

In the first half of this lecture I'll trace the evolution of the sounds of ska, reggae and dub. In the second half documentary I'll screen a documentary on ska's diasporic journey to Britain in the 1970s, *2 Tone Britain*. In other words, apart from outlining the contours of one of the most important genres of the twentieth century, I want to point to the way in which ska, reggae and dub are emblematic of Paul Gilroy's black atlantic — the black culture that supersedes any notion of an essentialised black-African identity and replaces it with something that is hybrid and formed through black journeys between Jamaica, the United States and Europe — all of which took place across the Atlantic Ocean.

Ska

The culture of Ska was rooted in the Sound System, which was the way in which many Jamaicans listened to music. It was prohibitively expensive for working-class Jamaicans to buy lots of records, so record store owners responded by setting up sound systems — mobile discotheques, in effect — and putting on parties. They normally charged between 2-5 shillings for entrance and customers got to listen to music as well as have a party. (White, 1967: 42)

The early sound systems played US R&B and Coxsone Dodd, a migrant farm worker living in Florida in the 1950s, became a particularly important figure. Many of the sound system DJs would travel to states such as New Orleans and Miami during the week in order to find work in-between gigs, and Dodd discovered southern US R&B while working in Florida. He started his own sound system and started importing R&B, which became the staple music of Kingston dance.

When the US public started to buy rock and roll in the 1950s — as traced in an earlier lecture — the sudden shortage of groove-oriented R&B spurred Jamaican DJs to enter the studio and develop their own versions of US R&B. In other words, Jamaican musicians started to imitate the sound of US R&B. But as they set about their work they also drew on native idioms such as mento and other favourites such as bossa, mambo, merengue, jazz and big band swing — and they also emphasised the off-beat (the second and fourth beat of the bar).

Here's what mento sounded like around the time rock and roll was peaking in the US:

Lord Power "Let's Do It"

Lord Lebby "Mama No Want No Rice & Peas"

And this is what indigenous mento sounded like when was blended with US R&B

Norma Fraser "Respect"

Dodd started to record one-off acetates of "Ska" to play for his Downbeat Soundsystem to outmanoeuvre competition from other sound systems. And when he realised the commercial potential of his music he opened the studio.

Early ska became virtually synonymous with Studio One, which was opened by Coxsone Dodd in 1963. (The Soul Jazz label has collected much of the music recorded in Studio One; the CDs are in library.) Tracks would often be recorded in the day and tested on the dance floor later that same evening. Depending on the response, the musicians might return to the studio to make changes the following day. Like Berry Gordy at Motown, Dodd saw the need to establish his own roster of artists, so he began to develop names such as the Wailers, the Ethiopians, the Maytals and Delroy Wilson. All these artists began their careers making joyous up-tempo Ska at Studio One.

Delroy Wilson "I Want Justice"
The Skatalites "Beardsman Ska"
The Wailers "I'm Gonna Put It On"

Ska music was generally recorded between 1962-65, so the music coincided with Jamaican independence from Britain, which achieved in 1962). As a result ska became the voice of the independence movement — the first truly modern Jamaican music, and we can hear the political backdrop of Jamaica in the optimistic, upbeat feel of ska music. Yet ska also became a signifier of the Jamaican class system, so whereas downtown working-class Jamaicans played ska, uptown middle-class Jamaicans continued to listen to US R&B.

Rastafarianism and ska

Along with mento, US R&B, sound system culture and Jamaican independence, the Rastafarian religion forms another key backdrop to the evolution of ska and reggae. Rastafarianism is an African Caribbean religion that venerates the former emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie. It forbids the cutting of hair and emphasises the sovereignty and worth of black culture and identity. Rastafarianism is one of number of religions — others emerged in Haiti and Cuba — that grew out of the West African tradition of drumming, in which the drums are used to summon the spirits and as a form of communication. Here's an example of this kind of drumming — this is Haitian drumming, from the Soul Jazz album *Voodoo Drums*.

Yanvalou "A1"

Studio One Ska was imbued with the philosophy of Rastafarianism and a number of bands and tracks directly referenced the religion.

The Skatalites "Exodus"
The Ethiopians "I'm Gonna Take Over Now"

The first Ska crossover hit in the UK via Island, initially a rock label, was "My Big Lollipop", which climbed the charts in 1964.

Millie "My Boy Lollipop"

Island was owned by Chris Blackwell, the white son of a plantation owner that dated back to the days of slavery, and Blackwell also produced "My Big Lollipop". Blackwell would go on to become a key figure in reggae — he later imported Bob Marley to the UK in the 1970s — so how did ska mutate into reggae?

Reggae

The shift from ska to reggae took place in the post-independence period. After the optimism of independence, troubles ensued, and the Rastafarian discourse of roots politics (black independence) was soon replaced by the discourse of the gangster. As the 60s progressed, Ska started to slow down, started to become heavier, and this formed the aesthetic foundations of reggae.

Key figures in reggae included Lee Scratch Perry and Bob Marley, who were starting to record in Studio One, and in the late 1960s Lee Scratch Perry produced the Wailers, Marley's first band. Released in 1973, *Catch A Fire* by Bob Marley and the Wailers sounds like this:

Bob Marley & the Wailers "Stir It Up"

Rastafarians were treated as outcasts in Jamaica for most of the 1960s, and reggae became the music from which they drew spiritual sustenance. The Jamaican reformer Marcus Garvey forecast the coming of the Messiah, Haile Selassie, and set up a liner ship to take African Caribbeans back to Africa. The religion also glorified the ideas of nature, of roots, of spiritual trance. Songs such as "Exodus" referred to the escape from the dystopia of Babylon to the liberated land of Zion.

The religious aspect of Rastafarianism was magnified by the emergence of the sound system, designed to play American R&B and then Jamaican Ska and Reggae at maximum volume. The sound system allowed for cosmic-spiritual release through sound (especially reinforced bass) and dance. Julian Henriques has described the sound system as a form of "sonic dominance", in which the sonic takes over from the visual and creates a community based on sound. In these situations, the sound permeates the body, and therefore creates a situation in which the bounded body is penetrated and becomes difficult to maintain as a separate and unified entity. Dancers tended to forget about themselves and merge into the dancing crowd, which becomes a collective force. Yet while the sound systems generated a form of internal unity, they also became deeply competitive, largely over competition for customers. This resulted in the emergence of the "sound clash", in which systems would stage contests in order to see which ones

could attract the greater number of customers. Of course the clashes in themselves became a point of interest and promotion. In Jamaica sound systems rivalled and continue to rival the church and the Jamaican football team as an institution.

Dub

Initially dub conjured up the idea of the acetate test pressings that were otherwise known as dub plates. By the late 1960s, however, a new version of dub began to emerge. In this version dub referred to an instrumental cut of a certain track that was made exclusively for the dancehall DJ and could be used as a musical bed for the DJs to rhyme over. Eventually these performances were recorded and made available to the general public as the "version" track, which would appear on the B-side of a 45rpm single.

The version was initially just the instrumental of the A-side, but as time went on, engineers and producers began to experiment with dropping different instruments in and out, plus using echo and reverb to make a version more interesting/unique — and this also became a way of fighting off market competition from other sound systems. These experiments were done with a mixing desk and tape-machines. Lee Scratch Perry and King Tubby played a particularly crucial role in the emergence of dub.

Perry started recording at Reid's Studio One but left in the late 60s to set up another studio and criticised everyone he'd previously worked for. Perry was a key figure in slowing down ska to create the sound of roots reggae, in which the rhythm became a gluey, viscous substance.

Lee Perry & the Upsetters "Dub Revolution (Part 1)"

Junior Murvin "Bad Weed"

The Upsetters "Vamp A Dub"

As for King Tubby, he took reggae into dub territory by bringing the B-side instrumentals to the fore. King Tubby built his own sound system and in the studio explored the possibilities of reconstructing sound with studio analogue effects, which he would then record onto dub plates. In contrast to Lee Scratch Perry, who had a quite simple approach to the studio, Tubby used more electronics, more reverb and more echo.

King Tubby & Friends "The Champion Version"

King Tubby & Friends "Wreck Up A Version"

King Tubby & Friends "Jah Lover Rockers Dub"

Dub comes from the word "doubling" — the track is doubled into a number of new songs — and all of the aesthetic components of dub are here in these King Tubby versions. Key aesthetic points to draw out include:

(i) Individual instruments are saturated in delay, with the music stripped down to its core rhythm and built around echoes.

- (ii) The combination of weed and analogue electronics produces a hallucinogenic dub. Like grass, it opens an inner door
- (iii) Yet in its reliance on technology and the machine, dub inadvertently challenged the roots ideology of reggae.
- (iv) At the same time, dub also became a postmodern music in which the original was no longer traceable: listening to dub creates a sense of the uncanny, of vaporising wholeness.
- (v) Dub emerged in the early 70s as an elaboration of instrumental tracks and, against this sonic backdrop, a new vocal style emerged: toasting or chatting on the microphone. This was the moment when the modern day MC first emerged.

By the mid-80s Jamaica was witnessing an explosion of violence and the rise of the darker sound of dancehall, which was heavier and more aggressive than reggae and dub. Lyrics focused on slackness and sex, with Yellow Man, a Jamaican albino, one of the most prominent artists. Beenie Man is another prominent artist. Here's the sound, which is quite close to drum 'n' bass.

Beenie Man & Bounty Killer "Borderline Monster"

Dance hall now has a high international profile, but the culture is also plagued by allegations of homophobia. The row took on an international dimension when venues started to refuse to book dance hall artists who were flagrantly homophobic, but over the last year or so some of the artists involved have modified their positions. This is an issue that's impossible to discuss in any kind of useful detail at the end of this quick overview, but it remains an important and contentious issue.

As for the UK, Jamaican migration to the UK carried the sound of reggae and dub to the UK — so the music has had a bigger impact in the UK than the US. Soul Jazz have just brought out a CD that traces the journey of reggae and dub into the UK — the album is titled *An England Story*. As we heard last week, reggae and dub had a significant influence on groups like the Clash, and they also had a huge impact on 2-Tone, the Selector and the Specials. After the break we'll look at a documentary that charts this influence, and which includes an interview with Paul Gilroy.