. Overall, this article is offered as a response to Revill's (2016, 241) appeal for systematic engagement 'with the socio-material processes and practices which facilitate the specificity of sonic spatiality.'

### **Building presence**

A sound system session cannot be reduced to a collection of objects or instruments used to play music. As Henriques' (2011) study of Stone Love in Jamaica illustrates, a sound system also consists of 'the skilled techniques for playing these instruments. The crew's performance techniques embody a particular way of knowing, or *techné*' (2011, xxii). Sound system sessions transcend the period where music plays: crews and operators must first set-up the system and organise the space of the dance, activities requiring both technical knowledge and sensory appreciation. This combination becomes evident through the sound system's bespoke construction.

### *Sound systems are 'home-made'*

The practice of building most, or a large part, of the equipment, is done by the crews interviewed – be it speakers, amplifiers or effects such as echo delays and siren boxes. This stage of the process is crucial for many, especially for crews who initially had very little engineering knowledge: ‘the fact of building it allows you to understand how it functions, to really think about what you want in terms of sounding, the quality you want to get’ (Albah 2013). Building also allows for continual modification:

The home-made aspect allows you to evolve piece by piece [...] and that’s something you can’t do with a factory made system. Either you have to change everything, or you keep it. Whereas with home-made you can change things as you go along (Jerome 2014).

Consequently, every sound system is different, with each crew using a speaker design, an amplifier, or a set-up which reflects their understanding of the sound they want to achieve. This led OBF to observe that ‘the sound system makes our identity, and so people come to see the people that play but also to listen to a particular system’ (OBF 2014). Engineers’ experiment (Bradley 2001), attempting to achieve new sound levels and frequencies through ‘improvised’ use of equipment. Both Albah and Jerome state that the kind of music played is often evident from the look:

A sound system that is all black, covered with grids like Iration Steppas, it’s quite aggressive. And generally there is a reason behind it. If you look at the Channel One sound system, it’s all wooden, the grids on the speakers are round, you have a feeling they are going to play roots, and it tends to be that way (Albah 2013).

Building and assembling of the sound system generates its physicality but also informs how the crews are understood by others. The texture and tone colour achieved by the sound system are also important, as Albah (2013) explains: ‘everyone has that particular texture that is linked to what you play. You try to have a sound system that sounds best for what you play

the most'. Jerome expanded on this notion that home-made brings a human touch to the sound:

A reggae sound system will have a lot more colour, a sound which is much more – without sounding negative – muddy. It's warmer, it's not as clean. With the human ear, if it's too clean, it doesn't seem good. That's why even with the new technologies, you can have very very clean sounds, which on paper is good quality, but people won't like it because the human body is not used to it being so clear (Jerome, 2014).

The approach used to adjust the sound system differs from more standard concerts:

The big touring companies who put up sound systems for gigs they will equalize their system – they will align it perfectly [...] all the frequencies will be at the same volume. That's why it sounds sort of... horrible. The bass will be as the same level as the tops.<sup>1</sup> [...]

That's where in reggae there's tweaking to be done. A reggae sound system isn't flat. It's going to be quite heavy on the bass and tops. [...] With the system we have, I could make it completely flat, but it wouldn't sound like reggae, it would sound like a concert venue (Jerome, 2014).

The sound system is not tuned mechanically, but through 'a refining and distilling process, whereby the output of a component is shaped and adjusted until it achieved the desired characteristics' (Henriques 2011, 71). In essence the tuning is sensory, and depends on a crew's preference. Henriques (2011, 72, emphasis in original) affirms, 'the ownership of a Sound [system] is indeed the ownership of a particular sound.' Notably, the sound system can also be understood through what records are played and,

Also the music you choose not to play. There's that whole aspect of tunes with homophobic lyrics, and we've always thought it's a strict thing, we'd never play that (Wayne, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> Tops are higher frequencies – as their name suggested they are balanced at the top of a speaker tower (see Henriques 2011).



Benoit, from *After All*, similarly used to play such songs for their flow and melodies, but now: ‘it’s the kind of tune I ban from my system [...] I try to promote Peace Love Unity Respect, one has to be a minimum coherent’ (Benoit, 2013). Finally, these decisions influence the format chosen to play the music. While Jerome states that ‘what music you play will give you an indication of how you set-up your sound’ the music you play also conditions the choice of format.

Most UK roots sound systems still use one turntable and have their own pre-amplifier. However, as sound system culture in the UK has increasingly moved toward bass culture a generational shift is observable. Many contemporary sound systems take a ‘combined’ approach: having two turntables and a mixer and using CDJs and Serato to accommodate other genres such as dubstep, jungle or grime largely available on formats other than vinyl.

In France, by contrast, it is usually the ‘traditional’ set-up – one turntable, a pre-amp, and an MC – that is used. Here, reggae sound systems did not have much presence until the 1990s and early 2000s. At that time, the majority of French sound system collectives were part of the techno and rave movement, with a few reggae-style systems around Paris playing a mixture of raggamuffin and dancehall brought in by people from West Africa and the Antilles (Sy 2010; Musso 2010). Dub and reggae was played mainly by live bands (e.g. High Tone, Kaly Live Dub, Improvisators Dub, Massilia Sound System, Regg’Lyss) (Binet 2003). Due to the lack of a direct connection with Jamaican culture, the closest reggae sound system influence was the United Kingdom and the UK sounds of the second revival in the 1990s such as Jah Shaka, Aba Shanti, Channel One, Jah Tubby’s and The Disciples. The upbeat ‘stepper’ sound that emerged at that time, also referred to as ‘UK dub’, had a lasting influence. French

reggae sound systems still say that they play in a ‘UK dub style’, referencing that genre of music and its set-up.

### **Assembling the dancehall**

Alongside building a sound system’s components, a crew also ‘builds’ or assembles the space of the dancehall. The distinct way of setting up is rooted in how the first sound systems were played: out in ‘lawns’ and in the street of Kingston, in order to allow crowds to attend and listen to the latest records (Mordecai and Mordecai 2001). In contrast, dances in the UK first took place in private houses. As the Jamaican diaspora grew, being joined by relatives and new generations, sound systems began to be used for celebrations in larger, but still enclosed, spaces, such as halls and community centres (Huxtable 2014). While the environment differed greatly between Jamaica and England, equipment is set-up in a similar way.

Unlike the Public Address (PA) systems often found in clubs and venues, sound systems are mobile and their arrangement is modified in relation to the context. The set-up of the inclusive space of the dance, the dancehall, follows a similar techné to the one used to build and tune each component.

Studies have explored the variety of spatial arrangements within venues for popular music, including adopted spaces (Bars and clubs), dedicated spaces (Concert halls), adapted spaces (multifunction art centres, arenas), and mobile spaces (festivals, tour stages) (Kronenburg 2012). Despite some changing designs, all such spaces separate audience (or crowds) and performers; and performers are in turn separated from the technical manipulation of the sound – levels, mixing and amplification. Figure 1 (A) illustrates the three distinct spaces – control desk, crowd, and the stage – this contrasts with sound system nights (B)

where crews (which includes their processes of engineering the sound) perform at ground level alongside the crowd.

**[Insert Figure1.tiff]** Figure 1: A comparison of a standard (A) and sound system set-up (B). In the standard set-up the audience tends to face the stage and speakers play out from this area whereas in sound systems the crowd and crew are immersed in the same soundspace.

By separating performers from audience the standard set-up generates a hierarchy, particularly where performers are literally and figuratively elevated on a stage. Crews identify sound systems as different, a difference also recognisable to people who regularly attend music events. Asserting that something is ‘different’ indicates that the sound system is partly defined through reference to what it is not. As such, crews inadvertently support an understanding of what is ‘a standard setup’ in this context (see Gregson and Rose 2000 for discussion). This diverges from the Jamaican situation, where people’s lack of individual access to transistors led to the emergence of large mobile discotheques. The set-up of sound systems in Jamaica grew organically, rather than conspicuously opposing a standard.

The representation of the sound system set-up in Figure 1 enables comparison with the standard. However, there is great variability: Crews may have one or more speaker stacks and the size of the space and preferences of the crew will alter speaker placement. For example, crews that use two turntables to mix songs will have a different sound system layout to those with one. However, there is consistently very little or no separate foldback for the crew – all those involved in the space of the dance, both the crew and the audience, inhabit the same sound space. Albah explains:

Once you’ve found a place, the aim is to play facing your system [...] It’s quite hard to get people to understand that when you play in venues [...] they do proper concerts,

which is a European way of consuming music. We do sound system, which is originally a Jamaican way of consuming music [...] So we put our system at the other end of the room, so it hits in the opposite way that they are used to hear (Albah 2013).

This creates an inclusive space as shown in Figure 2: ‘where one could be free and express oneself without a stage separating the performer from the audience’ (Sabelli 2011, 140).

However, the standard setup is functional. It can facilitate communication of higher frequency directional sound, whereas non-directional low frequency bass is still felt when people face away from the speakers. Indeed, the familiarity of the standard generates a veneer of neutrality, enabling distance from the performance.

[Insert Figure2.tiff] Figure 2: Sound System Session in France 2013 illustrating the way the audience and performers are in the same space and are not separated by a raised stage or distance (Photograph by Alex See).

Some venues, especially nightclubs, use a similar layout to the sound system setup. However, nightclubs often fix their speakers whereas contemporary sound systems are inherently mobile and can be used both indoors and out. However, many outdoor events, such as festivals and even raves, still use the ‘traditional’ concert set-up. Importantly, the sound system can be radically adapted to each space it occupies maintaining its particular, inclusive, sound-space. As ‘the life of the work is inseparable from its exhibition’ (Reyes 2010, 324) this adds to the bespoke quality of each dance.

### **Bass Culture – feeling the space made in sound**

Reggae and dub music's reliance on bass is best understood when it is played on a sound system. The vibration of the speaker-cone within the bass speaker cabinet generates the bass, with speakers made to allow the low frequency and non-directional wavelength of the bassline to be 'heard' through the body (see Henriques 2010 for a detailed description). The larger the bass speaker, the more air is moved and thus the more the bass is felt (Partridge 2010). The physical size of a sound system thus influences the sound and also how the crews can adapt it to a particular setting. Often, their large size means scoops and other speakers have to be physically tied, or 'strung up', to keep them together.

Bass is greatly amplified in comparison to 'normal' sound levels but it does not impact detrimentally on the human ear. As Jerome (2014) explained, often sound levels 'appear to be above the limits for health and safety, whereas in fact we are well beneath them as the dangerous [mid-range or top-range] frequencies are lowered'. Although '[reggae] sound systems were used in... the earliest house raves' (Earl Gateshead, 2013), attentiveness to sound content and quality differentiates them from the approach taken at rave and free party scenes:

ravers tend to want the most Kilowatts possible. We don't give a shit about kilowatts [...] there is a real importance awarded to the quality of sound [...] Whereas ravers often just pile up speakers, the things are out of tune [...]. But if we start doing that, you won't hear certain frequency anymore. So the music we play forces us to put the quality of sound at the front (Albah 2013).

Many DJs and performances rely on light shows, pyrotechnics, laser effects to emphasize the music or to create a 'good show'. Conversely, the crews chose to maintain a dark environment, with very little visual stimulation or visual standpoints. In many cases the only source of light comes from the control tower and over the turntables, or in heavily Rasta inspired sessions, a picture of Haile Selassie (who is regarded as a messiah in Rastafarian

religion) is the sole illuminated object. This emphasis on darkness prioritises the music, and this allows the dances to become reflective: ‘People don’t look at each other so much, so they’re not embarrassed to go there or to be all alone, because in any case you’re in the darkness’ (Albah 2013). The emphasis on bass and sheer power of sound creates ‘its own particular state of being and its own particular logic and distinct form of rationality’ (Henriques 2003, 470). This feeling is actively sought by the crews:

We’d tape up the windows with drapes to get it as black as we could, so that you could only feel the sound. So your concentration wasn’t directed away from the sound in any way (Earl Gateshead 2013).

Indeed, with all other senses (particularly the visual) ‘obliterated’ by the physicality of sound, the time spent within this space is almost entirely dedicated to feeling the music. This feeling has been linked by many to semi-religious experiences, or catharsis: for several hours there is only immersion in music. ‘It’s supposed to be about yourself. It’s a meditation’ (Earl Gateshead 2013). Darkness promotes a collective group experience, allowing a focus on the sensations arising from the music and movement rather than how people look: this ‘creates something special’ (Albah 2013). There are no dress codes, one can dance however one likes, people are there for the music, or to quote from the flyers: ‘All Tribes Welcome’.

This contrasts with the space of the Jamaican dancehall, where being seen is integral to the night. Audiences dress especially for the event, attire and dance moves are rewarded and promoted through call-outs from the singers, and through the often present live-video recordings (Henriques 2010). Those displaying the latest fashion and the most impressive dances are celebrated providing ‘avenues for the production and reproduction of selves’ (Stanley-Niaah 2010, 134).

The sense of unity that is sought within the dancehall is further emphasized by the set-up, as mentioned previously. The removal of hierarchical divisions allows all those present to participate in and experience a collective sound space. As Doug notes: ‘By performing more so from the floor, that’s one way of breaking down that barrier [between performer and audience], by being literally within touching distance of people dancing around, and simply being another person in the room who is dancing around to the tunes’ (Doug 2014).

Furthermore, placing the focus on the vibration that the music produces results in a unique experience of space. Henriques (2003, 459) holds that ‘sonic dominance helps to generate a specific particular sense of place rather than a general abstract idea of space’. This is in contrast to ‘non-places’ such as airports, shopping malls that are ‘made of images’, tend to be abstract, and ‘are there to be passed through’ (Augé 1995, 104). Sonic space, by contrast, is ‘specific, particular, and fully impregnated with the living tradition of the moment’ (Henriques 2003, 459). Such sonic or auditory space, as Carpenter and McLuhan (1960, 67) state ‘has no point of favoured focus ...[it’s] space made by the thing itself’ (see also the discussion in Reville 2016)

This way of understanding space and sound has implications worth pondering. It is not purely aesthetic. It is also anti-hegemonic. To elaborate, modernity, as a product of the Enlightenment, has been dominated by a vision-centred paradigm of knowledge, ethics and power. Historians of modernity themselves ‘have, until recently, focused almost exclusively on sight – when they have considered the senses at all’ (Damousi and Deacon 2007, 1), and ‘the ascendancy of vision also necessitated the denigration and discipline of the other senses’ (Ingham, Purvis and Clarke 1999, 284). The aural sense has therefore been sidelined in modernity, and associated with irrationality and disorder, in contrast to vision which epitomizes rationality and order (Henriques 2003). In a similar vein, space has tended to be

visualized in modernity, rather than, for example, heard. Even in urban theory and cultural geography, space has been ‘predominantly defined as a visual field of dynamic social interactions between the individual and his or her environment’ (Rawes 2008, 63). The sound system allows sound to temporarily replace vision, changing the dominant ‘rational’ understanding of self and space.

All those interviewed used the same word to describe the way one appreciates the music in a sound system session: one ‘feels’ it. This differs from simply hearing music; the body is submerged in sound and the body ‘hears’. Consequently, the interplay between space, sound and an individual’s body influences what is felt as ‘right’ or ‘good’. Testing and decision-making (choice of speaker, choice of song...) is achieved through the sensory modality (‘this feels right’ or ‘this sounds right’) as it ‘evokes emotional associations in the way that mere images fail to do’ (Henriques 2003, 467).

### **Building the Vibe**

It’s true that people increasingly enjoy getting together at reggae nights, but why? Because there is a good atmosphere, good vibes. There aren’t any troubles, people aren’t off their heads. They are here for the music, that’s what prevails. People come for the vibes (OBF, 2013).

The vibe, essential to enjoyment of the dance, is difficult to encapsulate. Rill’s (2006) study of the culture of electronic dance music that emerged from rave describes the ‘vibe’ as ‘an overwhelming wave of positive energy’ that ‘dissolves the selves of all participants into one collective mind, all experiencing the same sensations at peak moments of the night’ (Rill 2006, 649). While getting some things right about the vibe, Rill’s (2006) description omits what may be most important – namely, that the vibe is processual, constantly building through the interaction between music, people and performance within a particular setting. The vibe is



thus actively renegotiated through various performance techniques: 'The sound system, the DJs, the MCs will be feeding off the energy from the crowd, and different crowds have different energies, so you have to be reading that' (Tom 2013). The crew's equipment choices condition their negotiation of the vibe. Sounds with one turntable will use an MC to keep the vibe going between songs. Others using two turntables and mixer may maintain the momentum through relying on echoes and effects. The balance is never set: a constant interplay between machinery and the crew's performance techniques builds the spontaneity essential to the vibe.

In his study of the Kingston Dancehall scene, Henriques (2010) foregrounds the material importance of vibration to the communication of affect. He argues that although 'vibes connect musical beats with heartbeats, and thus become part of the libidinal and commercial economies of the dancehall' (Henriques 2010, 64) the vibe is not 'free' from cultural reference. Rather 'rhythm [becomes] a coded cultural beat' (Labelle 2008, 191). As Eidsheim (2011, 149) points out 'the experience of sound is a triangulation of events wherein physical impulses (sonic vibrations), our bodies' encultured capacity to receive these vibrations, and how we have been taught to understand them are at constant play and subject to negotiation'. This idea of the negotiation of affect is central to understanding the performance of the sound system.

### ***'Hyping up' the crowd***

The vocal interaction of the MC or singers provides a direct bridge between the crowd and crew. With the first sound systems often only having one turntable, the MC would sing over songs and the silence between two records. The MC will also present songs and inform the crowd about future sessions or current events, acting as spokesperson for the sound system

and its message. Rastafarian crews often focus on spirituality and consciousness, whereas others may be playful. Regardless of the equipment, format, or set-up, the MC's importance is universally accepted within sound system and wider bass culture. Even crews with two turntables, allowing mixing and continuous sound, make space for an MC. The MC's performance is crucial in 'hying up' the crowd, for example by engaging the audience in a call and response style of exchange:

... [Sound system are] vocal led. There's by and large somebody on the mic for almost the entire session as opposed to a nightclub where you might get a DJ who doesn't speak for the whole set. It's very involving [...] The participation of the crowd is a big thing (Earl Gateshead 2013).

The MC's role is to get people to join in, to get excited:

The vibes that get created in the dance [...] depend a lot on the music you play but also, especially for beginners, on what you are going to say to get them to come into the dance (Albah 2013).

This role is crucial for 'activating' the audience, which is done through call and response, or singing over instrumental songs, or talking directly to audience members.

Having an MC is a way of not only playing recorded material, you can literally interact with the crowd. You can say 'oi you', you can talk to people, you can do call and response of various sorts. Either musically or simply by saying 'how are you doing everyone (Doug 2014).

Most of the French sound systems 'talk' to the audience, even if there is no MC or singer: the selector may also use the microphone to engage with the crowd. As the majority of French sound system prefer a set-up with one turntable, engaging with the crowd is not only the role of the MC. In contrast, sound systems who opt for two turntables allows the crew to remain silent if they wish, and the act of speaking to the crowd is the sole responsibility of the

designated MC or singer. This performance choice is also due to an understanding that subtlety is necessary: if talking is overdone the interaction can be alienating: ‘you have to do it the right amount. You can do it too much and be annoying about it, and really turn people off’ (Tom 2013).

In addition to the MC, the selectors and other crewmembers are also in subtle dialogue with the crowd. Techniques such as the pull-up are used to stop a song (on vinyl or CD), bring it back to the start, and play it again; they often happen after a rewind where the record is audibly drawn back. This stops the music, with the short break directing attention back to the song.

The trigger for a pull-up is the crowd’s pleasure in a song, differentiated from others by its quality or novelty. The process is delicate: ‘if the timing is right, a rewind will bring excitement to the dancefloor’, but if it is misjudged, it can interrupt ‘the flow of the music or seem to be a mere celebration of the performer’s musical ego, an attempt at trying to fake excitement’ (Fintoni 2015, np). As with the MC, the selector must ‘read’ the crowd in order to effectively pull up a record. In reggae sound system sessions, this judgement is aided by the blending of the performers and the crowd.

Thought to have originated in the early sound systems in Jamaica, pull-ups and rewinds have entered many Jamaican-influenced genres of music such as hip-hop, jungle, grime, and dubstep. Other vinyl-based genres such as Disco, house, and techno often rely on continuous musical experiences, creating a vibe in their own way over the course of a night through a long build up which generates a sense of escapism (Clark 2006). Rewinds may be used as a mixing technique, but they are not normally employed to make an abrupt stop or signal that the same record will be played again.

Sound systems also often use other sonic triggers: noises such as echoes or delays are used to fill in silences between two records or allow the selectors to add layers to a song. Another trigger is the dub siren, which came to prominence with Jah Shaka's 1982 'The Commandments of Dub' album and his subsequent sound system sessions. The dub siren signals an 'event': selectors play a record with the bass off, then wail the siren, generating expectations within the audience, finally bringing the bass back in.

### **Reading the crowd**

Although there is no stage, and thus the crew may not be visible, the crews' performance remains an important part of the session. The integration and direct interaction between crew and crowd communicates a unity, influencing the vibe. Song choice depends on crowd reaction, which is why many crews said they never play the same set twice. Song selection develops according to the crews reading of the crowd's energy:

To build up your dance, you get people to get into the vibe by maybe playing a tune they will know, something a bit more mainstream [...] and once they are in the dance you can play some more obscure things (Albah 2013).

In traditional live concerts, artists mostly play a predetermined set list. By contrast, sound system sessions, as with most DJ sets, are determined in relation to the crowd. As Tom (2013) noted 'you can see the response that each tune gets and that informs the direction you are going to take.' This relies once again on the crewmembers' skills in reading and interacting with the crowd, the particular techné that allows them to take into account the audiences desires and reactions. These reactions can also inform the choice of format used by crews. Selecting records has, since the birth of reggae sound system, been an integral part of the performance. There is a strong tactile component to this process:

I like holding it, I like having the sleeves. I like the fact that you take the record off and on. I also find it a lot easier to find what you are going to play. If I was flipping through a laptop, I would kind of be stuck thinking ‘what am I going to play’. [Whereas with records] sometimes you just go through and you’ll think ‘oh this will go well now’. It’s a very tactile thing; you get more of a chance to interact with it (Wayne 2013).

Wayne noted that one thing he thought ‘really gets the energy going is when people see more than one person picking the music’, as this creates a friendly ‘challenge to the next person [...] and people can see that and you can get the energy building up from that’ (Wayne, 2014). In addition to the tactile qualities of the vinyl format, vinyl has remained central to the sound system scene due to the drive for a particular sound quality (Albah 2013). Indeed, vinyl is often preferred to digital formats: ‘It represents a better sound...I mean it’s all personal, but for me digital sounds tinny, I don’t really like it. It’s empty’ (Earl Gateshead 2013).

As stated, most sound systems do not reject contemporary technologies but adapt them. The crews will negotiate the choice of format depending on the genre played, the desired sound, or the importance they attribute to the medium. A different negotiation also happens within the space of the dancehall; the crew and their affinity group are constantly interacting with the broader crowd, most directly through the MC and singers. This interaction produces the vibe, the essence of the dance.

Following traditions from Jamaica, crews interviewed draw on a combination of sonic, felt, and tactile experience to make their sound system components, to set them up and to manipulate the sound in a way that is conducive to a shared, collectively produced way of experiencing the music. Peoples’ ordinary reliance on the visual is abandoned in favour of the sensory modality of feeling, ‘allowing a place between places and a time out of time’ (Henriques 2003, 469). In the dancehall, constant interaction between crowd, crew, sound and

system generates and can build the vibe – making an experiential space derived from, but then transcending, collectivity.

### **Interpreting convention**

UK sound system culture today is not solely reggae culture but a wider bass culture (Bradley 2013). Younger generations with West Indies ancestry have built on reggae sound systems set-up and performance techniques to pioneer genres and sub-cultures such as jungle, grime and garage. Many recent outfits without this background – such as Mungo’s Hifi,, Sinai Sound, Unit 137 or Dub Smugglers – echo this eclectic trend. This new generation of sound systems follow the DIY tradition of building their own speakers, but will accommodate a wider range of UK-genres which are driven by formats other than vinyl, making crews more accepting of digital technologies such as CDJs and Serato. Sound systems in France typically take a more ‘old-school’ approach favouring a one turntable set-up, a pre-amp and an MC, and often utilising digital mediums such as CDJs purely on a functional basis (for exclusive songs not pressed on vinyl). This set-up and what they play reflects the assimilation of reggae at a particular point in the development of the UK scene, and the relative youth of the French scene.

Yet in both contexts, the process of building and performing a sound system is consciously identified as doing something ‘different’, and thus departing from the standard, by producing a direct spatial intervention that is non- or anti-hierarchical. Crews reported that they were deliberately prioritising sound over vision in a counter-hegemonic move. This was evident in the way they sought to make the space as dark as possible, which in turn reduced the focus on individual dancing or being ‘seen’. The focal point of the dance is the sound

system itself, 'the look' being associated with the identity of the crew. Crews also considered the making of their equipment, the set-up and the dance as being distinct from consumerist practices, whereas in the original Jamaican situation commerce is inextricable from the dance.

Despite some variability, there are a series of conventions that make reggae sound systems recognisable. However, their home made form makes them malleable, with motivations communicated through the varied look, set-up of the systems and their sound. How participants understand or interpret these conventions rest on their histories and associations, influencing how the materiality of space and sound is experienced. With sound system culture becoming increasingly popular and integrating a multitude of other genres, questions arise about how present conventions will endure and continue to be understood. As the French sound system scene matures, the emerging crews will determine whether existing conventions adapt to other musical developments and practices to form a distinct identity; or whether a distance from and reverence for their source material reinforces the desire to replicate it.

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