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**'N'  
MIX**

COMEDIA

**Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music**

## Chapter Ten

## Dub and talk over

"Me love dub and but I and I don't get involved with it too much. Dub means right and tight, the perfect groove. When Wailers say *dub* this one, dis mean we gonna play it right and tight." (Bob Marley)

"You can copyright a song, but you can't copyright a rhythm."  
(Dermott Hussey, Jamaican record producer)

We have already seen how, in order to get through to the wider audience, the Wailers' LP had to be remixed so that the overall sound was brought into line with the expectations of the white rock audience. Many of the reggae LPs produced with the foreign market in mind are still remixed in this way. For example, some producers speed up the tapes slightly for reggae records destined for the American market, because the American rock and soul audiences who are likely to buy reggae prefer the faster rhythms. However in Jamaica the slower, heavier rhythms continued to be popular and around 1974 reggae began to slow down yet again until it began to sound even more menacing.

The new "dread rhythms" were called *rockers*. As with every other shift in Jamaican pop music, the new sound can be traced back to the way the drums and bass guitar were featured on recordings. In rockers, the bass was as heavily amplified as ever and continued to provide the basic background throb - reggae's heartbeat. But the bass patterns also became more complicated and experimental. In some types of heavy reggae (especially in instrumental or "dub" music) the bass takes over the prominent role normally reserved in rock music for the lead guitar. Robbie Shakespeare, a session musician who plays for the studio band The Aggravators, is held largely responsible for the new bass style. The drumming, too, became more complicated in rockers' music and again the change is generally attributed to the work of another session musician - Sly Dunbar.

You can hear Dunbar's drumming on many of the instrumental LPs. While Sly uses the bass drum to supply a steady, marching beat, he improvises on the cymbals, the snares and the tom toms to produce a multi-layered effect, rather like West African religious drumming.

Again, Rastafarian "rhythms" have played an important part in this development. Dunbar has himself been influenced by Rasta drumming patterns. His style is partly modelled on the work of an older session man, Leroy "Horsemouth" Wallace who now plays for the successful reggae group, Inner Circle. Wallace seems to have invented the rockers' rhythm for an early recording made in 1969 for Sir Coxsone Dodd entitled *Things a Come up to Bump*. And Wallace had been part of the original ska generation. He had attended the Alpha reformatory alongside Roland Alphonso and Don Drummond and, as we've seen, it was this group of musicians who led the way for the ska sound by combining Rasta "rhythms" with black American music.

But to understand the development of rockers and heavy instrumental dub, we have to go back to the early days of the sound system recordings. We have seen how djs like Duke Reid and Prince Buster used to add spice to the instrumental records they were playing by shouting out their favourite catchphrases over the microphone. These talk overs or toasts soon became a popular feature of the blues dances. After a while, the djs began adding electronic sound effects - echo and reverb - to make the records sound even more unusual. Gradually, as we've seen, more sophisticated recordings were made, using a number of different instrumental and vocal tracks.

One day, King Tubby, a record engineer, was working in his studio mixing a few ska "specials" (i.e., exclusive recordings) for Sir Coxsone's Downbeat system. He began fading out the instrumental track, to make sure that the vocals sounded right. And he was excited by the effect produced when he brought the music back in. So instead of mixing the specials in the usual way, he cut back and forth between the vocal and instrumental tracks and played with the bass and treble knobs until he changed the original tapes into something else entirely. These were the first ever dub records, and they soon helped to draw the crowds to Coxsone's sound. Soon other producers were experimenting with these *dubs*. By the late 1960s, Bunny Lee was putting a dub "version" of the title track on the flip side of all his singles. → *hip-hop & styles*

On the dub the original tune is still recognisably there but it is broken up. The rhythm might be slowed down slightly, a few snatches of song might be thrown in and then distorted with echo. The drums and bass will come right up to the listener and demand to be heard. Dermott Hussey, a Jamaican record producer, explains what modern dub is like:

"The dub now is just the bare bones, the rhythm played, bass line of course over-emphasised. And it's just a naked dance rhythm."<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, Jamaican studios contain equipment which can handle up to twenty-four tracks instead of just two, and the potential for experimentation in dub is vast. Over the past few years, some producers like "Scratch" Perry and Joe Gibbs have experimented with dub to such an extent that the music is beginning to resemble modern, free-form jazz. The original tune is stretched, broken and bent into the most extraordinary shapes by all kinds of electronic wizardry. For instance, on *Africa Dub*, in addition to the usual echo and reverb effects, producer Joe Gibbs has added what sound like car horns, cuckoo clocks, electronic buzzes, bells and pips, and even bomb blasts, to make the record sound unique.

But the early sound system recordings gave rise to yet another type of music within reggae – the dj talk over. As we've seen, Prince Buster's style had been loosely based on the dj "toasts". But it wasn't until 1967 that anyone tried to make recordings in the talk over style. In that year, Lester Sterling produced *Sir Collin's Special* in which he actually *spoke* over the rhythm. King Stitt followed one year later with three dj hits.

Then in 1970, the first big talk over star, U Roy, emerged. U Roy (real name Ewart Beckford) had begun as a dj for King Tubby's system. The weird rambling monologues which he spoke into the microphone over Tubby's sound soon won him a large following. Eventually, he decided to cut some toasting records. He would take a popular rhythm track, phase out the singing and add his own stream of screeches, yelps and muttered catchphrases. The records were an immediate success and U Roy went on to produce a number of classic talk overs with titles like *Wear You to the Ball*, *Flashing My Whip* and *Tom Drunk*. It's hard to find words to describe U Roy's outlandish style. Stephen Davis suggests that it sounds like "a hundred severely ruptured parrots".<sup>2</sup> These early talk overs are certainly wild; at times U Roy sounds almost possessed. U Roy's toasts resemble the inspired ravings of a worshipper "trumping in the spirit" at a Pocomania gathering.

By 1972, other dj artists were challenging U Roy's leadership of the talk over scene. The "King" was soon displaced by younger men. But he made a comeback in 1975 with an LP called *Dread in a Babylon* which sold well both in Britain and Jamaica. As the title suggests, U Roy drew on the Rastafarian imagery of dreadlocks and ganja for this LP. But his style remained basically unchanged. The toasts were just as crazy and full of blistering asides as they had ever been. And for a while the album reinstated U Roy at the top of the toasting league.

In the meantime, other talk over stars had emerged. Dennis Alcapone enjoyed a brief period of success around 1974, when he had

hits with records like *Cassius Clay*. But the two major challengers for U Roy's title were I Roy and Big Youth. I Roy (real name Roy Reid) was extremely popular during the mid 1970s. His voice was somewhat deeper and fuller than U Roy's. He would lace his toasts with snatches of song and nursery rhymes. Though his talk overs are frequently comic (listen, for instance, to the early *Welding*), I Roy also presents himself as a wise man "cooling out the youth". For example, I Roy's 1977 album *Crisus Time* was filled with sincere fatherly advice. And on his classic single *Black Man Time* (1974) I Roy solemnly counsels the youth to leave the street corners and to support the literacy programme which the government had just launched. Against a strange, discordant, almost oriental-sounding background of electric violins, I Roy delivers the following sermon:

"I talk to break oppression and set the captives free  
 So you got to understand I talk to rule the musical  
 Nation with justice and equality.  
 So black man you got to be free like a bird in a tree,  
 And live in love and unity for I and I.  
 So maybe you can make it if you try.  
 Say it's a black man time. It a black man time."

Again, you can hear echoes of the old African boast songs in talk over reggae. Just like Trinidad's calypsonians, the djs often strike "bad man" poses. They also tend to mock their rivals with jokey insults and put downs, just as in the 1940s Trinidad's singing stars carried out boasting battles in the *sans humanité* calypsoes. A whole string of I Roy's hits attacked another dj star, Prince Jazzbo, and Jazzbo retaliated by using his own insulting talk overs. In *Straight to Jazzbo's Head*, I Roy taunts his rival with the line: "Jazzbo if you were a jukebox, I wouldn't put a dime into your slot". Jazzbo's counter-attack was rather lame by comparison. In *Straight to I Roy's Head*, he accused his "enemy" of copying U Roy's style: "I Roy, you a boy - move out de way - 'cos you imitate the great U Roy".

DJ Battles

But the most popular dj of recent years has undoubtedly been Big Youth. Big Youth (real name Manley Buchanan) is the spokesman for the Rasta influenced youth. His early *skank* records (*Ace 90 Skank*, *George Foreman*, *Foreman and Frazier*, *Screaming Target*, etc.) were basically dance tunes and dealt with the usual rude boy concerns of motor bikes, boxing and "keeping your cool". But his later albums, particularly *House of Dreadlocks*, *Dreadlocks Dread* and *Natty Cultural Dread* made him almost as popular as Bob Marley with the Rastafarian youth. His style is peppered with grassroots patois and secret Rasta phrases:

"When the Lion is sleepin' don't try to wake him, baby...  
Then you walk with the idren, down in a Babylon,  
You talk with the idren, down in a Babylon,  
You can't walk free, down in a Babylon."

Big Youth stresses "dread" and vengeance. His "toasts", in contrast to I Roy's, are filled with threatening prophecies and images of brooding violence which are underlined by the heavy reggae rhythms:

"and di blood goin' flood and di blood goin' run  
Blood up town an' blood down town.  
An' di blood roun' town.  
Blood in di woods and di blood in di country  
Marcus Garvey word."

The sinister tone of Big Youth's records calls to mind some of the poems of the Haitian Griot group. Both Griot poetry and Big Youth's dread sounds show a deep awareness of social injustice and racial discrimination. Both teach black pride and fight fire with fire using the idea of Africa to summon up images of darkness and blood.

On *Lightning Flash*, for instance, Big Youth flashes (shakes) his dreadlocks and waits for Judgement Day when, the Bible says, the wicked will suffer and "the righteous black man stand". And the rhythm track in the background fairly pulsates with dread. In fact, it is possible that there is a direct connection with Rasta ridims. One writer has claimed that Big Youth uses his voice to improvise across the reggae rhythms like the repeater in Rasta drumming sessions. The way that he does this derives directly from the Rastafarian Grounation ceremony, in which a singer will lead the other brethren in prayer by toasting over the drums.

Transformative  
Use  
of Dub  
Talk over and dub have had a mixed reception from the reggae audience. The music is extremely popular with the young sound system fans. But the Jamaican radio stations have banned it because of pressure from the musicians' union. The union is indignant that the musicians who record the original versions (which then get transformed into dub and talk over records) don't get any royalties. And one tune, one set of ridims, can spark off a host of different versions.

There has always been a relaxed attitude to musical ownership and copyright in Jamaica. In many ways, it was because the island's music scene was so chaotic and disorganised in the early 1960s that reggae could develop from such a wide range of sources. And the Rastafarians had set the tone by "capturing" European hymn tunes and using them for their own purposes. Thus, the Mighty Diamonds feel quite happy about basing their hits on other people's ridims:

"It's not like we stealing anything from anybody. We take a ridim and update it and re-record it. And then we apply our new ideas to it. We call it 'anointing' the ridim with our own magic."<sup>3</sup>

De/Re-construct

But dub has taken this tendency a lot further. At one time in 1976 there were no fewer than twenty-five different versions of the tune *I'm Still in Love with You* by, among others, Marcia Aitken, Trinity, the Mighty Two, Clint Eastwood, Junior Murvin, the Mighty Diamonds, I Roy, Ranking Trevor, Alton Ellis, Hortense Ellis and Queen Tiney. And many of these artists are talk over djs.

Others accuse talk over of reducing reggae to a set of predictable clichés. Big Youth has spawned a thousand imitators, all claiming to be the true representatives of roots and the Ethiopian connection. And in the last few years there has been a glut of toasting records, many of which are dull. However, Tapper Zukie has won a formidable reputation and more recently Prince Far-I and Prince Hammer have released records. And Dr Alimentado (Winston Thomson) is a true original, with eccentric toasts such as the mysteriously named *She Weng Yep* (also known as "Best Dressed Chicken in Town").

But quite apart from the contributions of individual artists, dub and talk over are important because they are the basic material of the sound systems. And it is the sound systems which are largely responsible for keeping the traditions and the spirit of reggae music alive. It is here at the grassroots level that many of reggae's fads and fashions emerge - new dances, new attitudes, new tastes and trends. In 1976 one London sound system operator talked about the popularity of dub:

Hip-Hop  
in Box

"The people dem love fe hear strictly dubwize music 'cause dread dancing is comin' back into fashion. More rocking and swinging kinda movements - and steppers too."<sup>4</sup>

The sound system provides an opportunity for the grassroots people to talk back, to respond, to choose what they like and don't like. At the blues dances, the people can dictate the djs' choice of sounds. And each sound system has its own toasting heroes who can express the feelings of the crowd. I Roy puts it this way:

"We work as the media through which the people speaks, y'know. It's not just us suffering 'cos we're thinking for everybody."<sup>5</sup>

And often the talk over artist, like the calypso singer, can help to clarify local opinion on social and political issues. For instance, Big

Youth, who has been called the "human *Gleaner*" (the *Gleaner* is Jamaica's most popular daily newspaper), produced a record called *Green Bay Killing* about a murder that had occurred on the island a few days before. Within a week, Big Youth's version was matched by Jah Lloyd's *Green Bay Incident* – another dj commentary on the same event. In the same way, Tapper Zukie produced a record called *Ten Against One* about the riots in 1976 at London's Notting Hill Carnival, which was being distributed within days of the disturbances. Often in Jamaica, talk over is a way of getting round the libel and sedition acts. I Roy explains:

"The music is a way of getting the thing across because... you couldn't come out in public and say bluntly maybe somebody would hit you on the head or a copper would take you in for public mischief. [But] you can say it on record and get away with it. Y'know, it's a way of protesting against certain things, against certain physical and mental things that we Jamaican people have suffered."<sup>6</sup>

Early  
Hip-hop

This process of feed-back – of three-way flow between artists, record producers and the audience – is what helps to make reggae different from other types of pop music. The distance between the performer and the fans is never allowed to grow too great.

And it is at the sound system that the barrier between the fans and the stars is least noticeable. There is always a chance that a record company will discover local talent "toasting a version" over the microphone of a small sound system in a hired hall or club. That is how Glen Sloley, a young talk over artist, began his recording career in England. The old competitive atmosphere of the blues dance still survives in Britain, where sound systems were set up in every ghetto area where West Indians settled. Sloley was a regular at London's Bouncing Ball Club. Every Friday night, Admiral Ken, the resident dj, would play a dub and invite members of the audience to do a version over the microphone. Glen was keen to win and used all his spare time to practise for the next week's competition:

"... is just pure hands vote, y'know. Ken and two other men count the people's hands. The winner would get about £20 and second get nothing, and Bank Holidays it went up to £30 or £35... hard practice a rhythm for the weekend that was truly my work: indoors going over and over the rhythm till I get it perfect. 'Cos I knew that when Friday come if I win there's a money in my hand."<sup>7</sup>

And eventually, after winning eight competitions in a row, Sloley was spotted and signed up by a record company. So dub and talk over

help to keep reggae healthy and alive by providing an opportunity for ordinary people to talk back to the industry either as fans with preferences for certain kinds of music, or more directly as talk over djs.

Dub and talk over have had one more effect on the Jamaican record industry which may seem, at first sight, to conflict with the point that's just been made. The stress on recorded rhythms in dub has tended to concentrate even more power in the hands of the producers. We have seen how reggae has always been basically recorded rather than live music (though groups like Third World and Bob Marley and the Wailers have opened up the possibility of reggae performance). But both the Jamaican record industry and the music itself grew out of the sound systems. And for the most part, reggae still develops in accordance with the needs of the sound system operators and their fans.

same as  
early hip hop  
culture

In recent years, because of dub, reggae has become even more studio-based. Each studio has its own recognisable house-style dictated by the producer. For instance, Augustus Pablo at King Tubby's studio produces what he calls the "Far East Sound" featuring an instrument called the melodica. Meanwhile in the mid-1970s, Lee Perry's Black Ark studio released a string of records all with the same identifiable sound – slow, thudding bass lines and heavy rhythms. This batch of records included Junior Murvin's *Police and Thieves*, Max Romeo's *War in a Babylon*, the Upsetter's best-selling dub LP *Sugar Ape* and a talk over LP by Jah Lion (Pat Francis) entitled *Columbia Colly*.

But this emphasis on the studio sound doesn't mean that the music has become narrower and more "commercial" as a result – far from it. As we've seen, the situation is still flexible. Musicians move from one session to the next and jam in different combinations and different studio bands. And the producer is not just a manipulating Scrooge, feeding off young talent. For in dub the skill of the record producer and the studio engineer in using the electronic medium is so great, and so crucial, that they have become genuine artists in their own right.