Dancehall Dreams

Tom Jennings

Anyone keeping an eye on patterns of youth style in Britain over the last ten years cannot fail to have been struck by the increasing profile of Black music and its spinoffs in the media, advertising, fashion and leisure sectors, and, indeed, in spoken idiom and worldviews. Current styles were to some extent carried in from America with hip-hop, but by far the biggest-selling popular music genre in the world—and have blended with local vernaculars, steadily spreading into and irrevocably changing all youth cultural fields. The most obvious marker of the strength of influence is the degree of commercial appropriation—where all manner of celebrities have scrambled to affiliate; pop superstars copy the format to bolster their street cred; and every number of naturopreneur managed boy/girl band and pop idol-type embarrassment flounders on the teenybop market.

Major grassroots impacts, however, have been in pirate radio and especially on dance culture—where UK garage and now R&B/hiphop hop have severely eroded the hegemony of house, techno and other “rave” forms in superclubs and dance bars in many UK cities. The new marketing category of ‘urban music’ approximates this demographic well enough, reflecting both the multicultural atmosphere of urban centres and the generic hybridity of sounds which variously blend rap, soul, reggae, calypso and bhangra (among others). Under such pressure from consumers and MTV, and from a rising tide of homemade production and performing talent, the mainstream UK industry is finally failing to sustain its historic policy of granting only periodic novelty value to urban music, which now dominates the Top 20 and provides most of those hits which the school of pop superstars copy the format to bolster the careers of. And far from being perceived as irrelevant and out of date—urban music is therefore one compelling index of the profile of urban music in the world—and have blended with newer Latin and jazz styles.

Notes

1. A relatively downtempo drum & bass derivative focusing on dance rather than, say, the manic raves of jungleism, or an altogether different, more sophisticated take on hip hop

2. Among others. Under such pressure from consumer and MTV, and from a rising tide of homemade production and performing talent, the mainstream UK industry is finally failing to sustain its historic policy of granting only periodic novelty value to urban music, which now dominates the Top 20 and provides most of those hits which the school of pop superstars copy the format to bolster the careers of.

3. Even then, as above, the lyrical and thematic content of urban music performance, along with its assertive bravura, can usually be relied upon to shine through the glossy sheen. But as yet, all the more open political commentary regrettably creeps into the material. And far from meeting resistance from consumers preempted with their privatised hedonistic pleasures—as pre-supposed by the industry and most critics—such content may be embraced if it is perceived as relevant and true to the lives of both performers and audiences. In effect, the ethics of our intimate lives are socialised in the public sphere of the dance, so that wider questions of social power and control may be woven in—provided that the setting is felt to be sufficiently local, communal and (hence) personal.

4. The everyday ordinariness of place and the joint involvement of audience and musicians as performers in the urban dance event recall the community, dialogic, participative nature of many Black musical traditions. These elements appear to have survived even into today’s over-commercialised pop music, especially in those niche markets which have the most direct antecedents in the ‘original’, ‘authentic’ grass-roots forms of R&B, reggae and hiphop music developed and produced by and for lower class people for the express purpose of dancing. What follows discusses some important aspects of this history so as to sketch out their significance now that these marginal cultural forms have migrated, on the surface at least, to the centre of the popular mainstream—starting with a well-known recent example.

Where Is The Love?

A dramatic index of the profile of urban music appeared during the height of the UK’s mass mobilisations against war in Iraq in 2003.
The Life and Soul of the Party

Such concerns aren’t necessarily so clear or up front in other major urban hit singles in 2003/4. But scratching the surface of the lyrical mass market reveals the same organising metaphors around love, pain and hope, tied specifically to public locality and (bodily) pleasure—where neither can be taken for granted—provide the grounds for gazing the past, present and future role of lower class dancehall; not as a corollary, or addendum, to some intrinsic aesthetic sublime, but at the centre of musical sensibility, a sense that soul had sunk to. Meanwhile the new, and rather undistinguished R&B and hip-hop sensibilities, also showed through their autonomy, determination and imagination that they had no intention of conforming to the usual, decriably predictable and aimless marching, vaguely liberal sloganneering and mechanisms for the mass commercial exploitation of organic culture were perfected. Its text was ignored; not least the allusive utility of sexualised hatred with the idealisation of roots reggae. All cultural and historical contexts, are all obscured—allowing the conclusion to be drawn that the entire field must therefore be left to ‘experts’, to forge and then to decipher.10

Returning to the development of contemporary urban music, the credibility of R&B was a mixed blessing, however, in a period when possibilities and mechanisms for the mass commercial exploitation of organic culture were perfected. Its trajectory into rock and roll, and those of soul into the pop mainstream and funk into upmarket disco, to both rock, and hip hop influenced, the performative styles have also been re-energised the hearts and minds of musicians and recording artists and their travails in the petit bourgeois and corporate marketplaces are, here, the foolsgold of interpretation. Whereas what the art means in the corporeal conscious realisation of the dancehall—where both mind-body boundaries and distinctions between performers and audiences are blurred, rather than rigidly enforced by disciplinary discourse—is ignored or treated merely as ‘effect’; as ‘reception’. By extension, the significance of the lives of ordinary people, culture as active practice, and politics as the development of potential in particular material circumstances, are all obscured—allowing the conclusion to be drawn that the entire field must therefore be left to ‘experts’, to forge and then to decipher.10

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media and music industry and marched into radio stations, rock venue stadia and recording contracts; their attention shifted away from the almost insurmountable difficulties in maintaining a neighbourhood presence in embattled urban environments suffering the government withdrew policies. Nevertheless, as rap matured it gradually reinvigorated all manner of Black traditions which seemed to have been thoroughly ‘lost’ from the ghetto. It was only a matter of time before the new crop of producers colonising the pop mainstream underperformed R&B vocals with raps, infections, bass-heavy beats to cater to new club spaces in which to throw parties. And so, since the end of the 1980s, the local grass roots have succeeded in Rocksteady, roots, lovers rock, dub and the new dancehall. Mind you, in Kingston, Jamaica, they’d been rocking more or less non-stop since the fifties. 

**Routes and Cultures**

Jamaica’s indigenous ‘mento’ styles had been increasingly tinged with other Caribbean and American music in the first half of the twentieth century;12 and R&B took root, just as in the US, among the burgeoning urban poor in the fifties; whereas DJs and sound systems, rather than live shows, were the vehicles. Jamaican performers either emigrated or started the fledgling tourism industry. So, the exclusively ‘downtown’ sound system ‘blues dances’ were built musically, infrastructurally and economically on R&B, all with uptempo percussion and jazz flourishes, they nurtured the 1960s dancehall of ska. This was both the first purely Jamaican popular form and an openly political expression of the new ‘rude boy’ working-underclass faced with the suffocating postcolonial legacy of a feudal ruling autocracy and fundamentalist Christianity. These cultural developments driven by the lower classes thus not only birthed the embryonic expressions of all reggae and the major progressive innovations of hip-hop, but crystallised a series of overarching social and political struggles too.15 The subsequent broadening of Jamaican music from ska and rocksteady to roots reggae quickly enlisted the Rastafari religion brought by the rural poor, along with ‘burru’ (African drumming) and ganja, into the Kingston ghettoes. As class segregation faltered, and Garveyite Black nationalism began to become involved, the lyrics presented an increasingly powerful critique of class, race and nation as articulated by the conservative elites—whose politics was often made fact by insidiously consented and manipulated the reggae industry ever since. Then—while the phenomenal international success of Bob Marley and the transnational phase of roots to be misinterpreted abroad as the culmination of Jamaican lower class expression—the Kingston producers and DJs bequeathed a retreat to the studios as street violence shut many of the main dancehalls, temporarily muting the verbal and visual power of the medium.16

If anything, the political turmoil was even more brutal into the 1980s. But enough of an equilibrium developed for the dancehalls to reassert their central role in the community—while infrastructural and technological change, political (gang) affiliations, and cash earned from reggae’s overseas outposts all gave the sound systems a new dynamism. It was a period of musical styles for selectors to choose from encompassed rocksteady, roots, lovers rock, dub and the new synthesised dance rhythms of ragga, along with all the new US imports.17 Perhaps reflecting greater cosmopolitanism as well as confidence, the dancehall event could now express more openly than ever before—including in the wider public realms of the media—its own class-specific preoccupations and desires. Ever since, modern contemporary ‘gun talk’, the neo-Rasta Bobo DJs’ insurrectionary spiritualism, and the extreme sexual licence of slackness, have jostled for the engagement of crowds showing no concern for, or interest in, traditional bourgeois and religious standards and sensitivities.18

The reddened focus on sexuality was the prime key to dancehall’s effortless intimacy with its increasingly secular communities—not least those overseas where the baleful grip of Old Testament morality had ceased to hold so much sway. A revealing comparison of Shabba Ranks and Bob Marley by Jamaican scholar Carolyn Cooper exposes the archaic and reactionary gender politics coexisting with otherwise revolutionary material in roots. Noting that most lyrics of all reggae generations tend to indulge in the patriarchal objectification of woman as property, Cooper further points out that the reggae impulse to reappropriate and rearticulate the cultural memory of women in privileging mature sexual love as a necessary feature of any truly radical Rasta project—Marley’s outlook also confirms the traditional chauvinism of the nigh-on ubiquitous madonna-militant masculinity.19

If there should be any suspicion that women merely ‘receive’ this vibrant and passionate in the dancehall. Although regarded as separate and distinct in the cross-cultural context, these two women’s experiences as stage performers or recording artists have often amounted to outright exclusion, during the dancehall’s emergence as a marketable commodity.20 Women’s lyric make little sense without their and the DJs’ fully mutual call and response. Carolyn Cooper’s crucial ‘Slackness Hiding from Culture: Erotic Play in the Dancehall’20 illuminates the complementary rhetorical—and literal—functions of dirty talk in the DJ’s oral stage art and dirty movement in the cauldron of the dancehall. Temporarily escaping their (more or less) emasculating daily grind, local women dress up for the party and conduct themselves wholly on their own terms—deciding when, to what and with whom to ‘grind’ (i.e. dance), setting the tone for the success of the entire night. Parade the most gender, and most gymnastic contortions, the haughtily intimating ‘dancehall divas’ clear space for all the women’s expressions of desire for themselves without feeling besieged by men.

Better yet, these relatively subtle and implicit subversions of masculine privilege performed by women in the dancehall are openly and loudly celebrated in the raw power and lyrics of female DJs and their full frontal assaults on the hypocrisy, double dealing and everyday oppressions enacted by men, money and society. Though regretfully few in number, athletes such as Patra, Lady Saw and Tanya Stephens have always been among the most prominent with damage-dancehall participants. In "'Gyal You Body Good!": The Dynamics of Female Empowerment in Jamaican Dancehall Lyrics’, Kala Grant argues that the lyrical negotiations of class and gender fashioned by women like Salt ‘N’ Pepa to dismiss male adolescent arrogance, assert their own desires and re-emphasise the dance interaction as the most appropriate venue for such activity.21

24. Building understanding of wider social and political issues from responses to the most dramatic or immediately felt conflicts, women’s jazz and blues singers as well as rap women were more likely to start from love and relationships (see Tricia Rose, ‘Bad Sisters: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music’, in: Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, 1989); and Bell Hooks (eds.), Women, Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader, 2nd ed., Sage, 1995); Ch. 4 in Russell Peters, Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism (State University of New York Press, 1995); and my ‘Rap Music and the MBA (Master of Business Administration) (in: Youth and Cultural Politics: Diversity and Pluralism, Vibe Hip Hop Divas, 2001—which also contains short essays on many of the most famous women MCs).
Lady Sex and others articulate in complex ways with wider socio-political issues—thus striving for “the paradigm shifts necessary to critically analyse… society from the grassroots up.” 19 At this stage much of the lyrical content and orientation of women’s raps tended to correspond to the formula of the ‘female complaint’, whereby the interplay and cross-referencing in the lyrics matched aspects of the real-life frustrations and conflicts of the artists and their audiences.20 Then such texts were clearly cut out for a greater range of women’s points of view, stories and attitudes, where commercial success set a series of thematic precedents—as in the sheer ghetto storytelling prowess of MC Lyte and the explicit programmatic social consciousness of Queen Latifah. This access to the mainstream massively accelerated with the 1990s embrace of soul traditions into rap music, so that today every conceivable permutation of views on life, relationships and the world—as articulated by men and women—can be found on rap record labels.

The simple presence of so many female MCs as successful, self possessed musical artists in a subcultural context18 is significant. While their active physical presence is celebrated with pride and pleasure, presented as born from a ghetto upbringing and in explicit defiance of control by men—and yet showing solidarity both with other lower class women and those same men—the two-dimensional view as the property of pimps and playthings of playboys is quickly undermined. There is clearly a series of class, sex and race dialogues underway in this field of media representations—not least using discourse about personal autonomy that belies the status quo. Even though this has largely depended on two decades-worth of strong female artists, from their public profile, only gradually re-emerging from the recording and concert industry from the late 1980s onward.21 With the forging of a the industry and media and as a Black woman from a lower-class background struggling to make her way in a hostile world.

37. The nu-soul pioneers were Maxwell, Erykah Badu and D’Angelo— whom many young writers, including those of Angie Stone (an original MC at school), Bilal, John McRobbie ‘Soul Sector Magazine’ (note 35) present a comprehensive analysis of Da-Beat—among the most successful women MCs in R&B/rap (allied to hip-hop's community presence seemed to evaporate from its public profile, only gradually re-emerging after the experiment, the image, lyrics and narratives appears on the surface to conform to contemporary expectations—but actually in greater numbers, appeared less apposite to the scene of Da Beat’s image, representation, lyrics and narratives appears on the surface to conform to contemporary and traditional expectations—but actually is it less apposite, quests for textual engagements rather than specifically Black culture, and nihilism of the black underclass cannot contain.25

38. This includes outspoken political rap—for example by Dead Prez, DJ Trevor Nelson’s Soul Nation TV series (Channel 4, 2003). Note that until the current resurgence of club-based urban music, UK R&B has largely depended on two decades-worth of successful women artists for commercial visibility—most of whom chose ordinary ‘round-the-corner’ identities (e.g. in London, Bristol, Birmingham and Nottingham), UK hip-hop has stubbornly clung to a rabid defensive purism in the face of industry indifference (although frustrated artists often break out of the rigidly-enforced subcultural boundaries). Local hip-hop, such as in my city of Newcastle, often contains a wealth of talent but complete disregard for the dance-hall—so its parties merely showcase performers for passive audiences (also see Andy Bennett, ‘Hip hop am Main, Rappin’ on the Tyne: Hip hop History of House and rave appear now to represent little more than drug base weaker package hosted by hip-hop dominoes despite the utopian desires and energetic grass-roots organisation nurtured by their pioneers (see George McKay (ed.), DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain, Verso, 1995; Sean Elder, Pump Up The Volume: A History of House, Channel 4 Books, and Trio’s ‘Real’ Sex and the City

17. For discussions of recent UK Asian styles, see Sanjay Sharma, John Jutnyk & Ashwari Sharma (eds.), Dis-orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music (Zed Books, 1996). While ragga is strong and self-contained in its communities (e.g. in London, Bristol, Birmingham and Nottingham), UK hip-hop has stubbornly clung to a rabid defensive purism in the face of industry indifference (although frustrated artists often break out of the rigidly-enforced subcultural boundaries). Local hip-hop, such as in my city of Newcastle, often contains a wealth of talent but complete disregard for the dance-hall—so its parties merely showcase performers for passive audiences (also see Andy Bennett, ‘Hip hop am Main, Rappin’ on the Tyne: Hip hop Culture as a Local Construct in Two European Cities’, in Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place, Macmillan, 2000).

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42. For example Chris Wells, editor of UK Black music magazine Echoes, informed readers in April 2001 “Why R&B Has No Soul” (Echoes, 2001).
women as objects both of the male gaze and physical paternalism)—and a new breed of R&B divas now found their ghettoetic stories translated into smug middle class tales of upward mobility.34

The trend peaked with a series of late '90s hits which appeared to insult men simply for being short of cash. Though actually insisting on financial and sexual autonomy for women, the lyrics floated in a marketing environment where such freedom was touted as a luxury for sale. With sanitised visual styles emphasising expensive grooming and yuppie accoutrements, any socially aware messages risked being completely swamped—transformed into simple class-based contempt.35 However, the crossover commercial strategy means that different audiences do not respond uniformly to the music. The superficial confessions and showbiz celebrity blather of pop appeal to coexist with a strong affinity among urban listeners for those artists with more to say, thanks in particular to the lower class-specific pitch of their lyrics—and to some extent irrespec-
tive of the media packaging (which is understood for what it is).36

In the mid-1990s the subgenre of nu-soul also brought R&B back into play using a different route—hip-hop's reification of jazz and blues idiom and the spoken word commentary of Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets.37 Confident in using hip-hop beats from the pace at which the R&B beat had been refined, the more mature nu-soul stance weaves in the ethical and spiritual musings of soul. Young adults reflect honestly on their problems, yearn for positive solutions and regularly pay respect to their working class neigh-
bourhoods and social networks. The intricate effects of class, gender and race interact and inform the deliberations of the men as well as the women, with difference and conflict no longer wished away in bourgeois fictions of universal equality.38 Nu-soul consistently delivers far more complex notions of what might be needed for per-
sonal and collective well-being—without being preachy and moralistic and alienating the youth.39

So, understood broadly, hip-hop now reflects a rich, diverse tapestry of musical and lyrical styles—expansive and generous rather than inward-looking and exclusive—justifying its characterisation as culture rather than subculture. Thanks to rap's intense class consciousness and the abiding emphasis on lived experience, locality and dance, there is also room for more revolution-
ary and radical themes to voiced without instant recuperation into the consumerist lifestyle of 

the music's links in the Signifyin' chain of Black traditions—reminders of all the forms of social domination suffered from historic slavery up to our present and future versions.

Urban music's connections to a history of strug-
gles shaping its musical and cultural foundations, and the politics thus facilitated and (sometimes) nourished, give it a progressive potential absent from other contemporary UK dance styles—which have little explicit content to counteract and com-
plicate commercial takeover and neutralisation.19

The pathways followed by classic R&B in Britain, however, have always straddled popular, serious and dance-based perspectives, winding from the 60s Mods through Northern Soul, tacky and posh variants of '70s disco and later smooth jazz and funk styles and 'rare grooves'.40 With the late 1960s Soul II Soul production renaissance, club nights devoted to the new crossovers with reggae, hip-hop and soul began to appear in many UK cities, maintaining a faltering presence ever since—until youthful infusions of equally open-
minded UK garage, hip-hop and bhangra affi-
cionados have recently cemented the scene.41

As urban music booms through the limited, limi-
nal spaces of nightclubs and parties worldwide as well as above ground radio and TV, it is easy to draw conclusions based on a homogenisation of commercial popular culture and the neo-imperial-
ism of globalisation. Likewise, no one evangelises the genre in the kinds of 'taste war' waged by 
journalists, critics and the entrepreneurial mar-
testers of new musical subcultures in the public forums of student unions and trendy fashion and style magazines. All serious opinion seems to con-
tur that urban music is supremely fake: 'hip-pop' and 'rhythm & bullshit' (modern reggae being hardly worth mentioning at all).42 However, a Sara Thornton emphasises, such concerns really only preoccupy those guarding their own accumu-
lation of 'cultural capital', whereas: "the authen-
ticities of dance music are complex and 

contradictory. They wave between an ancestral world of real bodies and city places and the new high-tech order of faceless machines and global dislocation".43

In practice, urban music dance participation openly embraces its multiple antecedents, con-
flicts and futurisms—both in bodily appreciation of the hybrid processing in the music, and in its social resonances and repercussions—without feel-
ing any need to justify or explain itself. Due to the open expressive vulgarity of musical call and dance response, social prestige, stratification and snobbery get short shrift among crowds so hetero-

geneous in age, race, background and dress code—where it is middle class slummers with 

noses in the air, besuited after-party businessmen, and rhythm-free pub-circuit punters who stand out like sore thumbs. In sociological provenance we are in the realms simultaneously of the feudal struc-


tudes and transgressions of carnival, the modern 

excesses of display of those for whom hardship recurs randomly according to the whims of the 

world, and the newly globalising peripheral work-

ing classes who consume so as to partake of post-

modern human essence.44

The treatment of difference in the 'temporary autonomous zones' of urban dancehall is a final element to draw attention to. Of course there is no utopia, but an empathetic burgeoning of tentative practical solidarity it is no mean feat in the new 'refugee camps' which the plan-

et's urban regions are becoming.45 In particular, the 

space carried out by women to exist, enjoy, express and experi-

ence—despite the pressures and temptations to retreat to the disco's cattle-market mentality—

seems to me to be a significant precedent to set if matched in the thousands of new urban 
dancehalls in the New World's menacing Order, where commu-
n

nities will need the ability to mobilise and draw on the capaci-

ties of all our people in the grassroots struggles ahead.46

Dancehall dreams indeed.
Abandoned Dancehall Dreams is the second solo studio album by the English singer-songwriter Tim Bowness. It was originally released on 23 June 2014 by the label InsideOut Music. When scheduling conflicts postponed an intended 2014 album by Bowness' main band No-Man, Bowness collated the songs written for that album and reworked them for a solo record. Many of the elements of the original No-Man project remained on the finished album, with Bowness™ No-Man partner Steven Wilson remaining as sound mixer Dancehall Dreams (Work-In-Progress) - Ryan Polomski - Cinematographer/Producer. Ryan Polomski. 6:14. Dancehall dreams baga MIX rasta rish na/doras double ras. Reijnaldo philips. 3:16. Dancehall dreams baga MIX rasta rish na/doras double ras. Reijnaldo philips. Big up 4 love.