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Dubwise

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SOCIAL NETWORKS 2

Dubwise

Rob Riddle on May 15 2001

issue 16

"Dub means raw riddim...without voice."**Origins and Influence**

A music of a people from a certain time and place indicates more than a particular preference towards a set of sounds and rhythms; stories, thoughts, emotions and ideas steep in the songs of a culture, giving the full concoction a unique voice and flavor. Reggae music conveys the concerns of Jamaica, an island in the West Indies known historically for its unusual mix of African, European and Native traditions.

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Origins and Influence

A music of a people from a certain time and place indicates more than a particular preference towards a set of sounds and rhythms; stories, thoughts, emotions and ideas steep in the songs of a culture, giving the full concoction a unique flavor. Reggae music conveys the concerns of Jamaica, an island in the West Indies known historically for its unusual mix of African, European and Native traditions. Jamaica's story begins over two thousand years ago with the Arawak Indians, who subsisted by farming and fishing. As such they "were ill-prepared to absorb the impact of the Spanish"¹ who first arrived in 1494 (led by Christopher Columbus). The Spanish settlers, though successful in taking the island from the Arawaks, found none of the precious materials they sought and so never gained much attention or support from Spain. The English invaded in 1655 and were met with little resistance. Soon Port Royal became a point of trade between the first world, the old world and the new, a crucial link in the transferal of rum, cotton, sugar, tobacco and slaves. Such volatile maritime business attracted the attention of wealth-seeking, opportunistic pirates (of both the figurative and actual kind). Meanwhile runaway slaves called Maroons settled in the island's difficult mountainous regions, creating a strongly mystical religion influenced by Judaism but certainly all their own. These people would be the forbearers of the Rastafarians:

The main thing the Rastafarian element brought to Jamaica and to Jamaican music was a real recognition and honor of Africa. Whereas in American black music that was not the case-- there was nothing at that time that was embracing the African heritage, there was very little notion then in America of Afrocentricity. In Jamaica, though, there was a selection of the population that was looking to the west and listening to Miami and New Orleans radio, but also there existed the Rastafarian element which was saying that Jamaicans should hang on to our cultural roots. This has been a key dynamic in Jamaican music.²

Such a charged mix of clashing business and religious interests provided ample fuel for this particular synthesis of music and spirit. Africa inspired the rhythms as "slaves

brought with them their drumming traditions and the knowledge to fashion instruments in(to) their new environment."3 Ripples of the dark continent could also be found in the ritualistic performance dances that combined sound with storytelling. African heritage, however remains only one dynamic in the birth of Jamaican society.

Europe, and especially Imperial Britain, had a profound effect on the social development of Jamaica. Through trade and government English became the island's official language, though naturally the people developed their own distinctive patois (the stereotypical "jah mon"). European art became another factor affecting this young culture:

slaves began to imitate, often with heavy irony but with the blessing of plantation masters, the dances and customs of genteel English society. Reels, Morris dancing, the French quadrille, and polkas became incorporated into the growing body of amalgamated culture. Bands grew to include fiddles and horns.⁴

Over hundreds of years the characters of pirates, gentlemen, slaves, soldiers and shamen slowly combined their conflicting voices, partially in mockery, partially as transmission, creating the sounds of a society in transition.

Reggae Music Forward

So much like Jazz and Blues in the United States, Reggae emerged from a beautifully difficult scenario. "The island has...been the scene of a unique social experiment - the head-on collision of modern Western culture and African sensibilities."⁵ From this vibrant and eclectic mix of social influences came forth this exciting new music, an unusual combination of exotic instrumentation and lilting rhythms, that plays with elements of Kumina, Quadrille, Jazz, Blues and Motown Soul.

Reggae went through many early manifestations, beginning as Mento in the 1940's and 50's, then as Ska and Rocksteady into the late 1960's. At first vocalists, vocal groups and live bands entertained audiences, but during this time period the sound system developed, with the "deejay" essentially becoming a live sonic collage performer. Although not usually responsible for creating the records played that person became recognized for song selection skills and party energy. From inception Reggae had been a dance music after all.

Of course the economic conditions of Jamaica played a crucial role in the formation of the music:

For so many kids in the ghetto music literally was their only chance of hitting it big, of getting out of there. Music was the only possible way out. Luckily, a lot of music was needed by the sound systems--so there was a chance to keep coming up with something new.⁶

Sound systems rose to prominence not from any particular superior aesthetic; they simply were cheaper and easier to operate. The harsh realities of modern urban life in the poor sections of Kingston insured the business production of music as an entertainment commodity to be bought and sold, but also, more fundamentally, invoked the raw forces of survival as subject matter and inspiration for the songs themselves. The day to day difficulties of life became the fodder for these pragmatic artists, not that all the music overtly stated political positions (quite the opposite) but all the music represented the reality of a trying world.

Dubplates

From this electric stew of influences comes Dub Reggae music, instrumental remixes with a mistake-prone playfulness that teases tricked ears into questioning perceived sonic space. The "dub" is short for double because originally these mixes were an inexpensive and practical way to get many uses from one recording. Now the word means almost any instrumental remix of a track regardless of the rhythm.

In fact the style happened quite by accident. In 1967 a Jamaican sound system owner by the name of Rudolph "Ruddy" Redwood often played exclusive acetate versions of Duke Reid's songs. Producers and sound systems naturally kept close relationships, both for artistic and business reasons. Ruddy requested a copy of the Paragons, "On the Beach" from Duke Reid. Inadvertently the engineer, Byron Smith, left out the vocal tracks from that particular mix and "Ruddy realized he'd hit on something new."⁷ As the story goes this odd instrumental mix went over very well that night during Ruddy's set in the dance hall and so a marriage of chance and functionality created Dub Reggae.

Dub music embraces "the intertwining expertise and contribution of engineer, mixer, producer, and musician"⁸, celebrating the full process of production and not just the commercially staged element. Talented yet amateur studio engineers pushing the limits of their minimal gear, truly trying to make more with less. A network of fans brought together by pulsating sound systems and a music lover's fascination about just what's making those strange noises. This experimental, home fidelity approach directly affected the development of many divergent modern forms of music. "So much of what exists in popular music today started in Jamaica: the dub versions, the remixes, rap, so many electronic effects."⁹ Disco, Hip-Hop, House, Techno, Jungle all directly appropriated successful Dub techniques. On the surface that may seem to be trivial (so what if disco never happened?), but careful consideration reveals the true force involved in such a process of influence. The power of Dub music lies behind the scenes and just beneath the surface, out of initial earshot but eminently well connected.

Those First

Osbourne "King Tubby" Ruddock became the first producer to take strides in this new form. "Tubby was, by any standards, a genius."¹⁰ First of all:

King Tubby, in his position as master cutter for Duke Reid, regularly cut acetates (one-off soft wax discs) designed exclusively for the use of himself and a few other sound systems. Dance patrons, he had discovered, liked to hear new versions of songs that they were familiar (with) in their full vocal form.¹¹

Then he pioneered the use of the recorded dub instrumentals as backing tracks for live "toastmasters" such as Ewart "U Roy" Beckford, leading directly to the current Dancehall and Ragga styles of Reggae, and also a precursor to the Rap MC. "Dancehall was really born on that night in 1969 when Tubby brought dubs of four big Treasure Isle hits to his customized echo and reverb equipped set."¹² Once again the measurement of success came from the crowd's reaction. Most importantly he changed Dub from a convenient and inexpensive 45 RPM b-side to a music that could stand on its own.

From a completely different direction comes Lee "Scratch" Perry. Successful since the mid to late 1960's with a string of local hits, he went on to produce some of the Wailers earliest works:

Lee Perry had linked up with The Wailers in 1969; he and the group...began a collaboration that resulted in some of the finest work ever by both parties. Through their association with Perry, the Wailers were transformed; though it may never be known who influenced whom, the recordings they made together constitute a significant turning point for the participants and for Jamaican music. When the Barrett brothers joined The Wailers in 1970 the transformation was complete; the rhythmic matrix constructed by Family Man and the late Carlton Barrett provided the musical foundation for Bob Marley's entire legacy.¹³

"The Upsetter" probably created the first exclusively Dub album, 1973's landmark "Blackboard Jungle Dub". The album features mixes from King Tubby as well. Perry pioneered the form and masterminded a zany and experimental style that never failed to surprise the attentive listener.

More players and artists were involved, people like Augustus Pablo, "Bunny" Lee, Vivian "Yabby You" Jackson, Hopeton "Scientist" Brown, Lloyd "Prince/King Jammy" James, Sly Dunbar, Robbie Shakespeare and Glen Brown to name a few but Tubby and Perry certainly opened the doors for the many who have followed.

Rhythm Creation and Progression

By the early 1970's producers created rhythm tracks with dub versions in mind. This allowed for further experimentation with effects and instruments. These people innovated with new technology when possible but also felt the limits of their economic reality. Most studios were small rooms in the producer's home. Frugally they recycled the recorded tracks as many times as possible in as many different ways, forced on by creative necessity. The credo - do as much as possible with as little as possible. This philosophy spilled into the actual running of the studio itself:

Through the use of the mixing board, the engineer slides fade-switches on the control panel, uses FX such as echo, delay, phase, samples, his own voice, etc. to alter an already existing reggae vocal or instrumental track, thereby producing an altered yet recognizable new version.¹⁴

More Recently

As the sensation of Dub music died down in Jamaica, to be replaced by "deejay" Dancehall, the influence of the music had spread to other parts of the world. Notably England, with a large West Indian immigrant population, began to produce a noteworthy next generation of Dub.

Prince Far I (born Michael James Williams in 1944) helped to bridge the gap between the Dub scene in Jamaica and growing interest in Europe. With the juxtaposition of his deep, rugged voice with his genial content and style he forged a political, personal mixture all his own. Originally he worked for the likes of Coxsone Dodd and Joe Gibbs, but eventually he ran his own Cry Tuff. Many of his tracks were distributed in the UK by Adrian Sherwood's Hit Run label, and he toured the Old World in the early 1980's (including a documented set with Manchester's raga dub oriented Suns of Arqa).

Adrian Sherwood's On-U Sound combined classic roots elements with a highly experimental approach to effects and modern gear. "Sherwood in particular is a true eclectic, moving effortlessly between reggae, post-punk, blues and indie rock fields."¹⁵ Certainly I'm biased here but Dub Syndicate and African Headcharge have made some of the finest music available in recent years. "These deranged records are not exactly commercial"¹⁶ but they combine a playful approach to listening space with a serious study of Reggae roots and culture.

Ariwa Sounds, run by Neil "Mad Professor" Frasier, also continued to experiment with new electronic devices such as drum machines and samplers. "The technology may have changed from the two-track recordings of the sixties to today's computer modifications and drum machines, but the rhythm remains the same - hard yet leisurely, funky yet scary, avant-garde yet sexy as hell."¹⁷ He produced a recognizable sound "over a series of dub albums which did much to maintain market interest in the form when Jamaican producers stopped releasing their own dub sets."¹⁸ Some of his work with Lee Perry helped define the burgeoning Jungle music scene.

Reggae holds its place in Europe through the works of acts like the Twinkle Brothers, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Aswad, and Dub adapts to situations through exploration, and so adeptly uses both modern digital electronic devices as well as ancient instruments, rhythms and songs. Alpha and Omega, Twilight Circus, Suns of Arqa, Rootsman, Dry and Heavy, along with many others, exemplify this modern spirit of searching for music that works in new, potentially difficult transitions.

So What?

The importance of Dub music lies in it's approach towards problems. Dub experiments, plays with accidents, and exercises as well as exemplifies the Zen koan less is more. On Dub's significance:

Firstly, Dub is a bold(ly) innovative...approach to music production created in a society that had little access to electronic, sophisticated music equipment. As far as inventions are concerned, Dub music originated from a pure source of inspiration. Dub music was originally made for practical purposes; Dub mixes were tools of the sound system trade and (it) was not seen as a weird new genre of music (until the 1970's). Secondly, Dub music's later incarnations...reflected the psychedelic (and) political...influences of the time, but (also) added a spiritual dimension born out of the Rastafarian revival that had taken hold of the island. Lastly Dub is significant in how it's production aesthetic influenced other forms of music internationally."¹⁹

So why listen to Dub music? Would the open-ended manipulation of perceived sound attract you? Maybe breaking down musical elements into a crucial and sparse mix catches your attention? Or perhaps you'd be intrigued by the influx of spiritual and cultural concerns into the vocabulary of a popular music? Rarely does such a medium embrace the mystical so enthusiastically.

"Dub has to be one of the most thought-inducing and relaxing forms of modern music ever."²⁰ Or maybe it all sounds like Reggae elevator music to you, which is fine as well. Dub music isn't for every one, just those who appreciate it's low key mastery of chill sonic meditations.

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