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Towards a musicology of bass culture

Sonic materialism and DJ performance in the city, festival, and online environment

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Towards a musicology of bass culture: Sonic materialism and DJ performance in the city, festival, and online environment

Ivan Mouraviev

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of the PhD in Music in the Faculty of Arts, School of Arts, October 2023.

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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of bass culture, Black diasporic electronic dance music (EDM) genres derived from reggae that are invested in loud, low bass. I respond to the need for a more robust “musicology of bass culture” (Fink 2018) by combining theory with ethnography to offer analytical insights into DJs’ strategies of performance, and the sociocultural contexts in which these performances are situated. The thesis is structured in two parts. The first establishes how bass music inherits traditions from dub, a subgenre of reggae that remixes existing musical material through a principle of creative fragmentation/rupture (Chapter 1). I also examine the theories about sound’s capacity to affect people that circulate in and around bass culture, which I term sonic materialisms (Chapter 2).

The second part applies these ideas in three case studies. Chapter 3 considers the bass culture of Bristol and how it has become associated with a particular “Bristol sound”. I offer a more musically precise understanding of this phenomenon through dub and comparative analysis of performances by DJs in the local scene. Chapter 4 investigates Outlook Festival, an event known for hosting bespoke sound systems that invites critical reflection on how live bass music can be unsettling or banal as well as transformative or pleasurable. Chapter 5 then elucidates how bass culture takes shape in a dubstep-centric online community. I examine a livestreamed performance project that sheds light on the shifting nature of sonic materialism in internet-mediated popular music. The Conclusion connects the thesis’s diverse threads, arguing that this musicology of bass culture: (1) widens how researchers can understand relations between performance, affect, and genre; (2) demonstrates the value of analysing DJ performance in musicology; and (3) destabilises, through fragmentation/rupture, the stereotyped identity of live EDM as a seamless flow of sound that affords exclusively utopian experience.

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To my family, my brother Nikolai and especially Mum, thank you for supporting my higher education emotionally, financially, and academically for over a decade now. I hope this work makes you proud. An enormous thank you also to my partner Zakia who has been here for so many of the highs and lows of this project. I am so grateful for your grace and patience.

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Finally, a thank you and big ups to all of the DJs, producers, and music fans who contributed to this project. You gave up time to be interviewed or simply had a chat about bass culture and what it means and does, adding vital nuance and fresh perspectives. I hope you enjoy reading the thesis and that it does your creativity, ideas, and stories justice.

Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the *University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

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Companion website

This thesis makes use of several audio and video examples which are available online at:

<https://sites.google.com/view/basscultureproject/>.

Audio Examples and **Video Examples** will be colour coded throughout the thesis, with clickable links going directly to the relevant media on the website.

Where musical works and films are cited in the main text but are not featured on the companion website, these will be listed in the Discography.

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Opening

Introduction

A base is something that you can stand on, firmly; a good base. So, the bass instrument in reggae has become the base of that culture. [...] Until reggae came along, the bass player was sat in the back of the van, and the drummer as well. It was all about the guitarist and the saxophonist and the trombone and the singer and all that. Then reggae came along and went, it's all about the bass, it's all about the drums, hear how loud they are [...] and *it made people feel really good*.¹

You talk about reggae – it's a bass dominant music, its melody is in the bass line. [...] we see our sound systems with all these speakers and massive amps and all that, and we push them things hard to make people really feel it. *I don't really know how you can get that across to someone without [...] pushing them in front of a stack of speakers* and saying, yeah, just check this.²

This thesis is an investigation of bass culture: the sonic and social practices surrounding Black diasporic electronic dance music (EDM) derived from reggae, which—as the above quotations suggest—share a collective investment in loud, low bass lines. Bass culture is a collective affair, built by the work of engineers, producers, MCs, and audiences, to say nothing of promoters and record labels. Yet DJs, or selectors as they are known in reggae, ultimately play the records and bring their vibrations to life, and nowhere are these vibrations better felt than in a live sound system dance.³ Accordingly, in this thesis I ask: how can the musical and social practices of DJs in bass culture can be understood from a musicological perspective?

More precisely, this thesis aims to take a first step in developing a musicology of bass culture that demystifies the subcultural fascination with low frequencies felt through massive sound systems. It does this by offering analytical specificity on how DJs strategically manipulate bass (and other frequencies) in live performance and the sociocultural contexts in which these performances are situated. This approach stands in

¹ Dennis Bovell, in Bass Culture Research, “Bass Culture: Dennis Bovell”, interview by Caspar Melville, Mixcloud, 13 May 2020 (accessed 30 August 2020), <https://www.mixcloud.com/BassCultureUK/bass-culture-dennis-bovell/>, 58:10–59:30. Emphasis added.

² Russ Disciples, in *Musically Mad*, DVD, directed by Karl Folke (Uppsala: Independent, 2008), 02:05–2:50. Emphasis added.

³ A definitional note: per the norm in British club culture, I use the noun “dance” interchangeably with “club night” and “party” (occasionally also “session”) for the live performance events where DJs/selectors and dancers gather.

contrast to the primarily cultural, sociological, and anthropological perspectives that dominate EDM studies, which provide insights into bass's significance while actual performances, sounds, and their affects remain neglected.⁴ As such, the thesis responds to this state of the field, and especially to the 2018 essay "Below 100 Hz: Toward a musicology of bass culture" by Robert Fink, a critique of the growing (though small) interdisciplinary field that can loosely be called bass culture studies.⁵ In Fink's view, scholars such as reggae researcher Julian Henriques and philosopher Steve Goodman (also known as DJ-producer Kode9) have so far focused on the political, conceptual, and epistemological implications of bass culture while seemingly eschewing the precise "material constraints and affordances of sub-bass along the signal chain", from subwoofer to human body.⁶ In eulogising bass that oscillates below 100 Hz (cycles per second) as "exemplary [...] subtle, and ethereal", these authors make "unsubstantiated claims for the power of low frequencies", says Fink.⁷ They celebrate "the irrational, the unknowable, and the unstoppable" physicality of bass in ways that are "disappointingly vague" and provide "little practical information about how bass culture actually works [...] [making] no distinction between reality and fantasy".⁸

These issues in the literature and the details of the musicology I aim to develop in response will be explained in more detail over the next three chapters; for now, I wish to emphasise that my project does heed Fink's call for a more robust musicology of bass

⁴ Media scholar Paul Jasen discusses this state of the field in his monograph on bass-centric practices and ideas across different musics, cultures, and periods, a major influence on this thesis. He notes how the problem extends to hip-hop and popular music studies where, despite the music under discussion often involving "neighbourhood-rattling bass", scholars tend "to 'bracket' out aspects of [sound's] material existence" and keep vibration at an arm's length, maintaining that it "can only ever be encountered through our ideas about [it]." Jasen, *Low End Theory: Bass, Bodies and the Materiality of Sonic Experience* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 4–7.

⁵ Robert Fink, "Below 100 Hz: Toward a Musicology of Bass Culture", in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, ed. Melinda Latour & Zachary Wallmark (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 88–116.

It should be noted that "bass culture studies" is not Fink's term, and neither is it widely used. Rather, I put this forward to acknowledge the body of research critiqued by Fink, which has grown considerably in the years since the publication of his essay and even during the writing of this thesis. As I discuss below, there is a burgeoning interdisciplinary interest in understanding bass culture, especially as it relates to British reggae and related EDM genres like jungle and grime, even when authors do not explicitly identify their work as belonging to a unified field as such.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁸ *Ibid.*

culture while deviating from his suggested path forward. As he argues, “we must understand bass *as* culture. [...] In the final analysis, [...] the ‘sound’ of the sub-bass is a timbre of no timbre, a tone whose expressive effect comes largely from that which we cannot hear”.⁹ Yet this does not preclude paying critical attention to the music that makes up bass culture and its mediation—sub-bass frequencies and all—in live performance, an approach that need not, as Fink frames it, “fall prey to [...] the erroneous belief that certain sounds, by virtue of their physical qualities, have more ‘thisness,’ more reality, than others.”¹⁰ I contend, then, that a musicology of bass culture *is* viable if the point of departure includes both the music and the strategies DJs use to perform it. I will aim to demonstrate how the analysis of DJ performance, though generally underexplored territory in music studies, can be productively combined with ethnographic methods to gain insights into the sonic and social dimensions of bass culture. These social dimensions make up the geographical component of the thesis, in that I will illustrate contemporary bass culture in the environments of a city, music festival, and online community (primarily in the United Kingdom) as case studies. In doing so, the project will also show how bass culture is best understood in plural terms as a network of localised bass *cultures* that have taken root around the world.

Main contributions

As well as responding to Fink’s critique, this thesis makes two main contributions. First, I will show how the reggae-related genres that make up bass culture, which I refer to collectively as “bass music” (a contested category to be elaborated on shortly below), are informed by creative principles distinct from those of more dominant EDM genres. This distinction starts with the investment in bass as felt vibration, which manifests in some key differences between the performance environment of a sound system session and a typical EDM club setting. In bass culture, the DJ/selector often performs at ground level with the audience,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

rather than on a raised stage; the speaker stacks of the sound system—bespoke equipment tuned specifically for bass projection—are commonly positioned surrounding the audience, immersing listener and performer in sound together; and lighting tends to be minimal, except for what DJs require to perform, encouraging a collective sensory focus on movement, touch, and hearing over seeing or being seen. At the compositional level, bass music inherits reggae’s emphasis on bass and drums as the basis of melody and rhythm. It also inherits the aesthetic ideal of cutting and remixing instrumental layers that characterises dub, the experimental branch of reggae that emerged in the early 1970s and has since become a genre and artistic process in its own right.¹¹ This connection to dub has important flow-on effects for performance: whereas dominant EDM forms like house and techno descend stylistically from disco, inheriting that music’s grounding in hypnotic, kick drum-led grooves and the paradigm of the continuous DJ mix, in music of the “dub diaspora”—as journalist and author Paul Sullivan terms it—turntablism of a different kind tends to be favoured.¹² Bass lines may enter and exit the mix unexpectedly, or smother it entirely; selectors may play records one at a time without smooth transitions, or punctuate the flow of sound with unpredictable vocalisations and sound effects; and DJs will regularly stop records to rewind and play them again if demanded by the crowd. This is not to suggest dub and reggae are entirely discontinuous, or that heavy bass and sharp textural contrasts are alien to disco, house, or techno. Rather, I will conceptualise these strategies in bass music as shaped by a principle of fragmentation/rupture, one that DJs leverage and play with in performance to great effect.¹³

Although my aim in elucidating bass music’s alternative creative principle(s) is not necessarily to justify its aesthetic or cultural value—millions of people enjoy bass music and will continue to do so—this thesis does strive to counter persistent stereotypes about EDM

¹¹ Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

¹² Paul Sullivan, *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

¹³ I derive fragmentation/rupture from two researchers, borrowing from Veal and Edward Spencer for the former and latter, respectively. See: Veal, *Dub*, 57; Edward Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall: An Investigation of Bass Music”, PhD thesis, University of Oxford (2020).

that circulate both informally and academically. The goal of DJ performance is often assumed to be a carefully blended, continuous flow of sound built from repetitive grooves and seamless transitions between records. Leading EDM musicologist Mark Butler—whose research will be an important touchstone throughout this thesis—states, for example: “[a] poor DJ set would consist of short transitions that are clearly audible as such, with long stretches of single tracks in between. One can easily hear such performances in many a second rate club.”¹⁴ According to this normative standard, the discontinuous sonic contour of many bass music performances, from the jagged transitions of grime to the insatiable tension-release arcs of dubstep, might be dismissed as “second rate” or perhaps even failed attempts at smooth DJing. Yet the fragmentation/rupture enacted by DJs in these genres is nothing short of deliberate, creative musical performance.

At stake in correcting this issue is an interpretation of bass music and culture that may nuance how researchers understand electronic (dance) music broadly conceived, particularly in terms of aesthetic pleasure in repetitive music. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, Fink’s work is also a valuable reference here. In his 2005 study *Repeating Ourselves*, he thinks together disco and twentieth-century minimalism to argue repetitive electronic music reconfigures the tonal goal-directedness of Western music into more than mere harmonic or rhythmic stasis; instead, it hinges on different *kinds* of teleology that he calls “recombinant”.¹⁵ A musicology of bass culture offers a prime opportunity to take this perspective further by taking seriously music that revels in both the “unbroken groove” that characterises the teleology of post-disco EDM *and* in the fragmentation/rupture of this trajectory, embracing extreme low-register contrasts and a range of discontinuities in the flow of DJ performance.¹⁶

¹⁴ Mark Butler, *Playing with Something That Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 224–225; see also Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 97; Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”, 61.

¹⁵ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

It is crucial to recognise the implicit racial othering of bass music in this state of affairs. Bass culture is the product of Jamaican reggae and the migration of the African diaspora, both autonomously and as enslaved peoples. The positioning of dub-diasporic music as outside of or less than EDM—and more simply its absence from EDM studies, and the widespread treatment of reggae and hip-hop as somehow neither electronic nor dance music—is part of a longer historical process in which house and techno have been appropriated as canonical EDM genres by predominantly white audiences, especially in Europe and North America. The nested issue here, of course, is that house and techno are themselves products of Black, queer, and/or Latin communities in post-industrial Chicago and Detroit, respectively.¹⁷ Furthermore, as musicologist Alex de Lacey notes in his recent study of grime, Black music has historically been filtered through a “tired dialectic” that reproduces a racist mind/body binary, with “overly cognitive readings of (white) creative practice” set against “[n]eo-primitivist assertions that demand a militant foregrounding of the somatic in Black performance”.¹⁸

This thesis aims to work against the grain of these tendencies by taking seriously the deliberate, creative, and strategic musical skills of bass music DJs. Yet I do so without shying away from the importance Black diasporic music places on sound felt in the body, by foregrounding the artistry involved in mediating those vibrations rather than making shallow observations about Black artists’ supposedly “pre-technological orality” or expressions of “extreme violence” (to again quote de Lacey’s critique).¹⁹ I do not focus on Blackness per se, though in journeying through the dub diaspora, I will spotlight a host of Black creatives—from the late Jah Shaka to Iration Steppas, Mala, Coki, and beyond—whose contributions to

¹⁷ For more on this historiographic issue, see: Christine Capetola, “Finding a Home in House: Tracing Vibrations of Black Queer Femmeness from Chicago to Robin S. to FKA Twigs”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Electronic Dance Music*, ed. Luis Manuel Garcia-Mispirota & Robin James (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190093723.013.3>; Luis-Manuel Garcia, “An alternate history of sexuality in club culture”, *Resident Advisor*, 28 January 2014 (accessed 1 September 2023), <https://ra.co/features/1927>.

¹⁸ Alex de Lacey, *Level Up: Live Performance and Creative Process in Grime Music* (London; New York: Routledge, 2023), 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

electronic music are usually only recognised within the confines of UK bass culture. This is not to suggest the thesis is entirely successful in creating space for underrepresented voices in bass culture: it could have, for example, centred more women DJs, and a future project with more resources and fewer COVID-19 restrictions would enrich the range of artists engaged with in each case study.²⁰ Nevertheless, overall this project does contextualise the artists it discusses within the “convivial multicultural”, as Gilroy would put it, of UK bass culture, from the multiracial collectives of “the Bristol sound” to the ethnically diverse membership of an online bass music community.²¹

The second main contribution of this thesis is also multifaceted, and lies in connecting the creative principles of bass music performance to the present-day sociocultural contexts in which it is situated. I will do so by conducting fieldwork in contemporary music scenes in the city of Bristol, Outlook Festival, and an online dubstep community. This work builds on—and indeed benefits from—foundational work by researchers such as Henriques, Sullivan, and ethnomusicologist Michael Veal on the evolution of dub-diasporic bass culture in the years 1970–2010. Bass culture is increasingly recognised by public and academic institutions, especially in England; however, its primarily subcultural and racialised position in the global landscape of EDM is such that the documenting of its people, practices, and ideas is not yet a foregone conclusion. This necessary archival work continues to be carried out by bloggers, journalists, and scholars, though I contend that the field can now also benefit from the insights available in close ethnographic engagement with contemporary scenes and subcultures, where dub performance traditions are converging with shifting musical styles, ideas, and media (particularly on the internet).

²⁰ In Chapter 3: “The Bristol Sound”, for example, the two main analytical examples are both by white, male DJ duos. Their performances recorded by broadcast platform Boiler Room were the most easily accessible (and available in high enough quality for analysis) on YouTube when I moved my fieldwork online in 2020, and the very absence of online DJ sets by Black or women artists from Bristol spoke volumes about who had the resources and privilege to publish their performances online to begin with.

²¹ Paul Gilroy quoted in Melville, *It’s a London Thing*, 11.

Specifically, this thesis connects bass music performance to its contemporary social life to shed light on the epistemic discourses that circulate therein, in scholarly and vernacular registers. While these discourses have different guises, they centre on a widely held sentiment among bass enthusiasts illustrated in the opening quotations: that extreme amplification and the bodily experience of felt vibration are practically existential for bass culture. In other words, participants' fixation on feeling bass is not only motivated by aesthetic pleasure and musical tradition. It also enacts for them an alternative way of knowing and being in the world through sound, which is difficult to "get across to someone" without sharing in the vibratory intensity of a reggae (or reggae-inspired) performance. "I could tell you about sound system from now til' tomorrow morning", says Mikey Dread, selector for London's Channel One sound system, "but you have to *feel* sound system to know what sound system is about."²² Such "low end theories" are the subject of a 2016 monograph by media scholar Paul Jasen, who explains further that in bass culture, most musics "rely on felt vibration. They have a more explicitly material aim [than other popular musics] [...] saying 'you had to be there' is far less a claim to exclusivity or authenticity than a statement of material fact."²³ For Henriques, the "material fact" of amplified bass in reggae facilitates what he argues is a system of embodied "thinking through sound".²⁴ Theorist Kodwo Eshun, meanwhile, suggests the materiality of bass musics like jungle exceeds "big P Politics" to become "*sensual/sensory* politics", where sound *does* things more than it means or represents them: ways of moving become "inscribed in the body", displacing social habits or forming new ones.²⁵ This affective politics invokes a long history of Black music as a means of reconfiguring sonic and social space, as Paul Gilroy has said of reggae:

[...] when Frederick Douglass says, when you hear the noises that slaves make and we have to struggle to interpret what those might mean, if it's not in the words that are being used, *it's in the sound*. [...] there's something about the sound itself which

²² Mikey Dread, in *Musically Mad*, 03:00–03:30. Emphasis added.

²³ Paul Jasen, *Low End Theory: Bass, Bodies and the Materiality of Sonic Experience* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 170.

²⁴ Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (London; New York: Continuum, 2011), xvii.

²⁵ Kodwo Eshun, "Futurhythmachine: [An interview with Kodwo Eshun]", in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett *et al.* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2006), 294. Emphasis added.

[...] can be part of a resistance and a rebellion. [...] The music creates and projects a utopian possibility of a world that doesn't work the way that the outside world works. [...] that space, I would say, is unimaginable. [...] because the music summons that space, the music summons that possibility.²⁶

I will term these perspectives collectively sonic materialisms, recognising the plural forms they take in the discourses of and around bass culture and probing their epistemological implications. In focusing on DJing as the heart of bass culture, I will argue that DJs play a central role in rendering these materialisms palpable for audiences through a range of performance techniques particular to bass music.

Why bass culture, why now?

The question remains: why bass culture, and why now? The impetus for this thesis is twofold, motivated by the increasing prominence of bass in postmillennial (that is, twenty-first century) popular culture and the need for musicology to wrestle with associated changes in how music is produced, performed, consumed, and even theorised. In short, bass cultures are everywhere in the twenty-first century, but researchers have only recently started to address phenomena such as the multi-billion dollar North American EDM industry and its influence on music festivals globally, the displacement of rock and pop by bass-laden hip-hop and club music aesthetics in chart music, and the ongoing presence of dub-diasporic sound systems at events attended by millions like Notting Hill Carnival.²⁷ The pleasures of low-frequency pressure are even manifest in the tendency towards bass-centric “body

²⁶ Gilroy qualifies this notion of utopia by adding: “It can be a *negative* utopia; it can say that the way to free yourself here is to accept just how bad the world can be. [...] The music facilitates that encounter [...] with another way of being and thinking and loving and desiring”. Bass Culture Research, “Bass Culture: Paul Gilroy (part two)”, interview by Jacqueline Springer, July 2020 (accessed 10 March 2022), <https://www.mixcloud.com/BassCultureduk/bass-culture-paul-gilroy-part-two/>, 40:03–47:11.

²⁷ Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”; Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 191–192; Julian Henriques & Beatrice Ferrara, “The Sounding of Notting Hill Carnival: Music as Space, Place and Territory”, in *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, ed. Jon Stratton & Nabeel Zuberi (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 131–152. See also: The Wire, “Low End Theories: The Wire Responds to Bass”, *The Wire* 341 (2012): 30–51.

music” in recent film scores.²⁸ As Naomi Graber discusses, “timbre, texture, and rhythm [increasingly] do the heavy dramatic lifting”, in a style (exemplified by composer Hans Zimmer) that suggests EDM aesthetics are displacing film music’s classical emphasis on melody and harmony.²⁹ One can also observe the rising affordability of headphones and subwoofers through which listeners can enjoy high-fidelity low-frequency power, though these exist in messy tension with the ubiquitous “treble culture” of earbuds, smartphones, and laptops.³⁰ This landscape includes tactile “wearable bass” technologies developed in the last decade like the SubPac that allow listeners to augment earphone listening with sub-bass vibrations delivered directly to the body, technologies that are increasingly the subject of scientific research with the d/Deaf community.³¹ Indeed, tactile bass experience is already thriving in contexts like the Deaf Rave movement.³²

These contexts warrant critical attention not only in EDM, bass culture, and popular music studies; they invite music scholars in general to engage with the role of the body in listening and the extent to which our hearing capacities exist along a continuum of “aural diversity”.³³ Against the backdrop of these issues, this thesis aims to show how developing a

²⁸ Naomi Graber, “Body Music: Intensified Continuity, Affect, and Character Engagement”, *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 17, no. 1 (2023): 1–21.

²⁹ *Ibid.* See also: Nicholas Reyland, “Corporate Classicism and the Metaphysical Style: Affects, Effects, and Contexts of Two Recent Trends in Screen Scoring”, *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 9, no. 2 (2015): 115–30.

³⁰ Wayne Marshall, “Treble Culture”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies, Volume 2*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath & Jason Stanyek (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 43–76.

³¹ Michael Hove, Steven Martinez, & Jan Stupacher, “Feel the Bass: Music Presented to Tactile and Auditory Modalities Increases Aesthetic Appreciation and Body Movement”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 149, no. 6 (2020): 1137–47; Robert Jack, Andrew McPherson, & Tony Stockman, “Designing Tactile Musical Devices with and for Deaf Users: A Case Study”, in *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Multimodal Experience of Music*, ed. Renee Timmers et al. (Sheffield: The Digital Humanities Institute, 2015), <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/books/icmem2015/tactile-musical-devices/>.

³² As the name suggests, Deaf Rave is an event series where members of the Deaf community perform and listen to EDM. It aims to “give Deaf, Hearing and Disabled Artists and performers a platform to display their love for music” and “promote our unique Deaf/Disabled identity [while] teaching everyone about Deaf Culture”. Its founder Troi Lee explains that the project was partly inspired by his childhood in north-east London where bass music genres including reggae and jungle were “part of my growing up”. See: Deaf Rave, “About Us”, n. d. (accessed 10 July 2023), <https://www.deafrave.com/#about-us>; Champions of Independent Culture, “Deaf Rave: Feel the Beat”, Vimeo, 30 November 2018 (accessed 1 February 2024), 1:15–1:25, <https://vimeo.com/303755028>.

³³ Research at the intersection of musicology, sound studies, and Deaf studies has started addressing these questions over the last decade; see for example: Michele Friedner & Stefan Helmreich, “Sound Studies Meets Deaf Studies”, *The Senses and Society* 7, no. 1 (2012): 72–86; Jessica Holmes, “Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness”, *Journal of the American*

musicology of bass culture can help scholars understand the wider implications of sonic materiality. Examining the art and culture of bass music offers a window into how postmillennial popular musical culture may be reorientating around “affective alliances” led by mood or vibe, where DJs, listeners, and influential corporations like Spotify increasingly centre how music *feels* for “omnivorous” tastes in opposition to supposedly outdated constructions like genre.³⁴ Of course, from the perspective of bass culture insiders, tactile bass experience and materialist concepts of “vibe” are nothing new—as one of my interviewees, Nik, put it, “I don’t really believe in genre. I’m just interested in bass”.³⁵ The thesis thus aims to uncover practices and ideas that have been latent in bass culture for decades, while also illuminating their relevance to a wider landscape of sonic materialism in popular (musical) culture.

Bass culture studies

The literature that attends to the history and culture of reggae, often connecting it to other dub-diasporic musics as a singular bass culture of the African diaspora, has grown considerably in the years since the publication of Fink’s essay alone. “Bass culture studies” is not yet widely used and authors rarely identify their work as belonging to this field, but a major development that may encourage these developments is the recently concluded “Bass Culture” research project (2016–19) led by producer and writer Mykaell Riley.³⁶ In an essay reflecting on reggae and related musics as an “alternative soundtrack to Britishness”, Riley

Musicological Society 70, no. 1 (2017): 171–220; John Drever & Andrew Hugill (Eds), *Aural Diversity* (London; New York: Routledge, 2023).

³⁴ Born, “Music and the Materialization of Identities”, *Journal of Material Culture* 16, no. 4 (2011): 376–88; Paul Anderson, “Neo-Muzak and the Business of Mood”, *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (2015): 811–40; Robin James, “Is the Post- in Post-Identity the Post- in Post-Genre?”, *Popular Music* 36, no. 1 (2017): 21–32; Luis-Manuel Garcia, “Feeling the Vibe: Sound, Vibration, and Affective Attunement in Electronic Dance Music Scenes”, *Ethnomusicology Forum* 29, no. 1 (2020): 21–39.

³⁵ Interview by author, 27 July 2022. This remark and its context in the bass music event Outlook Festival will be explored in Chapter 5.

³⁶ Mykaell Riley, “Bass Culture”, UK Research & Innovation, n. d. (accessed 1 February 2024), <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FN001826%2F1>. It is also notable that this project led to the establishment of a new Black Music Research Unit at the University of Westminster, a sign that more institutional recognition of bass culture studies may be on the horizon. See: BMRU, “About”, n. d. (accessed 1 February 2024), <https://bmru.co.uk/>.

discusses how the project aimed to instigate “the academic appropriation of the term ‘bass culture’” as a means of increasing the institutional recognition of Jamaican musicians’ impact on British popular music.³⁷ This work was primarily an oral history and archival endeavour, however, and musicological interventions remain rare. I suggest activity in this emerging field can be grouped loosely into five streams, which I will briefly overview here.

The first category primarily concerns reggae in Jamaica and Britain. Dick Hebdige’s sociological but musically detailed study *Cut ‘n’ Mix* (1987), journalist Lloyd Bradley’s expansive history *Bass Culture* (2001), and an ethnographic study by Norman Stolzoff (2000) serve as a foundation, and have been followed by several biographical and historical projects.³⁸ More recent contributions include Riley’s funded project cited above, three interdisciplinary edited collections dealing with intersections of reggae, racism, community, and identity in the post-war and postmillennial periods, and a monograph by geographer Caspar Melville that connects reggae sound system culture in 1980s London to the influential EDM subcultures of 1990s acid house and jungle.³⁹ The second stream focuses on dub, with ethnomusicologist Michael Veal’s *Dub* (2007) providing a wealth of insights into the form’s history, compositional strategies, and global reach.⁴⁰ The main responses to Veal’s work include Sullivan’s *Remixology* (2014) and a special issue of the journal *Dancecult* (2015) elaborating on a range of narrower issues relevant to popular music

³⁷ Mykaell Riley, “Bass Culture: An Alternative Soundtrack to Britishness”, in *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, ed. Jon Stratton & Nabeel Zuberi (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 101–102.

³⁸ Lloyd Bradley, *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King* (London: Penguin, 2001); Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); David Katz, *People Funny Boy: The Genius of Lee “Scratch” Perry* (London: Omnibus, 2009); David Katz, *Solid Foundation: An Oral History of Reggae*, second edition (London: Jawbone, 2012); Paul Huxtable, *Sound System Culture: Celebrating Huddersfield’s Sound Systems* (London: One Love Books, 2014); Simon Jones & Paul Pinnoch, *Scientists of Sound: Portraits of a UK Reggae Sound System* (Birmingham: Baseline Books, 2018); Joe Muggs & Brian David Stevens, *Bass, Mids, Tops: An Oral History of Sound System Culture* (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2019).

³⁹ Stratton & Zuberi (Eds), *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*; William “Lez” Henry & Matthew Worley (Eds), *Narratives from Beyond the UK Reggae Bassline: The System Is Sound* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Monique Charles & Mary Gani (Eds), *Black Music in Britain in the 21st Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023); Caspar Melville, *It’s a London Thing: How Rare Groove, Acid House and Jungle Remapped the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

⁴⁰ Veal, *Dub*.

studies.⁴¹ Research into the history, culture, and specialised practices of reggae sound systems constitutes a third stream. Julian Henriques's ethnography with Stone Love in Jamaica, *Sonic Bodies* (2011), offers a detailed explication of the main performing roles of the sound system (engineer, selector, and MC), with several more scholars offering humanistic and historical perspectives on sound systems in the UK and further afield, and the contributions of Black women.⁴² The fourth stream is primarily epistemological, where reggae, dub, and sound systems inform analyses of bass culture's Black cultural politics and conceptual implications. This work includes an emerging "black sound studies" discourse building on the research of Henriques and literary scholars Alexander Weheliye and Chude-Sokei, the latter two of whom frequently work with dub as the basis for wider analyses of Blackness in/as European modernity.⁴³ In this stream are also the aforementioned frameworks of "thinking through sound" and "sonic warfare", Jasen's *Low End Theories*

⁴¹ Sullivan, *Remixology*; Hillegonda Rietveld & tobias van Veen, "Introduction to Echoes from the Dub Diaspora", *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2015): 1–4.

Other contributions on dub explore, for example, its connections to punk and African diasporan Christian traditions. See: Klive Walker, *Dubwise: Reasoning from the Reggae Underground* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2005); Robert Beckford, *Jesus Dub: Theology, Music and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2006); Christopher Partridge, *Dub in Babylon: Understanding the Evolution and Significance of Dub Reggae in Jamaica and Britain from King Tubby to Post-Punk* (London; Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2010); Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016); Eric Abbey, *Distillation of Sound Dub and the Creation of Culture* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2022).

⁴² Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*; William "Lez" Henry, "Reggae, Rasta and the Role of the Deejay in the Black British Experience", *Contemporary British History* 26, no. 3 (2012): 355–73; Marvin Sterling, *Babylon East: Performing, Dancehall, Roots Reggae, and Rastafari in Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Paul Ward, "Sound System Culture: Place, Space and Identity in the United Kingdom 1960-1989", *Historia Contemporánea* 2, no. 57 (2018): 349–76; Alexandre Fintoni & Anna McLauchlan, "Assembling the Dance: Reggae Sound System Practices in the United Kingdom and France", *The Senses and Society* 13, no. 2 (2018): 163–78; Cooper, *Sound Clash*; Lynda Rosenior-Patten & June Reid, "The Story of Nzinga Soundz and the Women's Voice in Sound System Culture", in *Narratives from Beyond the UK Reggae Bassline*, 125–42.

See also: Julian Henriques, "Black Knowledge and Street Technology [SST Research 1.0]", *Sonic Street Technologies*, 6 September 2021 (accessed 1 October 2023), <https://sonic-street-technologies.com/sst-research-1-0-introduction-black-knowledge-and-street-technology/>.

⁴³ Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Henriques, "Dread Bodies: Doubles, Echoes, and the Skins of Sound", *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 2 (2014): 191–201; Tavia Nyong'o, "Afro-Philo-Sonic Fictions: Black Sound Studies after the Millennium", *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 2 (2014): 173–79; Weheliye, "Engendering Phonographies: Sonic Technologies of Blackness", *Small Axe* 18, no. 2 (2014): 180–90; Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016); Chude-Sokei, "Echoing the Echoes", *Small Axe* 22, no. 1 (2018): 181–90; Tsitsi Ella Jaji, "Within Earshot of Africa—Meditations on The Sound of Culture", *Small Axe* 22, no. 1 (2018): 159–71; Wayne Marshall, "Listening to the Sound of Culture", *Small Axe* 22, no. 1 (2018): 172–80.

(2016), and explorations of affective registers such as sonic intimacy and the “ecologies” of postmillennial bass music.⁴⁴ In the fifth stream, genre-specific histories are being written for the many EDM subcultures and subgenres that were innovated in the UK in the period spanning approximately 1980–2010 and have connections to reggae or dub: from the “bleep” techno scene in the Midlands and North of England to jungle/drum ‘n’ bass and grime in London, and beyond.⁴⁵

Overall, then, bass culture studies are thriving, and the field is ripe for further development along musicological and ethnographic lines, as a handful of scholars demonstrate. Veal’s producer-focused work on Jamaican dub and Ray Hitchins’ more recent monograph on reggae include several analyses of recordings at the studio (compositional) level, with sensitivity to the performance context of sound system events.⁴⁶ Particularly valuable for thinking about bass music’s alternative creative principles in live performance is Veal’s theorisation of fragmentation and rupture as aesthetic principles in dub, which he shows can be read as metaphors for the cultural experience of the African diaspora in postcolonial modernity.⁴⁷ Fink’s recent analysis of kick drum and sub-bass design in EDM “desktop production”, whilst less politically inclined, represents a similar effort to identify precisely how the sonic materialisms of bass culture are engineered by producers.⁴⁸ More

⁴⁴ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*; Garcia, “Feeling the vibe”; Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Malcolm James, *Sonic Intimacy: Reggae Sound Systems, Jungle Pirate Radio and Grime YouTube Music Videos* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); Dhanveer Singh Brar, *Teklife/Ghettoville/Eski: The Sonic Ecologies of Black Music in the Early Twenty-First Century* (New Cross: Goldsmiths Press, 2021).

⁴⁵ Matt Aniss, *Join the Future: Bleep Techno and the Birth of British Bass Music* (Bristol: Velocity Press, 2019); Jo Hall, *Boys, Bass and Bother: Popular Dance and Identity in UK Drum ‘n’ Bass Club Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Martin James, *State of Bass: The Origins of Jungle/Drum & Bass*, second edition (Bristol: Velocity Press, 2020); Richard Bramwell, *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City: The Aesthetics and Ethics of London’s Rap Scenes* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Monique Charles, “Hallowed Be Thy Grime? A Musicological and Sociological Genealogy of Grime Music and Its Relation to Black Atlantic Religious Discourse”, PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2016; Joy White, “Growing Up Under the Influence: A Sonic Genealogy of Grime”, in *Narratives from Beyond the UK Reggae Bassline*, 249–68.

⁴⁶ Veal, *Dub*, 77–89; Ray Hitchins, *Vibe Merchants: The Sound Creators of Jamaican Popular Music* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 143–153.

⁴⁷ Veal, *Dub*, 196–197.

⁴⁸ Fink, “The Boom in the Box: Bass and Sub-Bass in Desktop Production”, in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Music Production*, ed. Andrew Bourbon & Simon Zagorski-Thomas (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 281–92.

interdisciplinary and performance-oriented studies of contemporary bass music are also emerging in the work of doctoral students and recent graduates. For example, Edward Spencer's thesis examines "the drop", the moment of climax in EDM tracks and DJ performances where all instrument layers including bass converge, and its wide range of sonic and social consequences; this work includes numerous analyses of the rapid, cut-based mixing style of DJs at North American EDM festivals.⁴⁹ De Lacey's monograph on live grime in London explicates the improvisational strategies of DJs and MCs, connecting these to established dub-diasporic practices.⁵⁰ Intersections of sound, affect, and identity with bass music audiences in London have also been illuminated by Christabel Stirling's hybrid ethnography in a range of urban settings, and in Christoph Brunner's first-person affective writing on the dubstep scene of mid-2000s London.⁵¹

Although this state of the field is promising, the structural racism that gives Black diasporic music a subaltern position in popular culture is also manifest in the range of scholarly voices that are published in the field, and thus whose work predominantly informs this thesis. It is encouraging that Black women are making significant contributions to several of the research streams outlined above, as, for example, in Charles' and Gani's recent edited collection on postmillennial Black British music.⁵² However, in the dub- and EDM-specific research I will be regularly in dialogue with below, aside from a handful of prominent voices (such as Veal, Henriques, and Garcia), most of the literature reflects the perspectives of white, cis-gendered men—as does this thesis overall given I share this identity. I do not believe that most academic experts on bass music *should* be white and/or male, though due to stubborn structural inequalities—such as the underrepresentation of Black women in British higher education—this group has become a dominant voice in the field. As a result,

⁴⁹ Spencer, "The Drop and The Fall".

⁵⁰ de Lacey, *Level Up*, 79–129.

⁵¹ Stirling, "Sonic Methodologies in Urban Studies", in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sonic Methodologies*, ed. Michael Bull & Marcel Cobussen (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 127; Brunner, "The Sound Culture of Dubstep in London", in *Musical Performance and the Changing City: Post-Industrial Contexts in Europe and the United States*, ed. Fabian Holt & Carsten Wergin (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 256–258.

⁵² Charles & Gani (Eds), *Black Music in Britain in the 21st Century*.

while I diversify my citational practice wherever possible, the thesis has blind spots in its theoretical outlook and findings that reflect this limited perspective.

This imbalance is an ongoing problem seen across EDM culture and how it is documented, and it has only been exacerbated in the last decade as some bass music genres such as dubstep have become more mainstream. As Garcia writes in an alternate history of club culture and its roots in queer communities of colour, “history is written by victors: as dance music [...] had more crossover success, the people writing its history followed the “more relevant” threads into primarily straight, white, middle class environments, quickly forgetting about the more queer and colorful scenes that were still dancing and making music.”⁵³ Researchers are making strides in countering these tendencies, especially in the historiography of Detroit techno and to a lesser extent of Black British music, as with Riley’s project and the others cited above.⁵⁴ Yet it speaks to both the persistence of structural inequality and the emancipatory potential of the internet that in beginning to correct for this problem, I found it necessary to cite publications that circulate outside of academic institutions and thus cannot benefit from the resourcing or peer review normally afforded therein. For example, I occasionally draw on *gal-dem*, an independent online magazine written by people of colour of marginalised genders, which sadly (and revealingly) closed in 2023 because it could not remain financially viable.⁵⁵ Though it was beyond the scope of this thesis, future bass culture studies could also engage with emerging practice-led research approaches such as Lynnée Denise’s “DJ scholarship” framework.⁵⁶ DJ scholarship in Denise’s interpretation participates in “erasure resistance” by centring the contributions of Black and/or queer women in hip-hop, dub, and other DJ cultures, treating

⁵³ Garcia, “An alternate history of sexuality in club culture”.

⁵⁴ DeForrest Brown Jr’s recent retelling of Detroit techno’s musical and social history is an example of EDM scholarship that centres Black scholarship and creativity. See: Brown Jr, *Assembling a Black Counter Culture* (Brooklyn: Primary Information, 2022).

⁵⁵ gal-dem staff, “Goodbye from gal-dem”, *gal-dem*, 31 March 2023 (accessed 20 January 2024), <https://gal-dem.com/gal-dem-goodbye-letter/>.

⁵⁶ DJ Lynnée Denise, “The Afterlife of Aretha Franklin’s ‘Rock Steady’: A Case Study in DJ Scholarship”, *The Black Scholar* 49, no. 3 (2019): 62–72. See also: DJ Lynnée Denise, “Musical Essays: DJ Mixes”, online, n. d. (accessed 1 February 2024), <https://www.djlynneedenise.com/locations>.

the DJ as “archivist and information specialist” and their performances as viable tools for disseminating (insider and academic) knowledge.⁵⁷

Terms and definitions

Before concluding this chapter, it is crucial to define the terms used in this study. I define bass culture as an “assemblage” of people, practices, and ideas centred around music with prominent sub-bass (near or below 100 Hz) intended to be amplified through a bespoke and/or specialist sound system.⁵⁸ This interpretation of bass culture is deliberately broad, meant to reflect the many diverse bass cultures that today take the bass register and extreme amplification as their point of affinity; it also foregrounds how participants tend to think about sound in material, affective terms (the implications of which will be the subject of Chapter 2). As will become clear later in the thesis, bass culture can thrive even when the performance context of sound system events is primarily implied or imagined, as with the online communities formed around dubstep (see Chapter 5). Here I also adopt a relational view of bass culture in the spirit of two anthropological theories of music. The first is “musicking”, Christopher Small’s term describing how music is more social activity than static object.⁵⁹ Understood as musicking, bass culture is constituted by acts of performing as well as listening, dancing, and practices in which performance with or for others is implied, such as solitary rehearsing and producing (and here I also include, for example, preparing records for a DJ set). Second, I work with Georgina Born’s model of music’s social mediation across four interconnected planes: (1) real-time musicking; (2) the scenes, genres, and imagined communities engendered by music; (3) the wider identity formations of race, gender, class,

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 64–65.

⁵⁸ The assemblage is a Deleuzian concept currently popular in musicology for thinking through the messy interactions between sound, behaviour, technology, identity, and so forth that constitute musical culture. Per Georgina Born, an assemblage can be defined as “a multiplicity made up of heterogeneous components, each having a certain autonomy [...] while the interactions between components are non-linear and mutually catalysing”. See: Born, “Music and the Materialization of Identities”, *Journal of Material Culture* 16, no. 4 (2011): 377.

⁵⁹ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 9.

age, or sexuality through which musicking tends to be mediated; and (4) the institutional and economic structures that afford or influence musicking.⁶⁰ In situating DJ performances in their localised bass cultures, I will primarily illustrate how the material forces of amplified bass (first plane) engender and are recursively shaped by subcultural “affective alliances” in the environments of a city, festival, and online community (second plane), though these mediations always connect to the other planes through relations of “affordance, conditioning or causality”.⁶¹

Contemporary bass cultures could not exist without Jamaican dub, particularly as it developed in the roots reggae period, 1968–1985. This historical connection is essential, because bass culture as I define it in this thesis is *not* about the culture surrounding bass instruments or bass players in general, or simply any musical form where a low register is important compositionally. Rather, I investigate bass culture as built around *sound system performance events* in the tradition of the Jamaican dance hall.⁶² It is also notable here that the earliest documented use of “bass culture” is in the 1980 dub poetry album *Bass Culture*, by Jamaican-born vocalist and scholar Linton Kwesi Johnson (now based in Britain).⁶³ In the album he plays lyrically on “movement” and “hurt” in “bass history” as a product of the African diaspora: “bass history is a movin’, is a hurtin’ black story”.⁶⁴ Although today’s bass cultures are neither wholly Black nor subcultural, most scenes owe their existence to the struggle and politics of the African diaspora and their cultivation of sound system events as sites of cultural resistance—particularly in post-war Britain when the “Windrush generation” faced racist violence and systematic exclusion from mainstream life for decades.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Born, “Music and the Materialization of Identities”, 378.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁶² Of course, the electric bass guitar *was* essential to reggae at this time, playing a central role in the genre’s reconfiguration of melody and rhythm in the popular song around the bass register. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, though, these songs were almost always composed, engineered, and distributed in relation to the performance context of sound systems, since the arrival of reggae coincided with Jamaican popular music pivoting away from a live band economy. See: Bradley, *Bass Culture*, 157–158.

⁶³ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Bass Culture*, LP (London: Island Records ILPS9605, 1980).

⁶⁴ “Reggae Sounds”, in *ibid.*, 00:10–00:14.

⁶⁵ Gilroy, *Ain’t No Black*, 197–209; Melville, *It’s a London Thing*, 70–72.

In emphasising bass culture as contingent on specialised sound equipment, this thesis also acknowledges that a musicology of bass culture will not necessarily be generalisable to most EDM. As my case study chapters will aim to show, bass is certainly prominent and valued in many popular genres, but in live performance, DJs' creative strategies, the audience's collective participation, and the engineering of sound systems are rarely bass centric. This differentiation is most evident when comparing subcultural bass music scenes with, for example, large-scale festivals such as Tomorrowland and Coachella, where audiences expect—and organisers invest significant capital into—elaborate light shows, stage designs, and multicultural arts activities, and music is only one of many parts of the experience. At events like Outlook Festival (to be investigated in Chapter 4) or Dub Camp, by contrast, live music stages are almost entirely organised around bespoke sound systems, the crews of which can play a role in curating who performs on the stage, and issues with loudness and sound quality will reverberate through online message boards and fan communities for weeks after the events end. This gravitation around sound systems in bass culture also means it entails significant barriers to entry, raising important questions—albeit beyond the scope of this thesis—about who can access and fund it, and what its subcultural social position actually entails. In Fink's words, "how much does all this bass cost? [...] it seems appropriate to stop and ask who pays for sonic dominance and why."⁶⁶

Defining bass *music* is more difficult. The term most commonly refers to a set of genres developed in the last 15 years on the North American music festival circuit, in a category known confusingly as "EDM", distinct from EDM as the acronym for electronic dance music in general. I will use "EDM" in quotation marks hereafter to refer to the specific North American formation.⁶⁷ Bass music as "EDM" arose in the period 2008–2011 in the wake of the new, suddenly popular genre dubstep, a subculture born in early 2000s London that took dub's instrumental "drums and bass" mixes to a creative extreme, and has since

⁶⁶ Fink, "Below 100 Hz", 108, 111.

⁶⁷ This differentiation of "EDM" from electronic dance music aligns with current leading scholarship; see for example: Luis-Manuel Garcia, "Beats, Flesh, and Grain: Sonic Tactility and Affect in Electronic Dance Music", *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 73, note 2.

had a significant influence on postmillennial electronic music.⁶⁸ Musicologists such as Stirling, Spencer, and Mike D'Errico have begun to unpack the musical and social dimensions of dubstep as it has evolved in the UK scene and along the lines of North American “EDM” (sometime known pejoratively as “brostep”), both of which have come to be associated with a host of problems and negative perceptions. These issues range from “cringe-inducing” synthesiser aesthetics designed to shock listeners and the irony that mid-range frequencies (200–1000 Hz) often dominate the so-called *bass* music, to the cultural appropriation of terms from Jamaican patwa such as *riddim* (rhythm) by largely white audiences, and men’s exclusion of women from those audiences by participating in “adrenaline-addicted ‘bro’ culture”.⁶⁹

In this project I aim to offer a recuperative reading of bass music and/as dubstep. This is not to deny their sharply gendered problems but to disconnect both categories from the appropriations of North American “EDM”, and to focus on DJ performance in British and online contexts and show how they offer valuable insights into bass culture overall. I define bass music as an assemblage in which a genre’s belonging depends on two distinct axes of relation to dub (hence my term dub-diasporic bass music): the extent to which it employs dub-like principles such as bass-centric composition and fragmentation/rupture, and how much it descends from reggae stylistically.⁷⁰ These relations are visualised as a matrix in **Figure 1** below with examples, depicting genealogical links to dub/reggae on the horizontal axis and the use of dub-like principles on the vertical axis. The model is intended to acknowledge how bass music as a category remains heavily debated, where belonging takes shape as a messy spectrum rather than binary insider/outsider or centre/periphery relationship. The genres positioned closest to dub are, unsurprisingly, those developed in the

⁶⁸ Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”, 8–15.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 139, 154, 210; Christabel Stirling, ““Beyond the Dance Floor”? Gendered Publics and Creative Practices in Electronic Dance Music”, *Contemporary Music Review* 35, no. 1 (2016): 130–49; Mike D'Errico, “Bassweight: Dubstep and the Transnational Space of Hip-Hop”, in *Hopeless Youth!*, ed. Francisco Martínez and Pille Runnel (Tartu: Estonian National Museum, 2015), 309–30.

⁷⁰ For a useful application of assemblage theory to genre theory, see: David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 10.

UK from 1990 onwards, which have been influenced significantly, though not exclusively, by the settling of Jamaican migrants and reggae sound system culture in post-Second World War Britain. These genres' belonging to bass music is generally undisputed, and examples include jungle and drum 'n' bass (fast, breakbeat-centric musics with dub-like bass lines), garage (a British interpretation of house and garage music from the US), and grime and dubstep (broadly faster and more aggressive, bass-heavy evolutions of UK garage). The matrix also helpfully elucidates how genres closely related to dub can be plausibly interpreted as bass musics even when they are rarely discursively treated as such and work with distinct musical principles. See, for example, hip-hop and dancehall, where the former explicitly foregrounds bass and the fragmentation/rupture of sampled material, while the latter tends to prioritise digitally produced rhythms and synthesised aesthetics, but both inherit crucial elements of reggae sound system culture such as toasting.⁷¹

⁷¹ On hip-hop, Tricia Rose's seminal study *Black Noise* identifies the centrality of bass in its production, while Jeff Chang details its many inherited practices from Jamaican music. See: Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 74–80; Jeff Chang, "Sipple Out Deh: Jamaica's Roots Generation and the Cultural Turn", in *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 21–40.

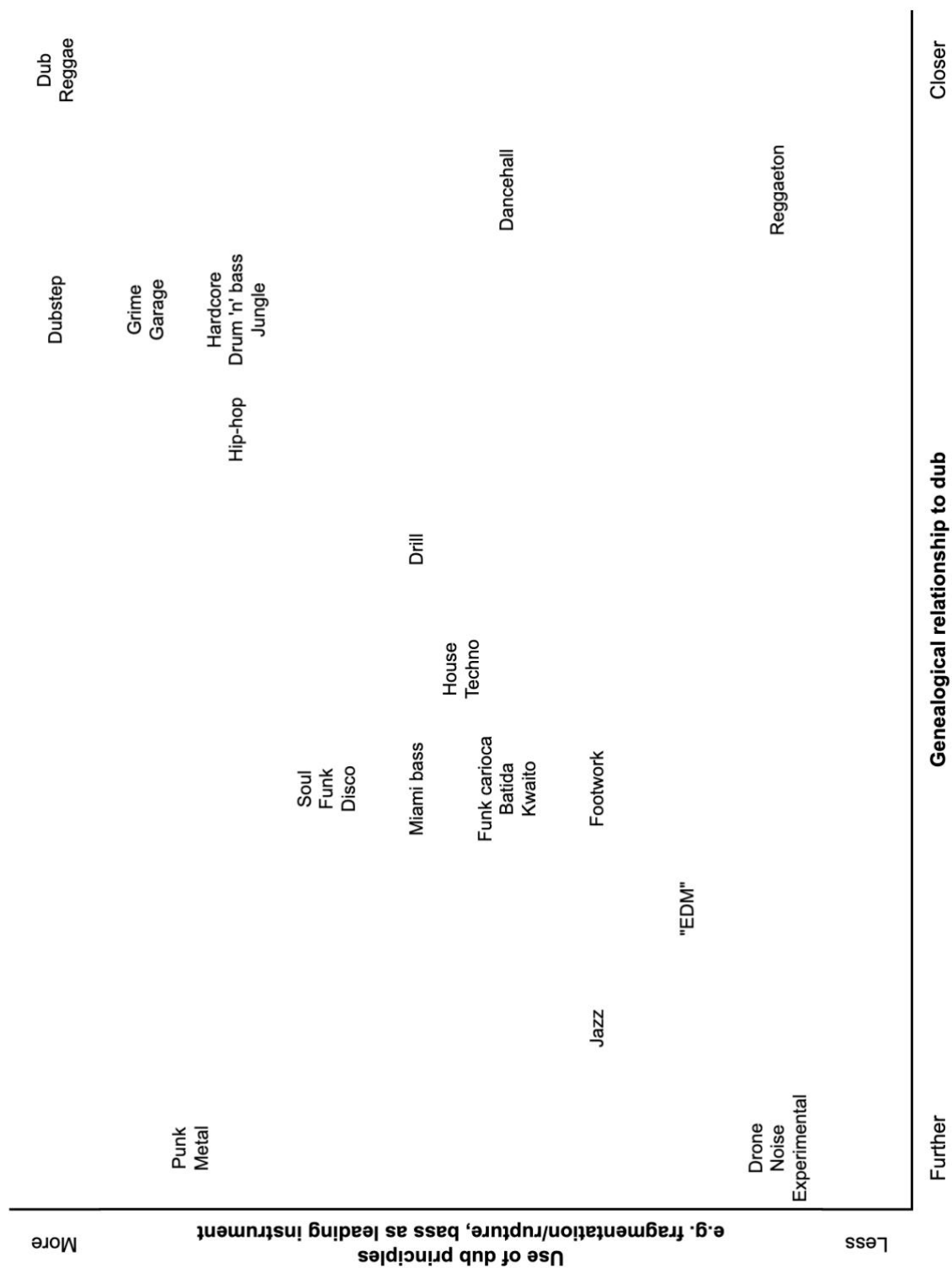


Figure 1 Bass music genres and their relationship to dub.

The many bass-inflected and Caribbean-influenced dance musics of the Global South, such as kwaito and batida, could also be understood bass music. However, this may be more contested given their relative distance from dub along both axes; these genres also receive notably less institutional recognition than dominant UK bass styles.⁷² Similarly contested in the bass music assemblage are the canonical genres of house and techno where, as noted above, the groove-centric design inherited from disco tends to take precedence over loud sub-bass and the bespoke sound systems required to amplify it. This is despite the importance of tactile low-frequency sonic experience and discourses of sonic materialism in these genres, as ethnomusicologist Luis-Manuel Garcia shows.⁷³ More broadly, the matrix also suggests a wider interpretation of bass music that includes metal, punk, or jazz, which are largely unrelated to Jamaican music stylistically but at times employ bass-centric design, extreme amplification, and principles like fragmentation/rupture in dub-like fashion—a topic to be revisited in Chapter 2 and the Conclusion.⁷⁴ My inclusion of these genres alongside even more far-fetched candidates such as experimental drone music is deliberately provocative, intended more as a critical reflection on dub’s influence across EDM and popular music than a normative prescription about what belongs in bass music. Relatedly, I prefer a dub-centric perspective over frameworks such as Simon Reynolds’ “hardcore continuum”, which usefully highlights the connections between post-1990 UK bass genres but privileges the influence of house and techno over Jamaican music (and scholars criticise its London-centric perspective and arbitrary periodisation, among other problems).⁷⁵

⁷² For a useful study on this issue, see: David Font-Navarette, “Bass 101: Miami, Rio, and the Global Music South”, *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27, no. 4 (2015): 488–517.

⁷³ Garcia, “Beats, Flesh, and Grain”. Note there are also hybrid subgenres like “bass house”, which make the exact relationship between house and bass music—and some audience’s insistent separation of the two—even more difficult to settle.

⁷⁴ Punk in particular has had a close cultural relationship with dub in Britain. Veal discusses the crossover albums of bands like The Clash and resonances between the two genres as “symbol[s] of dissent” with bass-forward, “rough” studio production. In a more recent example, Caspar Melville also documents the influence UK bass genres are having on contemporary British jazz. See: Veal, *Dub*, 225–227; Melville, “Today’s Warriors: British Jazz in the Twenty-First Century”, in *Black Music in Britain in the 21st Century*, 119–40.

⁷⁵ For example, researcher and journalist Matt Annis discusses how the “hardcore continuum” fails to account for developments in the late 1980s “bleep techno” scene in the Midlands and the North of

It must be re-emphasised here the extent to which bass music is a contested category. Many people reject or criticise the term, considering it at best a vague catch-all and at worst a tool for dominant institutions to perpetuate the whitewashing of EDM's Black diasporic roots.⁷⁶ This issue is particularly visible in the separation of house, techno, and adjacent EDM genres from the continuum of UK bass music in some event promoters' programming. A notable case is the established UK bass festival Outlook, which has operated a "sister" event called Dimensions since 2012 at the same site, marketing it to techno fans and audiences of other more experimental styles.⁷⁷ In a 2020 Twitter thread, British DJ and singer Fauzia criticises this programming for (re)producing a "hierarchal segregation of 'Bass' music vs house/techno" and implied dichotomy between Black and white musics, adding that "[t]he term 'Bass' music mirrors the same racist undertones as 'BAME' [Black and minority ethnicities]— minimizing the work of artists within this field by lumping all of these offshoots under one category."⁷⁸ Fauzia continues by connecting the racist over-policing of grime in London to the racialisation of bass music more broadly:

In 2005, London Met police introduced Form 696, a risk assessment form which underhandedly targeted Grime events. This form was a way for the police to monitor what music was being played.

[...]

This allowed venues to favour house/techno promoters (which was appropriated by Europeans at this point) under the guise of the law. Leaving promoters showcasing Black artists without spaces to host their events.

England, where local dub practice informed a hybrid style. Geographer Caspar Melville also contends that Reynolds ignores the influence of London's 1980s soul and reggae scenes on post-1990 "hardcore", which he suggests repackages bass culture's "complex racial politics [...]" for a white avant-gardist audience who would rather not think about race". See: Simon Reynolds, "The Wire 300: Simon Reynolds on the Hardcore Continuum: Introduction", *The Wire*, February 2013, originally published February 2009 (accessed 10 August 2023), <https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/the-wire-300-simon-reynolds-on-the-hardcore-continuum-introduction>; Jeremy Gilbert, "Break/Flow/Escape/Capture: The Energy and Impotence of the Hardcore Continuum", in *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, 169–84; Anniss, *Join the Future*, 270–271; Melville, *It's a London Thing*, 193–194.

⁷⁶ Though Garcia works mostly outside dub-diasporic music, his revised history of EDM through the lens of its predominantly Black, queer, and/or Latin roots provides invaluable context for the appropriation of bass music by overwhelmingly white, male, heterosexual audiences and DJs in the US "EDM" scene. See: Garcia, "An alternate history of sexuality in club culture".

⁷⁷ Big Up Magazine, "Dimensions Festival 2012 Program", Issuu, 13 September 2012 (accessed 1 August 2022), <https://issuu.com/bigupmagazine/docs/dimensionsprogram2012>.

⁷⁸ FAUZIA (@itsFAUZIA), "THREAD: 'Bass' Music vs Techno & how this hierarchical segregation contributes to systemic racism!", Twitter, 10 June 2020 (accessed 1 September 2023), <https://web.archive.org/web/20200610181123/https://twitter.com/itsFAUZIA/status/1270775130730487811>.

[...]

Venues and festivals uphold this systemic racism and we can see this through programming. A clear example of this is Outlook vs Dimensions.⁷⁹

By building on Sullivan's framework of the dub diaspora with a musicological examination of dub and dubstep DJs' creative techniques, this thesis aims to develop a more inclusive and musically precise understanding of the Black creativity in, and convivial multicultures of, bass music. This aim comes with the admittedly optimistic aspiration that bass music could become a more productively used term in EDM industries and music studies. A broader aspiration is also to show how genres not typically considered electronic, dance, *or* bass music, like hip-hop, can be fruitfully understood as all three.⁸⁰

Chapter outline

The remainder of the thesis will proceed as follows. The next chapter will explain my hybrid methodology that combines DJ performance analysis with ethnography. I will address questions of interdisciplinarity in musicology and focus on concepts and methods in the literature for analysing DJ performance, with the details of fieldwork to be explained later in the relevant chapters. The remaining chapters are structured in two parts. In Part one: Music and materialism, I focus on the two main theoretical contributions of the thesis, examining in turn the creative principles of bass music performance (Chapter 1) and the sonic materialist discourses that circulate in and around bass culture (Chapter 2). These chapters will establish the histories and practices of the two genres under investigation in the thesis, dub

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Note that criminologist Lambros Fatsis has investigated at length the racist policing of grime and drill. The longer history of British institutional action against EDM also includes landmark moments like the 1994 Criminal Justice act, which (somewhat successfully) outlawed outdoor raves with music based on "repetitive beats". See: Fatsis, "Policing the Beats: The Criminalisation of UK Drill and Grime Music by the London Metropolitan Police", *The Sociological Review* 67, no. 6 (2019): 1300–1316; Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture*, second edition (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012), 146–149.

⁸⁰ For a nuanced ethnographic discussion of this issue, including hip-hop's situatedness in London's diverse continuum of bass subcultures, see: Griffith Rollefson, *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 172–173.

and dubstep, as well as the theoretical frameworks that are to be tested in subsequent chapters: sonic dominance, immersion, and intimacy.⁸¹

Part two: Case studies turns to a practical application of these ideas in contemporary bass music scenes. Chapter 3 will examine the bass culture of Bristol and how the city has come to be associated with a particular “Bristol sound”, echoing a long history of city-genre associations in EDM. I argue “the Bristol sound” should be understood as a localised manifestation of the global dub diaspora. Expanding on efforts to explain “the Bristol sound” in geographical and sociological terms, I will offer a more musically precise understanding of how Bristol sounds through comparative analysis of two DJ performances by artists in the dub scene. Working through the materialisms at play in these performances and their sound-space-place relations, the analysis shows how the artists express versions of *dub in Bristol* and *Bristol dub*.

In Chapter 4, I move to Outlook Festival, an established bass music event held annually in Croatia since 2008. Outlook is known for centring specialist sound systems and UK bass genres, and its unique site at the formerly abandoned Fort Punta Christo, Pula. Drawing on interviews with attendees and soundscape-oriented fieldwork at the UK edition of the festival held in 2022, I will situate Outlook’s particular vision of bass culture in relation to the affective registers of sonic immersion and dominance. The discussion will begin with a critique of music and sound—or lack thereof—in the festival studies literature, then proceed through two vignettes, focusing on the immersive sound systems and spatial qualities of Outlook’s infamous Moat stage, and the politics of noise and sound quality at the 2022 event. The chapter finds that bass experience at Outlook can be as disturbing and impotent as it is transformative and pleasurable. I principally argue the festival can be read as a window into the capacity for bass culture, and by extension EDM, to engender unsettling affective experience.

⁸¹ Julian Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session”, in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 451–480; Will Schrimshaw, “Exit Immersion”, *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 155–170; James, *Sonic Intimacy*.

The third case study in Chapter 5 shifts the thesis's geographical lens online. I will consider how bass culture, an assemblage of sonic materialist practices and ideas, takes shape in a dubstep-centric community called Real Heads on the social media platform Discord.⁸² The chapter uses digital ethnography and to a lesser extent DJ performance analysis to explore how Real Heads functions as an affinity group whose online sociality parallels that of early dubstep web spaces, and in turn articulates the materialisms of early dubstep radio, especially its sonic intimacy.⁸³ The main case study will be a project called Fruit Sessions, a weekly broadcast of livestreamed DJ sets by Real Heads that began during COVID-19. Reading Fruit Sessions as a communal musicking project operating outside of institutional standards and offline sound system culture, I argue the case study sheds light on "new amateur" musicianship and how DJs relate to "trebly" listening media and internet platforms: a seemingly paradoxical relationship between bass and "treble culture".⁸⁴

Finally, the Conclusion will bring together the rhizomatic threads of the thesis. As well as reflecting on the study's limitations and the future lines of research it may open, I will discuss the implications of developing a musicology of bass culture, making the case for why such a project matters outside the confines of this decidedly niche sub-field. To do so, I will connect the thesis's findings to three themes of broader importance to music and the humanities: genre and performance, affect and the social, and the utopian politics and orthodoxies of EDM.

⁸² The name of the community has been pseudonymized to protect their privacy, though the intended meaning as a space for "real" dubstep fans is preserved.

⁸³ "Sociality", essentially a shorthand for "social relations", is a term recently popular in anthropology and music studies for thinking about ongoing changes in how people relate to each other, particularly with respect to new media. My usage aligns with Georgina Born; see "Music and the Materialization of Identities", 378.

⁸⁴ Nick Prior, "New Amateurs Revisited: Popular Music, Digital Technology, and the Fate of Cultural Production", in *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, second edition, ed. Laura Grindstaff *et al.* (London; New York: Routledge, 2019), 340–48; Wayne Marshall, "Treble Culture", in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies, Volume 2*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath & Jason Stanyek (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 43–76.

Methodology and literature review

In this chapter, I will specify my methodology and situate it in the relevant literature. In covering broad musical and social terrain, I contend that a musicology of bass culture requires grappling with both the sonics and sociality of genres like dub and dubstep: that is, analysing both the bass and the culture in bass culture. I will therefore employ a variety of methods to elucidate the under-studied performance practices of contemporary bass music DJs, and to situate these in their cultural contexts, examining in particular the affects that arise from and inform performance in recursive feedback loops.

In practice, this means I primarily employed the close reading of recorded DJ performances and ethnography, and to a lesser extent each case study includes some critical engagement with media such as online fan forums, blogs, news outlets, and documentaries. **Table 1** below overviews these methods and their respective chapters. The underlying goal is to always consider how DJs mediate the sonic and affective extremes of live bass music events. In doing so I emphasise—but rarely focus exclusively on—performers’ manipulation of the sub-bass register, reflecting the reality that bass music is still a full-spectrum affair despite its bass-centric design and culture. In the ethnographic component, I conducted semi-structured online interviews, as well as two kinds of participant-observation: “sensory” fieldwork focused on the soundscape of live bass music events (as in Chapter 4: Outlook Festival) and community-centred digital fieldwork (relevant to Chapter 5: Real Heads).¹

¹ Peter McMurray, “On Serendipity: Or, Toward a Sensual Ethnography”, in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz & William Cheng (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 380–96.

Chapter	Chapter 3 “The Bristol Sound”	Chapter 4 Outlook Festival	Chapter 5 Real Heads
Performance analysis	✓		✓
Fieldwork		✓	✓
Interview	✓	✓	✓
Critical readings of media and/or literature	✓	✓	✓

Table 1 Overview of methods and case studies.

Below, I will explain what a musicology of bass culture entails and its rationale, benefits, and limitations, bringing it into dialogue with issues of disciplinarity in music studies. The second half of the Methodology will overview the practical and theoretical bases of DJ performance analysis. I will both review the existing literature and summarise my analytical methods given the importance of performance analysis to two of the three case studies. The remaining details of each case study’s methods will be presented in the relevant chapters.

Musicology and (inter)disciplinarity

The project of developing a musicology of bass culture requires briefly engaging with questions of disciplinarity and method. In postmillennial music studies, scholars typically start from the position that music cannot be divorced from sociocultural context. Music is neither strictly sonic or social: it is both. Richard Middleton writes in *The Cultural Study of Music* that although a singular orthodoxy for music studies is unlikely (especially given the siloed nature of Anglophone scholarship), the range of new approaches developed since the

upheavals of 1990s “new” musicology and the related “performance turn” have a shared proposition: “that *culture matters*, and that therefore any attempts to study music without situating it culturally are illegitimate”.²

An important corollary of this status quo is that, at least when popular music is the object of study, the default methodological orientation of musicology is becoming more interdisciplinary. While the (sub)disciplinary boundaries within music studies are unlikely to dissolve in the near future, researchers increasingly recognise that learning from and applying the methods of ethnomusicology and other humanities disciplines is not only useful, but arguably necessary for understanding what popular music is and does. Representative examples in this vein include projects that combine music analysis (whether of recordings or performances) with fieldwork or rich cultural data, by scholars whose work strongly informs this thesis: Veal, Butler, Spencer, and de Lacey, among others.³ Grouping these researchers together is, of course, partly arbitrary, and I do not intend to deny their specialisations in doing so—Butler is a music theorist with ethnographic training, and Veal is an ethnomusicologist, for example. Nevertheless, in my view these authors’ projects symbolise what Georgina Born theorises as the “agonistic-antagonistic” mode of interdisciplinarity in musicology.⁴ In this mode, the goal is not necessarily collaboration with or extensive dialogue between distinct disciplines and a subsequent division of labour between specialists. Instead, the aim is to destabilise “given epistemological and ontological foundations” and thus produce a “new *interdiscipline* irreducible to its ‘antecedent disciplines’”, for example by reconfiguring dominant methodologies and diversifying the viable pool of methods.⁵

² Richard Middleton, “Introduction: Music Studies and the Idea of Culture”, in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, & Richard Middleton, second edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 5. Emphasis original.

³ Veal, *Dub*; Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”; de Lacey, *Level Up*. Though I cite her less frequently, Megan Lavengood’s recent situating of timbral analysis in cultural context—notable also for her extensive use of spectrograms—is another example of interdisciplinary research in this vein. See: Lavengood, “The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis: A Case Study in 1980s Pop Music, Texture, and Narrative”, *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 3 (2020).

⁴ Georgina Born, “For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn”, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135, no. 2 (2010): 211.

⁵ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

Understood in this light, the increasingly interdisciplinary character of postmillennial musicology does not quite affirm Nicholas Cook's provocation in 2008 that "we are all ethnomusicologists now".⁶ Rather, I suggest some scholars are adapting musicology into a new "interdiscipline" that fluidly incorporates insights from ethnographers and popular music scholars, who for decades have shown the value of approaching music as an immanently social phenomenon. In turn, my musicology of bass culture works from the premise that, as David Beard and Kenneth Gloag write, "musicology [is] now understood as an all-embracing term for the study of music" (again the perspective of UK-based researchers).⁷ In aligning with this view I am not arguing for a musicology that absorbs and thereby erases ethnomusicology and popular music studies—per Born's "integrative-synthesis" mode of interdisciplinarity—even if the current popularity of the moniker "music studies" (which I employ at times as a convenient shorthand) suggests holistic integration of this kind is on the horizon in some institutions.

As for why this thesis develops a *musicology* of bass culture despite my use of ethnographic fieldwork, the answers are somewhat pragmatic, and do not preclude the possibility of future research that would constitute, for example, an ethnomusicology of bass culture. First, I am not an ethnomusicologist and to claim that this thesis overall is an ethnography is misleading. This project reflects my training as a musicologist with the acquisition of anthropological theory and method being a secondary, albeit important, aspect of postgraduate study. Second, I am pursuing a musicology of bass culture because I contend that musical performance and thus DJing is the ideal point of departure for understanding the larger sociocultural flows that emerge from, and reciprocally mediate, bass music.⁸ Sociological and anthropological methods are widely overrepresented in EDM

⁶ Nicholas Cook, "We are All (Ethno)musicologists Now", in *The New (Ethno)musicologies*, ed. Henry Stobart (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 65.

⁷ David Beard & Kenneth Gloag, *Musicology: The Key Concepts*, second edition (New York; Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), xii.

⁸ A study more attuned to sound systems and the engineers who run them would also be less fitting for a musicology of bass culture. There, the relevant practices are, while musically informed, mostly the domain of acoustics and engineering.

studies, even in contexts like music festival research where the performance of loud, bass-heavy music for days can be just as (if not more) important as the social environment. As the colloquial sentiment goes, to know bass culture is to experience a live sound system session, and to understand a sound system session is to feel its vibrations. Much of the emerging literature focuses on how this visceral experience goes beyond aesthetic pleasure or cultural ritual, informing orientations like the “come meditate on bassweight” slogan used by dubstep crew DMZ at their influential club nights, and what Henriques calls “thinking through sound”.⁹ My musicology of bass culture aims to enrich the scholarly understanding of these sonic experiences and epistemologies by connecting them more explicitly to the musical performances that facilitate them to begin with—performances that cannot be wholly understood through the methodologies of ethnomusicology or popular music studies alone.¹⁰

Analysing DJ performance

In turn, a major focus of this thesis is the close analytical reading of recorded DJ performances. I choose this approach because, as already suggested, DJ performance and live sound system sessions are essential to bass music aesthetically, culturally, and epistemologically. In addition, the fragmentation/rupture that informs bass music performance challenges received stereotypes of the EDM DJ set as a continuous flow of sound where the transitions between records should be seamless. A secondary aim of analysing performance is to foreground how bass music DJs facilitate palpable bass

⁹ Georgina Cook, “DMZ Update”, Drumz of the South, 4 January 2006 (accessed 4 August 2023), <https://drumzofthesouth.wordpress.com/2006/01/04/dmz-update-2/>; Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, xv, xxii.

¹⁰ This approach has a similar orientation toward real-time sonic events and experiences as Jasen, who in his cross-cultural investigation of low-frequency sound practices criticises the “the traditional emphasis on the social construction of sonic experience” in popular music and sound studies. Instead, he favours “the sensory production of the audiosocial”: how configurations of vibration *afford* practices, ideas, and socialities. However, Jasen’s training in fields other than musicology means that, like in many similar studies, actual musical performances are sidelined. See: Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 7.

experiences for their audiences, despite some theorists' downplaying of human agency in favour of concepts like "pre-individual" affect (see Chapter 2).¹¹

Outside of some concerted efforts to notate and analyse hip-hop turntablism, EDM is absent from the burgeoning literature on the musicology of performance.¹² Furthermore, analysts of EDM tend to favour groove-based genres like house and techno, and in the literature that does focus on bass music, researchers mostly prioritise individual listener experience, technical knowledge of DJs and sound system crews in reggae, and how music like dub is produced in studios, rather than actual performances.¹³ Notable exceptions in this state of the field are the 2013 essay collection *DJ Culture in the Mix* edited by Bernardo Attias and colleagues, studies of hip-hop turntablism, and de Lacey's investigation of live (DJ and MC) improvisation in grime; the latter two have been formative in my methodology and will be discussed shortly below.¹⁴ The stakes of a performance-centred approach in my musicology of bass culture are, then, threefold. I aim to show how scholarly writing on EDM can benefit from a wider musical and intellectual repertoire that accounts for the alternative creative principles at play in bass music; to illustrate how research on sonic affect can be

¹¹ Steve Goodman's work is a representative example of bass culture-inspired research that elides artistic agency, and thus the intricacies of DJ performance, in favour of more general analyses of vibration's power to affect people. As Goodman posits, "phenomenological anthropocentrism of almost all musical and sonic analysis, obsessed with individualized, subjective feeling, denigrates [...] the nonhuman participants of the nexus of experience." See: *Sonic Warfare*, 71, 82.

¹² The musicology of performance has bloomed into a recognisable field over the last two decades. I occasionally refer to this literature—for example to contextualise methods like tempo mapping—but it has mostly developed in studies of Western art music, especially piano repertoire, and is thus not transferrable to EDM. In popular music studies, the close reading of recorded songs is developing rapidly, and the field has dealt considerably with performance-related questions of liveness, institutions, and studio practice, but the analysis of live performance itself in concert or club settings remains neglected. See: Ian Pace, "The New State of Play in Performance Studies", *Music and Letters* 98, no. 2 (2017): 281–92; Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, second edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2008); Simon Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Fabian Holt, *Everyone Loves Live Music: A Theory of Performance Institutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020); William Moylan, Lori Burns, & Mike Alleyne (Eds), *Analyzing Recorded Music: Collected Perspectives on Popular Music Tracks* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2022).

¹³ Studies by Mark Butler and Lorenz Gilli are examples of pioneering (though at times difficult to generalise) DJ performance analysis, and will be elaborated on shortly below.

¹⁴ Bernardo Attias *et al.* (Eds), *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Dance Music* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Sophy Smith, *Hip-Hop Turntablism, Creativity and Collaboration* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); de Lacey, *Level Up*. See also: Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

productively focused on the agency of musicians in live performance; and to demonstrate the wider value of DJ performance analysis for musicology.

Definitions and practical concerns

Performance analysis is still emerging as a methodological orientation in EDM studies.

There is also no standardised vocabulary for writing about DJ performance generally. It is thus important to explicitly define the terms and practicalities of my research, with the aim of supporting future studies. The first question is: what constitutes the musical text?

In this thesis I focus on the DJ set, which I define as any electronically mediated performance that uses one or more turntables and a mixer, analogue or digital, to play records sequentially, usually in an improvised fashion.¹⁵ The value of the DJ set as a unit of analysis is explained by Butler, who writes that in EDM, sets are “clearly understood as bearers of musical identity”: they are the cumulative product of what a DJ does in any given performance.¹⁶ This relates to how larger-scale structure tends to be a culturally prized aspect of DJ performance irrespective of genre. Audiences expect to experience, and DJs are expected to articulate, a mix of records greater than the sum of its parts. DJ sets “are understood as musically unified totalities” that “grow and develop in certain clearly definable ways” yet develop “processually and contingently”, to quote Butler.¹⁷ In focusing on the DJ set I include performances that have an in-person or mediated audience or some combination of both; this includes club, festival, radio, and podcast performance. I exclude sets that are branded “live” and solely use instruments other than turntables (such as mixing desks, synthesisers, or software tools), although such performances are important in dub and EDM more broadly.¹⁸

¹⁵ Because the act of sequencing records like this is known as mixing, I use “mixing” synonymously with “DJing”, and the resultant “mix” of the performance is thus synonymous with “the set”. The term mix occasionally also refers to a particular mixture of two or more records *within* a set.

¹⁶ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ To be clear, I exclude “live” EDM because of its hybrid ontological status and the fact these modes of performance are not typically encountered in bass music. Most DJ sets are already real-time live

To obtain a recording of a DJ set for analysis, generally, three options are available: (1) film another DJ and/or record the audio of their set, working ethically and with consent; (2) perform a DJ set yourself and record it; or (3) use existing recordings available publicly online. The first approach is ideal for analysing the strategies and values of DJs in a given scene, and accordingly Butler does this in his study.¹⁹ Given the constraints of COVID-19, however, in this project I only analyse recordings available online. I also focus on YouTube videos rather than audio-only sets uploaded to platforms such as SoundCloud because of the obvious advantage of being able to both see the DJ's actions and hear them. The importance of visual communication and gesture is well established in performance studies but it is especially pertinent in the context of DJing. An impressive range of sonic manipulations are possible at the press of a button on modern mixing equipment, but the correlation between a performer's movements and their acoustic consequences is not always immediately apparent. Accordingly, I use plain descriptive writing in combination with timestamps for video excerpts of DJ sets to describe what performers do in detail. Where relevant, I also refer to musical beats and bar numbers (counted from recordings) and established techniques like cuts and rewinds. This approach aligns with no particular musicological method for analysing gesture but takes its lead from the use of language in current DJ scholarship, a kind of anthropological "thick description".²⁰ For example: "[a]t 28:25 [...] Litschko lets go of the jog dial, Vaak releases a vertical fader [...] and a new snare-drum pattern enters the texture" (Butler), and "Eastwood cuts in 'Buzz Lightyear' for beats

events; however, over the last fifteen years, the term "live" has become confusingly reserved for EDM shows in which the artist uses some combination of hardware and software tools other than turntables (and also usually plays their own compositions). The result is a hybridized digital musicianship that for Butler "is distinct from DJing per se", and he adds that some of his laptop musician interviewees "bristle if called 'DJs' because they regard this as a misunderstanding". See: *ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ Butler explains that "During filming I was usually on stage, either behind or to the side of the musician. The camera was largely focused on the performer and his or her equipment, as the goal was to understand what he or she was doing." *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰ "Thick description" is an analytical writing strategy that aims to denaturalise culture by combining rich observation with interpretation to make insider practices legible to outsiders. See: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 7.

three and four of bars 5, 6 and 7 before [...] allowing 'Buzz Lightyear' to come through with full force at bar 9" (de Lacey).²¹

Although I consider digital- and analogue-mediated DJ sets equally viable performances for analysis, most of my case studies centre DJs who prefer analogue equipment, specifically the Technics SL-1200 turntable and 12" vinyl records. These preferences reflect bass music artists' respect for the many practices that genres like dubstep inherit from roots reggae, including the use of dubplates (records traditionally cut to acetate rather than vinyl for distribution amongst DJs) and hand-built sound systems. I will elaborate in the case studies how, beyond tradition and personal preference, this analogue "formatism"—as communications scholar Bernardo Attias would term it—often extends into ideological claims about authenticity in electronic music.²² Indeed, the ease with which digital tools allow DJs to trigger complex changes in a sound instantaneously has stoked passionate debates about the perceived inauthenticity of digitally-mediated EDM and hip-hop for decades.²³ These debates continue to manifest in live performance today, as with a livestreamed DJ set I will analyse in which Bristol dub artist Stryda quips that his mixing style is "not a laptop and a mouse business".²⁴

In accessing video-recorded DJ sets online, a final consideration is how the mode of distribution shapes the audience-performer relationship. For example, on the streaming

²¹ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 136; de Lacey, *Level Up*, 115 (see also 71–74).

²² Building on Attias' research, I use "analogue formatism" to describe the pro-analogue—and at times anti-digital—stance commonly encountered in bass culture. Analogue formatism can be read as a masculine "gear fetish", resonating with the wider fetishisation of bass I will be touching on throughout the thesis. Chapters 2 and 4 will return to this theme most explicitly. See: Bernardo Attias, "Subjectivity in the Groove: Phonography, Digitality, and Fidelity", in *DJ Culture in the Mix*, 17; Eliot Bates & Samantha Bennett, "Look at All Those Big Knobs! Online Audio Technology Discourse and Sexy Gear Fetishes", *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 28, no. 5 (2022): 1241–59.

²³ D'Errico recently theorises these debates in terms of digital "controllerism". See: Mike D'Errico, *Push: Software Design and the Cultural Politics of Music Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 129. For the hip-hop perspective, relevant to bass culture because of the shared context of analogue turntablism, see: Katz, *Groove Music*, 237–204.

²⁴ Boiler Room, "Dubkasm at Deep Medi in London", 27 October 2015 (accessed 1 July 2023), <https://boilerroom.tv/recording/dubkasm>.

Butler theorises these kinds of gestures as part of the wider "performing performance" of EDM, observing, for example, how some DJs will exaggerate hand movements to create "proof" of meaningful musical action. See: Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 95–105.

platform Twitch—an increasingly popular online space for DJs, both amateur and professional, in the wake of COVID-19—the site’s design encourages listeners to interact via real-time chat, an experience akin to a media-rich evolution of internet radio.²⁵ This contrasts with the more limited interaction possible via phone or text message in FM radio and the largely one-directional flow of communication in promotional mixes uploaded to YouTube, for example. In my case studies, I analyse an in-person club night that was co-streamed online and subsequently published for asynchronous viewing on YouTube, and portions of a DJ set streamed on Twitch. In both cases, the DJ set as it exists online has a layered online-offline ontology, such that there are effectively three audiences to account for: the in-person audience; the audience who joined the stream live and/or interacted in chat; and the distributed online audience, who have either already listened or may become listeners in the future.

Concepts and methods in the literature

As noted, Butler is a leading researcher of DJ performance in EDM. His main contribution in this regard is a 2014 monograph on turntable and laptop performance with Berlin’s minimal techno scene as a primary fieldsite, though the study provides a theoretical foundation for thinking about DJ performance in general.²⁶ A key concept Butler proposes is the performative state that DJs enter into which he calls “listener orientation”, or informally, “playing with something that runs” (the title of the book).²⁷ Listener orientation describes how

²⁵ Jason Ng & Steven Gamble, “Hip-Hop Producer-Hosts, Beat Battles, and Online Music Production Communities on Twitch”, *First Monday* 27, no. 6 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v27i6.12338>.

²⁶ It should be noted that Butler’s 2014 book builds on his first monograph, one of the first sustained analytical studies of EDM, which does include a lengthy chapter on DJ performance. However, I engage with this chapter sparingly because it mostly focuses on structural design *within* EDM tracks and how this translates to the form of DJ sets in general. It also prioritises interviews with artists to establish common mixing strategies in techno, seemingly at the expense of laying out an overall analytical approach to DJ sets. While useful (informing for example my below discussion of how I discern the structure of DJ set), many of the chapter’s findings are thus not transferable to bass music, and they leave his 2014 study as the most methodologically insightful. See: Mark Butler, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 202–254.

²⁷ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 105–107.

recording *precedes* performance in EDM and popular music, a straightforward but vital factor that distinguishes DJing from other kinds of musicking—and partly explains why most musicological performance studies, developed in analyses of Western art music, are not transferrable to EDM. Listener orientation occurs when a DJ puts a record in motion and the sound flows continuously without additional physical input, freeing their time and attention to “stand outside the event” they have initiated and engage in other kinds of improvisation.²⁸ This improvisation can include simple frequency-based adjustments such as with equalisation (EQ), hip-hop derived techniques like scratching, and evaluative processes like reading the crowd: thinking and planning ahead about which record(s) should be played next. Butler’s main interest is the manipulation of texture through the layering of one or more records simultaneously, and the transitions between records arising from this process. Such layering is usually achieved through a process called beat matching, where the DJ synchronises the tempo and pulse of another record playing simultaneously to blend the sounds together and create a new, transient “third record” greater than the sum of its parts.²⁹

Three of Butler’s analytical-representational strategies are worth highlighting; he pairs these with contextual data (from fieldwork at live events and interviews with DJs) and occasional transcriptions of melody and percussion lines to produce his analyses. The three forms are: (1) action lists, descriptive tables that provide granular detail on DJ’s moment-to-moment gestures during a particular section of a set; (2) textural graphs, diagrams depicting instrumental layers (*y* axis) changing over time (*x* axis) to illustrate how the DJ manipulates sound; and (3) track lists, another kind of descriptive table offering perspective on how multiple records are blended within the set’s overall structure.³⁰ Together, these analytical-representational forms provide a helpful variety of perspectives on the DJ’s actions and their

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

³⁰ I use “track” and “record” interchangeably to refer to the through-composed musical works that are the basic building block of a DJ set. However, some DJs use “track” to specify digital music, reserving “record” for analogue media like vinyl.

sonic results. This includes qualitative detail on hand movements and some quantitative data such as the length of time tracks are audible in the mix.

It is notable that the gridded format of Butler's textural graphs—see **Figure 2** below for an example—aligns with the visual design of samplers and digital audio workstations (DAWs) commonly used by EDM artists.³¹ The emphasis on representational strategies other than conventional staff notation reflects a consensus amongst researchers of DJ performance that new frameworks are needed to adequately evaluate the intricacies of turntable-based popular music. Sophy Smith, for example, incorporates a number of existing turntablism transcription methods into her own notational and descriptive system for representing team-based DJ performances.³² She uses a grid-based format similar to Butler's textural graphs that includes space for tempo, time signature, and sampling information, as well as colour codes corresponding to common turntable techniques (such as scratching and beat juggling), among other tools like stickers on records that facilitate looping.³³ Smith also offers a framework intended to guide an analyst's observations into eight structured categories, ranging from the "group organisation" of the performers and "general properties" of the set like its tempo and meter to hip-hop specific "sound manipulation techniques".³⁴ A more recent intervention in EDM performance studies by musicologist Lorenz Gilli further shows how such descriptive schemes can be refined by conceptualising the DJ's actions along three temporal planes of musical activity.³⁵ These include the "micro" level of individual beats, bars, and measures; the "meso" level of hyper measures and formal elements in tracks, such as the archetypal "build-up" or "breakdown" sections; and the "macro" level, which concerns entire tracks and the higher-level structure

³¹ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 153.

³² Smith, *Hip-Hop Turntablism, Creativity and Collaboration*, 94–101.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 78–79.

³⁵ Lorenz Gilli, "DJing as 'Phonographic Work(ing)': A Systematic Approach to Analyzing EDM DJ Sets", in *Oxford Handbook of Electronic Dance Music*, ed. Luis-Manuel Garcia Mispireta & Robin James (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024; forthcoming).

that emerges from sequencing tracks together into “modules” or “chapters” in the wider narrative of the set.³⁶

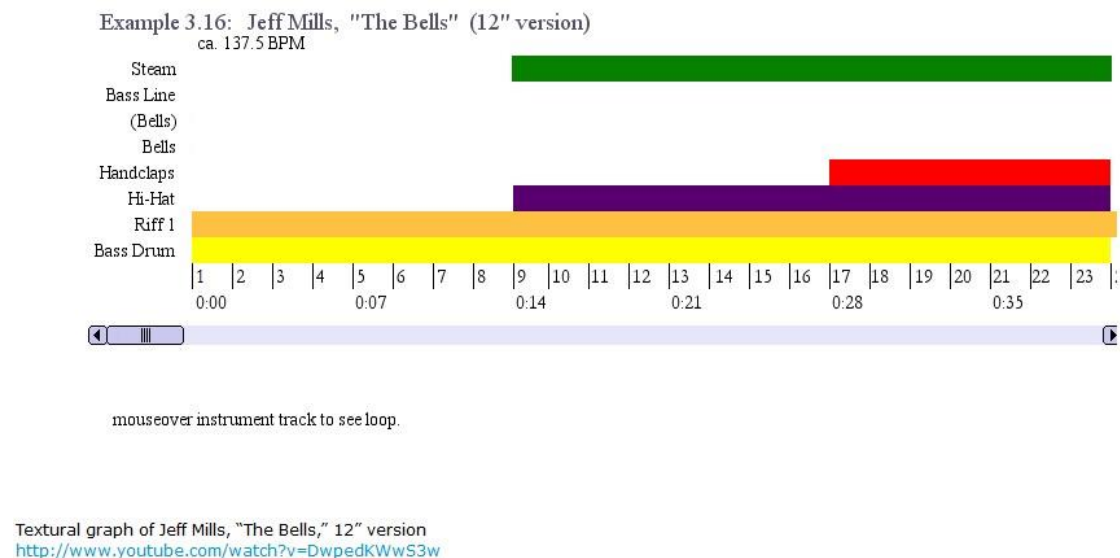


Figure 2 An example of Butler’s (2014) textural graph format.

Several issues emerge in this literature. First, it is somewhat surprising that Butler, Smith, and others do not make use of spectrograms to illustrate DJs’ manipulation of timbre and texture. Spectrograms in essence visualise a sound’s timbre by reducing its complex signal into layers of simple sine waves, depicting time on the x axis and frequency (measured in cycles per second, Hz) on the y axis.³⁷ The resultant graph typically has colour

³⁶ *Ibid.* Though Gilli does not make the connection, his micro-meso-macro distinction resonates with an earlier, though less clear, framework based on temporal planes. Developed by ethnomusicologist Kai Fikentscher, it outlines how “DJs and dancers negotiate their respective performances by prioritizing rhythm on both macro- and microtime levels”, where the micro level is about “maintaining a balance between constant features (pulse, meter, musical structure) and variable features (dynamics, sound, and repertoire)”. Under “dynamic” manipulation Fikentscher includes how DJs play with the tactility of amplified percussion and bass; “timbral” performance includes changes to EQ and the mixing of records with two or more turntables. The “macrotime” level thus encapsulates the DJ organising music in the set “according to style or tempo or overall energy level”, which I subscribe to in my synthesised approach below. See: Kai Fikentscher, *“You Better Work!”: Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 82–84, 91.

³⁷ David Blake, ‘Timbre’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Concepts in Music Theory*, ed. Alexander Rehding & Steven Rings (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 147–149.

coded frequencies to aid legibility, with brighter colours also corresponding to a higher amplitude (volume, measured in decibels) in a given frequency.³⁸ Software programs like Sonic Visualiser were already established tools for these purposes in the analysis of performance in Western art music in the early millennium, and only in recent years have musicologists turned to spectrograms for analysing beat-driven popular music.³⁹ Spectrograms help elucidate sonic qualities of a DJ set that are not neatly captured by the individual instrumental layers that Butler uses in his textural graphs, such as sub-bass tones below 50 Hz that are primarily felt rather than heard. More generally they help to articulate “whether the recording is noisy, clean, [or] whether sonic events within it are sparse or continuous”, to quote Maria Perevedentseva in her thesis on timbre in EDM.⁴⁰ A related advantage of spectrograms is that they can illustrate the complex sample-based nature of composition and performance in EDM, where many layers of instrumentation or ambient sounds often already exist within a singular sound source. Ethnomusicologist Joseph Schloss makes this case in his critique of transcriptional approaches to sample-based hip-hop: “[t]o present each instrument as playing an individual ‘part’ [in score form] is to misrepresent the conceptual moves that were made by the song’s composer.”⁴¹

A second critique is that, with each of Butler’s tools, the analysis tends to centre on how DJs leverage the “third record” to facilitate novel musical experience. This approach is understandably informed by Butler’s work in a techno scene where most records consist of relatively minimalist, repetitive grooves intended to be layered and manipulated over long

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.* See also: Nicholas Cook, “Methods for Analysing Recordings”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 221–45; Stephen McAdams *et al.*, “Analyzing Musical Sound”, in *Empirical Musicology: Aims, Methods, Prospects*, ed. Eric Clarke & Nicholas Cook (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 157; Steven Gamble & Justin Williams, “Analyzing Hip-Hop Hacktivism and Automobility in Injury Reserve’s (2019) ‘Jailbreak the Tesla’ (Feat. Aminé)”, in *Analyzing Recorded Music: Collected Perspectives on Popular Music Tracks*, ed. William Moylan *et al.* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2022), 38–39, 41–44; Lavengood, “The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis”, 2–3; Maria Perevedentseva, “Something for Your Mind, Your Body and Your Soul: Timbre and Meaning in Electronic Dance Music”, PhD thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London (2022), 34–38.

⁴⁰ Perevedentseva, “Something for Your Mind, Your Body and Your Soul”, 37.

⁴¹ Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*, second edition (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 14.

stretches of time at a constant tempo, such that the sonic surface of the DJ set is highly continuous. As Butler writes, in this aesthetic ideal “transitional states are drawn out for as long as possible, and it is difficult to tell where one record ends and another begins.”⁴² This explains why his study foregrounds ontological questions about the slippery nature of “the work” and performance in EDM and why the findings may be generalisable to a wide range of contemporary EDM practice. What I will argue, however, particularly in the next chapter, is that the way bass music DJs perform shows that seamless continuity is far from a universal goal of live EDM. Research by musicologist José Gálvez, for example, identifies a rapid mixing style in mainstream dubstep where artists such as Skrillex play tracks at a rate of nearly one per minute in a 60-minute set, sequencing build-ups and breakdowns in quick succession to produce a “saturated” sensory experience.⁴³ Furthermore, in today’s more subcultural dub scenes, a traditional reggae practice still observed involves the selector playing with a singular turntable. This creates inherently discontinuous transitions between records, a generally variable rather than consistent tempo, and no possibility of a blended third record—instead focusing the dance hall’s attention on other aesthetic-affective priorities centred around bass.

A synthesised approach

As such, my methodology for analysing DJ performance is a novel synthesis of several different approaches. First, I take Butler’s lead in using track lists and video recordings to examine the transitions and precise hand gestures that characterise a DJ set. Yet I also pivot from his emphasis on the “third record” and overlapping textures by focusing on two

⁴² Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 224.

⁴³ José Gálvez, “On Analyzing EDM DJ Sets: Problems and Perspectives for a Sociology of Sound”, in *Contemporary Popular Music Studies: Proceedings of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music 2017*, ed. Marija Vilotijević & Ivana Medić (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2019), 153.

Note that Gálvez’ study does provide valuable detail on the differences between DJ performance in dubstep as “EDM” and more canonical forms like techno, making it a key predecessor to my project. However, as the proceedings of a conference paper, his piece stops short of engaging in performance analysis proper, and hence I do not engage with it further.

parameters more relevant to bass music: the presence or absence of bass in discrete moments of time, as measured with spectrograms, and the overall structure and flow of sets over time, considered both qualitatively and through tempo mapping each track (in beats per minute, BPM). The focus on these parameters articulates the second element of my methodology, where I conceptualise the DJ set as proceeding at two levels, a micro and macro plane, respectively. This builds on Gilli's and Smith's above systems for organising musical observations; see **Table 2** below for a schematic representation including examples. The micro-macro distinction is temporal, per Gilli: it broadly corresponds to the manipulation of sound along vertical (real-time) and horizontal (through time) planes, respectively. While the micro-macro boundary can certainly be fluid, and decisions made at each level tend to influence the development of the other, I adopt this framework because of its helpful delineation between short-term musical gestures and their longer-term formal consequences in a DJ set.

Temporal plane	Relevant phenomena
Micro	
<i>I. Console performance</i>	Cueing and beat matching Channel fading & crossfading Rewinding, scratching EQ and filtering Mixer effects e.g. reverb, echo, delay Looping
<i>II. Instrumental performance</i>	MIDI keyboards and synthesisers Hardware and software effects units MCing and singing Acoustic instruments
Macro	Groups of tracks Sections, journey, narrative Shaping of mood, affect, or energy Tempo over time

Table 2 The micro and macro levels of a DJ set.

At the micro level, I distinguish between two kinds of activity. *Console performance* includes techniques performed directly with a mixer and turntables, my main focus; *instrumental performance* includes any gestures that embellish the DJ set through, for example, digital keyboards, acoustic instruments, or an MC's voice. Console performance thus includes most aspects of playing and transitioning between tracks: slip-cueing, beat matching, and adjusting the volume, tone, and bass content of tracks with volume faders, EQ, and effects such as reverb. To analyse these techniques, in addition to close listening and thick description, I use the free DAW Audacity to generate spectrograms, looking at DJs' manipulations of texture, timbre, and bass, especially through gestures like the rewind and bass drop (to be discussed in the next chapter).⁴⁴ At times I also use conventional score notation to illustrate key rhythmic or melodic elements in a track, and grid-based graphs (akin to Butler's) to visualise how a DJ overlaps records in a transition. Both tools are, however, used sparingly, in line with Schloss' above critique of transcription in popular music analysis. I also do not employ the turntablism notation systems reviewed by Smith, given that their bespoke symbols require a level of elaboration already available in straightforward thick description, and are generally better suited to more complex techniques than those used by the dub and dubstep DJs I analyse.

At the macro level, micro-level techniques give rise to structural units larger than individual tracks, lending the DJ set a wider sense of shape, narrative, or journey. Foundational here in analysis is the track list: an outline of what music is played in which order, for how long, and at what tempo. A sense of macro-level structure tends to arise from the mutual interaction between these parameters and may be shaped by specific transitional techniques, such as when a DJ marks the ending of a section by applying a wash of reverb and cueing a new record at a faster tempo. As such, in analysis I will construct detailed form charts that include basic track list and tempo information alongside details on how DJs transition between tracks, such as with a sharp cut or smooth beat matching. In considering

⁴⁴ For the full details of how I use Audacity, see the Appendices.

tempo, I produce a tempo map for a set by first measuring the pulse of each individual track in BPM using a metronome app, and then plotting this information as a scatter-plot graph with time as the x axis and BPM as the y axis.⁴⁵ I use the results to consider questions such as: How does the flow of BPM over time correlate to structure in the set? Does the music get faster over time as might be expected in EDM, or is the tempo-time relationship nonlinear—and if so, why?⁴⁶

In form charts I also describe sections that emerge from micro-level gestures. Typical examples are the opening warm-up (dub and dubstep DJs often play a few reggae records before moving into their DJ set proper, for example) and mid- or late-set climax, which can occur with the audience's appreciation for well-known tracks. My main criteria for determining sections is to listen closely for contrasts in tempo and energy, with changes in only one variable often being insufficient to justify demarcating a new section. I understand energy here to include both musical feel, such as how dense the texture or how sharp the timbre of a track is, and the audience's participation, as gleaned from a video recording. Sections can also be sensitive to the sociocultural context of a performance, reflecting, for example, the relative timing of a set within a club night or whether the DJ is a headline act.⁴⁷ While this approach is admittedly subjective and articulated with straightforward descriptive language, it is a response to the fledgling nature of this research area and, crucially, is consistent with how many DJs shape the macro-level structure of their performances. As Butler finds in his first study, his DJ interviewees "all emphasized the importance of shaping *energy* or *intensity* within a set", with energy being "more than any individual musical factor

⁴⁵ There are several viable approaches for taking these measurements; I opt for the simple route of measuring the pulse of a 30-second excerpt of each track, ideally using moments in the set when only one track is audible.

⁴⁶ My use of tempo mapping as the starting point for further questions, rather than producing data as an end in itself, is informed by Cook's writing on the matter and his numerous case studies of tempo fluctuation in piano performance. See: Cook, "Methods for analysing recordings", 230–232.

⁴⁷ As Butler has found, these factors can significantly impact how a DJ chooses to begin or end their set. For example, some EDM scenes observe an etiquette where "DJs are expected to match the start of their performance with the end of the previous DJs' set, so that the music will flow continuously in spite of the change of performers", a requirement "more likely to affect lesser-known DJs" than those with "headliner status". See: *Unlocking the Groove*, 248.

[...] the glue that holds a set together”, yet always contingent on audience interaction.⁴⁸ He concludes: “[i]n the absence of recurring motives, themes, and keys, this give-and-take is the primary source of coherence in a DJ set.”⁴⁹

Finally, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, secondary literature, and media sources, I interpret micro- and macro-level performance alongside the physical and social mediations that shape a DJ set but are not strictly the music itself: the venue, its acoustics and sound system, audience demographics, and so on. Ideally, these concerns are investigated in conjunction with in-person research, especially through interviews and by attending the live performance itself (per Butler’s methodology). However, in my project—aside from Chapter 5’s digital ethnography—COVID-19 limited opportunities for holistic analysis of this kind.

Ethics statements

The interviews conducted online in relation to the Bristol dub scene and Outlook Festival were approved by the University of Bristol Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee (UoBFREC) with reference no. 114004 on 8 February 2021. The fieldwork and interviews conducted in the online Discord community Real Heads were approved by the UoBFREC with reference no. 7933 on 11 October 2022. Informed consent was provided by all participants and their names have been changed except for cases where an interviewee explicitly wished to be identified with a real name or artist alias. In citing YouTube videos, Reddit posts, and other publicly accessible online sources like forum threads, I have not changed the names of the respective authors.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 254, 251. Emphasis original.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

Part one: Music and materialism

Chapter 1: Understanding bass music: DJ performance in dub and dubstep

This chapter examines DJ performance in bass music through the lenses of dub and dubstep, genres central to the case studies of this thesis. Dub represents the beginnings of bass culture, an experimental offshoot of 1970s reggae that has since given rise to a global “dub diaspora” of musics and practices, and become a genre in its own right.¹ Dubstep originates from a subculture of early 2000s London that applied dub’s musical principles to UK garage and other dance genres, eventually popularising the term “bass music” and having a marked impact on postmillennial EDM—but the genre remains under-studied relative to its cultural influence.² Analysing dub and dubstep together offers valuable insights into DJ performance in contemporary bass music, and demonstrates how and why the music demands a different methodological and conceptual toolkit to that developed so far in EDM studies. I will argue that dub and dubstep share a tendency toward sonic fragmentation and rupture—and, of course, bass—that complicates the stereotypical understanding of EDM performance as a seamless flow of beats, associated with canonical dance genres such as techno in which groove is central and continuity is a prized aesthetic. This argument will be pursued in dialogue with Michael Veal’s ethnomusicology of dub and Mark Butler’s “musical technologies of mediated improvisation”.³ The latter is a theoretical framework describing how DJs leverage the affordances of repetitive music to mix records in particular ways and

¹ Sullivan, *Remixology*.

² This state of the field is illustrated by a 2015 special issue of the journal *Dancecult* dedicated to the dub diaspora, in which dubstep is largely only mentioned in passing. The aforementioned research by D’Errico, Stirling, Sullivan, Spencer, and Brunner collectively uncovers many aspects of dubstep’s sonics and social life, but of these, only Spencer’s has an explicitly musicological approach. See: Hillegonda Rietveld & tobias van Veen, “Introduction to Echoes from the Dub Diaspora”, *Dancecult* 7, no. 2 (2015): 1–4; D’Errico, “Electronic Dance Music in the Dubstep Era”; Stirling, “Beyond the Dancefloor?”; Sullivan, *Remixology*, 130–146; Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”; Brunner, “The Sound Culture of Dubstep in London”, in *Musical Performance and the Changing City: Post-Industrial Contexts in Europe and the United States*, ed. Fabian Holt & Carsten Wergin (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 256–70.

³ Veal, *Dub*, 57–80; Butler, *Playing with Something That Runs*, 173–179.

thereby create novel sonic experiences for listeners.⁴ I will expand Butler’s framework to include fragmentation and rupture as “technologies” of dub-diasporic bass music. Avoiding an essentialist dichotomy between fragmentation/rupture and groove in EDM—because DJ performances are rarely exclusively (dis)continuous—I will also suggest the expression of such technologies depends on genre, cultural context, and the agency of the performer in drawing on the affordances of their records.

The chapter will begin by establishing dub’s origins in the studio and its close relationship with sound systems. Drawing on examples from contemporary artists, I will then discuss three core aspects of dub performance that have shaped the dub diaspora (including dubstep) and derive aesthetic pleasure from creating a deliberately discontinuous sonic surface: the selector style of DJing, and techniques known as the rewind and bass drop.⁵ In the second half, I will turn to dubstep and its intensification of dub’s practices and principles, using examples from early in the genre’s history to engage with and expand on Butler’s framework of musical technologies. The chapter ultimately aims to demonstrate the wider applicability of both bass music performance analysis and Butler’s framework.

Dub: Foundations and principles

Dub began in late 1960s Kingston, Jamaica as an alternative approach to producing reggae songs. It is thus helpful to first outline its foundations in the studio. Veal has shown how, in the roots reggae period (1968–1985), producers developed an art of remixing instrumental tracks to foreground bass and drums while cutting or reconfiguring vocal elements to create new musical textures.⁶ Engineers such as King Tubby and Lee “Scratch” Perry created space in recordings for embellishments of time and space, especially via echo and reverb, improvising with these and other tools as sources of potentially endless variation; they would often also splice in their own vocalisations and field recordings of local rural and urban

⁴ Butler, *Playing with Something That Runs*, 173–179.

⁵ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 147–171; de Lacey, *Level Up*, 79–109.

⁶ Veal, *Dub*, 45–94.

soundscapes (an early form of sampling).⁷ The result was an imaginative, heterogeneous soundscape and generally expanded listening experience, as heard, for example, in records such as King Tubby and The Barrett Bros' "In The Rain Dub 2" (1974) and Horace Andy's "Mr. Bassie" (1978). Bass was already the leading instrument in reggae, and as some engineers further deemphasised the voice and "reduc[ed] harmonic activity to an episodic coloration", they largely subverted conventional song form, tuning their "drums and bass" mixes instead to the social environment and extreme amplification of sound system dances.⁸

Collectively, these practices became known as dub and were established in reggae culture by the mid-1970s.⁹ Though dub always retained the steady groove of reggae, its producers focused on designing eccentric soundscapes in which instrumental layers moved in and out of the mix unpredictably, such that in Veal's analysis, "fragmentation and incompleteness" emerged as the "two central strategies of dub mixing".¹⁰ This embracing of discontinuity also manifested in producers' liberal use of reverb and delay, the latter being a kind of controlled echo that usually repeats a signal rhythmically and decays over a controlled amount of time. By applying these effects in varying degrees to, for example, spliced vocal tracks—often reduced to individual words—and accented snare hits, dub engineers could juxtapose a sense of both small and large virtual space for the listener.¹¹ This immersed them in exaggerated soundscape filled with sounds both reverberant and dry, near and far, with "Ethiopian Version" (1976) produced by King Tubby illustrating well how these effects could converge in the same recording.¹² As well as affecting space and rhythm, these techniques could remix harmony, for example by drastically expanding the decay of chords at the end of bars to create artificial suspensions or dissonant layers over the tonic.¹³

⁷ *Ibid.*, 64–77.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁹ The exact origins of the name "dub" are unknown, or more precisely, can be traced to several different people and practices, a crucial one of which is the "dubplate" record, that I will discuss shortly below. See: Veal, *Dub*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 71–72.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 73.

Overall, Veal explains that dub mixes could “intensify the basic rhythm tracks or [...] decenter them violently”, and “were best experienced at the extreme volumes of the sound system, where a listener [...] would experience the virtual sensation of being drawn into the various vortices simulated in the music.”¹⁴

By the 1990s, although reggae was superseded (locally and globally) by dancehall as the leading genre of Jamaican popular music, the act of dubbing a record had become a codified aesthetic strategy and (sub)genre in its own right.¹⁵ This obviated the need for dub producers to start with a reggae song or any singular recording as their source material, leading to a new approach that English producer Adrian Sherwood defines as “designer dub [...] music designed as a work of dub from the beginning”.¹⁶ Less strictly tethered to reggae, then, dub spread internationally and took root in local music scenes, spurred by the spread of the Jamaican diaspora after the Second World War.¹⁷ In this process, while many communities continued to practice dub with reggae (which I hereafter term dub-reggae), dub was also subsumed stylistically and conceptually in the remix culture of other popular musics—hence Sullivan names his study of the dub diaspora *Remixology*. The influence of dub on other bass-centric subcultures was indeed wide ranging. For example, it was adapted in hip-hop, where the earliest New York block parties echoed the sonic and social environment of Jamaican sound system sessions; in techno, a prominent subgenre of which is the hybrid form dub techno; and in UK club music, where dub has shaped genres including trip-hop, dubstep, jungle, and drum ‘n’ bass (which takes its name from dub’s drums and bass mixes).¹⁸ The polyvalence of dub is summarised neatly by Louis Chude-Sokei, literary scholar and another major researcher of the form: “[d]ub is a process. Dub is a

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 188–189.

¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 228.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 220–260.

¹⁸ On dub-reggae and hip-hop, see: Wayne Marshall, “Kool Herc”, in *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture*, ed. Mickey Hess (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), 3; Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 21–40. For dub’s influences on techno and UK bass genres, see: Veal, *Dub*, 2, 220–260; Sullivan, *Remixology*, 170–175.

way of thinking about sound, it's a way of thinking about the world. Which means you can dub any genre of music. But you can also really dub *anything*.”¹⁹ The result is that dub is paradoxically both central and marginal in popular culture. Veal contends that it “is not overstating the case to suggest that this music has changed the way the world conceives of the popular song. [...] Few people are aware [...] that much of what is unique about contemporary dance music is directly traceable to the studio production techniques pioneered in Kingston”.²⁰

Fragmentation and rupture

Dub today is best understood in processual and epistemic terms. It is as an Afro-diasporic sonic materialist approach to using the mixing desk, turntable, and sound system in a way that prioritises bass and is informed by a principle of creative fragmentation and rupture. Although fragmentation and rupture are somewhat synonymous and have a shared basis in discontinuity—hence my use of the combined shorthand fragmentation/rupture hereafter—I use these terms to identify two related but distinct methods of manipulating sound. Fragmentation refers to dub artists reconfiguring existing material and abstracting the voice, typically in the studio, as outlined above; rupture entails the leveraging of extreme contrast in instrumentation and other parameters, typically by DJs/selectors in live performance, to be discussed shortly below. In framing fragmentation/rupture as such I am synthesising the contributions of two scholars, namely Veal’s study of “fragmentation and incompleteness” and

¹⁹ “LOUIS CHUDE SOKEI interview @ Rototom Sunsplash 2014”, *Rototom Sunsplash*, 19 August 2014 (accessed 05 May 2020), 02:40–02:50, <https://rototomsunsplash.com/en/video/louis-chude-sokei-interview-rototom-sunsplash-2014/>.

²⁰ It should be acknowledged that dub producers were not alone in destabilising aesthetic and technical norms in the 1970s. The same decade saw, for example, disco DJs expand dance music beyond the three-minute pop format and hip-hop artists herald a new era of sampling breakbeats from funk and soul records. Sullivan also notes that African American musicians set the precedent for the production of instrumental B-sides in the 1960s (for instance in the soul scene), so dub instrumentals were not strictly novel either. Nevertheless, dub is unique in its global reach through the dub diaspora, a key branch of which is dubstep, to be discussed below. See: Veal, *Dub*, 2–3, 55–56, 227; Sullivan, *Remixology*, 24.

musicologist Edward Spencer's exploration of how bass music (especially dubstep)

"foregrounds discrete moments of rupture" musically and socially.²¹

While this chapter is primarily interested in how fragmentation/rupture functions as a creative *principle*, that is, a shared conceptual starting point in DJs' pursuit of bass-forward discontinuity in the dub diaspora, scholars include Veal, Chude-Sokei, and Spencer rightly frame fragmentation/rupture as metaphors with hermeneutic value for thinking about bass culture more broadly.²² It is worth briefly introducing these perspectives here to establish why fragmentation/rupture warrants critical attention, and I will return to the topic in full in Chapter 2. Focusing on Veal's interpretations, he theorises fragmentation in dub extensively in dialogue with the Black cultural studies literature, grounding it in the postcolonial reality of Jamaica. He argues that by transposing vocal and instrumental tracks into "otherworldly" spaces and reassembling them into new textures, often sharing recordings with other studios for them to do the same, dub destabilises the Western European emphasis on authorship and the immutability of "the work".²³ The conventional song form is treated as a fluid starting point for further improvisation in the studio and at the hands of a sound system crew in the dance hall. Furthermore, Veal suggests dub resonates with the wider political moment of the 1970s, given the prominence of Rastafarian musicians in the genre during the roots era and the music's transporting of the listener through virtual space and time through effects like echo. At the time, African nationalist, Black civil rights, Afrofuturist, and local democratic socialist efforts in Jamaica all "stimulated, in varying ways, a reevaluation of African cultural roots", and "even at the height of cultural pride, many still wished for another place to call home."²⁴ In effect, dub's articulation of surreal musical space and bold remixing of the voice

²¹ Veal, *Dub*, 57, 259; Spencer, "The Drop and The Fall", 23.

²² To clarify, I use the term principle to avoid the implications of alternatives such as "aesthetic" and "logic". The former risks reducing fragmentation/rupture to a mere convention or preference among dub-diasporic musicians, while the latter (occasionally used by Veal) suggests a level of necessity that downplays the agency artists have in articulating it. "Principle" therefore speaks more accurately to how fragmentation/rupture functions like a shared belief that tends to govern, but does not predetermine, the aesthetics of dub-diasporic production and performance.

²³ Veal, *Dub*, 215.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

sounded out this yearning for the realisation of a new, alternative African identity and/or homeland. Veal argues in turn that dub's fragmentation/rupture is the "ideal sonic metaphor for the mutable contingent constructions of identity" and more broadly "the condition of diaspora [...] reflecting Said's characterization of exile as 'fundamentally a discontinuous state of being'".²⁵ Dub expresses, ultimately, "[t]he condition of simultaneously yearning for and being alienated from a cultural homeland that can never be fully experienced as home, and also from the very *history* of connection to that homeland."²⁶

Returning to fragmentation/rupture as a musical principle, several questions arise. With dub engineers creating a kind of dance music laden with discontinuity, differing from both popular song form and the conventional aesthetic priorities of EDM, what is going on when DJs/selectors articulate this music in performance? Does implementing fragmentation/rupture in the studio necessitate an equally discontinuous musical flow during a live session? Or is the music also amenable to continuous grooving at the hands of the DJ/selector? Is bass simply a constant presence from start to finish in a live set, or is something more sophisticated afoot?

At stake in the answers to these questions is an interpretation of bass music and culture that nuances how musicologists might approach electronic (dance) music, especially regarding repetitive music and the basis of its aesthetic pleasure. In *Repeating Ourselves*, Fink brings disco into conceptual dialogue with twentieth-century minimalism to argue repetitive music involves "not the negation of desire, but a powerful and totalizing metastasis".²⁷ The tonal goal-directedness of Western music, he shows, is reconfigured in repetitive music into more than mere harmonic or rhythmic stasis: it hinges on different *kinds* of teleology that he calls "recombinant", ranging from tension-release arcs that cycle through single measures to "expanse[s] of teleology that the music does not articulate within time frames listeners can recognize as 'normal' or 'human.'"²⁸ Dub and dubstep offer a prime

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 252–253, 197, 199.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁷ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44–45.

opportunity to take this perspective further by considering music that seemingly revels in both the “unbroken groove” that characterises disco *and* in the fragmentation/rupture of this experience.²⁹ Crucially, where Fink suggests the recombinant teleology of minimalism and disco (and other related forms) can be read as “a move deeper into [...] The flat, generalized, timeless, placeless, depersonalized world of [...] consumer society”, as suggested above, sonic fragmentation/rupture in the dub diaspora is grounded in an Afrofuturistic impulse to imagine a different world altogether, and not necessarily a utopian one.³⁰ Veal identifies this precisely with dub, worth quoting at length:

[...] [dub] essentially *subverts the pleasure principles* of two musical systems: aesthetic pleasure here is fundamentally predicated upon the fragmented narratives of the sound collage, which in this case seems to conform to the emotional pendulum of post-traumatic experience that allows pleasure to be experienced only fleetingly as it swings between sensations of harmonic fullness and starkness, and between sensations of rhythmic continuity and disruption.³¹

In what follows, then, I will elucidate how fragmentation/rupture arises in dub and dubstep to “subvert the pleasure principles” of canonical EDM through practices that embrace discontinuity in the flow of performance. The discussion will focus primarily on techniques that create sonic rupture, reflecting its importance in live performance and the contours of the existing literature—where Veal has established how engineers fragment soundscapes in the studio, and Henriques has laid the foundation for analysing reggae sound system performance in general.³² This sets the stage for a deeper interrogation of dub-wise performance techniques, and DJ performance in dubstep as a case study in postmillennial bass music.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74. As noted in the Introduction, Gilroy conceptualises dub and Black diasporic musics like it as facilitating access to utopian space through sound, space that “can be a *negative* utopia [...] [where] the way to free yourself here is to accept just how bad the world can be”. This speaks to dub’s politics of resistance and reconfiguration of space and time that Gilroy, Veal, and others explore further in terms of Afrofuturism. See: Bass Culture Research, “Bass Culture: Paul Gilroy (part two)”, 40:03–47:11; Gilroy, “Between the Blues and the Blues Dance: Some Soundscapes of the Black Atlantic”, in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, second edition, ed. Michael Bull & Les Back (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 486–489; Veal, *Dub*, 208–214; Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 160–170.

³¹ Veal, *Dub*, 199–200, 206–207. Emphasis added.

³² Veal, *Dub*, 45–94; Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 147–171.

Dub-wise sound system performance

Although dub formally began as a studio art, it is inextricably tied to sound systems and DJing given its development in the reggae dance hall. Jamaican sound systems are a collective affair involving multiple specialised roles, from the DIY craft of building loudspeakers, to the ongoing tuning of the equipment “set”, and the labour required to perform sometimes upwards of eight hours a night.³³ Focusing on dance hall performance, the essential roles include the selector, who chooses the records, plays them, and manipulates their sound; the engineer, who tunes the pre-amplifier and manages sound quality in general; and the “deejay”, who traditionally rides their voice over the music, equivalent to an MC in modern parlance (I will reserve the term “DJ” for its modern usage outside of reggae).³⁴

When reggae arrived in 1968, dub would emerge over the next decade as a creative means for studios to leverage their existing recordings into a steady supply of exclusive material for selectors. Dub producers leveraged relatively new and affordable consumer electronics, reflecting the “profit-driven recycling” that had come to characterise the Jamaican recording industry in a difficult economy that could no longer support the previously dominant system of live ensemble performance.³⁵ From this socioeconomic context emerged a number of musical practices that defined dub and remain influential in dub-diasporic bass music today. The foremost of these was the use of *riddims* (rhythms in Jamaican patwa): instrumental song templates usually consisting of a chord progression and/or bass line that would be rearranged into different *versions* by other (often competing) studios.³⁶ Circulating in a manner not dissimilar to jazz standards, riddims allowed producers to get the most value out of the same musical ingredients and a limited pool of session

³³ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 39–46.

³⁴ *Ibid.* While the traditional split between selector and deejay is still observed in some contemporary scenes, some selectors take on both roles simultaneously or share hosting duties with their deejay.

³⁵ Veal, *Dub*, 44–48, 89–92.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

musicians.³⁷ Around the same time, records called *dubplates* started to be cut as a cheaper albeit ephemeral alternative to vinyl, using aluminium discs covered in a thin acetate coating.³⁸ Dubplates were a significant innovation. They allowed selectors—many of whom were also owner-operators of their own recording studios and sound systems—to test a new single or instrumental version before deciding whether to issue a larger run of records, again without steep financial investment, with the temporary usage aligning with the short lifespan of the material.³⁹

There is a serendipitous origin story told about the synthesis of reggae versions and dubplates in the “dub version”, which Veal outlines:

The story goes that in late 1967 Ruddy’s Supreme Ruler of Sound operator Rudolph “Ruddy” Redwood was getting a dubplate of the rocksteady track by The Paragons called “On the Beach” (1967) cut at Treasure Isle’s studio. Engineer Byron Smith (allegedly assisted by King Tubby) was having difficulty dropping in the vocal track and wanted to stop cutting, but Redwood insisted that Smith continue to the end. When the miscued dubplate finished cutting, Redwood apparently pronounced it “art” and played it at his next dance, where the crowd went wild.⁴⁰

“This was a seminal moment”, writes Veal, as Redwood’s “artful” mistake would become “one of *the* fundamental compositional strategies in dub music: dropping out of vocal and instrumental parts.”⁴¹ By the mid-1970s, producing a 7-inch record with a reggae single on the A side and its dub version on the B side was embraced as an industry standard.⁴² Some versions were elaborate re-compositions, but many reduced reggae songs to their simplest possible texture, consisting of only the drum groove and bass line in what came to be known as drums and bass dub mixes.⁴³ The minimalist musical textures and distribution of these versions via dubplate suited the needs of selectors, for whom the records were valuable

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 51–54.

³⁹ Veal, *Dub*, 51–52. The acetate coating of a dubplate wears out over a few months or years depending on its use, compared to the generally endless lifespan of plastic (vinyl) records.

⁴⁰ Sullivan, *Remixology*, 23–24; see also *ibid.*

⁴¹ Veal, *Dub*, 52. Emphasis original.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 53; Bradley, *Bass Culture*, 323.

⁴³ Veal, *Dub*, 53, 57–61. More elaborate versions involving additional instrumentation were also common. Called “specials”, these works would circulate as exclusive dubplates and also fed into the competitive culture of dance halls, ironically becoming more expensive than their publicly-available and more durable vinyl counterparts.

sources of attention-grabbing variety and exclusivity. They also suited deejays, who could freely “toast” and “fast chat” over the instrumentals.⁴⁴ Sound system performance was so important to dub that Veal contends its studio practices were likely foreshadowed by “the interruptive performance logic” of deejays, who had already been vocalising over soul, blues, and reggae records for years before the arrival of dub:

[...] while studio engineers were beginning to use the mixing board to open songs up from the inside, their work was clearly prefigured by the deejays who destroyed song form from the outside. Rapping, chanting, and shouting their laconic improvisations often irrespective of harmonic or formal changes, and asking their selectors to “pull up” [...] at every opportunity, the deejays were rudely and creatively disrespectful of song form.⁴⁵

Selector style

I will now discuss three aspects of dub performance that illustrate its principle of fragmentation/rupture. First is the art of the *selecta* (selector in Jamaican patwa), many aspects of which will be familiar given it is a key predecessor to the modern DJ.⁴⁶ The role of selectors is to choose which records to play, exercising their taste and knowledge in sequencing the records and how long they are played using one or more turntables and a mixer.⁴⁷ Simultaneously, they collaborate with MC(s) to monitor the audience’s response to the music in real time, adjusting their selection to keep dancers engaged.⁴⁸

While there are few strict rules shaping a selector’s decisions, an established convention still observed today involves playing riddims in pairs, where the vocal version is played first and its dub (instrumental) version immediately after.⁴⁹ In his ethnography with Stone Love sound system, Henriques also identifies a typology of interpretive skills that reggae selectors usually deploy to keep dancers engaged. These include sequentially

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

⁴⁶ Frank Broughton & Bill Brewster, *How to DJ (properly): The Art and Science of Playing Records* (London: Bantam Press, 2002), 128.

⁴⁷ A mixer is a hardware instrument that allows multiple channels of audio to be played and manipulated simultaneously. For thorough definitions of this and other EDM terminology, please see the Glossary.

⁴⁸ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 125–126.

⁴⁹ Veal, *Dub*, 55.

“juggling” dubplates or versions of the same riddim, “steering” and “reading” the crowd to “build up the vibes”, “evaluating” in real time which tunes are popular, and creatively “manipulating” the sound.⁵⁰ Manipulating typically involves frequency-based adjustments like EQ, time-based effects such as echo, and the use of peripheral synthesisers or instruments like the “dub siren”.⁵¹ In performing these embellishments, the selector transposes the dub engineer’s use of the recording studio as a musical instrument into the context of a live dance.⁵² Furthermore, readers unfamiliar with EDM may take it for granted that, once the selector sets a record in motion, the turntable does not require physical input for there to be a continuous flow of sound, unlike with conventional acoustic instruments. But this acousmatic aspect of being a selector—the ability to enter “listener orientation”—is vital.⁵³ It frees one’s time and attention to “stand outside the event he has initiated” and thus engage in other kinds of improvisation: steering the vibes and manipulating the sound.⁵⁴ This improvisation includes developing a sense of “journey” or long-term progression during a set, as is the expectation of any good selector (and DJs in general).⁵⁵ In sequencing records, selectors recontextualise individual tracks where they can “acquire new meaning”, as Veal puts it, based on their relative position within the performance.⁵⁶ This casts the selector as a “macrocomposer” responsible for creating a “new metacomposition that is thematically cohesive and configured to the social dynamics of the dance”.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 129–146.

⁵¹ Manipulations are usually enacted by the selector but sometimes by a separate performer. See: *Ibid.*; Fintoni & McLauchlan, “Assembling the Dance”, 163–78.

⁵² My focus is on turntable performance, but there is also a parallel practice in this vein known as live dubbing, where a producer performs solely with a mixing desk and peripheral units to (re)construct and manipulate dub compositions in real time. This mode of performance warrants critical attention but falls outside the scope of the thesis. See, for example: eyeondj, “MAD PROFESSOR !LIVE! @crossclub”, YouTube, 4 July 2016 (accessed 10 June 2023), <https://youtu.be/Fxwy3n7amYA>.

⁵³ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 105–107.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Broughton & Brewster, *How to DJ (properly)*, 133; Alinka Greasley & Helen Prior, “Mixtapes and Turntablism: DJs Perspectives on Musical Shape”, *Empirical Musicology Review* 8, no. 1 (2013): 26–27; Kai Fikentscher, “‘It’s Not the Mix, It’s the Selection’: Music Programming in Contemporary DJ Culture”, in *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Dance Music*, ed. Bernardo Attias, Anna Gavanias, & Hillegonda Rietveld (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 130–133.

⁵⁶ Veal, *Dub*, 86.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

In EDM outside the dub diaspora, DJs often achieve thematic cohesion by crafting the transitions between records to build a sense of continuity and flow. Butler explains:

A poor DJ set would consist of short transitions that are clearly audible as such, with long stretches of single tracks in between. [...] In an ideal performance, by contrast, transitional states are drawn out for as long as possible, and it is difficult to tell where one record ends and another begins”.⁵⁸

This perspective is understandably shaped by Butler’s chosen fieldsites in the techno scenes of Detroit and Berlin. There, DJs generally value an “aesthetic of continuity” and often strive to enter “flow states” in aiming “to move as smoothly as possible from one record to another”, with the frequently minimalist rhythms and textures of the music being well suited to gradual manipulation over long stretches of time (usually at a constant or slowly climbing tempo throughout a set).⁵⁹ Yet Butler is not alone in emphasising continuity as the central paradigm of EDM performance. In accounts of EDM in the 1990s and early new millennium by prominent critic Simon Reynolds, as well as musicologists Philip Tagg and Stan Hawkins (among others), a long-standing view—orthodoxy, even—was established in which EDM is said to revolve around sonic-affective registers like flow and endless groove.⁶⁰ Reynolds, for example, contended that “this music only really takes effect as total flow [...] [it] abolishes narrative: instead of tension/climax/release, it offers a thousand plateaux of crescendo”.⁶¹ Influential in this discourse was also Tagg’s theorisation of rave music as subverting the established relationship between “figure” and “ground” in Western music.⁶² Figure/ground broadly corresponds to melody/accompaniment, and he argued EDM constitutes a radical departure from the norm in its “celebration of ground on its own terms”

⁵⁸ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 224.

⁵⁹ To clarify, Butler primarily worked in Berlin in his second monograph, and Detroit in the first. See: *Ibid.*, 223–224; *Unlocking the Groove*, 242–243, 252.

⁶⁰ Spencer shares this view in his discussion of sonic-social rupture in live bass music; see “The Drop and The Fall”, 61–62.

⁶¹ Simon Reynolds quoted in *ibid.*, 62. For examples of similar commentary that centres continuity and flow in live EDM, see: Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 271–274; Fikentscher, “You Better Work!”, 44; Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 97.

⁶² Philip Tagg, “From refrain to rave: the decline of figure and the rise of ground”, in *Electronica, Dance and Club Music*, ed. Mark Butler (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 7–20. Originally published in *Popular Music* 13, no. 2 (1994): 209–222.

through percussive grooves with few (if any) figures to foreground difference or change.⁶³ A seminal 1998 study by EDM scholar Hillegonda Rietveld historicised this paradigm in the DJ culture of early house music and disco.⁶⁴ Rietveld explained how, thanks to innovations of the late 1970s such as the automated drum machine and 12-inch “disco mix” (which looped instrumental drum breaks in hip-hop-like fashion), it became “increasingly easier to make one record flow into the next in a near seamless fashion”.⁶⁵ By the 1990s DJs in Chicago and New York had settled on a gradual, “flowing kind of mixing” known as the “slow mix”, designed to keep clubbers dancing “without a break”.⁶⁶

In Jamaican music, as Veal writes, “the opposite is often the rule”.⁶⁷ The flow of a dub performance is often ruptured “violently and abruptly”, whether from interjections by a vocalist, the selector’s lifting of the needle and improvised manipulations, or the variable tempo of records played in sequence—even when the music is grounded in the steady pulse of reggae.⁶⁸ This is not to suggest that the dub-reggae selector embodies an ideal of the “fast mix” in opposition to rave’s “slow mix”—the audience still likes to dance, and agile turntablism is more the domain of hip-hop DJs anyway.⁶⁹ Rather, it is to state more simply that what might be considered dead air between records and a breaking of momentum in other EDM settings is par for the course in dub. Indeed, many contemporary selectors play with a single turntable, proceeding simply by lifting the needle to place new records. The ensuing transitory silence between each record is sometimes softened by the selector’s (or MC’s) voice and other embellishments, though in general, transitions are necessarily a moment of sonic rupture and, in the extreme volumes of a live event, may sound disjointed and even jarring to inexperienced listeners. These realities are amplified in the context of

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 12–14.

⁶⁴ Hillegonda Rietveld, *This Is Our House: House Music, Cultural Spaces and Technologies* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 105–109.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Veal, *Dub*, 86–87.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Katz touches on this topic, noting also how early hip-hop DJs distanced themselves from the aesthetic of smoothness that was latent in the performance of disco: “as [Afrika] Bambaataa puts it, disco DJs had “that clean sound, where the hip-hop DJs were more rugged and rough.” Katz, *Groove Music*, 26, 33.

clashes, an energetic kind of performance where two or more sound systems play in turns, traditionally in a competition to be crowned the “Champion Sound” as judged by the crowd.⁷⁰ In these ways, as Veal explains, “the strategy of disruption [...] characteristic of the dub mix [in the studio] is reasserted in the selector’s on-the-spot composition of a set”.⁷¹ To reformulate Tagg’s framing, the “ground” of danceable drums-and-bass mixes does not displace melodic “figure” in dub so much as the melody of the bass line *becomes* the ground, which the sound system crew then fragments and ruptures with their turntables, voices, and engagement of the crowd. Even without listening to a performance, this strategy is visually apparent in the digital waveform of a recording where each record appears as a discrete segment or fragment. **Figure 3** below illustrates with the example of a two-hour show by Channel One sound system at Outlook Festival 2019.⁷² Channel One are a widely respected Rastafarian dub act who began performing in London in 1979, naming their sound after the influential Channel One studio in Kingston.⁷³

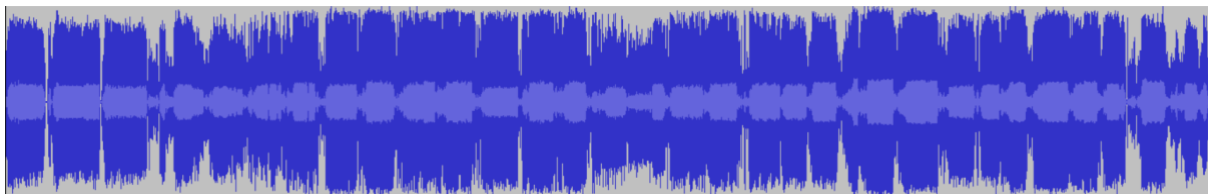


Figure 3 Audio wave form, Channel One session.

To elaborate with a musical example, [Audio Example 1.1](#) shows the selector style in action in a one-minute excerpt (21:30–22:30 in the recording) of a 1979 session by the late Jah Shaka.⁷⁴ Shaka is easily England’s most celebrated dub sound system, and was also a

⁷⁰ Norman Stolzoff, *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2000), 201.

⁷¹ Veal, *Dub*, 86–87.

⁷² Outlook Festival, “Channel One - Live at Outlook 2019”, SoundCloud, 23 April 2020 (accessed 10 June 2023), <https://soundcloud.com/outlookfestival/channel-one-outlook2019>.

⁷³ Veal, *Dub*, 135.

⁷⁴ Rooftop Defoe, “Jah Shaka Sound In Session @ Phebes. Amhurst Road. 1979. Vintage Audio File Section”, YouTube, 4 October 2021 (accessed 10 June 2023), <https://youtu.be/LKqTZ3szSfE>.

London-based Rastafarian act.⁷⁵ The excerpt begins in the second half of Aswad's "Warrior Charge" (1980), a classic instrumental dub with a syncopated groove. Jah Shaka decides the crowd has heard enough of "Warrior Charge", cutting it from the mix at 00:19. Simultaneously—or, most accurately, a few milliseconds before cutting the record—Shaka sends the signal to a delay unit. This repeats the last heard note of the trumpet line in "Warrior Charge" in a dotted rhythm, which he crescendos for an instant before also removing it from the mix at 00:22, such that the flow of sound has been ruptured yet also fragmented and dispersed. For a moment, the only audible sound is the hiss of the cassette the session was recorded to.⁷⁶ This is perhaps a welcome pause for dancers to catch their breath between riddims, though by 00:23, the next record, "Kunta Kinte" by The Revolutionaries (1976) (also a classic riddim from the roots reggae era), is already in motion. At 00:49, the bass line of "Kunta Kinte" enters the mix, and the frequency spectrum of the session returns to its full weight. This passage is represented visually in the below spectrogram (**Figure 4**). The marked gap in low-frequency energy below 300 Hz in the transition to "Kunta Kinte" underlines how potent the sonic contrast likely would have been for listeners.

⁷⁵ Christopher Partridge, "Conscious Sounds: Encountering Jah Shaka", *Dancecult* 7, no. 2 (2015): <http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2015.07.02.13>.

⁷⁶ The faint voice of an MC, possibly Shaka himself, can also be heard making a toast to Rastafarian prophet Haile Selassie.

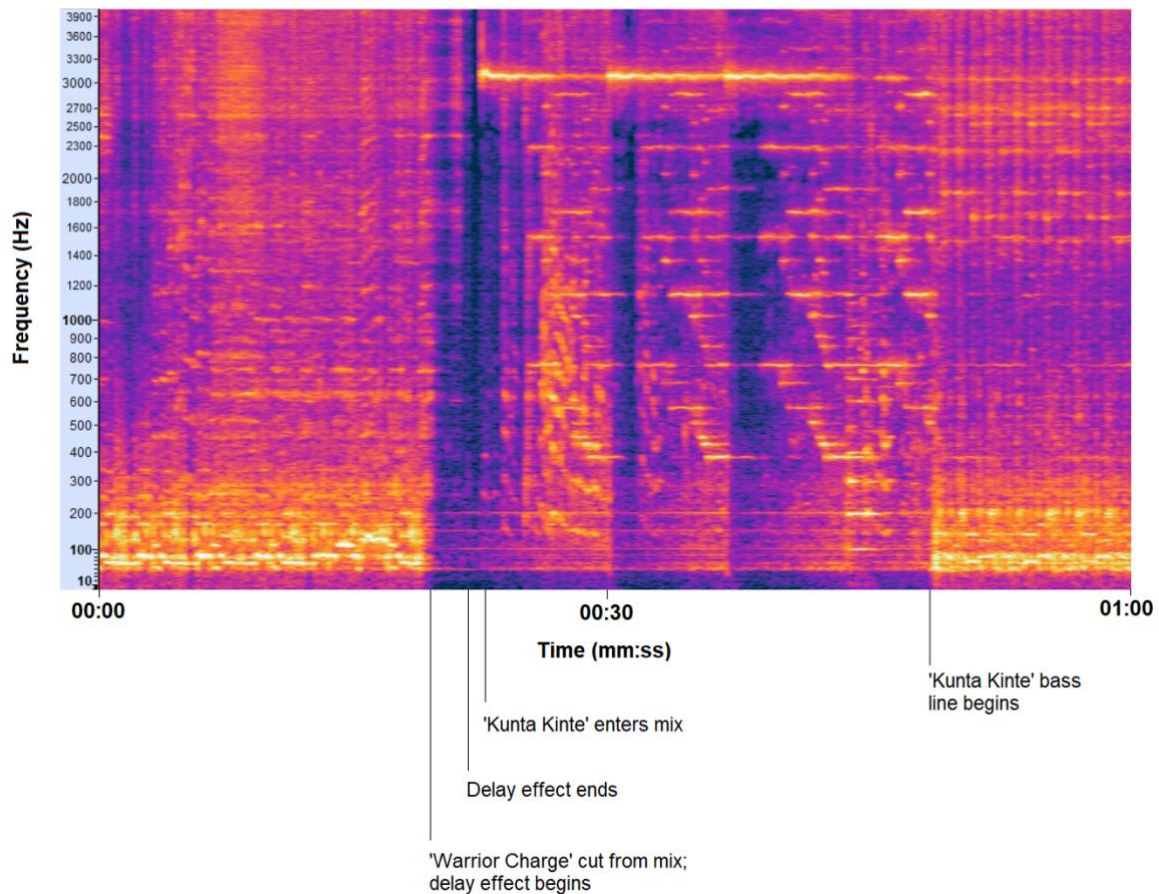


Figure 4 Spectrogram of the selector style, Jah Shaka session.⁷⁷

It can additionally be noted that, for some commentators, the transitions between records are de-valued to such an extent in dub and reggae that the ideal selector is a mere curator who sequences records with minimal embellishment. These views can be read as a kind of modernist ideology in that they suggest, for example, that music “speaks for itself” and should have “room to breathe”, leaving the audience to “drink in the significance” of its vibrations.⁷⁸ Each record is given the status of a complete musical “work”, in contrast to, as

⁷⁷ Per the Audacity Manual, the visual coding of this and all subsequent spectrograms follows a five-colour scheme: “white, orange, magenta, dark blue, and black.” White denotes the highest amplitudes for a given frequency, and black denotes the quietest. See: Audacity, “Spectrogram View – Audacity Manual”, 24 May 2023 (accessed 30 October 2023), https://manual.audacityteam.org/man/spectrogram_view.html#meaning.

⁷⁸ See, for example: Gino Sorcinelli, “Letting the Music Speak for Itself”: Unpacking DJ Platurm’s ‘Breaking The Ice’, *Micro-Chop*, 10 December 2018 (accessed 10 June 2023), <https://medium.com/micro-chop/letting-the-music-speak-for-itself-unpacking-dj-platurms-breaking-the-ice-cf6ea19135b4>; Martin Clark, “This Is Not Your Normal Dubstep Mix...”, *Blackdown*, 16 July 2007

Butler finds, some techno DJs' understanding that an individual track is only a "tool", the raw material for improvisation to be manipulated in order to "make it your own".⁷⁹ Indeed, in techno and other groove-led genres, an established practice is the production of "DJ tools", tracks which are rarely through-composed and meant exclusively for layering with other records in a live set.⁸⁰ Henriques adds to this discourse when he suggests the art of selecting in reggae is "*about* music, rather than musical", which I disagree with on the grounds that turntablism of any kind is creative and therefore musical by definition (especially when understood as musicking).⁸¹ The agency and labour involved in even the simplest performances is not to be underestimated: the selector still chooses, sequences, and evaluates a series of musical pieces according to the sonic and social environment of the dance floor. Nevertheless, these perspectives do speak to a broader truth that DJs in dub-diasporic music—especially when adopting the traditional selector style—tend to be more concerned with the soundscape *within* records and the trajectory of a performance overall than the transitional space *between* records.

The rewind

Having established how dub's fragmentation/rupture informs selecting in general, I now turn to two more specialised techniques within selecting that bring this principle to life. First is the rewind, a gesture ubiquitous across dub-diasporic music (including hip-hop) that goes by many names describing its mechanics, such as the pull-up, wheel, and reload.⁸² A rewind is

(accessed 1 February 2023), <https://blackdownsoundboy.blogspot.com/2007/07/grievous-angel-dubstep-sufferah-vol3.html>.

⁷⁹ Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 5, 204.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 125.

⁸² de Lacey, *Level Up*, 84. Is it notable that, of the various names for a rewind, the "reload" as it is commonly called in grime is arguably the most apt. The verb "to reload" emphasises how the selector instantly refills a track's potential energy with the mechanics of the turntable akin to reloading a firearm. This metaphor resonates, in turn, with the above-discussed principle of violent fragmentation/rupture in dub and the discourses of sonic dread, weaponry, and war that permeate bass culture. See: Cooper, *Sound Clash*, 35; Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 28; Nabeel Zuberi, "Worries in the Dance: Post-Millennial Grooves and Sub-Bass Culture", in *Britpop and the English Music Tradition*, ed. Andy Bennett & Jon Stratton (Burlington, VT; Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 179–92.

typically performed during a climactic moment of interaction between performer and listener, often in response to a well-known *riddim*, impactful bass line, or sought-after dubplate. The audience communicates—verbally, gesturally, or both—that they want the record stopped and played again. Given how established the rewind is in dub-diasporic scenes, a rush of excited cheers, whistles, or shouts will usually be a sufficient signal and the request is often not explicitly stated. A paradigmatic example of this is in the Channel One sound system performance cited above. [Audio Example 1.2](#) is a 90-second excerpt (01:58:14–01:59:44 in the recording), with selector Mikey Dread introducing the final record of the session. He adds to the audience’s anticipation for the bass line by triggering a dub siren at 00:27 before the track enters in full at 00:30. There are audible cheers and whistles from the crowd, and he responds by briefly filtering out the low frequencies of the mix and stopping the record at 00:41. “Rasta sound system, big respect and greetings” says Mikey Dread as he sets the needle back and plays the record from the top: the rewind is complete. **Figure 5** below visualises the sonics of this passage with a spectrogram, noting also a bass drop that Mikey Dread performs when the bass line enters the mix for a second time:

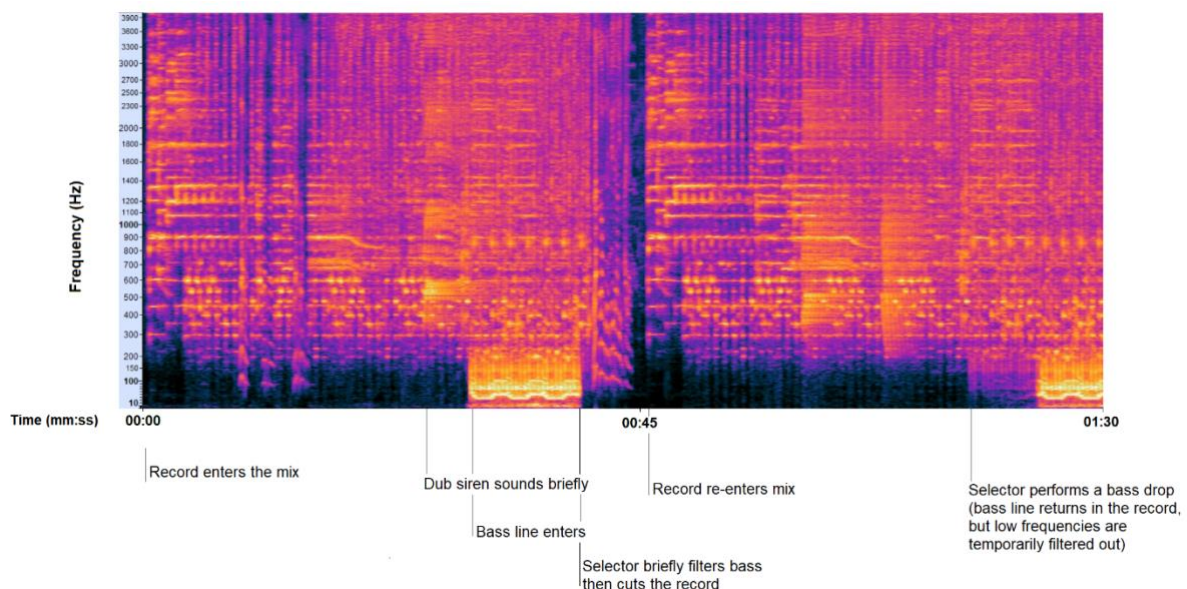


Figure 5 Spectrogram of a rewind and bass drop, Channel One session.

A well-timed rewind can electrify a dance hall. This sentiment is summarised by the expression “if it’s nice, play it twice”, but selectors may be willing to rewind a record upwards of three or more times if the energy of the moment demands it.⁸³ Veal notes how the sonic “disruption” of rewinds are “such a central strategy of recent Jamaican popular music that live reggae bands have even incorporated the ‘pull-up’ into their stage performances.”⁸⁴ It should be emphasised here that the sonic rupture enacted by a rewind is less a retreat or stoppage than an inflection point rich with potential for further improvisation. As de Lacey’s finds in his investigation of grime, the rewind catalyses an “emergent trajectory” of many “possibilities for forward movement”; in journalist Laurent Fintoni’s words it is also straightforwardly a “celebration of the music being played”.⁸⁵ Henriques identifies this nuance when he writes that “[t]he apparently simple technique of repeating a section of the record [...] introduces a wealth of creative possibilities”, one of which is that the selector now has new information at their disposal: the crowd enjoys *this* particular bass line or *that* particular riddim.⁸⁶

Although rewinds necessitate rupture, selectors have remarkable agency in how they articulate that rupture. First, there are several approaches to rewinding a record with a turntable, and thus different timbral outcomes for the gesture. For example, Fintoni observes how “Some rewinds are smooth, the record stopping by use of the turntable’s start/stop button, while others are a little rougher, the needle hurtling across the vinyl’s grooves as a hand frantically spins the record back.”⁸⁷ Also useful here is de Lacey’s identification of the three types of rewind that grime DJs tend to perform, applicable to bass music overall: “the drop wheel, the MC’s wheel and the DJ’s wheel”.⁸⁸ A drop wheel is a more specialised

⁸³ Sonjah Stanley-Niaah, “Negotiating a Common Transnational Space: Mapping performance in Jamaican Dancehall and South African Kwaito”, *Cultural Studies* 23, no. 5–6 (2009): 767.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ de Lacey, *Level Up*, 91. Laurent Fintoni, “Wheel It Up: History of the Rewind”, *Cuepoint*, 23 January 2015 (accessed 10 June 2023), <https://medium.com/cuepoint/wheel-it-up-history-of-the-rewind-21fdcff243d9>.

⁸⁶ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 165.

⁸⁷ Fintoni, “Wheel It Up”.

⁸⁸ de Lacey, *Level Up*, 85.

occurrence of the rewind already illustrated above, where the selector rewinds a record following the audience's response to an impactful "drop" section of a track: usually an important structural transition where all the instrumental layers including bass are heard together for the first time (note this is distinct to bass drops as a performance technique, to be explained shortly below).⁸⁹ The MC's wheel can take two different routes. Either the vocalist's enjoyment of a record leads them to demand a rewind from the selector, or in the case of a vocal-led genre like grime, the DJ issues a rewind to acknowledge a moment of individual flair by the vocalist.⁹⁰ In a DJ's wheel, by contrast, the selector rewinds the track "in recognition of the riddim", which can be a source of tension in the group performance environment of grime, and potentially between audience and performer in other genres.⁹¹ As one of de Lacey's participants states, "sometimes u have to realise u didn't deserve that reload, the DJ just happened to drop [a canonical grime instrumental such as] rhythm and gash".⁹² A more egregious DJ's wheel can also involve breaching implicit trust where the selector stops a record because they feel *they* deserve recognition even without the co-sign of their audience or MC.⁹³ These tensions serve as a reminder that DJ performance, like any socially contingent art form, produces affects that are rarely musically predetermined.

The bass drop

The third technique I wish to highlight that manifests dub's fragmentation/rupture is the bass drop. This straightforward gesture involves the selector temporarily cutting the low-frequency component of the mix to build anticipation and create a burst of impact when the bass is quickly restored, that is, "dropped".⁹⁴ As with the rewind, the execution of a bass drop can

⁸⁹ The "drop" section of bass music tracks is equivalent to what Butler calls the "core" section of techno compositions, the first instrumental climax around which DJs organise their mixture and sequencing of different records. The difference in name likely speaks to the relative importance of bass and groove in each category of EDM, respectively. See: Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 223.

⁹⁰ de Lacey, *Level Up*, 87–89.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 136.

vary depending on the selector's stylistic inclinations and equipment. In the roots era, bass drops were often performed with "mute switches" on the pre-amps of sound systems—the same mute switches dub engineers improvised with in the studio to remix the instrumental layers of reggae—with some consisting only of "volume, bass, and treble" controls.⁹⁵ Today, bass drops are more commonly performed with either three-band EQ (bass, mid, and treble frequency adjustment), or filters, specialised EQ tools that cut frequencies below a specified threshold and introduce resonance at the cut-off point to create an audible sweeping effect as the DJ changes the threshold. Returning to Channel One sound system's 2019 session, the excerpt considered above illustrates how a straightforward bass drop is performed with a filter. When Mikey Dread runs the record again following the rewind, at the exact moment listeners would expect the bass line to return, he filters frequencies below 200 Hz. The gesture briefly builds tension and anticipation that stretches into the beginning of a new section (akin to a harmonic suspension), before the full weight of the bass is unleashed a few seconds later: see 01:15–01:30 in **Figure 5** above and in [Audio Example 1.2](#).

At the compositional level, bass drops are ubiquitous in EDM. They are generally comprised of the moment in a track when all the instrumental layers including bass converge for the first time in a track after a period of tension. Filter sweeps and other continuous processes of manipulating timbre and pitch are also ubiquitous in EDM composition as methods of increasing tension before a bass drop. According to a recent analytical essay by musicologist Jeremy Smith, these effects will serve to orient listeners through predictable 16- or 32-bar cycles and are typically released immediately when an exciting bass drop or other "structural downbeat" occurs.⁹⁶ The bass drop as performed live by a DJ is thus not to be confused with a bass drop written into a track, though DJs will often perform bass drops at key musical boundaries, including to accentuate the impact of a bass drop at the compositional level—as Mikey Dread does in [Audio Example 1.2](#) above. Yet DJs also have

⁹⁵ Veal, *Dub*, 64.

⁹⁶ Jeremy Smith, "The Functions of Continuous Processes in Contemporary Electronic Dance Music", *Music Theory Online* 27, no. 2 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.27.2.7>, para. 3.7.

the freedom to perform a bass drop in any other section, meaning the technique can be an effective source of *disorientation*: both because it plays with listeners' expectations and because the cutting of low frequencies can obscure the bass line or kick drum pulse around which dancers orientate their movements.⁹⁷ For these reasons, Butler frames the bass drop as an act of "withholding the beat" that employs a "teasing" dynamic between audience and performer, showing how "DJing does not always involve pleasing the crowd in the most direct and simple way possible".⁹⁸

In dub, the notion of performing a bass drop (or "bass withholding" perhaps) is more apt than "withholding the beat", given that a steady kick drum pulse plays a relatively less important role than in, for example, techno (though the underlying thrust of the technique remains the same).⁹⁹ As Garcia shows, the loud, low-frequency beating of percussive rhythms in house and adjacent genres has a particular sonic tactility due to "spiky amplitude envelopes" that "*strike* the body in a very concrete way" in live settings.¹⁰⁰ These transient strikes "index the event of forceful contact" while simultaneously enacting it "sensorially and non-representationally [...] beats do not just sound like impact; they *are* impacts."¹⁰¹ In dub, by contrast, withholding the bass acquires its potency from sustained bass lines and the prominence of sub-bass both compositionally (where kick drums compete for, rather than dominate, the lowest registers) and in the engineering of the sound systems through which DJs perform.¹⁰² These factors make the sudden entry or exit of a bass line a moment of extreme rupture in bass music, one that listeners often relate to through affective registers like weight, dominance, warmth, intimacy, and immersion more than tactile impacts (though

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, paras 1.2, 3.28.

⁹⁸ Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 91–94, 241–242.

⁹⁹ Butler's outline of how a techno audience responds to a typical withholding on the dancefloor is indeed also applicable to dub: "[t]he crowd seems to actively anticipate the return of the beat: during its absence, they look toward the DJ as if to see what will happen next, and their dancing becomes tentative or breaks off. When the bass drum comes back, however, they dance with greater energy than in any other portion of the track, while enthusiastically expressing their appreciation to the DJ." See: *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁰⁰ Luis Manuel Garcia-Mispireta, *Together, Somehow: Music, Affect, and Intimacy on the Dancefloor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 72.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁰² Fink, "The Boom in the Box", 282.

as Chapter 2 will discuss, tactile perception is nevertheless crucial in bass culture). This much is evident in audiences' sometimes fervent reactions to a bass drop and its ability to engender sublime experience. For example, Veal describes the "frenzied shouts" and "convulsive ecstasy of possession" with which dancers have historically reacted to dub in live settings, including (more specific to the early days of reggae) violent sounds such as "lickshots", gunshots fired into the air in reaction to heavy bass.¹⁰³

Spencer has also examined at length the social and musical entanglements of the bass drop. He provides several valuable insights despite his findings being largely specific to the North American "EDM" scene where he conducted fieldwork. He observes, for example, how the bass drop can affect festival audiences in divergent ways, such that euphoric responses to the sudden rush of low-frequency power and musical climax are not necessarily a foregone conclusion. Some people revel in the intoxication of a new bass line while others experience the drop as sobering, engaging self-consciously with its extreme timbral and registral contrasts—which tend to be more exaggerated in "EDM" composition than in British dub or dubstep—in terms of aesthetic "filth" (the implied fetishistic qualities here will be considered in the next chapter).¹⁰⁴ Listeners "hunger" for the DJ's repeated delivery of these "discrete moments of rupture" in "dirty-yet-desirable (and readily digestible) chunks" and a "nonlinear" temporal flow.¹⁰⁵ In turn, Spencer finds that "the drop halts movement and triggers movement at the same time [...] it aims to afford an acute feeling of 'what the fuck?', a prevalent exclamation in the festival setting."¹⁰⁶ While the social and material contours of these findings are less pronounced in dub-diasporic scenes, where the shock value of the drop is often mediated more by bespoke sound systems or the bass lines heard in exclusive dubplates, both cultures share an emphasis on fragmentation/rupture in live performance. A striking example from Spencer's fieldwork is when DJ Mija at the 2017 Lost Lands festival played an impromptu section of grooving EDM inspired by Chicago

¹⁰³ Veal, *Dub*, 201.

¹⁰⁴ Spencer, "The Drop and The Fall", 58.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 20, 65, 220.

house, which many of the bass music fans in attendance “met with confusion”: some interviewees lamented that “there’s no drops!”, others stated “I don’t like music that sounds like it’s trying to hypnotise me”.¹⁰⁷ Revealingly, these responses spoke to how fragmentation/rupture can become entangled in the bodily capacities that DJs and listeners learn through music, associate with particular sounds over time, and then incorporate in their further participation in a genre or scene. As Spencer summarises, the “slow-burning timbral continuity and perpetual four-to-the-floor pulse [of house music] appeared to afford stasis and suspicion rather than the moving and grooving it was supposed to choreograph. Put simply, *the crowd did not know what to do.*”¹⁰⁸

The bass drop should thus be understood in the wider context of dub-diasporic bass culture and the ways it affords a more nuanced understanding of creative expression in EDM. The non-linear flow of the selector style and rewind together with the extreme sonic contrast provided by techniques like the bass drop show that these ideas are far from universal in EDM. Through the global spread of the dub diaspora, the principle of fragmentation/rupture continues to be adapted and incorporated in new settings, a prime example of which is dubstep.

Dubstep: Bass culture intensified

Since its inception in early 2000s London, dubstep has been a subculture almost exclusively about bass. Like dub, it has always been tethered to live sound system performance. Yet dubstep also concentrates and intensifies many aspects of the bass culture that preceded it. Indeed, bass matters to dubstep DJs, producers, and listeners to such an extent that it can be framed, to quote Jasen, as a modern day “bass cult”.¹⁰⁹ This is reflected in the impressionistic language of dubstep discourse, as in the documentary *Bassweight* and record labels such as Chestplate (a play on bass resonance in the chest delivered through

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 63. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁹ Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 151, 179–181.

dubplate records), and in the ubiquitous use of terms such as “sub” and “low” in promotion and distribution channels (see radio station Sub FM for example).¹¹⁰ Yet there is also a simplistic quality to this bass reverence; at times, it seemingly exceed participants’ ability to articulate it. As Skream, one of the genre’s pioneers and first superstars, summarised in a 2006 interview: dubstep is “purely stripped down, minimal beats and bass [...] the bass actually grabs you and sort of takes you [...] rattling in your chest and in your throat. *It just feels cool.*”¹¹¹

Only a few years following Skream’s interview, dubstep became an international sensation and one of the most influential branches of the dub diaspora. It was incorporated as a stylistic trend in chart music and catalysed the growth of the multi-billion dollar North American “EDM” industry, giving rise to “bass music” as a new—and contested—category.¹¹² These changes in dubstep have been examined by a handful of scholars, especially musicologist Mike D’Errico. He explores dubstep’s local-global flows via the internet and its mainstream-underground tensions, including the genre’s transformation into its commercialised “EDM” other, pejoratively termed “brostep”.¹¹³ Spencer pursues similar themes in his thesis on “the drop”, applying D’Errico’s ideas in contexts such as the aforementioned North American “EDM” festivals and trolling practices on social media.¹¹⁴

Most research into dubstep has so far focused on its impact on EDM after 2007; however, the genre’s subcultural strains and styles were never fully displaced. Here I argue the innovations of early dubstep (approximately 2001–2007) and its inheriting of dub’s creative principles warrant more attention. Dubstep in this period offers a window into an extreme intensification of bass culture where, as Skream put it, dub’s drums and bass mixes

¹¹⁰ *Bassweight*, DVD, directed by Suridh Hassan (London: SRK Studios, 2008); Chestplate, Soundcloud, n. d. (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://soundcloud.com/chestplate>; Sub FM, n. d. (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://www.sub.fm/>.

¹¹¹ Red Bull Music Academy, “Skream talks Dubstep Warz, Hatcha and FWD”, YouTube, 20 May 2015 (accessed 10 June 2023), https://youtu.be/wqchdQQV_QY, 03:00–03:15, 19:35–20:15.

¹¹² Mike D’Errico, “Electronic Dance Music in the Dubstep Era”, Oxford Handbooks Online (2015): <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935321.013.74>.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*; see also D’Errico, “Bassweight: Dubstep and the Transnational Space of Hip-Hop”, in *Hopeless Youth!*, ed. Francisco Martínez & Pille Runnel (Tartu: Estonian National Museum, 2015), 309–30.

¹¹⁴ Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”.

were reduced even further to “minimal beats and bass”, and techniques like the rewind and bass drop were recontextualised in the musical and social environment of British club culture. In this section, then, following an introduction to dubstep’s bass-centric design at the compositional level, I will discuss DJ performance in early dubstep and how it re-articulated foundational aspects of dub. Because contemporary dubstep scenes outside of North American “EDM” continue to honour most if not all of these practices (reflecting a remarkable commitment to the genre’s subcultural roots I will revisit in Chapter 5), the focus on early dubstep will also serve as an analysis of dubstep performance in general.

Dubbing 2-step garage

Dubstep began as a reinterpretation of 2-step garage. In late 1990s London, UK garage was the popular club genre of the day. Producers of the 2-step variant sped up and reconfigured the steady, “four on the floor” kick drum pulse of New York garage and Chicago house into more swung and syncopated patterns—with the name 2-step referring to this rhythmic asymmetry—at a tempo of around 130 BPM (up from house music’s standard of 120 BPM).¹¹⁵ When London producers such as El-B and Zed Bias took to producing instrumental 2-step beats with minimalist textures that cut vocals and other instrumental layers to foreground bass and percussion, they stoked a “dark” garage scene with Big Apple Records in Croydon being a hotspot.¹¹⁶ In a 2001 article, Steve Goodman—at the time writing on his website Hyperdub and DJing in the scene as Kode9—heard the remixing of 2-step into dark garage as a dub-like approach. He hence coined the term “dub step”, merged soon after into “dubstep” in a story by *XLR8R* magazine.¹¹⁷ Dubstep was thus less a direct descendant of

¹¹⁵ Lexis & Dr Love, “UK Garage History & Family Tree: 20 Years of UKG!”, 28 January 2003 (accessed 2 March 2023), <https://www.musicismysanctuary.com/the-history-of-the-uk-garage-family-tree#1999>.

¹¹⁶ Jordan Gather, “El-B, Horsepower and The Roots Of Dubstep”, *UK Bass Music*, 31 January 2019 (accessed 3 September 2023), <https://ukbassmusic.com/el-b-horsepower-and-the-roots-of-dubstep/>.

¹¹⁷ Oli Marlow, “Hyperdub Archive: 21st Century Skank: The Haunting of UK Garage (2001)”, *fabric*, 7 May 2014 (accessed 1 October 2020), <https://www.fabriclondon.com/blog/view/hyperdub-archive-21st-century-skank-the-haunting-of-uk-garage-2001> (original article by Steve Goodman, *Deuce Magazine*, 2001); XLR8R, “Dubstep History Honors XLR8R”, 17 August 2019 (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://xlr8r.com/news/dubstep-history-honors-xlr8r/>.

dub than it was a kind of convergent evolution in studio methodology and musical principles, spurred by the integration of Jamaican sound system culture with UK club music. Dubstep producers fragmented and reconfigured 2-step into drums and bass mixes intended for levels of bass amplification not typically available in clubs, with producers distributing the music to DJs via dubplates in a subculture revolving around live sound system events (especially the DMZ parties and club night FWD, pronounced “forward”) and a handful of pirate radio stations (such as Rinse FM).

Space, both real and virtual, was an important dimension of early dubstep. The music was in a sense doubly spatial, as producers sought to create new musical experiences of “bassweight” in the virtual “sound stage” of their tracks *and* in the space of the sound system-enabled dance floor.¹¹⁸ The manipulation of bass and space within the sound stage of dubstep began with rhythm. Whereas dubstep initially borrowed the groove template of 2-step garage, by 2004 producers such as Loefah were experimenting with a “half-step” groove, placing snare hits on the third beat of the bar rather than the second and fourth.¹¹⁹ Though dubstep beats had sped up to an average of 140 BPM by this time, the half-time groove effectively halved its rhythmic feel to 70 BPM while keeping the music amenable to being mixed by DJs at the original tempo. In addition, with longer rests between kick drum hits (which compete for valuable low-frequency space and can “muddy” a track if not carefully engineered), the half-step groove freed space in Loefah’s already minimalist mixes for longer and louder sub-bass lines.¹²⁰

Audio Example 1.3 is a 30-second excerpt (1:15–1:45 in the original) of the half-step groove and bass line in Loefah’s “Goat Stare” (2005). The drum pattern consists of a

¹¹⁸ The “sound stage” is the virtual three-dimensional space perceived by the listener in a recording. The careful positioning of sub-bass in the “low centre” of the sound stage is considered essential in bass music for creating a sense of immersion and fullness. See: William Moylan, *Recording Analysis: How the Record Shapes the Song* (London; New York: Routledge, 2020), 292–294; Fink, “The Boom in the Box”, 284.

¹¹⁹ Some dubstep participants consider “halftime” a more appropriate term than “halfstep”, and the exact musical origins of the groove are debated. See: u/adult_nutella, “When / why did dubstep become halftime?”, Reddit, 2 August 2022 (accessed 8 February 2023), https://www.reddit.com/r/realdubstep/comments/wenjex/when_why_did_dubstep_become_halftime/.

¹²⁰ Fink, “The Boom in the Box”, 284.

singular kick on the first beat and a snare between beats two and three, looping at 137 BPM (transcribed in **Figure 6 below**). The bass line is heavily saturated—a process that combines compression of the dynamic range and harmonic distortion to thicken timbre—and has a simple contour, droning on G₁ (49 Hz) with a downward glissando on the attack every two bars. A spectrogram visualisation of the excerpt (**Figure 7**) shows the extent to which percussion and bass dominate the relatively thin texture of the track. Loefah and others in DMZ, a record label and crew of DJ-producers influential in early dubstep, were strongly influenced by jungle in the 1990s, and Loefah’s approach to producing “Goat Stare” clearly references the sound design of jungle producers, who would emphasise bass and high-frequency drum sounds while “scooping” out mid-range frequencies.¹²¹ In an interview, DMZ frontman Mala relates their being influenced by jungle to the balance of space and bass they heard in dub:

[...] jungle really is like a London dub [...] the techniques that a lot of the guys use with the delays, reverbs [...] It wasn’t gnarly bass, a lot of it was that space between the high frequencies, and then there’s this gap, and then you’ve got the sub-low frequencies. [...] that’s how I thought sound should be.”¹²²



Figure 6 Half-step groove in “Goat Stare” by Loefah.

¹²¹ Red Bull Music Academy, “Mala talks Digital Mystikz, defining dubstep and Deep Medi label”, YouTube, 22 January 2018 (accessed 10 February 2023), 11:22–13:22, <https://youtu.be/Bmp0k0M8vzY>.

¹²² *Ibid.*

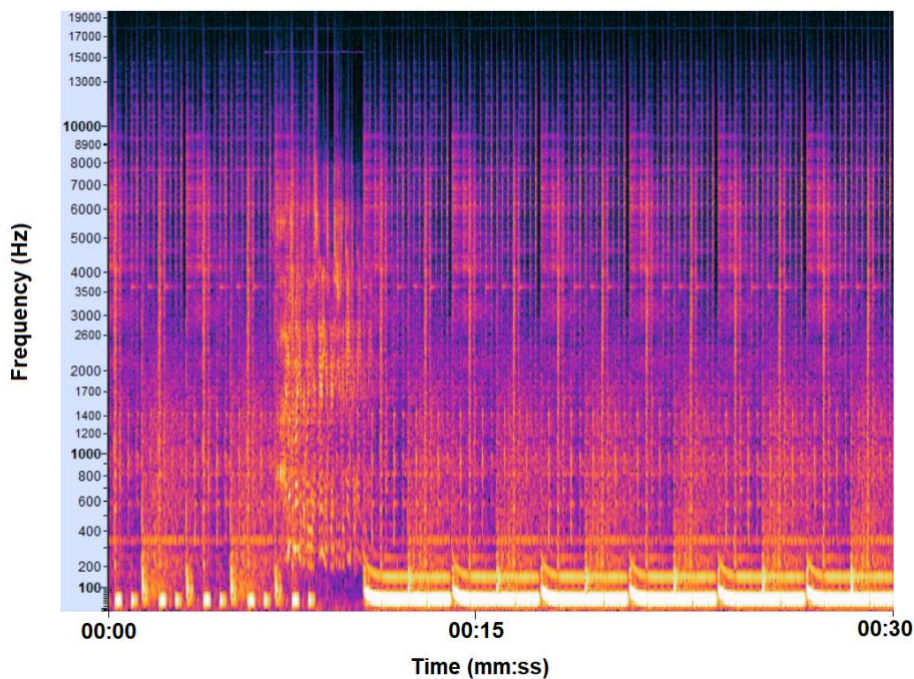


Figure 7 Spectrogram, half-step groove, Loefah’s “Goat Stare”.

A further stylistic innovation of early dubstep was its intensification of what Veal calls “an aesthetic of surprise and suspense, collapse and incompleteness” in dub.¹²³ Dub engineers treated the drums and bass reggae instrumental as a “continuously unfolding ‘canvas’ [...] [an] episodic coloration in which ‘explosive’ sonic events take place against a static background”.¹²⁴ The result was an improvised soundscape where snippets of drums, bass, guitar, field recordings, and more could drop in and out unexpectedly.¹²⁵ In dubstep, the spirit of this improvised studio art and its aesthetic of instability manifested in producers’ approach to bass and synthesiser melodies. Specifically, they crafted a style based on sharp, distorted synthesiser timbres and the “wobble” movement afforded by low-frequency oscillators (LFOs), which can fluctuate the attack, decay, volume, resonance, or other properties of an audio signal at a regular speed (usually up to 20 Hz), an ideal recipe for dub-like surprise and suspense. These techniques converged in a “maximalist” or “tear-out”

¹²³ Veal, *Dub*, 77–78.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

aesthetic that seemed deliberately designed to shock listeners through its juxtaposition of elaborate sound design, wobble bass, and a regular (and thus still danceable) pulse.¹²⁶

The ideal example here is the music of Coki: a canonical producer of early dubstep, DMZ member, and one half of Digital Mystikz alongside Mala. Coki's style often relied on wobbly, mid-range synthesiser melodies doubled in the sub-bass. His track "Spongebob" (2007), a 30-second excerpt of which (00:17–00:47) is in [Audio Example 1.4](#), shows this style at full strength. The main musical element is a complex modulated synthesiser melody colonising the soundscape and moving frantically between triplet and straight rhythms, the affect of which is almost entirely disorientating if not for the steady half-step groove of the drums. Skream's remix of "Ancient Memories" (2007) by Digital Mystikz ([Audio Example 1.5](#), 00:21–00:51 in the original), by contrast, shows a more restrained interpretation of this style. The track has a more intelligible stepwise motion in its bass melody; doubled in the mid-range by a relatively simple square-wave synthesiser lead, the texture also allows the snare and sub-bass to be more present in the sound stage than in Coki's production.

Variations aside, the mid-range maximalism crafted by Coki and other producers played a major role in dubstep gaining mainstream traction.¹²⁷ As Spencer discusses, wobble bass effectively became a "sonic synecdoche" for dubstep, a "genre topic" instantly recognisable by its combination of timbre and instrumentation—which was further reified in the tutorials that proliferated online explaining how bedroom producers could recreate such sounds.¹²⁸ Indeed, dubstep's dissemination in the 2010s on the internet via the "trebly" listening environment of social media platforms like YouTube (and the low-bitrate MP3 files uploaded therein) likely played a significant role in this process.¹²⁹ Dubstep was

¹²⁶ Perevedentseva, "Something for Your Mind, Your Body and Your Soul", 158.

¹²⁷ Spencer, "The Drop and The Fall", 12.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, 283. Musicologist Megan Lavengood recently advances the notion of a "genre topic", where timbre and instrumentation can converge to evoke an entire genre, a phenomenon she insightfully connects to the "digital-era polystylism" of sampling. See: Megan Lavengood, "Timbre, Genre, and Polystylism in Sonic the Hedgehog 3", in *On Popular Music and Its Unruly Entanglements*, ed. Nick Braae & Kai Arne Hansen (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 218.

¹²⁹ Marshall, "Treble Culture", 56, 65.

recontextualised from a sound system-centric local bass culture in a new, digitally mediated, globally dispersed “treble culture”.¹³⁰

Darkness and alienation: The Croydon context

The resonances between dub and dubstep also extend to social and geographical context, worth briefly documenting here. As dub reflected the postcolonial realities of 1970s Jamaica, so too was dubstep a product of multicultural, urban, 2000s London. In particular, early dubstep is often characterised as moody, serious music that reflects the alienating, neglected cityscape of post-industrial London, including by the genre’s own innovators. While perpetuating a crude stereotype, this perspective points to an important mediation of sound, space, and place in the genre. D’Errico discusses how the “origin myth” of dubstep is that it emerged as the fitting sonic signature of Croydon, London’s largest borough but far from its wealthiest.¹³¹ In Croydon, many dubstep artists met or interacted at Big Apple Records, where garage producer Artwork rented the studio above and informally mentored younger musicians frequenting the store. Artwork recounts in an interview that “Croydon was a dead zone, there was nothing to do [...] No clubs playing good music, complete crap everywhere you looked [...] when a record shop did open, it became like a mecca for anybody interested in music”.¹³² Loefah is similarly blunt in connecting dubstep to the troubles of working-class life in the area: “[t]here’s a reason it all came from Croydon. [...] [it’s] an incestuous town, with people just working, drinking, thieving, and getting fucked.”¹³³ A perspective more resonant with Mark Fisher’s “capitalist realism” is also expressed by Mala, who describes the “dark” aesthetics in his music as articulating the “struggle and

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ D’Errico, “Bassweight”, 319; Office for National Statistics, “How life has changed in Croydon: Census 2021”, 19 January 2023 (accessed 6 March 2023), <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E09000008/>.

¹³² Tom Kirkby, “A Chat With Artwork”, *Breaks Magazine*, 9 August 2014 (accessed 8 February 2023), <https://archive.breaksmag.com/2014/08/a-chat-with-artwork/>.

¹³³ Lauren Martin, “The VICE Oral History of Dubstep”, *VICE*, 23 June 2015 (accessed 1 March 2023), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9bqm5e/an-oral-history-of-dubstep-vice-lauren-martin-610>.

freedom” of life in London, adding, “it’s not an evil or menacing kind of dark, *it’s more just like life is*”.¹³⁴

The struggle Mala refers to is well-documented by scholars interested in British bass culture. Research into grime, for example, provides a useful touchpoint. Grime emerged in east London shortly before dubstep and was mediated by many of the same subcultural institutions, including pirate station Rinse FM and the FWD parties at Shoreditch club Plastic People (where dubstep DJs often had their sets hosted by grime MCs such as Skepta).¹³⁵ Joy White’s ethnography *Terraformed* lays bare the socioeconomic reality of grime’s emergence from predominantly poor, young, and Black areas such as Newham.¹³⁶ White demonstrates how the neutered neoliberal welfare state and its strategies of wage stagnation, privatisation, and austerity are—while broadly felt across the British working class since the 1980s—disproportionally felt in Newham and historically poor areas like it.¹³⁷ Grime scholar Monique Charles also notes how the genre centres a spatial-affective register of “coldness”, whereby “cold sounds [...] convey the sense of isolation or coldheartedness, the architectural nature of the blunt ‘concrete,’ lifeless or angular objects of the inner city, [...] [and] one’s precarious position in relation to gentrification”.¹³⁸ Media scholar Malcolm James similarly analyses the effects of neoliberal Britain on the sonic culture of grime. He connects its verbal expressions of “coldness” and “agonism” to the music’s characteristically “tinny” timbres and energetic pace (though grime is also a bass culture, with beats running at 140 BPM).¹³⁹ In turn, grime’s aesthetics directly reference “lo-fi, grit, soil and the ground [...] post-industrial places under erasure from the cleansing aesthetics and architectures” of the

¹³⁴ Red Bull Music Academy, “Mala talks Digital Mystikz”, 13:22–15:27, emphasis added; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009).

¹³⁵ James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 64; Martin, “The VICE Oral History of Dubstep”.

¹³⁶ Joy White, *Terraformed: Young Black Lives in the Inner City* (London: Repeater Books, 2020), 10–19.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34–36.

¹³⁸ Monique Charles, “MDA as a Research Method of Generic Musical Analysis for the Social Sciences: Sifting Through Grime (Music) as an SFT Case Study”, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1 (2018): 7.

¹³⁹ Malcolm James, *Sonic Intimacy: Reggae Sound Systems, Jungle Pirate Radio and Grime YouTube Music Videos* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 97.

towering east-London business districts that loom over areas like Newham.¹⁴⁰ Dubstep's investment in sub-bass pressure as a response to the pressures of urban alienation should be read as one of several similar expressions in the UK bass music continuum of the late 1990s and early 2000s. James cites a succinct explanation by grime MC Wiley: "[i]t's a cold, dark sound because we came from a cold, dark place."¹⁴¹

DJing dubstep

At the macro level, DJ performance in early dubstep occupies a middle ground between dub's traditional selector style and the newer EDM paradigm of smoothness. This approach outlines a continuum between dub's impulse to give each record "room to breathe", where it is not uncommon for individual tracks to be played for nearly their entire duration, and the more recent practice of beat matching, where DJs synchronise the tempo and "multimeasure patterning" or hypermetre of two simultaneously playing tracks to smooth the transition between them.¹⁴² As Butler discusses, knowing how to beat match is considered so fundamental to contemporary EDM performance it is "like learning to play one's violin in tune", though in inheriting dub's principle of fragmentation/rupture, dubstep does not strictly abide by this norm.¹⁴³ In an article introducing beginner DJs to the genre, an EDM blogger explains: "[w]ith Dubstep, you don't have to mix the beginning of track B into the end of track A. [...] it won't slide smoothly into your typical 4-on-the-floor transition, [...] But this genre's inability to play nicely with more traditional strains of EDM is one of the most exciting things [about it]".¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴² Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 194.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴⁴ Andrew Davis, "How Do I Start Mixing Dubstep? (Complete Guide)", *Spinbad*, 25 October 2021 (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://spinbad.com/how-do-i-start-mixing-dubstep/>.

These aspects of dubstep performance are demonstrated in a vinyl performance by Mala and Loefah, playing back-to-back live at FWD in 2006 hosted by MC SGT Pokes.¹⁴⁵ Three examples can be drawn from a five-minute stretch in the middle of the performance (30:18–35:18 in the recording) where Mala is in control and the audience responds with fervent energy.¹⁴⁶ [Audio Example 1.6](#) is a one-minute excerpt (30:18–31:18) of Mala mixing in selector style; he performs two dramatic rewinds in quick succession following a passionate response from MC and crowd. The excerpt begins with Mala ending his track “Learn” (2007), which he does not beat match or fade out gradually, instead removing it from the mix at 00:05 by powering down the turntable then immediately playing “Burnin’” (2007) by Coki (a bass-heavy remix of “Marijuana Pon De Corner” by Richie Spice). The power-down technique leverages the sound of the turntable’s motor winding down when its power supply is switched off. The pitch of the record warps as it slows and creates an exaggerated, drawn-out mechanical churn, a texture useful for transitioning between records.¹⁴⁷ As “Burnin’” reaches its bass drop, SGT Pokes exclaims “forward!”, and Mala places his hand on the record to stop it and play it again at 00:12 for the cheering crowd. At 00:24, Mala sets the record in motion again. SGT Pokes checks in with the dancers, asking “who said pull up the riddim track?!” and Mala stops “Burnin’” for a second time to even louder cheers, this time exaggerating the gesture by scratching the record. The “people have spoken”, announces Pokes. This short sequence concentrates many essential dimensions of dubstep’s bass culture. The crowd revels in the bass of a dub-inspired remix, performed in selector-like fashion with dubplate records—all in a stop-and-start musical flow that might be considered unruly and at best barely danceable in other EDM settings.

¹⁴⁵ GetDarker, “Mala b2b Loefah & Sgt Pokes – Live at FWD – 01.06.2006”, YouTube, 15 February 2020 (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://youtu.be/RGQ1Mvv8EhA?si=wZLupSPRGPMV6EBb>.

¹⁴⁶ Back-to-back or B2B is the term in EDM for performances where two or more DJs take turns playing records, usually two or three each at a time. Mala is “in control” in my examples here because he played the tracks, confirmed by SGT Pokes vocalising this as MC.

¹⁴⁷ The power-down technique is notable for its dub-diasporic connection to hip-hop turntablism, where nominally “noisy” extra-musical artefacts such as the sound of a needle scratching a record are reframed as musical. See: Veal, *Dub*, 85, 193.

Two more moments in this five-minute stretch are worth highlighting. In [Audio Example 1.7](#) (32:11–32:31), as “Burnin’” reaches the end of a 16-bar cycle and new structural downbeat at 00:08, Mala unexpectedly plays his canonical 2-step-inspired track “Anti War Dub” (2006). The entry is timed exactly with the beginning of the refrain in “Burnin’”, showing that Mala had beat matched and cued “Anti War Dub” using his headphones but chose to keep its volume down until that precise moment, for dramatic effect—playing into the record’s sought-after status at the time as an unreleased dubplate.¹⁴⁸ Mala also uses EQ to dampen the bass line of “Burnin’”, such that its instrumental beat and vocal line are audible over the “Anti War Dub” bass, making this transition reminiscent of a bass drop. **Figure 8** below illustrates the passage with a spectrogram, depicting the entry of the bass line and three-note ascending melody in “Anti War Dub” at 00:08. On display here is how, even in exercising the fundamental process of beat matching, dubstep DJs do not necessarily gravitate toward smooth transitions. The soundscape *within* records is generally a higher priority than the space between them. In this case, Mala understands the popularity of “Anti War Dub” and decides to unleash its bass line out of the blue to rupture the flow of sound and maximise its affective impact.

¹⁴⁸ This again is a technique resonant with hip-hop turntablism. Mala’s entry of “Anti War Dub” is akin to “slam mixing” in hip-hop where DJs change tracks by “slamming” the horizontal crossfader of a mixer to another channel, which mutes the current track and makes the next one audible in a single action. “Chopping” quickly between instrumentals in grime has a similar effect. See: Katz, *Groove Music*, 61–62; Sean, “Slam mixing”, Future Producers, 29 March 2001 (accessed 9 January 2023), <https://www.futureproducers.com/forums/threads/slam-mixing.4752/>; de Lacey, *Level Up*, 71.

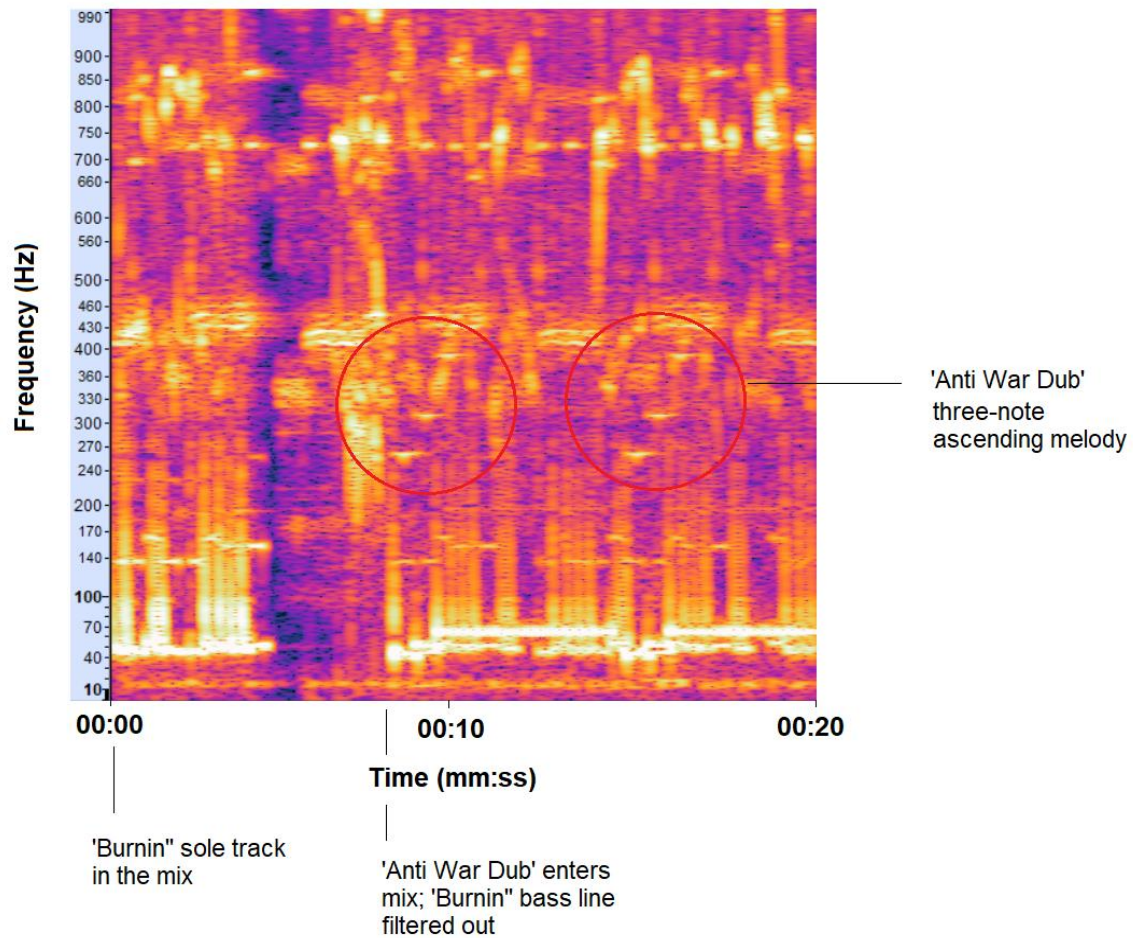


Figure 8 Spectrogram, transition into “Anti War Dub”, Mala B2B Loefah DJ set.

Relatedly, “Anti War Dub” features in my third example from this performance, a straightforward demonstration of the instrumental dub version enacted in a dubstep setting. In [Audio Example 1.8](#) (34:21–34:51), Mala again uses the power-down technique to transition out of “Anti War Dub” from 00:05–00:14. He then plays an unreleased instrumental version of the record at 00:15, engaging in the tradition of playing a reggae single and its instrumental version in sequence. The bass line is still recognisable as the ascending arpeggiation of a minor triad in “Anti War Dub”, but is now heard as a cleaner (less saturated) sine wave with no doubling in higher registers, embellished also with a more pronounced dubstep wobble in contrast to the original’s relatively sustained bass. The material affectivity of vibration converges with its capacity to resonate with culturally situated

knowledge in this moment: the crowd receives the dubbed version of a canonical record with more excited cheers (00:18), their appreciation for either side of the equation reducible to neither.

Technologies of the self: On the performative affordances of bass music

To bring this chapter toward a close and demonstrate the wider value of analysing performance in bass music, I return to Butler's 2014 monograph. In a theoretical discussion, Butler outlines a notion of "musical technologies of the self".¹⁴⁹ I suggest this framework opens a nuanced understanding of the DJ as an artist whose records function like a flexible toolkit of affordances, or technologies as Butler calls them, facilitating modes of performance that are contingent on genre and sociocultural context. The thrust of Butler's idea comes from Foucault's "technologies of the self", something broader than everyday tools. In Foucault's words, these technologies "permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things [...] [or] permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others [...] operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts [...] and way of being".¹⁵⁰ Butler transposes this idea to EDM, arguing that a musical technology is a specific aspect of sonic organisation in a given work which affords particular modes of performing.¹⁵¹ He primarily discusses how such technologies arise from rhythm in EDM, though this does not preclude the possibility of accessing technologies through other parameters such as timbre, and a given work may house several technologies with different affordances.¹⁵² In addition, the emphasis on affordance, referring to the concept developed in ecological psychology,

¹⁴⁹ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 174–175.

¹⁵⁰ Michel Foucault (1988), quoted in *ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 174–175.

¹⁵² Technologies of the self are also not exclusive to EDM, though they are particularly relevant to DJing given the performer's ability to leverage listener orientation: playing with something that runs. See: *Ibid.*, 105–107.

underlines how musical technologies can invite particular approaches while not necessarily closing others off: their expression depends on the performer.¹⁵³

Butler introduces seven technologies as examples, defining each in its gerund form akin to musicking. The first is “repeating”, serving as the generic category within which the other technologies fall. Given some also have overlapping functions (namely “cycling”, “going”, and “flowing”), I will describe the three most distinct technologies here: “grooving”, “riding”, and “transitioning”.¹⁵⁴ Grooving arises from repetition that shapes musical expectation. Butler focuses on “autotelic” patterns: those “designed to lead the listener to expect its beginning to follow its ending”, drawing from a typology of grooves defined by musicologist Timothy Hughes.¹⁵⁵ While any pattern could in principle be understood as autotelic, Butler clarifies by contrasting the cyclical teleology of autotelic grooves, in which the “simultaneity of arrival and departure is [...] fundamental”, with musical phrase structures based on tonal resolution (for example), where cadences demarcate the boundaries between each repetition and “the real resolution occurs at the end rather than the beginning”.¹⁵⁶ A striking example of how autotelic designs afford grooving for a DJ is the type of EDM composition known as a locked groove. These works are typically “etched into records as perfect circles, so that they will repeat infinitely on playback”, a kind of “DJ tool” as described above—where the music is rarely through-composed and typically only sees use in the creation of “third records” in live performance.¹⁵⁷

The next technology, riding, describes how DJs improvise “over” a record using turntables or the effects available in a mixer, laptop, and peripheral instruments.¹⁵⁸ The vocal improvisations of an MC and the filtering a DJ performs during a bass drop are examples of riding. Third is transitioning, which generally arises when record A is played, record B is

¹⁵³ Psychologist James Gibson theorised affordances as relationships between an individual and their environment that create both material constraints on, and possibilities to engage in, action, which Henriques has applied to the context of reggae sound system performance. See: *Sonic Bodies*, 120.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 191–228.

¹⁵⁵ Hughes quoted in Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 209.

¹⁵⁶ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 210–211.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; see also Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 5, 204.

¹⁵⁸ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 220.

introduced, and the two records audibly overlap, creating a temporary third record until record A is removed from the mix and the transition is complete.¹⁵⁹ Butler differentiates between transitions as formal sections within EDM tracks and transitioning as a performative technology, framing the latter as a state of flux that can be extended and improvised with for long stretches of time. Transitioning is not necessarily “a means to an end but rather [it can be] a goal in itself”, he writes; it “produces a constant, self-renewing teleology. The image that best captures this idea is that of a fountain. [...] [it] is not so much unstable as *dynamic*.”¹⁶⁰

Having established some of the performance strategies of dub and dubstep, and now with a framework of performative technologies in mind, fragmentation/rupture in the dub diaspora and continuous grooving in canonical EDM emerge not as fixed properties of the music in either category. Rather they are flexible *technologies* that afford DJs particular ways of performing and, through sociocultural context and the DJ’s agency, may be amplified, ignored, or recontextualised, none of which necessarily result in a “poor” DJ set. Stated directly, I suggest that fragmentation/rupture is the dominant musical technology of dub-diasporic bass music. This technology invites, but does not predetermine, performance strategies that can create equally fragmented and ruptured soundscapes. In the Mala b2b Loefah performance analysed above, for example, Mala shows that beat matching “Anti War Dub” and leveraging its 2-step beat to create a drawn-out, grooving transition *is* viable. However, the record’s bass-centric composition and the social context of playing at FWD appear to make it more appropriate to slam mix the track instead, and play into the impact of its bass line.

In Butler’s own analytical examples, his case study of Detroit techno pioneer DJ Jeff Mills is revealing in this regard, supporting my wider interpretation of musical technologies. He discusses how Mills was influenced by hip-hop turntablism early in his career, and now performs with a style that combines “the pace and virtuosity of hip-hop DJing with track

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 224–225. Emphasis original.

selections from techno and house”.¹⁶¹ This includes, for instance, “complex tricks such as beat juggling”, where two copies of the same record are played in alternating fashion to create a new extended passage.¹⁶² The “Purpose Maker Mix” Butler analyses features virtuosic turntablism of this kind, where for instance the autotelic grooves of Mills’ techno track “The Bells” are juggled in a series of unpredictable, rapid cuts that fragment the flow of sound in dub-like fashion:

Mills alternates rapidly between the two versions of “The Bells.” In a passage lasting a little over a minute (9:54–11:07), he switches records twenty-two times. He does so with the cross-fader: in contrast to the majority of DJs, who use this device for mixing between tracks, he reserves it almost exclusively for cutting. [...] He produces new rhythms—musical entities that do not exist in either record.¹⁶³

Though Butler does not refer to the dub diaspora, his analysis of Mills’ hybrid approach to techno performance shows how fragmentation/rupture need not be built into EDM compositionally for the music to be performed according to that principle. Indeed, Mills’ rapid cut-based style is reminiscent of the hip-hop-like “chopping and punching” de Lacey observes in grime.¹⁶⁴ If their improvisatory relationship with the MC invites it, grime DJs will, among other techniques, rapidly cut between instrumentals with the crossfader to create “alternative percussive lines” not present in either record individually.¹⁶⁵

A 2007 blog post by Martin Clark interviewing DJ Grievous Angel offers a useful final perspective on matters of affordances and technologies in bass music.¹⁶⁶ The post introduces an instalment of Grievous Angel’s “Dubstep Sufferah” mix series, self-described as “coherent, long-form pieces of music in the manner of house or techno mixes” with the present edition being “a dubstep versus grime cross over mix”.¹⁶⁷ Grievous Angel

¹⁶¹ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 152.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 164–165.

¹⁶⁴ de Lacey, *Level Up*, 71.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Martin Clark, ““This Is Not Your Normal Dubstep Mix...””, *Blackdown*, 16 July 2007 (accessed 9 January 2023), <https://blackdownsoundboy.blogspot.com/2007/07/grievous-angel-dubstep-sufferah-vol3.html>.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

perceptively discusses genre conventions and their affordances in terms of DJing, worth quoting at length:

To a degree this has always been the intention of DJing – ‘give me two records and I’ll make you a whole world’ – and it’s particularly evident in house and techno, where the blend creates radically new music. You can do the same with jungle and UK garage [but] [...] r’n’b and hip hop tend to jump between tunes even when they’re mixed, and together with the ragga-derived rewind, creates a deliberately discontinuous, even disjointed, progression.

[...] This is most apparent in live grime. Dubstep is actually very mix-friendly, but done live it has lots of rewinds and is very discontinuous. This has actually been a good thing for dubstep (even though the rewinds have been over-done) because it partially inoculates dubstep from some of the nerdier mixing-for-the-sake-of-it that you get in techno. But I think dubstep’s potential for continuous mixing is under-exploited.

Value judgements aside, this passage is an insightful meditation on the musical technologies of bass music. On one hand, Grievous Angel identifies the tendency towards “disjointed progression” in dubstep as it is performed live with plenty of rewinds; this tendency is shared by hip-hop and grime, where the creation of “radically new music” through beat matching is generally a lower priority than revelling in beats and bass (or the overall narrative of the set).¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, he appreciates that dubstep can be “mix-friendly” outside of live settings, such as in the Dubstep Sufferah mix series; dubstep’s half-step grooves can act as technologies of grooving, riding, and transitioning to create novel third records. As Grievous Angel states later in the post, “I’m happiest with my mixes when I’m [...] giving the audience something new and tasty from blending”.¹⁶⁹ A key point left implicit here is the emphasis on dubstep sets being discontinuous in the *live* environment but theoretically mix-friendly overall, which in turn speaks to the social contingency of musical technologies. As my analyses above show, performing a rewind may reflect the fragmentation/rupture and bass pressure built into dubstep compositionally, but the gesture hinges on real-time feedback from an audience: irrelevant in a studio mix like Dubstep Sufferah. Indeed, playing with “lots of rewinds” would be inappropriate in Grievous Angel’s case, and he instead has the luxury

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

of experimenting with the limits of dubstep's performance conventions: its possibilities for grooving, riding, or transitioning in the manner of live house or techno.

Conclusion

This chapter has taken a first step towards developing a musicology of bass culture by analysing the creative principles and performance practices of music in the dub diaspora. I explored the origins of dub as a remix culture of 1970s reggae that developed in tandem with sound system dances, where aesthetic priorities and performance strategies revolved around sonic fragmentation/rupture. I then examined three aspects of dub performance that enact this fragmentation/rupture and remain relevant to bass culture today: the selector style, rewind, and bass drop. The second half turned to dubstep, discussing how the genre inherits and intensifies elements of dub and can be interpreted in divergent ways by DJs in performance. In doing so, I expanded Butler's notion of performative technologies to reflect on the centrality of fragmentation/rupture in bass music. Whereas EDM orthodoxy tends to enshrine seamless continuity as the ideal quality of DJ performance, the dub and dubstep sets analysed here show that rupturing the flow of a DJ set through rewinds or bass drops can be just as expressive, without necessarily precluding the expression of other technologies like grooving and transitioning. Reflecting more broadly on the dub diaspora as a framework for bass music, it emerges, then, that a genre's belonging to the dub diaspora is defined less by direct historical links to Jamaican dub in the studio, than it is by how DJs perform the music through dub-diasporic technologies. Having established the most important dimensions of what bass music is and how it is performed, the thesis will next probe the epistemological implications of bass culture: the various sonic materialisms it engenders and inspires.

Chapter 2: Theorising bass culture: Affect and sonic materialism

Sound system is something where, I can tell you about it, but you have to *feel* it. You see, that's the nature of sound system. I could tell you about sound system from now til' tomorrow morning, but you have to feel sound system to know what sound system is about.¹

It's a sound you can't really describe until you hear it [...] There's a physicality to the music, you know, it's a physical listening experience. When you hear it on a big system, and you hear it loud, you feel the bass move through your chest.²

This chapter will examine the epistemological implications of a widespread sentiment among dub and dubstep DJs, captured in the above quotations: that you “have to feel” the vibrations of a sound system to understand bass culture. In this view, extreme vibratory experience—what dubstep enthusiasts refer to as “bassweight”—is the *raison d'être* of bass culture.³ More than a source of aesthetic pleasure, bass unlocks what reggae researcher Julian Henriques calls “thinking through sound”, or what cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun frames as “*sensual/sensory politics*”.⁴ Such vernacular and scholarly “low end theories” are the subject of a monograph by media scholar Paul Jasen, who similarly contends that bass-centric musics “*rely on felt vibration. They have a more explicitly material aim [than other popular musics] [...] saying ‘you had to be there’ is far less a claim to exclusivity or authenticity than a statement of material fact.*”⁵ In what follows, I will interrogate these ideas’ shared implication that bass culture facilitates access to an epistemology of sound and/as felt vibration, by

¹ Mikey Dread, quoted in *Musically Mad*, DVD, directed by Karl Folke (Uppsala: independent, 2008), 03:00–03:30.

² Joe Nice, quoted in GetDarker, “Dubstep documentary, 2006: Mala, Loefah, Skream, Youngsta, Kode9, Joe Nice, Blackdown + more”, YouTube, 1 June 2017 (accessed 11 November 2020), <https://youtu.be/fKYuwRUGhCo>, 04:58–05:21.

³ *Bassweight*, DVD, directed by Suridh Hassan (London: SRK Studios, 2008); Basstrap, “Basic dubstep question: What is bassweight?”, Dubstep Forum, 3 April 2011 (accessed 1 July 2023), <https://www.dubstepforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=192296>.

⁴ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*; Kodwo Eshun, “Futurhythmachine: [An interview with Kodwo Eshun]”, in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, & Jason Toynbee (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2006), 294. Emphasis added.

⁵ Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 170. Emphasis added.

critically reviewing a set of “sonic materialist” theoretical frameworks developed over the last two decades across music and sound studies.⁶ I will propose a flexible understanding of multiple sonic *materialisms* that can be productively applied in bass culture research and may be transferrable to popular music studies more broadly. The chapter aims to develop an intellectual toolkit that elucidates the “material fact” of low-frequency vibration to establish why DJs and their audiences participate in bass culture, bridging Chapter 1’s discussion of what bass culture entails musically and the following chapters’ case studies of how bass music is practiced today.

The main argument of the chapter is that the DJ is a vital yet under-researched dimension of sonic materialism in bass culture. As sound scholars Christabel Stirling and Iain Campbell define it, sonic materialism is a position that generally draws on affect theory developed from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to argue vibration has non-human agency and can impact people at the level of “autonomous” bodily affects in ways that precede signification and subjectivity.⁷ Expanding on EDM scholar Luis-Manuel Garcia’s critique of this literature as underestimating “the agency that listeners and dancers have in directing their own affective experiences”, I contend that because DJs also exercise agency in deciding which bass lines are felt, when, and how, they play an instrumental role in shaping how people experience sonic affect and thus bass culture’s sensual/sensory politics.⁸ Despite some theorists’ collective downplaying of agency in their centring of vibration—“it strikes before cognition can make sense of it, and before culture can mediate it”, suggests Jasen—live DJ performance remains the heart of bass culture and EDM.⁹ This demands a reassessment of received ideas of sonic materialism and the supposed affective autonomy of felt bass.

⁶ Campbell, “Sound’s Matter: “Deleuzian Sound Studies” and the Problems of Sonic Materialism”, *Contemporary Music Review* 39, no. 5 (2020): 618–637.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 619, 631; Christabel Stirling, “Sound, Affect, Politics”, in *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies*, ed. Michael Bull (London; New York: Routledge, 2019), 54–67.

⁸ Garcia-Mispireta, *Together, Somehow*, 132–133.

⁹ Jasen, *Low End Theories*, 11.

The chapter is structured as follows. I will begin with a three-part theoretical overview, introducing in turn the principles of affect theory, the debates around materialism and affect that have recently played out in sound studies, and the nature of tactile bass perception in human audition. I will then examine three materialist frameworks that are most relevant to bass culture: (1) sonic “dominance”, where bass reconfigures sensory habits and thus has political potential;¹⁰ (2) sonic immersion, where bass engenders “spherical” or directionless space in opposition to the “distal, linear logic of [...] visual space”;¹¹ (3) and sonic intimacy, where bass reproduction technologies and bass experience structure affective relations like “vibe” and “grime” that go beyond intimacy as romance.¹² These frameworks will be shown to explain bass culture’s sensory, spatial, and relational dimensions, respectively. I will conclude the chapter by weaving each framework into a brief case study of the sonic materialisms of London’s early dubstep scene.

Theoretical background

Affect theory

With the impetus for theories of bass culture being extreme felt vibration, a primarily physical rather than strictly musical concern, the materialist lens of affect theory is a fitting starting point. Affect scholarship broadly aims to understand what entities and sensations tangibly *do* beyond the Peircean semiotic triad of signifier, sign, and signified.¹³ I define affect here in line with theorists Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg as a feeling that arises in individuals or groups from a given force (the result of an “entity or event” acting or being acted upon), existing “beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing”.¹⁴

¹⁰ Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session”, in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull & Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 451–80; Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, xv.

¹¹ Will Schrimshaw, “Exit Immersion”, *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 158.

¹² James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 16–18.

¹³ For an overview of Charles Pierce’s semiotic theory in a musical context, see: Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁴ Gregory Seigworth & Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers”, in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 1. Note that I use the phrasing “entity or event”,

Affect in this sense is the result, as Stirling frames it, of something's "ability to alter our bodily states, to invade us physically in ways that first become perceptible as atmosphere, vibe, or sensation".¹⁵ Affects are distinct from emotion, though they afford emotional experience and may be interpreted as emotions. They are often accompanied by changes in the body's "visceral" biological systems, as with a joyful rush of adrenaline or anxious change in breathing.¹⁶ Yet researchers of affect stress that it can also be routine or mundane and "need not be especially forceful", as with, for example, the "ubiquitous musics" sedating customers wandering through a supermarket, or at home listening to a 24/7 "beats to relax/study to" channel on YouTube.¹⁷

Affective experience is thus a broad spectrum and can potentially be involved in fleeting, invisible, and even unconscious perception. This open understanding of affect derives primarily from the "affective turn" in humanities scholarship of the 1990s and its ongoing influence, as sociologist Patricia Clough outlines in her introduction to the matter.¹⁸ Music/sound scholars Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle further explain that affect theory after the "turn" builds on, but is largely different to, older and more established frameworks such as the Baroque "doctrine of affections" and "passions".¹⁹ The scope of this work is, like its interpretation of affect, wide-ranging and not housed in a singular discipline, though as Clough explains, the stakes of the research ordinarily centre on dynamics between individual and structural power under neoliberal capitalism.²⁰ Scholars probe, for example, into the affects of state surveillance or the lived experience of women's unpaid domestic labour.²¹ In

borrowed from Goodman, as a more concise explanation of what is typically referred to as "human and non-human" bodies or actors by affect theorists. See: Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, xiv.

¹⁵ Stirling, "Sound, Affect, Politics", 54.

¹⁶ Seigworth & Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers", 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2; Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Emma Winston & Lawrence Saywood, "Beats to Relax/Study To: Contradiction and Paradox in Lo-Fi Hip Hop", *IASPM Journal* 9, no. 2 (2019): 40–54.

¹⁸ Patricia Clough, "Introduction", in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Clough & Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁹ Marie Thompson & Ian Biddle, "Introduction: Somewhere between the signifying and the sublime", in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorising Sonic Experience*, ed. Thompson & Biddle (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 12–14.

²⁰ Clough, "Introduction", 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

Clough's words this engagement with affect theory reflects how the research is "occurring at a time when critical theory is facing the analytic challenges of ongoing war, trauma, torture, massacre, and counter/terrorism" and "the deployment of technoscience to reach beyond the limitations of the human".²² Philosopher Steve Goodman shares this outlook in his speculative survey of "sonic warfare", where affect triggered by forces of vibration "traverses police and military research into acoustic means of crowd control, the corporate deployment of sonic branding, through to [...] sound art and music culture."²³ Throughout his study, Goodman emphasises the need to understand how sonic affects take shape at the populational level, where even individually seeded feelings can bloom into a "bad vibe" within a group through "contagion", creating moods "both controlling and creative".²⁴ Overall, then, affect—especially when delivered through an inherently fleeting medium like sound—is important because it can move people even if they do not have a say in the matter. Affective analysis, in turn, can offer insights into how visceral feelings play out along asymmetrical power relationships. A potent example is musicologist William Cheng's essay on how loud, bass-heavy rap music and racial bias converged in a white civilian's murder of Jordan Davis in 2012, where Black music likely helped young men "feel invincible" yet simultaneously was filtered through instinctive bias to become "black noise", with tragic consequences.²⁵

The most common intellectual foundation for contemporary affect theory (including that used in the sonic materialist frameworks to be examined below) is the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (themselves building on earlier work by Baruch Spinoza), as interpreted by their students during the 1990s and early 2000s, especially Brian Massumi, Eve Sedgwick, and Adam Frank. Massumi's 1995 article "The Autonomy of Affect" discussed the limits of human perception and concluded that affect is a "pre-personal" phenomenon of intensities distinct from emotion.²⁶ Sedgwick and Frank's reading of

²² *Ibid.*, 1–3, 22.

²³ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, xv.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi.

²⁵ William Cheng, "Black Noise, White Ears: Resilience, Rap, and the Killing of Jordan Davis", *Current Musicology*, no. 102 (2018): 119, 128–129.

²⁶ Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect", *Cultural Critique*, no. 35 (1995): 83–109.

psychologist Sylvan Tomkins published the same year sought to decouple affect from the post-structuralist investment in textual interpretation popular in the late twentieth century.²⁷ Reviewing the legacy of these ideas in the wider affective turn, Ruth Leys discusses how the “pre-personal” view of affect popularised by Massumi sought to escape “the straitjacket imposed by the poststructuralist emphasis on language and psychoanalysis”, but ultimately reinscribed a rigid mind-body dualism where “intentionality has no place in the initiation” of affect.²⁸ Scholars taking a different approach have sought to avoid the pitfalls of biological “reductionism” by arguing for affect as social and culturally situated, as seen in Cheng’s study among many others.²⁹ Despite these different trajectories, the result is that affect theorists today tend, in Leys’ words, to “share a single belief [...] that affect is independent of signification and meaning” in some fashion, even if there remains disagreement about how that autonomy works in practice.³⁰ As Stirling summarises in a more recent review, “new affect theory” is most commonly concerned with larger flows of affect between events and entities within groups, akin to Goodman’s interest in affective contagion through populations.³¹ She writes: “theorists are [...] sceptical of psychoanalytic concepts of the bounded, autonomous individual subject, tracing instead the affective connective tissue that *binds subjectivities to other bodies, socialities, places, technologies, and worlds*”.³²

Sound studies debates

In sound studies, the last decade has seen a similar discourse play out around the question of whether sound and its affects are (or can be) a material, observable reality distinct from their social mediation. The catalyst for this debate is the work of self-described “sonic realist” Christoph Cox and a series of critical responses by scholars including Brian Kane, Marie

²⁷ Eve Sedgwick & Adam Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Sylvan Tomkins”, *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (1995): 496–522.

²⁸ Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique”, *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 440–441.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 456–457.

³⁰ Leys, “The Turn to Affect”, 443.

³¹ Stirling, “Sound, Affect, Politics”, 55.

³² *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

Thompson, Annie Goh, and Campbell.³³ In Cox's 2011 article titled "Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism", he starts by critiquing the tendency in cultural studies to assume that "there is no such thing as a prediscursive reality".³⁴ The logical extension of this assumption, Cox argues, is that any experience which "precedes linguistic processing [...] finds no voice in thought or discourse", and as such "there is nothing we can do with it" except "put it aside and concern ourselves with that of which we can speak."³⁵ Drawing on Deleuze's distinction between "the actual" and "the virtual", broadly corresponding to empirically verifiable nature and culture respectively, Cox develops a sonic ontology that asks of a vibrational "event" "not what it means or represents, but what it does, how it operates, what changes it effectuates".³⁶ In other words, he asks, what is the event's affective power? In doing so, Cox insists that sonic art operates "beyond the domain of 'culture', signification, and representation, [...] as particular manifestations of a broader differential field: the field of nature and matter themselves."³⁷

A fundamental problem with Cox's "sonic real", a close relative of Goodman's vibrational ontology, is that it separates affect from cognition and sociality in what Kane calls an "untenable dichotomy".³⁸ Despite Goodman claiming his project rejects mind/body dualism, he perpetuates this binary in suggesting, for example, that Afrodiasporic bass cultures like hip-hop and baile funk reverse structural "bad vibes" by deploying "bass materialism" to affect listeners on the same "subpolitical" or pre-cognitive level of perception.³⁹ But how does this bass-materialism-as-resistance manifest if, like the "bad vibes" of racial capitalism, it too operates on a pre-cognitive plane of affect? To what extent

³³ Christoph Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism", *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (2011): 145–161; Brian Kane, "Sound studies without auditory culture: a critique of the ontological turn", *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 2–21; Marie Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies", *Parallax* 23, no. 3 (2017): 266–282; Annie Goh, "Sounding Situated Knowledges: Echo in Archaeoacoustics", *Parallax* 23, no. 3 (2017): 283–304; Campbell, "Sound's Matter".

³⁴ Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification", 146.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Kane, "Sound studies without auditory culture", 7–8.

³⁹ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 81, 137, 172.

do all bass materialist practices take place outside conscious knowing? Critiquing Cox and Goodman together, Kane poses a series of questions in this vein. He concludes that the ontology “cannot account for cases where the end result of a process is more important than its initial conditions [...] [or] *very common instances of feedback, where the output of a process is fed back into its input*”.⁴⁰ Drawing on research by Sterne, Kane extends this point by noting the nuanced relationship between cultural knowledge and embodied practice that characterises auditory cultures, especially music. When listeners or performers “acquire new skills, *much of the cognitive effort involved in the initial training is offloaded onto the body*. [...] bodily capacities [then] constitute both the basis upon which training occurs and the ground for potential future cultivation.”⁴¹ The obvious connection here is to the Black diasporic dance musics that are “sidestepped” in Goodman’s project.⁴² When a dub selector or dubstep DJ performs a bass drop for their audience, the impact of low-frequency weight triggers an immediate affective response—likely a learned, embodied one—but it is mostly in the culturally contingent response of the crowd and their shouting for a rewind that a catalyst for further improvisation arises, paving the way for novel experiences.

As such, studies in “auditory culture” that attend to the materiality of sound and its socially-situated affects—like this thesis aims to do in developing a musicology of bass culture—are better suited to understanding a unified “body and mind” or “nature and culture” than the rigid sonic materialisms of Cox and Goodman allow for.⁴³ If bass music’s appeal were strictly affective and pre-cognitive, it would be impossible to account, for example, for why some genres “count” as bass music more than others (hip-hop, funk, and metal could all immediately qualify on account of their bass-centric designs and use of extreme amplification), or why outdated vinyl and dubplate records continue to be prized in dubstep despite the higher fidelity and affordability of digital formats. The clue, of course, is in the name: bass *culture*, which speaks to the social mediation of nominally affect-driven

⁴⁰ Kane, “Sound studies without auditory culture”, 7. Emphasis added.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴² Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 172, xv.

⁴³ Kane, “Sound studies without auditory culture”, 8.

practices. Garcia ties these threads together in his analysis of how sound leads to affective “resonance” between dancers in EDM, where he concludes that “ethnomusicology need not abandon cultural specificity in order to explore phenomena that exceed cultural frameworks”.⁴⁴ He writes:

The notion of “bass pressure”, for example, in the electronic dance music styles that form the so-called “hardcore continuum” (Fisher 2009; Gilbert 2009) – such as jungle, drum’n’bass, dubstep, and trap – exemplifies how affective experience (as a bundle of sensory and embodied feelings that leak into emotional registers) informs style and aesthetics. [...] Producers, DJs, and dancers all evince a fascination with the lower end of the frequency spectrum [...] where sonic affect becomes haptically manifest as force and movement. In this instance, affect is not completely “autonomous”, but instead bound up with taste, genre, and socio-historical context[.]⁴⁵

To conclude this section, it should be noted that the stakes of working through seemingly outdated nature-culture debates via affect theory are more than simply finding a productive analytical middle ground for music and sound scholars. As Thompson writes in dialogue with Black cultural theorists such as Sylvia Wynter and Frantz Fanon, there is “good reason to be suspicious of a reinvigorated interest in [vibrational] ontology, given the historical complicity of metaphysics in erasing and justifying violence against marginalized social groups.”⁴⁶ The basic problem of a dualist ontology in “new materialist” projects like Goodman’s and Cox’s is that a natural extension of its logic might conclude that “race and racialization are too social, too discursive and too ‘human’ to merit attention”.⁴⁷ In Goh’s discussion of these issues through a feminist lens, she adds that dualist materialisms also reinforce a gendered binary: between “the masculinist subject/mind/culture and the feminized object/matter/nature”.⁴⁸ Overall, then, Goodman’s assessment that Black diasporic musics deploy bass materialism to create affective alliances at a “subpolitical” level is less a strategic deployment of Gilroy’s “anti-anti-essentialism” and more a choice to sidestep the

⁴⁴ Garcia, “Feeling the vibe”, 26, 34.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies”, 267.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 268–269.

⁴⁸ Goh, “Sounding Situated Knowledges: Echo in Archaeoacoustics”, 288.

messy affective-social dynamics that give rise to these bass cultures in the first place.⁴⁹ Like the vibrations emitted by a sound system, the lived experience of race, gender, sexuality, or class is sometimes also felt through “split-second” affects before people can make sense of them emotionally.⁵⁰ A sonic materialism that casts these affects aside as purely cultural risks (re)producing a “white aurality”, Thompson argues, one that downplays its own situated perspective and, despite its effort to access a “sonic real”, becomes “entangled with formations of whiteness, masculinity and Eurocentrism”.⁵¹

Feeling bass

An important source of affect in bass culture is, unsurprisingly, bass. In this section I offer a third theoretical primer, considering from a psychoacoustic perspective why amplified bass, more than other registers, tends to be more felt in the body than heard. The aim is to shed light on precisely what bass experience involves and why it inspires critical reflection on vibration’s capacity to induce affect, exceeding signification and meaning to materially do something.

Beginning with definitions, sound is a type of mechanical energy that travels in waves through a given medium: air, water, or a solid.⁵² These waves consist of repeating bands of compressed and decompressed particles which create an oscillation as the waves propagate. This oscillation is measured in terms of its periodicity or frequency as cycles per second (Hz). The range of sounds audible to humans is generally regarded as 20–20,000 Hz.⁵³ Everyday sounds such as the human voice fall approximately in the range 500–1000

⁴⁹ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 172; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London; New York: Verso, 1993), 99–100.

⁵⁰ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 48.

⁵¹ Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies”, 272.

⁵² This and the other acoustics principles I discuss here will primarily be drawn from three scientific articles: Pat Brown, “Fundamentals of Audio and Acoustics”, in *Handbook for Sound Engineers*, fifth edition, ed. Glen Ballou (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2015), 256–94; Peter Xinya Zhang, “Psychoacoustics”, in *Handbook for Sound Engineers*, 169–230; and Jörg Mühlhans, “Low Frequency and Infrasound: A Critical Review of the Myths, Misbeliefs and Their Relevance to Music Perception Research”, *Musicae Scientiae* 21, no. 3 (2017): 267–86.

⁵³ Brown, “Fundamentals of Audio and Acoustics”, 267–268.

Hz, with most bass instruments falling somewhere in 40–400 Hz. The domain of sub-bass is usually 20–100 Hz, with 80 Hz being the industry standard “crossover frequency”: the threshold below which a subwoofer becomes solely responsible for reproducing those frequencies, leaving the rest to “mid” and/or “tweeter” speakers.⁵⁴

Loudness is a crucial factor in how bass is perceived. Human hearing is not uniform; the ear is broadly predisposed to sounds near the middle of the audible range like the voice.⁵⁵ Pitch becomes increasingly difficult to discern as a sound’s frequency approaches the extremes of this range, and very low or high sounds also require significantly more amplification to become audible.⁵⁶ This latter effect is more pronounced in lower frequencies such that amplifying a 50 Hz tone, for example, requires several orders of magnitude more input energy to have the same perceived loudness as a 1000 Hz tone (a phenomenon explained by the “equal loudness curves” of audition).⁵⁷ However, as Jörg Mühlhans notes in a review of low-frequency sound perception, even signals below 20 Hz can be audible with enough intensity, as with a 32-foot organ pipe sounding at approximately 16 Hz, for instance.⁵⁸ The extreme amplification required by sound systems at live bass music events is therefore not solely a subcultural ritual that revels in towering speaker stacks and massive wattage; it is indeed a prerequisite for bass to be felt in the body.

Given these parameters, it is unsurprising that live bass music can be an intense sensory experience. Anecdotally, most bass music fans who have attended a rave powered by a specialist sound system will be familiar with how sub-bass resonates their chest, head, skin, nose, or feet. Bass is routinely described as large, heavy, weighty, and deep, a penetrative force that shakes buildings, fills the body, and has gravity (as with bass “drops” in music and in the expression “drop the bass”). These experiences are valued in

⁵⁴ Fink, “The Boom in the Box”, 282.

⁵⁵ Zhang, “Psychoacoustics”, 191–194.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*; see also Thomas Stainsby & Ian Cross, “The Perception of Pitch”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, second edition, ed. Susan Hallam *et al.* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Mühlhans, “Low frequency and infrasound”, 278.

subcultures like dubstep to such an extent that they are given a shorthand term, “bassweight”, as captured in a 2008 documentary by the same name.⁵⁹ Another expression sometimes also heard in dubstep is “if your chest ain’t rattling, it’s not happening”, and claims in the scene that bass makes “your eyeballs vibrate”, induces hallucination, or can force professional DJs back to the green room to take a break are not uncommon.⁶⁰ Bass and the sound systems amplifying it are at times fetishised—in what appears to be more sublimated kink than commoditisation—as, for example, in the practice I observed regularly during fieldwork where dancers insert their heads or limbs into the cavity of subwoofers to maximise tactile sensation (to be revisited below).⁶¹ “It’s like eating good food. You feel it in your belly”, says a dubstep fan of such bass experiences in the documentary *Living Inside the Speaker*.⁶² Beyond dubstep, tactile bass perception is also embedded in cultural practices like the established Deaf Rave movement, who organise events “organized by and for Deaf people” to build community through vibration.⁶³ The capacity for bass to literally touch the body is indeed taken as given by some stakeholders, with deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie arguing that “[h]earing is basically a specialized form of touch. [...] With very low frequency vibration [...] the body’s sense of touch starts to take over. [...] we tend to make a distinction between hearing a sound and feeling a vibration, in reality they are the same thing.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *Bassweight*, dir. Suridh Hassan.

⁶⁰ Stephen Dalton, “Dubstep: ‘If your chest ain’t rattling, it’s not happening’”, *The Times*, 8 October 2010 (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dubstep-if-your-chest-aint-rattling-its-not-happening-tm7xgddq2jxk>; Lauren Martin, “The VICE Oral History of Dubstep”, *VICE*, 23 June 2015 (accessed 27 February 2023), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9bgm5e/an-oral-history-of-dubstep-vice-lauren-martin-610>.

⁶¹ By “sublimated kink” I mean a kind of bass fetish that appears to recontextualise a potentially painful or dangerous physical object/activity into a pleasurable one, though it is practically never sexual or acknowledged as such. This is arguably distinct from, though related to, the Marxist notion of the commodity fetish, where consumer technologies and goods become objects of desire in light of the individual’s alienation from their labour and community. See: Bates & Bennett, “Look at All Those Big Knobs!”, 1244.

⁶² *Living Inside The Speaker – Dubstep: Bristol*, DVD, directed by Michael Thomas and Mark Walker (Bristol: Rooted Records, 2006), 01:20–01:40.

⁶³ Deaf Rave, “About Us”; Holmes, “Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing”, 192–193.

⁶⁴ Evelyn Glennie, “Hearing Essay”, 1 January 2015 (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://www.evelyn.co.uk/hearing-essay/>.

To what extent, then, do DJs and listeners actually perceive bass outside the auditory system, directly in the body? What exactly makes sub-bass so phenomenologically big and heavy? The psychoacoustics literature is ambivalent on these questions. Mühlhans, for example, states that “the auditory system is the most sensitive detector for sound independent of frequency”, basing his position on several factors, including the general attenuation of vibration in the body by flesh, fluids, and bones and evidence that the sensitivity of skin to vibration reduces drastically with age (“approximately 50 dB per decade”).⁶⁵ On vibration of the skin, he notes specialised neurons can be sensitive to frequencies as low as 5 Hz but are most sensitive at 200 Hz, where “the threshold of displacement [...] is similar to the particle displacement of a 200 Hz sound wave with a level of 94 dB, *which is a very loud sound*”.⁶⁶ Mühlhans thus suggests resonance inside the chest/lungs around 50–80 Hz as a more likely example of felt bass supported by evidence from studies with profoundly deaf people. Again, though, he cautions that for the wider population, this experience requires potentially dangerous volumes.⁶⁷

Though reliable data on the volume of bass music events are lacking, limited evidence and the knowledge of cultural insiders offer some insights here. Some sources suggest that volumes typically exceed—and depending on subcultural context, *must* exceed—Mühlhans’ threshold of a “very loud sound”, including the hypothesised 40–50 dB excess required for resonance in the chest. For example, online comments by the dub-inspired Sinai sound system from Sheffield indicate that peak intensities at bass music festivals in the UK are in the range of 98–102 dB.⁶⁸ Other data suggest the average volume of a UK club is consistently over 90 dB, with DJ booths and “chill-out zones” such as

⁶⁵ Mühlhans, “Low frequency and infrasound”, 272.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ I spoke informally with Huw Williams, Sinai sound system’s owner, at Outlook Festival 2022, an event marred by hundreds of noise complaints from local residents (see Chapter 4). The organisers stipulated a limit of 98 dB, and in an online forum Williams notes a 102 dB limit for London venues. For context, the UK Health and Safety Executive recommends that continuous audience exposure does not exceed 107 dB. See: concept-10, “Sinai RC1”, Speakerplans Forum, 18 November 2022 (accessed 1 July 2023), https://forum.speakerplans.com/sinai-rc1_topic107484_post1063796.html#1063796; Health and Safety Executive, “Event safety - Noise”, n.d. (accessed 1 July 2023), <https://www.hse.gov.uk/event-safety/noise.htm>.

smoking areas exceeding 100 dB in some cases.⁶⁹ The vibrotactile perception of bass in the body may be more commonplace than Mühlhans' review suggests, then, especially given the ongoing success of projects like Deaf Rave.⁷⁰ In a study of "loudness and the affective encounter", musicologist Michael Heller affirms this position in discussing how extreme loudness transgresses the everyday reality (at least for hearing subjects) that "sound tends to be experienced as travelling from a remote source to our ear".⁷¹ When noise guitarists or metal audiences feel music resonate their body, loudness enacts a "somatosensory shift [that] transforms sound into a tangible presence"; Heller also argues this "erases our ability to distinguish between exterior/sound and interior/self", a popular claim that will be addressed in the second half of the chapter.⁷²

Even with extreme amplification, many audiences may not get to perceive the most tactile bass tones at the threshold of hearing for practical reasons. For example, engineers at live events typically filter out frequencies below 30 Hz. This is because the risk of harmonic distortion and the energy required to amplify a signal rises steeply, and the efficiency of subwoofers simultaneously declines, as its frequency approaches 20 Hz. For Mühlhans, this makes sub-bass perception below 30 Hz arguably a "counterproductive" pursuit.⁷³ The argument is corroborated by a convention among dubstep and other EDM producers that F minor is an ideal key for most tracks, and that the lowest note of a given track should generally not be lower than F₁ (43.65 Hz, roughly the middle of the contra

⁶⁹ Hiske Helleman & Wouter Dreschler, "Short-Term Music-Induced Hearing Loss after Sound Exposure to Discotheque Music: The Effectiveness of a Break in Reducing Temporary Threshold Shift", *International Journal of Audiology* 54, sup. 1 (2015): S46.

⁷⁰ Deaf Rave founder Troi Lee explains in a documentary how, at these events, his audiences tend to "rely on the vibration of the floor, or whatever surfaces they are next to. You just turn the bass up, and you will feel that vibration." I will stress here, though, that this does not mean the ways a hearing person and a Deaf person experience felt bass are necessarily equivalent. For instance, Jessica Holmes observes in her critical reassessment of listening for musicology that interaction through sign language, lighting, dancing, and other visual-corporeal modes of communication remains paramount at events like Deaf Rave despite their leveraging of vibrotactile perception. See: Champions of Independent Culture, "Deaf Rave: Feel the Beat", 00:25–00:40; Holmes, "Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing", 192–193.

⁷¹ Michael Heller, "Between Silence and Pain: Loudness and the Affective Encounter", *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 44.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷³ Mühlhans, "Low frequency and infrasound", 278.

octave).⁷⁴ This convention appears to be a compromise between achieving tactility in the live environment and audibility in domestic and mobile listening, and in turn it speaks to the value of analysing how bass culture is mediated by “trebly” new media and the internet (see Chapter 5).⁷⁵

Robert Fink is also sceptical of bass enthusiasts’ eulogising of low-frequency vibration as a force that exceeds audition. He writes that the ear is “so sensitive to sound energy, that any other part of your body produces, by comparison, only a faint sensory trace when vibrated”.⁷⁶ Fink also notes how research into low-frequency noise in health contexts finds that the resonant frequency of the human body is likely around 5 Hz, well outside the usual domain of sub-bass in music.⁷⁷ A further point relates to equal-loudness curves, which by Fink’s calculation are such that a 30 Hz tone “takes roughly one million times the energy of the softest audible sounds for us to hear anything at all.”⁷⁸ What follows from this, however, is a positive: that the intensities required for amplified bass to induce hearing damage or otherwise harm people are so extreme that they are virtually impossible to encounter even in subcultural scenes that specialise in bass.⁷⁹ Indeed, I observed during fieldwork at Outlook Festival how even safety-conscious ravers welcomed the opportunity to remove their earplugs and revel in the weight of a well-tuned sound system—including by dipping their heads into subwoofers. The potential for one’s hearing to go unscathed despite the extreme volume in these settings is explained by higher frequencies generally being the most responsible for ear fatigue and hearing damage, and that they rarely cross the threshold of tactile perception (they can however limit our perception of dynamic range even at relatively low volumes).⁸⁰ Moreover, in bass music high frequencies are usually less

⁷⁴ See, for example: digital cause, “What is the lowest note you use for bass?”, Dubstep Forum, 7 June 2010 (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://www.dubstepforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=146631>; u/[deleted], “What notes to use for dubstep”, Reddit, 9 April 2020 (accessed 10 March 2023), https://www.reddit.com/r/edmproduction/comments/fy0xzi/what_notes_to_use_for_dubstep/.

⁷⁵ Marshall, “Treble Culture”, 47–51.

⁷⁶ Fink, “Below 100 Hz”, 94.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 93, 97.

⁸⁰ Fink, “Below 100 Hz”, 97.

pronounced than in other EDM genres to begin with, given their relatively low importance at the compositional level.

To preface my discussion of sonic immersion below, it is helpful to consider here one more aspect of bass psychoacoustics: directionality. On this point Fink is again critical of authors such as Henriques and Goodman, who “impute a uniquely insidious metaphoric character” to sub-bass by claiming “it has the subversive ability to impinge on us from nowhere and everywhere at once”.⁸¹ I will return to a range of humanistic perspectives on this shortly, but strictly in terms of perception, directionality relates to the basic law that frequency is inversely proportional to wavelength: the physical distance covered by one oscillation of a sound wave. Low-frequency waves oscillate slowly and are thus large in wavelength. A 20 Hz signal is approximately 17 metres long. Fink explains that the “supposed nondirectionality” of felt bass in spaces like concert halls and outdoor festivals is therefore rare, since engineers have established strategies for positioning and tuning subwoofers in these settings to avoid phasing and other problems.⁸² However, he concedes that in spaces narrower than a typical sub-bass wavelength “there is indeed great difficulty in localizing low frequencies”.⁸³ Though understated by Fink, this is an important point given the subcultural position of many bass music scenes. In contemporary dub and dubstep, occupying large concert venues is unusual, making immersive bass experience in tight basement clubs and small community halls a realistic prospect.

Lastly, there may be an underlying psychological association between bass and large, heavy forces in nature whose directionality is difficult to ascertain. This insight comes perhaps unexpectedly from the study of metal music. Despite being socially distinct from bass culture, metal has much in common with a genre like dubstep in its pursuit of loud, low, distorted bass with “heavy” and “punchy” aesthetics, heard through massive sound systems

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

in live performance.⁸⁴ As musicologists Jan Herbst and Mark Mynett indicate, sub-bass in metal “creates heaviness through reference to the physical world” and a base understanding that “lower frequencies generally require bigger entities able to generate this energy”, whether it be thunder or a large animal.⁸⁵ Layered with distortion, which can also connote “high-intensity emotion” in resembling the timbre of strained vocal chords for example, felt bass can thus powerfully evoke weight, dominance, immersion, or fear.⁸⁶ It can touch the body and induce affect even if listeners know its source and directionality.

Sonic dominance

The extreme experience of bass music is captured in the framework “sonic dominance”, a prominent intervention in sonic materialist discourse developed by cultural scholar and reggae sound system researcher Julian Henriques.⁸⁷ Sonic dominance has an intuitive sensory point of departure, arguably its greatest strength as an affective framework. When I feel a bass line surround my body, resonate my chest, and flap my trouser legs at a dub session, the sound physically dominates the space and assaults my senses. As a scholarly framework, sonic dominance also concentrates a cluster of related ideas about sound as a force with political potential. This politics stems from two factors: vibration’s mediation of an alternative “way of knowing” the world that Henriques calls “thinking through sound”, and vibration’s capacity to modulate the affective state of whole populations and therefore be a potential tool for violence.⁸⁸ Like Goodman’s sonic warfare, then, sonic dominance has an underlying goal of theorising vibratory power in general, with Jamaican reggae sound systems as the primary testing ground. As Henriques writes, reggae is only “the epistemic

⁸⁴ Jan-Peter Herbst & Mark Mynett, “Toward a Systematic Understanding of “Heaviness” in Metal Music Production”, *Rock Music Studies* 10, no. 1 (2023): 20, 22.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session”.

⁸⁸ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, xv; Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, xiv.

example” of sound’s affective potential in society, with sonic dominance also encountered in sports arenas, political rallies, and so on.⁸⁹

“The first thing that strikes you in a Reggae sound system session is the sound itself. The sheer physical force, volume, weight and mass of it. Sonic dominance is hard, extreme and excessive.”⁹⁰ This is Henriques’ introduction to sonic dominance, a saturated state of feeling where bass rattles the chest and vibrates the flesh. It is “visceral, stuff and guts”, at times akin to diving “deep underwater” (a provocative spatial metaphor I will return to shortly).⁹¹ In this setting, sound has “the near monopoly of attention” as it potentially “blocks out rational processes” in listeners, but Henriques is careful to note that this is not a stereotypical “trance” state.⁹² Rather, the sonic dominance of the reggae session has unpredictable affects. Selectors draw for new dubplates or instrumental cuts that do not mean something so much as they move something: air, clothes, people. Sonic dominance is felt when the music resonates sympathetically with the skin, feet, or chest, encouraging—probably forcing—meditative self-awareness. As he puts it, “Sound at this level cannot but touch you and *connect you to your body*”.⁹³ In turn, sonic dominance activates “fears of the body as a threat to rationality”, enacted in subcultural settings that, from the perspective of Jamaica’s middle and upper classes, consists of “vulgar” street parties, “lewd” dance, and working-class “cacophony”.⁹⁴

Sonic dominance in a sound system session is thus always already politically transgressive in its mode of sensory experience. This leads to one of Henriques’ main arguments: that sonic dominance displaces ocularcentrism, that is, the primacy of vision, in Western modernity’s hierarchy of knowledge.⁹⁵ It rejects the dominance of language and text as the primary modes for creating and disseminating knowledge, in favour of a “flattened”

⁸⁹ Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session”, 451.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 452.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 452.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 452, 457.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 464.

hierarchy where hearing is engaged multi-modally with the other senses: embodied knowledge.⁹⁶ In this way, the vibratory immersion of the sound system session teaches its participants an alternative to the “long association between the visual, the rational and the mind [...] opposed to – the sonic, the irrational and the body”.⁹⁷ A related idea is that sonic dominance operates on a “both/and” rather than “either/or” logic in its juxtaposition of sensory extremes.⁹⁸ Henriques argues the affects of the reggae sound system can involve pleasure *and* pain, sight *and* sound; you move to the rhythm of a bass line but its vibration also moves you.⁹⁹ Embodied knowledge and affect thus co-exist with signs and representational meaning in the dancehall as a “multimedia” form of musicking.¹⁰⁰

It is important to interrogate the implied dimensions of power in sonic dominance. Henriques paints an extreme picture regarding the sensory overload of the sound system: “[t]here’s no escape, no cut off, no choice but to be there.”¹⁰¹ In using the term “dominance”, Henriques argues the framework is about power “shared with others, in peaceful collective endeavours” rather than power “used over others, as in oppression”.¹⁰² Extrapolating this thinking, sonic dominance is both an affective state felt by individuals and the product of a social occasion between DJ, sound crew, and audience based on agreed-upon values and ethics. It is not simply the predetermined outcome of specialised speakers projecting bass, but rather depends on the agency of performers and listeners and—as Goodman’s project investigates—has the potential to be abused or resisted.¹⁰³ What also warrants critical attention here and in Henriques’ passing comment that the sound system can feel like it is “playing on the bone and resonating the genitals”, is the possibility of sonic dominance as an implicit or sublimated bass fetish.¹⁰⁴ If the DJ delivers dominance then the crowd are their

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 452, 467.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 465.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 460.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 458, 462–463.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 464.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 451.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 453.

¹⁰³ Framed differently, sonic dominance involves the production of a particular sonic space, which in turn includes the construction of a particular *social* space, an issue to be returned to below regarding immersion.

¹⁰⁴ Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session”, 452.

willingly submissive participants, and the sound system is their vibrating toy. In light of bass culture's predominantly young, heterosexual, and male audiences, sonic dominance (and indeed most of the materialisms under discussion in this chapter) can therefore be read as a kink that men can safely, collectively engage in without a threat to their masculinity or sexuality.¹⁰⁵ Libidinal undercurrents aside, Garcia addresses these issues of power and affect precisely in his study of the "resonance" between individuals in night clubs, working against crude utopian readings of EDM where "asymmetries of power are entirely absent from the dancefloor."¹⁰⁶ He discusses how the materiality of bass means it can "transmit affect trans-personally and non-representationally" through crowds, which while "providing a basis for shared affective experience" does not preclude the music being "emotionally perceived in divergent ways by co-listeners."¹⁰⁷ The push-and-pull of agency on the dancefloor amidst a flood of sonic dominance is thus not to be underestimated:

[...] the DJ is expected to "read the crowd" and risks losing their support if the performer "forces the vibe" in a direction that the dancers do not wish to follow. Such subcultural norms evince an awareness of the coercive capacities of sonic affect without foreclosing on the possibility of resistance.¹⁰⁸

Overall, the wider stakes of sonic dominance echo those I discussed above with respect to materialism and affect theory. Henriques aligns his framework, particularly its element of knowing-through-sound, with an interdisciplinary field shaped by postcolonial, feminist, and queer studies (such as by Sedgwick). Sonic dominance is therefore not necessarily novel, and Henriques identifies its multiple intellectual predecessors. In particular, the binary oppositions he establishes between sonic and visual knowledge—such as circular/linear, irrational/logical, and whole/dichotomous—map directly onto those in Jonathan Sterne's "audiovisual litany", where hearing opposes seeing along binaries such as

¹⁰⁵ This topic also deserves further investigation in light of (ethno)musicologists Eliot Bates and Samantha Bennett observing how men in online spaces like the forum Gearslut (recently renamed Gearspace) reproduce a "hegemonic masculinity" in their overt sexualisation of, and desire to own, analogue equipment like sound systems and mixing desks. See: Bates & Bennett, "Look at All Those Big Knobs!", 1244.

¹⁰⁶ Luis-Manuel Garcia, "Feeling the vibe: sound, vibration, and affective attunement in electronic dance music scenes", *Ethnomusicology Forum* 29, no. 1 (2020): 28–33.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

spherical/directional and affective/intellectual.¹⁰⁹ Henriques also draws connections to ethnomusicologist Steven Feld’s “acoustemology”, which explicitly forged “acoustics and epistemology to argue for sound as a capacity to know”, and to Murray Schafer’s canonical “soundscape” research and Gibson’s ecological perception.¹¹⁰ Knowing-through-sound can even be read as resonating with a tendency in postmillennial music studies to work against the grain of music-as-text: to displace interpretive analysis of “the work” and its meaning with a focus on musicking as “a material, present event” (as Carolyn Abbate put it in her classic essay).¹¹¹

Sonic immersion

Whereas sonic dominance is about the sensory experience of bass culture, sonic immersion—the next materialist framework I will examine—is about the spatial dimensions of that experience. Sonic immersion is not attributable to a single scholar, though Henriques will again be a prominent voice here. I use the term to encapsulate a wider discourse amongst bass music researchers, DJs, and fans concerned with how bass surrounds, fills, and interacts with space. The following discussion will therefore work through sonic immersion from a variety of perspectives. I will begin by grounding immersion in research on sound, space, and sociality, before moving to sonic immersion’s imbrication with metaphors of water and the womb and the implied gendered dimensions of this thinking.

Sonic immersion is, in essence, a claim that amplified bass engenders what media theorist Marshall McLuhan called “acoustic space”.¹¹² In sound scholar Will Schrimshaw’s summary, acoustic space is a “field of simultaneous relations without centre or periphery” that follows an “encircling” logic rather than a “linear, distal” one.¹¹³ While acoustic space can

¹⁰⁹ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 255; Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 15.

¹¹⁰ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, xviii; Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, third edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), xxvii.

¹¹¹ Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?”, 506.

¹¹² Marshall McLuhan, “Visual and Acoustic Space”, in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox & Daniel Warner (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 67–72.

¹¹³ Will Schrimshaw, “Exit immersion”, *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 157–158.

be facilitated by sounds across the frequency spectrum, bass is presumably particularly effective at doing so, given its tendency to resonate floorboards, ceilings, and chest cavities and exceed our ability to perceive its pitch and directionality. Furthermore, in dub-diasporic sound system cultures, speakers are usually level with the audience and surround the dance floor in a square or triangular shape, projecting inwards at performer and listener together. Henriques and Beatrice Ferrara note how such arrangements are crucial to the demarcation of space and place in the context of street performance at Carnival, for example.¹¹⁴ Taking these factors together, bass creates a seemingly inescapable sonic envelopment and literally forces people to feel the same vibrations together. As Henriques writes, in contrast to “the insertion of music into the body when listening with in-ear headphones”, a reggae session facilitates “immersion of the whole body inside the sound”.¹¹⁵ Indeed, dancers sometimes take immersion into their own hands, as one of Henriques’ interviewees explains: “[i]t’s not just enough to hear it, you got to feel it ... I take a dangerous proximity to the speakers. [...] it is about loudness, but it’s also about this quality. I plug my ears so I can get nearer to the speaker.”¹¹⁶

In Henriques’ summary, the acoustic space of a reggae sound system session is “a kind of space you are inside as well as outside and it is inside you as well as you being inside it.”¹¹⁷ Sonic immersion thus brings us to, again, the reductive binaries of Sterne’s audiovisual litany, where amplified bass is only one of many means of experiencing the sound’s “encircling” logic. Schrimshaw critiques this problem in his 2015 essay “Exit Immersion”, where he identifies how Sterne’s framework—itself an extension of McLuhan’s earlier work on acoustic space—has become “the predominant ideology” in sound studies.¹¹⁸ Anticipating Fink’s issues with the writing of Goodman and Henriques on bass culture, Schrimshaw argues that the ideology of immersion limits epistemological progress by being

¹¹⁴ Henriques & Ferrara, “The Sounding of Notting Hill Carnival”, 140–141.

¹¹⁵ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 54.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19; see also 80.

¹¹⁷ Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session”, 459.

¹¹⁸ Schrimshaw, “Exit immersion”, 157.

opposed to ocularcentrism to such an extent that it removes distinctions like interior/exterior and subject/object from the analytical equation. Sound is consigned to being “vague, imprecise, ambiguous, anonymous, and blurry”, and “[i]n place of the trained or critical ear we find [...] an appreciation of sounds simply given, as they appear “immediately” in a purely qualitative state.”¹¹⁹ Sound scholar Andrew Eisenberg shares this perspective in an article on the relationship between sound and space, where he argues that a totally immersive sound would vibrate impossibly “everywhere and nowhere” and become, in effect, “sound without space”, which is to say unimaginable.¹²⁰

A pragmatic solution out of these issues, I suggest, is that sonic immersion should be understood as a set of idealised sound-space relations that bass cultures strive to (re)produce. At its most immersive, bass *feel/s* as though it is spaceless despite being constrained by physics and the limits of our audition. Of course, in the *livity* of a sound system session—the Jamaican patois for lifestyle or “a way of being-in-the-world”, as Henriques explains—the difference is unlikely to matter.¹²¹ In Fink’s summary, bass immersion is a “textbook example” of “the Kantian sublime” where part of the thrill is being surrounded by “a phenomenon much larger than ourselves [...] but without any real physical pain or danger. Safe behind the evolutionary specialization of our ears, we can contemplate the vibratory energies of the bass register in comfort.”¹²² Goodman echoes this sentiment when he frames the sensory extremes of bass culture as “fear activated deliberately to be transduced and enjoyed in a popular music context.”¹²³ These perspectives speak again to a potential reading of bass immersion as kink, as well as to the established resonances between fragmentation/rupture and sonic warfare in bass culture, including for example the Rastafarian discourses of “dread” sound that music scholar Nabeel Zuberi documents.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹²⁰ Andrew Eisenberg, “Space”, in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak & Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2015), 193.

¹²¹ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 7, 25, 100.

¹²² Fink, “Below 100 Hz”, 95.

¹²³ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 29.

¹²⁴ Zuberi, “Worries in the Dance”, 189.

Another useful theoretical framing for sonic immersion is in Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre's established theory of the social production of space, an intellectual precursor to the argument that bass produces acoustic space.¹²⁵ According to Lefebvre, social space is both the grounds for and result of economic production, and its qualities can be simultaneously naturally "given" (as with the constraints of physical geography) and a "locus of possibilities" for change through cultural practice (including music).¹²⁶ Lefebvre's ideas have been applied in many studies of music in/as social space, with Caspar Melville, for example, arguing in his study of London sound system cultures that scenes like jungle and acid house effectively "remapped the city, [...] opening up new spatial possibilities and political alternatives in the face of attempts to dominate and fix space in the service of the status quo".¹²⁷ Melville shows how bass music is both a social activity that modulates the racialised "power geometry" of the city, and a material force that creates new space for those immersed in its vibrations: recall Gilroy's argument for the reggae dance hall "summoning" a utopian space that "doesn't work the way that the outside world works".¹²⁸ Returning again to Henriques and Ferrara's work, they show how the sounding of reggae crews in the streets of Notting Hill each year plays a key role in producing the social space of Carnival.¹²⁹ Bass lines flood a neighbourhood with an "exclusively white" social image, temporarily transforming it into a celebration of Black diasporic London.¹³⁰

Metaphors of bass experience as submersion under water constitute another trajectory of sonic immersion discourse. In dubstep, the ocean looms large in insider depictions of bassweight, with Goodman, for instance, speaking (at the time as DJ-producer Kode9) on the environment of the revered party DMZ in mid-2000s Brixton: "[t]he sub-bass on the system in there makes the air heavy. There's a blue light [...] It's kind-of like doing a

¹²⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹²⁷ Melville, *It's a London Thing*, 6–7.

¹²⁸ Bass Culture Research, "Bass Culture: Paul Gilroy (part two)", 40:03.

¹²⁹ Henriques & Ferrara, "The Sounding of Notting Hill Carnival", 131, 139.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

rave 20,000 metres under the sea.”¹³¹ In *Low End Theory*, Jasen extends this idea with an experiential vignette of a raver moving to the aquatic rhythms of a bass line. As “she presses downward, over and over, seeming to nearly touch an invisible mass coursing around her[,] There’s no suggestion of playacting [...] there is something livably liquid about this dancefloor.”¹³² Jasen pursues this metaphor in detail, using it to illustrate the “structuring agency” of vibration:

Liquid surroundings quite obviously alter what a body can do. [...] In their undulant weight, we sense new constraints, but also new potentials. [...] So we try things out: “How will this feel ... ? How else might I move ... ?” We might intuit little repertoires of aqueous techniques that can be linked and elaborated. When we do these things together – devising games, forming groups – they acquire a sociality.¹³³

This metaphor is effective, I suggest, because it helps explain how low-frequency pressure operates at the level of affect *and* how that affect catalyses cultural practice. Like swimming through ocean waves, bass immersion can feel heavy and even suffocating. It can seemingly force dancers to adapt to its rhythms before interpretation or emotion sinks in; as Jasen suggests, seemingly “independently of our ideas and intentions”.¹³⁴ Yet in the dance, DJs also exercise taste and skill in deciding which waves people will swim through, structuring that affect in the short term while the collective response of the crowd shapes its development over time (such that “ideas and intentions” remain relevant).

Elsewhere, the liquidity of sonic immersion is coded feminine. Musicians and scholars often reflect on the capacity for bass to facilitate a maternal, womb-like space, delving into Freudian reflection on the “oceanic feeling” and its dissolution of distinctions like self/other.¹³⁵ Writing on disco and rave culture and their often ecstasy- and LSD-fuelled rhetoric of “love, peace and unity” is a case in point, showing also how sonic immersion is celebrated in EDM outside bass music.¹³⁶ For example, in his history of 1970s dance music,

¹³¹ Kode9, in GetDarker, “Dubstep documentary, 2006”, 05:45–06:00.

¹³² Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 1.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁵ Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”, 79–80.

¹³⁶ Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 61.

See also: Graham St John, “The Difference Engine: Liberation and the Rave Imaginary”, in *Rave Culture and Religion*, ed. Graham St John (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 30–31.

Tim Lawrence outlines the spatial qualities of David Manusco's parties at "The Loft" in New York, frequently credited for its influence on disco and house.¹³⁷ It was a "dark, warm, and [...] really quite cozy" space, he writes, one that "symbolically re-created the irretrievable scene of the womb, where the constant and memorable sound is that of the mother's beating heart [...] individual dancers had little choice but to dissolve into the amorphous whole".¹³⁸ Musical materiality was valued at The Loft more generally: "music was played for an extended period of time and for an explicitly physical purpose: to hail the dancer and drive the dance".¹³⁹ Reynolds, commenting on the "ambient" EDM scene of the early 1990s, similarly describes dub's bass immersion as indexing "our personal prehistory in the amniotic sea of the womb".¹⁴⁰ He suggests it invokes the "primordial" low-frequency music we first hear as infants in our mother's voice, in turn providing access to a "lost paradise before individuation and anxiety", a "cocoon" of safety.¹⁴¹ This claim for the primordial affectivity of bass is even found in the 1995 album *Bass is Maternal* by dub-inspired Bristol duo Smith & Mighty. They explain in an interview how "[o]ur friend [...] wrote the line "Bass is maternal, when it's loud I feel safer". [...] as unborn babies, we only hear bass frequencies, and so now maybe we feel a familiar comfort when we listen to and feel bass music".¹⁴²

These ideas helpfully speak to how the intensity of a live sound system can be both extreme and soothing (Henriques' both/and logic), but the maternal or feminine character of bass immersion is not necessarily given. Men have historically dominated bass music, as they have EDM generally. Stirling identifies how the UK dub and dubstep scenes in

¹³⁷ Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 25.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* Underlining the ubiquity of this kind of writing about early house and disco, Rietveld also describes the dancefloor as filled with "warm, moist bodies [...] within a dark space or [...] environment akin to the womb, while the amplified pulse of the bass drum, inescapably entering and embracing the body in a tactile manner, acts like a mother's heartbeat. [...] this can produce a profound experience of transcendental universality [...] a forever here and now". See: Hillegonda Rietveld, "Ephemeral Spirit: Sacrificial Cyborg and Communal Soul", in *Rave Culture and Religion*, ed. Graham St John (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 54.

¹³⁹ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 26.

¹⁴⁰ Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 194.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Ban Ban Ton Ton, "Interview / Rob Smith / Smith and Mighty", 18 December 2018 (accessed 1 September 2023), <https://banbantonton.com/2018/12/18/interview-rob-smith-smith-and-mighty/>. See also Sullivan, *Remixology*, 10–11.

particular have developed along gendered lines, with the former becoming opposed to “the feminised genres of lovers’ rock, UK soul and dancehall” during the 1980s, and producers in the latter rejecting ““feminine” associations with commercialism, vulgarity and decadence” in 1990s UK garage (which Skream once called “girl tunes”).¹⁴³ Against this historical backdrop, the literal penetration of sub-bass into listeners’ resonant cavities, unlike the mostly metaphorical notion of swimming in sound (though Jasen argues convincingly for this as a hermeneutic tool), may be a more apt model than maternal embrace. A masculine interpretation of sonic immersion is further supported by the findings of Spencer’s fieldwork at “EDM” festivals, where the “satiation routine” of consuming ever more bass drops is “commonly discussed in terms of female submission to male penetration”, and pornographic memes visualising this submission circulate in Facebook groups such as the Lost Lands Fam.¹⁴⁴ Yet when women tend to be absent from the stage and dance floor to begin with because they are excluded or made to feel unsafe, these and other practices like men positioning their bodies as close as possible to (and sometimes directly in) subwoofers to maximise tactile experience emerge as laden with gendered contradiction.¹⁴⁵ The sonic-social realities of bass culture are ultimately difficult to reconcile with the above narratives about immersion in the safety of the womb, especially given the importance of rupture—in contrast to the smoothness implied by immersion—in live performance. Techniques like the rewind will punctuate the flow of a DJ set in violent, unpredictable ways, and as Spencer observes in his analysis of “EDM” discourses, listeners nickname the music of some dubstep DJs “vomitstep” for its deliberately “filthy” aesthetics for example, in turn resisting “idealist accounts of the musically visceral.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Stirling, ““Beyond the Dance Floor”?”, 135, 139; Red Bull Music Academy, “Skream talks Dubstep Warz, Hatcha and FWD”, 2:20.

¹⁴⁴ Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”, 50–51.

¹⁴⁵ It should be noted that, as I observed at Outlook Festival and other events, speaker fanatics of this kind are not exclusively men. They have also likely existed in other genres since the earliest days of rave and reggae, though the tactile component of the experience is likely heightened in bass culture given the musical emphasis on sub-bass and the culture’s gravitation around specialist sound systems.

¹⁴⁶ Spencer, “Music to Vomit to”, 160.

My aim here is not to essentialise sonic immersion as either masculine or feminine, although in bass culture I do believe it has “sticky” male associations; nor do I argue for a bass-filled dystopia against a bass-less utopia.¹⁴⁷ More simply, I problematise sonic immersion to stress its contingency on both social context and live DJ performance. This will be elaborated on shortly below in a brief case study of the sonic materialisms in early dubstep’s DJ culture.

Sonic intimacy

Having established frameworks for bass culture’s sensory and spatial dimensions, I want to briefly also consider the intersection of sound and social relations: sonic intimacy. At a glance, sonic intimacy may seem an unexpected addition to dominance and immersion. Yet intimacy is encountered surprisingly frequently in bass culture, from the tactile sensation of bass in the body that DJs leverage to bring listeners to a deeper understanding of their own corporeality, to the intimate relationships between the audience, DJ, and their technology (in the conventional sense) that suture the unpredictable flow of live performance. Sonic intimacy is thus a helpful addition to the materialisms examined so far in that it helps elucidate how bass facilitates a variety of intimate social relations in and around the dance floor. Sonic intimacy is the most recent framework examined in this chapter and again is distributed across different projects, though my focus here will be on media scholar Malcolm James’ interpretation.¹⁴⁸ James draws on theorisations of sonic materiality, affect, and media to examine the shifting relationships between media, sound, and creativity in London bass cultures since 1970. He defines sonic intimacy as a relational phenomenon that goes

¹⁴⁷ Stirling, ““Beyond the Dance Floor”?”, 141.

¹⁴⁸ Malcolm James, *Sonic Intimacy: Reggae Sound Systems, Jungle Pirate Radio and Grime YouTube Music Videos* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2021).

Garcia is the other major researcher of intimacy, affect, and sonic materialism in EDM that must be acknowledged here. His work documents how music and affect forge “stranger-intimacy” between dancers in postmillennial techno/house scenes, focusing particularly on tactile perception in these beat-driven genres. I focus on James because his work more explicitly relates to the dub diaspora, though many of Garcia’s findings are transferrable to bass culture too. See: Garcia-Mispireta, *Together, Somehow*.

beyond “love, sexuality and romance” in private or public life.¹⁴⁹ Instead, sonic intimacy emerges as affects that James calls “vibe”, “hype”, and “grime”, arising respectively from the three pairings of genre and media that structure the study: reggae sound systems in the 1970s–80s, jungle pirate radio in the 1990s, and grime YouTube music videos in the 2000s.¹⁵⁰

I will highlight two of these case studies here, reggae and grime. Starting with the former, James focuses on reggae sound systems in 1970s and 1980s Britain. He argues that “alternative expression was built into the fabric of” reggae because sound system crews worked with equipment that could be routinely disassembled and modified, and assembling your own speaker boxes or tinkering amplifiers to suit the crew’s tastes was routine.¹⁵¹ In other words, the relatively open design of analogue technology afforded engineers intimate knowledge of their “sound”, a term referring to both a sound system’s tonal quality and the overall set of equipment.¹⁵² An intimacy that James understates here is that between selectors and their vinyl and dubplate records, which were less customisable than amplifiers or speakers but continue to be prized mediators of sonic intimacy in bass culture today, especially in opposition to the more abstract labour relations afforded by digital media (an orientation I call analogue formatism).¹⁵³ Nevertheless, radiating from these intimacies were relations which James summarises as apprenticeship, wisdom, and kinship, reflecting reggae’s largely oral traditions and knowledge transmission.¹⁵⁴ What emerged was the “mysterious and unknowable condition” of “vibe” in reggae: “the feel of technology, sound and human participants in mutual relation” in the dance hall, flooded with bass.¹⁵⁵ Vibe connected to reggae’s politics of resistance, too, with the alternative spaces and frequencies of dance halls and blues parties in constant tension with a society marked by Thatcherite

¹⁴⁹ James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 10, 13.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 28, 56, 96.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 38–42.

¹⁵³ See: Attias, “Subjectivity in the Groove”, 17.

¹⁵⁴ James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 37–46.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

economics and racist policing. Yet these dances were not marginal, says James, in the sense that the sound system “was central to black British life in the period”.¹⁵⁶ In this way, the sonic intimacies of reggae tell “a story of the black experience and a story of Britain itself”.¹⁵⁷

Turning to the early 2000s and grime in east London, James shifts his focus to the newly affordable consumer electronics that became available during that period. Because these changes “obfuscated the need to build your own boxes” and made bespoke engineering relatively more expensive for sound systems, he argues the labour relations that were once characterised by craft and apprenticeship in reggae became more individualised, precarious, and manufacturer-designated in a scene like grime.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, grime was distributed through bedroom studios, pirate radio, lo-fi phone recordings, and by the mid-2000s, thousands of music videos uploaded to YouTube (where most grime is still found today). For James, grime thus became mediated by what he calls the “closed-circuit” design of new media.¹⁵⁹ With enough financial and physical access, anyone could create and share grime, but within the constraints of phones and YouTube, there was “no apprenticeship to be had and little alternative wisdom to be forged.”¹⁶⁰

While this media landscape limited free experimentation and opportunities for intimate relations with the inner workings of sound reproduction technology, it also opened alternative avenues of expression and pathways to sonic intimacy. As such, James discusses how the leading sonic intimacy of grime is, fittingly, “grime”, and to a lesser extent also “coldness” and “agonism”.¹⁶¹ These affects reflect the machismo of the vocal-led genre and its sound palette of punchy drum samples, chromatic square-wave synthesiser melodies, and bass lines that conjure texts like “dirty”, “grotty”, “brittle”, and “mucky”.¹⁶² A

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 32–36, 54.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 89–90.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 92–93.

hybrid, energetic musical form that moves at pace (140 BPM), grime intensifies many elements of the UK bass music that came before it. For example, it speeds up garage's syncopated 2-step beat, inherits jungle's chromatic melodic movement, and takes cues from dubstep's brooding bass aesthetics (which developed coterminously and was notably also nicknamed "grime" in its earliest years).¹⁶³ In performance, dub's principle of fragmentation/rupture comes alive in DJs' rapid transitions and "quick draw" cutting of instrumentals, meant to maintain an open playing field for improvising MCs and create intensity for the audience.¹⁶⁴ The sonic intimacy of grime is thus in its "straight to the point" aesthetics, which themselves are part of a self-conscious documentation of grime's roots in London's most neglected urban communities.¹⁶⁵ As James puts it, grime is a "claim to the material history of East London working-class life, its factories, soot and grease. [...] it is also a reckoning with the clean glass of Canary Wharf, and the social violence of those aesthetics."¹⁶⁶ Grime's sonic intimacies were entirely "faithful to the 'fuck you' neo-liberal capitalism of the moment."¹⁶⁷

From the perspective of bass culture studies, grime is a compelling case study in sonic intimacy because, particularly in its early years, the genre adapted to a largely bass-less social life. This reality was a confluence of lossy compression algorithms in the dominant file format (MP3), a bandwidth-restricted distribution platform (YouTube), playback devices with thin frequency responses (phone and laptop speakers), and the economic reality of music in working-class life.¹⁶⁸ Producers again responded to their material conditions by finding alternative methods of playing with bass and keeping the sonic intimacy of bass culture alive, methods which remain established in the genre today. For grime's "godfather" MC Wiley, for example, rhythm and especially the snare drum take on a more

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶⁴ de Lacey, *Level Up*, 70–71.

¹⁶⁵ James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 93.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁶⁸ "You need decks, a mixer and a regularly updated supply of music" to be a DJ, notes James, but "[t]o MC you only need your voice and a microphone". *Ibid.*, 99.

important role than bass because they shape a track's sense of movement and flow, crucial for an improvising MC.¹⁶⁹ But grime was and remains embedded in UK bass culture. As ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall discusses in his historicisation of bass filtered through modern "treble culture", grime producers compressed and distorted the timbre of square-wave synthesiser leads to fill the middle of the frequency spectrum (in contrast to it being "scooped" out in jungle and DMZ-style dubstep), and deployed other techniques such as doubling bass lines at higher octaves to create affective impact for listeners despite "trebly" playback.¹⁷⁰ For some stakeholders, the "psychoacoustic labour" of hearing bass lines that are "not actually present" in these ways indicates "a higher level of agency in our participation with treble culture"—a topic I will return to in Chapter 5's exploration of bass culture on the internet.¹⁷¹

Come meditate on bassweight: The sonic materialisms of early dubstep

To ground this mostly theoretical chapter in a practical example, I want to now briefly consider how sonic dominance, immersion, and intimacy converged in the DJ culture of early dubstep. I define early dubstep as the period approximately 2001–2007, prior to the genre's mainstreaming. The music was performed in spaces which have been mythologised by DJs and fans, becoming the standard against which scenes continue to define themselves today, particularly in the UK but also further afield. Kode9's above depiction of a rave on the seabed lit by a singular "blue light" hints at these criteria, suggesting an ideal performance environment that is dimly-lit, underground, and filled with bass, where the only prominent structures are a sound system and DJ booth. These qualities in turn reflect the environments of dubstep's most influential club nights, FWD at Plastic People (2001–2013) and DMZ at Third Base (2005–2011), which contributed to the genre's early development and

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Marshall, "Treble Culture", 62–64.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

international growth, respectively. Like Manusco's Loft parties, FWD and DMZ are nostalgically remembered for fostering a collective focus on sound and their audiophilic sound systems, symbolised by DMZ's motto "come meditate on bassweight".¹⁷² As the DJs and sound engineers delivered sonic dominance, an immersive space was produced in which visual stimulation was thought of as superfluous. With the social game of "seeing and being seen" deemed irrelevant (and the sheer flood of sound likely making conversation on the dancefloor difficult to sustain anyway), a particular brand of sonic materialism was established.¹⁷³

This materialism can be further examined by drawing on two "oral history" articles written in 2015 in the wake of Plastic People's closure and a reunion event celebrating ten years since the first DMZ party.¹⁷⁴ As DMZ's host MC SGT Pokes states, "I used to stand and think, 'I wonder what the foundations of this building are like?'—because the building was physically shaking".¹⁷⁵ The penetrative quality of sub-bass at DMZ is also remarked on by Mala, co-organiser of the event, with noteworthy specificity: "you would see and almost hear the audience respond at a slight delay from each other the further back in the dance you go, as the bass wave is physically moving through people".¹⁷⁶ Though it is difficult to separate accurate testimony from rose-tinted memories in these sources, as documented by photographer Georgina Cook, both DMZ and FWD were certainly masculine spaces with near-pitch black lighting, the former characterised by its scattered orange lamps and low ceilings, and the latter set in a sparsely decorated functions room in St Matthew's Church

¹⁷² Georgina Cook, "DMZ Update", Drumz of the South, 4 January 2006 (accessed 1 April 2023), <https://drumzofthesouth.wordpress.com/2006/01/04/dmz-update-2/>.

¹⁷³ Christoph Brunner, "The Sound Culture of Dubstep in London", in *Musical Performance and the Changing City: Post-Industrial Contexts in Europe and the United States*, ed. Fabian Holt & Carsten Wergin (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 263.

¹⁷⁴ Lauren Martin, "The VICE Oral History of Dubstep", *VICE*, 23 June 2015 (accessed 27 February 2023), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9bqm5e/an-oral-history-of-dubstep-vice-lauren-martin-610>; Tom Lea & Mr. Beatnik, "An Oral History of Plastic People", *FACT*, 17 February 2015 (accessed 25 March 2023), <https://www.factmag.com/2015/02/17/plastic-people-an-oral-history-fwd-cdr-co-op-ade/>. See also: GetDarker, "Dubstep Heritage - Location 01 - FWD, Plastic People [Shoreditch, London]", YouTube, 15 March 2022 (accessed 27 March 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaXDOMasSqM>.

¹⁷⁵ Martin, "The VICE Oral History of Dubstep".

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

(known informally as “Brixton Mass”). See **Figures 9** and **10**, below, for example photographs by Cook. Geography likely played a role in these parties’ ability to facilitate sonic dominance and immersion without the threat of noise control: both were basement venues, and Brixton Mass was also in an isolated position at an urban intersection on Brixton Hill buffered by gardens on all sides.



Figure 9 FWD, Plastic People, London, 2005. Top: Bar area. Bottom: Main room. Copyright: Georgina Cook. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 10 DMZ, Third Base, London, 2006. Copyright: Georgina Cook. Reproduced with permission.

Turning to FWD, the following fieldwork vignette by ethnographer Christoph Brunner at one of its parties in 2007 provides a useful phenomenological illustration of dubstep's idealised sonic immersion:

We enter a dark hole with scarce lighting [...] The space is difficult to navigate as the bass captures our bodies and demands full attention. [...] The ambience is dark and one can hardly see what others wear, what they look like [...] When we arrive, we can hardly find the entrance until we get to a door with a tiny desk [...] We enter and go down a flight of stairs into what seems like a hole. A gloomy bar is built along the wall and curtains separate the space from the main room, which is pitch black and filled only with bass. [...] The body becomes the center through which all trajectories go: feeling, thinking, sense of space and time.¹⁷⁷

Initially a weekly garage- and grime-centric club night, FWD was established in 2001 by Sarah Lockhart of Ammunition Promotions, a key contributor to the now-legal pirate and

¹⁷⁷ Brunner, "The Sound Culture of Dubstep in London", 256, 263.

internet radio station Rinse FM and several record labels that were important to the “dark garage” scene from which dubstep emerged.¹⁷⁸ When the fuzzy stylistic boundaries of dubstep started to sharpen in 2004, FWD was thus a natural home for the new genre, though the club continued to also book garage and grime DJs, making its programming more united by tempo (140 BPM) and affect (bass) than musical style per se. This approach also meant that, as Mala corroborates, FWD’s immersive environment catalysed the formation of a local feedback loop between budding DJ-producers and the wider garage-grime-dubstep network. Aspiring producers including Mala would engineer new tracks according to how they sounded at FWD/Plastic People, deliver their music on dubplate to Hatcha, a DJ who worked at Big Apple Records and regularly played at FWD, to then hear their music again in that environment and adjust accordingly. “On a system that is that big in that kind of space, you really are exposed to your production” says Mala, adding, “it was dubplates, dark room, big soundsystem. None of these fancy lights, none of the unnecessary nonsense that we see in a lot of venues today.”¹⁷⁹ Garage DJ Oris Jay further details the intimate economy that emerged from FWD’s immersive environment. He describes how he would sometimes cut new records only hours before performing, often without having heard the music at all: “[i]f I wanted a Skream tune, [...] [I would cut the dubplate] without knowing what it’d sound like. [...] on the radio was cool, but it was how it sounded in FWD, on that soundsystem, that mattered most.”¹⁸⁰ Kode9 (Goodman), who regularly played at the event and hosted the FWD show on Rinse FM, elaborates on this perspective, suggesting—partly in jest—that Plastic People’s sound system could make unfinished tracks come across as through-composed music. You could play a DJ set with “one snare an hour, one hi-hat every two

¹⁷⁸ Alex Macpherson, “Jungle, Garage and Grime: 20 Years of Rinse FM”, *The Guardian*, 27 November 2014 (accessed 28 February 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/27/jungle-garage-and-grime-20-years-of-rinse-fm>.

¹⁷⁹ Red Bull Music Academy, “Mala (Digital Mystikz)”, lecture recorded 2008, transcript published 2019 (accessed 25 March 2023), <https://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/lectures/mala-5-db-to-perfection/>.

¹⁸⁰ Martin, “The VICE Oral History of Dubstep”.

hours, [and] loads of sub in between”, and it “wouldn’t have worked on any other system”, he says.¹⁸¹

Rare footage of FWD published to the Reddit community r/realdubstep in 2022 provides an excellent opportunity to consider the sonic materialisms of FWD at Plastic People in further detail: see [Video Example 2.1](#). As the Reddit user states, they uploaded this video “because it perfectly captures what FWD was like at Plastic People. Pitch dark except for the little orange lamp, and a wall of bass playing music that sounded like it was from the year 3000”.¹⁸² The low-resolution video, likely recorded on a mobile phone, begins silently with an edited-in still of a FWD flyer, showing DJ Youngsta and MC Crazy D (both dubstep artists) and the other residents performing that night in July 2006. As the recording at Plastic People then begins we hear music but the screen remains black, the transition working like a cinematic audio bridge. Jagged strings and an FX-laded introduction mark the music as a grime instrumental (which YouTube commenters identify as the work of MC-producer JME), and signal that we have arrived at the dancefloor, allowing us to hear FWD before we see it. Suddenly, a sliver of orange light shakily appears in the centre—to dubstep heads, immediately recognisable as Plastic People’s DJ booth—amidst shuffling shadows that are now legible as dancers’ silhouettes. Their chatter peppers the soundscape, suggesting a more social environment than some nostalgic accounts imply. At 00:44 the video cuts to another clip, filmed from the same perspective, of Youngsta playing a JME track again, with the DJ’s silhouette behind the decks fleetingly visible against the orange light as dancers move across the frame. Youngsta drops another aggressive track at 1:01; the style is firmly between grime and dubstep with a step-wise synthesised bass melody, half-step drum-machine beat at 140 BPM, and occasional flurries of syncopated percussion. From 1:55 to 2:03, two more stills are edited into the video, this time showing a crowd of young men from the back of the room as well as Youngsta at the DJ booth, with one hand

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² u/[deleted], “FWD @ Plastic People 21 Jul 06”, Reddit, 26 March 2022 (accessed 7 February 2023), https://www.reddit.com/r/realdubstep/comments/tois92/fwd_plastic_people_21_jul_06/.

adjusting his headphones and the other at the console. Both stills are flooded with white light from the camera's flash, the sharp contrast of which underlines just how pitch-black the room was otherwise. The video then cuts to a final clip of Youngsta's set, who this time is playing the introduction of Loefah's canonical dubstep track "Disco Rekah" (2007), a jagged half-step beat with a sampled Busta Rhymes hook. At 2:58, Youngsta drops "Disco Rekah" with, unexpectedly, the drop section of another instrumental—a mixing technique known as a "double drop"—which MC Crazy D acknowledges by exclaiming, "mix!"¹⁸³

I will have more to say in Chapter 5 about how the performance environment of early dubstep, neatly captured in this video, has become entrenched in discourses that pit "real" dubstep against its mainstream "EDM" other. For now, it is worth reflecting on the various threads of sonic materialism that converge in my above thick description of this scene. First is the near total absence of visual spectacle and emphatic sonic dominance and immersion facilitated by Youngsta, as we are left to only imagine how the sound system—in such a tight, unlit, underground space—may have shook the walls or tingled dancers' bodies. The visual dimension of the video is also telling in that it speaks to a long-standing tension between sonic immersion and visual spectacle in DJ culture, which EDM scholar Hillegonda Rietveld historicises in a 2013 essay.¹⁸⁴ Rietveld argues that over the course of the 1970s and 80s "the dancefloor and its soundsystem became the dominant medium, while the visual field was being fragmented and subordinated to the audio experience".¹⁸⁵ She suggests this model was displaced by a reinterpretation of EDM performance as visual spectacle in the 1990s, when (at least in the UK) the emergent rave scene encountered widespread moral panic about illegal raves and drug use, which led to the infamous crackdown on parties soundtracked by "repetitive beats" in the 1994 Criminal Justice Act.¹⁸⁶ In turn, she argues DJ culture became increasingly professionalised and hence image-conscious, and out of this

¹⁸³ Gálvez, "On analyzing EDM DJ sets", 154.

¹⁸⁴ Hillegonda Rietveld, "Journey to the Light? Immersion, Spectacle and Mediation", in *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Dance Music*, ed. Bernardo Alexander Attias, Anna Gavanis, & Hillegonda Rietveld (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 79–102.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁸⁶ Rietveld, "Journey to the Light?", 92–93; Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 146–149.

period “a different type of international DJ emerged: self-disciplined, sober and with a business plan. [...] [They were] staged as a spectacular ‘stadium DJ’ or ‘arena DJ’, fêted as rock stars”.¹⁸⁷

In his investigation of bass culture, Jasen similarly theorises a continuum between “the-DJ-as-affect-engineer” and “the DJ-of-signs”, mapping closely onto the immersion-spectacle dichotomy historicised by Rietveld.¹⁸⁸ Jasen’s framework is useful as it avoids the problems of periodisation latent in Rietveld’s critique, instead emphasising the immersive (or not so immersive) affordances of a given performance space and the agency DJs have to facilitate sonic affect. To depict the two extremes of his continuum, Jasen returns to the proto-house scene of 1970s New York, drawing a contrast between, respectively, the infamous immersion of Manusco’s Loft and the “carefully curated visual economy” of Nicky Siano’s club Studio 54.¹⁸⁹ In these examples, live performance at The Loft symbolises the DJ-as-affect-engineer who “attempts to work on the [...] capacities of the sonic body” with explicitly “material aims”, while “the DJ-of-signs stays in the realm of the known (familiar rhythms, sounds and forms – ‘the hits’), playing what amounts to a game of text-recognition with the pose-striking crowd.”¹⁹⁰

Early dubstep’s self-conscious rejection of, as Mala put it, “the unnecessary nonsense that we see in a lot of venues today” thus emerges as a passionate commitment to the DJ-as-affect-engineer. It is worth noting that the dimly-lit environments of FWD and DMZ, deliberately constructed to facilitate bass-centric sonic immersion, are arguably no less curated than the “spectacle” of other EDM settings that Jasen and Rietveld critique. Jasen identifies this issue precisely, noting how “[t]he underfilling of vision in darkness is no less a perceptual event than the overfilling of vision with lasers and strobe lights”, and in turn the “real interest [...] is the a-signifying work of affect, by whatever route.”¹⁹¹ Following

¹⁸⁷ Rietveld, “Journey to the Light?”, 92.

¹⁸⁸ Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 170.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 170–171.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

Jasen's cue, the FWD video reveals a nuanced interplay between novel affective experience and "text recognition" facilitated by Youngsta, the DJ-as-affect-engineer. He initially plays "Disco Rekah", a dubplate that was well known in 2006 and would eventually be released by DMZ's label in 2007. The crowd is familiar with the track and thus ready in waiting for the bass to drop, until Youngsta subverts expectations by performing a double drop, creating a tangibly energetic moment that immediately gets dancers moving. Recalling a similar moment analysed in Chapter 1, where Mala played into the popularity of his track "Anti War Dub" and subverted expectations by playing an unreleased dub version in succession, this example underscores the agency DJs have in shaping sonic affect and the contingency of binaries like immersion/spectacle and affect/sign. Though they are argued for persuasively by Jasen, such dichotomies are rarely linear or predetermined in live performance, and the penetration of bass and/as affect in the body is difficult to separate from cultural context. As Garcia summarises, "vibratory energies may be less culturally determined in some cases – such as the overwhelming force of loud bass frequencies – and yet a dancing crowd's enthusiastic response to familiar tunes or an exciting new track entails a kind of energy-conversion that is relayed through micro-cultural knowledge and socially formed taste."¹⁹²

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored and critiqued three sonic materialisms through which contemporary bass culture can be understood: sonic dominance, immersion, and intimacy. Rather than pursue a singular Deleuzian theory of affect, I have shown how these materialisms can be productively brought together to elucidate the sensory, spatial, and relational dimensions of the live sound system events that constitute bass culture. As well as synthesising the theories that will be tested in the forthcoming case studies, this chapter has provided a more detailed scholarly perspective on the vernacular theories and discourses that are already prominent in bass music communities, where the culture is understood to be

¹⁹² Garcia, "Feeling the vibe", 30.

fuelled by affects with vernacular names like bassweight. While the tendency in some sonic materialist research is to foreground the non-human agency of vibration and/or the affective responses it generates—ideally to elucidate larger flows of affect between bodies in musical or other publics—I have argued that the DJ’s agency in shaping affective experiences like bassweight is not to be underestimated and requires more attention in the literature around sonic materialism. The following case studies aim to offer a corrective in this regard, analysing aspects of DJ performance and culture in dub and dubstep scenes at three geographical scales.

Part two: Case studies

Chapter 3: “The Bristol sound”: Bass culture in the city

Bristol is a weird place. [...] its identity away from the capital, connected but away from it all, has allowed it to foster a completely distinct musical identity. The insular nature of the place, which isn't meant to sound negative, has in fact led to an incubation of ideas and ideals. Sounds and sensibilities with their roots in the days of sound systems and St Paul's Carnival, have survived, mutating and evolving, but principally strongly loyal to a city built on bass.¹

The above passage is representative of a widespread sentiment among EDM fans, journalists, and institutions: that Bristol is a city with a unique bass culture. Through the alignment of its geographical, social, and musical histories, particularly the settling of Jamaican migrants and their sound system culture in Britain after the Second World War, the city is said to have a “Bristol sound”, a special sonic quality that no other city can reproduce.² “The Bristol sound” was first coined in the 1990s to describe the hybrid style of so-called “trip-hop” bands such as Massive Attack and related musicians who were influenced by dub.³ The term has since become a catch-all motto (that many artists reject) for Bristol as a “music city” that fosters subcultures across EDM, hip-hop, punk, and more.⁴ In this chapter, I will interrogate “the Bristol sound” and probe the city's bass culture. I ask how these largely discursive ideas, which have so far mostly been critiqued by journalists, geographers, and historians, can be understood with greater musicological specificity in relation to dub. To do so, the chapter will consider how “the Bristol sound” and the sonic materialisms of its bass culture manifest in DJ performance, analysing sets (livestreamed from London at a 2015

¹ Angus Harrison, “Bristol and the Bold Future of Bass Music”, *VICE*, 14 September 2015 (accessed 17 September 2020), https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/pg4b99/bristol-and-the-bold-future-of-bass-music.

² Boiler Room, “Keep Bristol Weird | A Boiler Room & British Council Documentary”, YouTube, 14 August 2019 (accessed 30 September 2021), <https://youtu.be/aSsizfxYEaQ?si=65ziD4z-4EPcC8pl>; Noel Gardner, “Bristol sound systems: A history”, *Red Bull*, 8 December 2016 (accessed 30 September 2021), <https://www.redbull.com/gb-en/bristol-sound-systems-a-history>; British Council, “The story of the ‘Bristol Sound’”, 21 August 2014 (accessed 1 October 2021), <https://www.britishcouncil.org/en/rewind-bristol>.

³ Michelle Henning & Rehan Hyder, “Locating the ‘Bristol Sound’: Archiving Music as Everyday Life”, in *Sites of Popular Music Heritage: Memories, Histories, Places*, ed. Sara Cohen (London; New York: Routledge, 2015), 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Boiler Room event) by two duos in the city's dub scene, Dubkasm and Gorgon Sound.⁵ I argue these DJs articulate distinct versions of "the Bristol sound" as a relational mediation between bass, space, and place. In the spirit of dub's versioning of pre-existing music into alternative forms, this distinction takes shape as a continuum between dub in Bristol and Bristol dub. Dubkasm tend to re-present dub as roots-era music emplaced *in* Bristol, and Gorgon Sound largely transform dub into a hybridised product of postmillennial Bristol.

I will begin by introducing Bristol's geography and musical history with respect to reggae and EDM. The next section will interrogate "the Bristol sound" as a localised manifestation of the dub diaspora. The remainder of the chapter will then turn to Dubkasm and Gorgon Sound, reflecting on their performances as a case study of bass culture in the city.

Bristol: History and geography

Bristol has long been the unofficial capital of England's south-west, and its reputation for being a crucible of bass culture cannot be divorced from its socioeconomic history. Much of the city's present economic significance stems from its connection to London by rail and its legacy as a port city of the British Empire. Bristol serviced the trans-Atlantic trade routes which shipped enslaved Africans, tobacco, sugar, and other commodities throughout the eighteenth century.⁶ A wealthy trader who profited from this era was Edward Colston (1636–1721), memorialised in "cult"-like fashion after his death for his patronage of schools, churches, and other public institutions.⁷

Following the Second World War and the arrival of the Windrush Generation, Bristol become increasingly ethnically diverse. The West Indian population more than tripled in the

⁵ Boiler Room, "Deep Medi", 27 October 2015 (accessed 1 July 2023), <https://boilerroom.tv/session/deep-medi/>.

⁶ Madge Dresser, "Remembering Slavery and Abolition in Bristol", *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 2 (2009): 224–226.

⁷ *Ibid.*

years 1958–65 alone.⁸ As discussed by sociologist Ken Pryce in his classic ethnography *Endless Pressure*, areas with poor housing and public services such as St Paul's, Easton, and Eastville were settled by large communities of working-class Caribbean migrants and garnered nicknames like "Shanty Town" and "the Jungle".⁹ These migrants faced outright racism in being excluded from work, leisure, and public spaces in a repeating pattern of racialised geography seen across London, Birmingham, and other English cities in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰ As noted in the Introduction, Britain's failure to integrate Caribbean workers and accept their Black British identity was a major factor in the development of the country's dub-diasporic bass culture. Caribbean migrants developed their own music-led leisure spaces, hosting what came to be known as "blues dances" and unlicensed drinking venues called "shebeens".¹¹ In communities such as St Paul's, Pryce observed how these practices, together with the arrival of reggae in the late 1960s, "coincided with the worsening of racial relations in Britain" and "satisfied deep cultural and political needs" for the Windrush Generation as a result.¹² A landmark moment of political and cultural resistance also came in 1963 when Roy Hackett organised a successful boycott against the racist "colour bar" of the Bristol Omnibus Company, and went on to found the St Paul's Afrikan Caribbean Festival (now Carnival) in 1968.¹³ Despite these achievements, racist over-policing and underdevelopment in Bristol's marginalised communities continued, with a raid on the Jamaican-owned Black & White Café catalysing a violent riot in St Paul's in 1980, the first in a wave of mass civil disobedience across England that decade.¹⁴

⁸ Edson Burton, "African-Caribbeans 1948-1990", in *Bristol Ethnic Minorities and the City, 1000-2001*, ed. Madge Dresser & Peter Fleming (Bognor Regis: Phillimore Publishing, 2007), 158.

⁹ Later in the twentieth century, migrants from other countries such as India and Somalia also became present in these areas. Ken Pryce, *Endless Pressure: A Study of West Indian Lifestyles in Bristol*, second edition (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1986), 25.

¹⁰ Caspar Melville, "Hostile environment: London's racial geography, 1960–1980", in *It's a London Thing: How Rare Groove, Acid House and Jungle Remapped the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 25–53.

¹¹ Beckford, *Jesus Dub*, 40.

¹² Pryce, *Endless Pressure*, 160.

¹³ Bristol Archive Records, "An Interview with Roy Hackett – St Pauls Carnival from 1968", 10 September 2012 (accessed 21 April 2020), <http://bristolarchiverecords.com/blog/an-interview-with-roy-hackett-st-pauls-carnival-from-1968/>.

¹⁴ Roger Ball, "Violent Urban Disturbance in England 1980-1981", PhD thesis, University of West England (2012).

Today, progressive activism and a spirit of working-class independence are a signature of Bristol's identity. This is reflected in, for example, the establishment of a People's Republic of Stokes Croft in St Paul's in the mid-2000s, and more recently the toppling of a Colston statue in the city centre, as activists strive for racial justice in the wake of the 2020 uprisings.¹⁵ Bristol is also popular among students, young professionals, and migrants with creative or subcultural interests, with the city garnering a reputation for incubating independent retail communities as well as lively hip-hop, EDM, and street art scenes, among other activities.¹⁶ A 2010 survey by the Performing Rights Society found that Bristol had the highest concentration of registered musicians per capita among British cities, leading the BBC to label it the country's "most musical city".¹⁷ These factors ultimately contribute to Bristol being one of Britain's fastest growing ten "Core Cities"; its population is expected to exceed 500,000 by 2030 and already includes a million residents in the wider metropolitan area.¹⁸ Bristol also remains ethnically diverse with 16% of residents stating they belong to a "black or minority ethnic group" and a quarter of residents identifying as "not White British" in the 2011 census.¹⁹

The effects of racism and economic inequality are not easily reversed, however. Areas including St Paul's, Stokes Croft, and Old Market house some of the city's most popular bass music venues and events, including the biannual (formerly annual) Carnival. These spaces have been subject to numerous urban regeneration efforts, yet are chronically affected by what geographers call "territorial stigmatisation" and a "reputational ghetto".²⁰ In

¹⁵ Fabian Frenzel & Armin Beverungen, "Value Struggles in the Creative City: A People's Republic of Stokes Croft?", *Urban Studies* 52, no. 6 (2015): 1020–36; Saima Nasar, "Remembering Edward Colston: Histories of Slavery, Memory, and Black Globality", *Women's History Review* 29, no. 7 (2020): 1218–25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ BBC News Bristol, "Bristol is Britain's "most musical city", 12 March 2020 (accessed 15 April 2020), http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/bristol/hi/people_and_places/music/newsid_8563000/8563916.stm.

¹⁸ Bristol City Council, "The population of Bristol", April 2020 (accessed 6 August 2020), <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/statistics-census-information/the-population-of-bristol>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Tom Slater & Ntsiki Anderson, "The reputational ghetto: territorial stigmatisation in St Paul's, Bristol", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37, no. 4 (2012): 530–546.

the face of endless pressure these spaces and their people have contributed to an internationally recognised bass culture.

Bristol bass culture

Reggae and the roots era (1968–1985)

Reggae arrived in Bristol shortly after the opening of The Bamboo Club in St Paul's in 1966. A fondly remembered space for soul and Black popular music in general, The Bamboo Club served as a "second home" for locals and regularly hosted major acts such as Bob Marley until it was forced to close in 1977 after a fire.²¹ Sociologist Pete Webb documents some of Bristol's live music culture in this period, noting, for example, that Gilbert Watson's Ajax club was a popular space for reggae powered by his namesake Ajax sound system.²² Throughout the 1970s, reggae sound system culture expanded rapidly in the city as it did in Jamaica, the US, and Britain. It is estimated that hundreds of sound systems were formed locally with notable crews including Jah Lokko, Qualitex, Sir Bastian, and Raiders 32 (mostly Jamaican groups from the St Paul's and Easton areas).²³ Other influential artists from the 1970s include Henry & Louis who ran their Red Eye Hi Power sound system, and later established the label and sound system Three Stripe with Ray Mighty; reggae bands such as Talisman and Black Roots also formed in the late 1970s and went on to tour extensively outside Bristol.²⁴ Sound systems played in spaces such as the Docklands Settlement, Blue Lagoon, and St Paul's Carnival.²⁵ Reggae-friendly community centres were also established in St Paul's, with the African-Caribbean Arts (now Kuumba) centre and Malcolm X centre built in

²¹ Pete Webb, "Interrogating the Production of Sound and Place: Bristol as a Site of Music Production, From Lunatic Fringe to Worldwide Massive", in *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieux Cultures* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 49.

²² Pete Webb, "Bristol Blues and Roots", Bristol Archive Records, 2007 (accessed 5 April 2020), http://www.bristolarchiverecords.com/people/people_Pete_Webb.html.

²³ Several of these sound systems from the 1970s are still active today in Bristol. They have been interviewed at length by sound system enthusiast Ashish Joshi under the name Saffron. See: "Bristol's Reggae Sound System Veterans - Part 1 : Raiders 32 Sound - with Bagga Brown & Daddy G", YouTube, 21 July 2020 (accessed 23 July 2020), <https://youtu.be/OKogZazzGlo>.

²⁴ Webb, "Bristol Blues and Roots".

²⁵ Melissa Chemam, *Massive Attack: Out of the Comfort Zone* (Bristol: Tangent Books, 2019), 66.

1974 and the early 1980s, respectively.²⁶ In Old Market, the eighteenth-century Trinity Church was deconsecrated and rebranded as the Trinity Centre to serve community and arts projects, hosting reggae sound system dances and other events.²⁷

Amongst these spaces of the roots reggae period, The Dug Out club was particularly influential.²⁸ It followed in the footsteps of The Bamboo Club as a multiracial community space but was designed more explicitly as a night club. It operated from 1970–1986 near the city centre with programming focusing on reggae, dub, funk, and soul, and hip-hop in the early 1980s.²⁹ The Dug Out is fondly remembered and has a somewhat mythologised reputation in Bristol's bass culture; its club nights were formative in the early musical experiences of acclaimed artists such as drum 'n' bass DJ Roni Size, for example.³⁰ The Dug Out was also influential for Grant Marshall, who became a DJ in the early 1980s under the name Daddy G, befriending DJ Milo and forming The Wild Bunch around the same time.³¹ The Wild Bunch became resident DJs at The Dug Out and regular performers at St Paul's Carnival, often incorporating dub and reggae into their performances.³² Daddy G has spoken about the importance of "wall-to-wall" bass pressure at sound system events he experienced in Bristol in the 1970s, with the crossover of punk and reggae audiences on the dance floor creating a sense of multicultural unity, although he nevertheless frequently encountered racist abuse around the city.³³

²⁶ Kuumba, "African Arts and Community Resource Centre", 2013 (accessed 1 October 2021), <https://www.kuumba.org.uk/>; Malcolm X Community Centre, "About Us", 2020 (accessed 1 October 2021), <https://www.mxccbristol.com/about>.

²⁷ Matt Robson, "Trinity Centre: A brief history of one of Bristol's most important cultural places", *LOUD* no. 2 (2020): 26–28.

²⁸ Webb, "Interrogating the Production of Sound and Place", 46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Bristol Archive Records, "Daddy G", interview by Peter Kirk, 1 January 2010 (accessed 19 September 2020), http://www.bristolarchiverecords.com/people/people_Daddy_G.html.

Dub, hip-hop, and beyond (1985–2000)

From 1985, night clubs such as The Tropic Club, Lakota, and Thekla became established in Bristol's emerging dub-diasporic bass culture, with techno, house, trance, and jazz scenes also thriving.³⁴ Rob Smith, friend of Ray Mighty and Three Stripe, started crafting records inspired by dub engineers such as Adrian Sherwood and became an established producer in the city, having already played bass guitar for several years in the reggae band Restriction.³⁵ Hip-hop was also important to Bristol's musical ecosystem at this time; in 1983, the genre was already popular enough that The Dug Out was hosting hip-hop club nights several times a week with reggae and punk crowds frequently attending.³⁶ The Wild Bunch successfully incorporated hip-hop into their already musically diverse DJ sets throughout the 1980s.³⁷ Daddy G befriended Robert del Naja (3D), Andrew Vowles (Mushroom), and Paul Hooper (Nellee) in this period as they bonded over mutual interests in dub, reggae, hip-hop, and graffiti, and the group established a band called Massive Attack in 1988 that incorporated all of these influences within a hybrid aesthetic framework.³⁸ They recorded their first single with production duo Smith & Mighty (Rob Smith and Ray Mighty) in 1989 and released their first album *Blue Lines*, largely self-produced, in 1991 to critical acclaim.³⁹

This musically and racially mixed bass culture continued evolving in the 1990s. Dubkasm, a dub DJ and production duo comprised of DJ Stryda (Sam Howard) and Digistep (Ben Glass) formed in 1994, with Stryda running his Sufferah's Choice radio show and record label.⁴⁰ Smith & Mighty also released a dub- and breakbeat-centric album *Bass Is*

³⁴ Webb, "Bristol Blues and Roots"; Charlotte Pierce, "Lakota: a brief history of one of Bristol's most infamous clubs", *Her Campus*, 1 February 2022 (accessed 3 September 2023), <https://www.hercampus.com/school/bristol/lakota-a-brief-history-of-one-of-brisstols-most-infamous-clubs/>; Thekla Bristol, "History", n. d. (accessed 3 September 2023), <https://www.theklabristol.co.uk/history/>.

³⁵ Joe Muggs, "10 Questions for DJ / producer Rob Smith of Smith & Mighty", *The Arts Desk*, 24 November 2018 (accessed 1 October 2021), <https://theartsdesk.com/new-music/10-questions-dj-producer-rob-smith-smith-mighty>.

³⁶ Chemam, *Massive Attack*, 40.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁸ Webb, "Bristol Blues and Roots".

³⁹ Chemam, *Massive Attack*, 11–12.

⁴⁰ Rachel Morris, "Behind the scenes with Stryda", *Nitelife*, 25 April 2017 (accessed 1 September 2021), <https://www.nitelifeonline.com/words/behind-scenes-stryda/>.

Maternal in 1995: as Webb writes, the music articulated “the kind of warm, enveloping sub-bass that reverberated through your solar plexus and rose up through the ribcage [...] the bass in question was the enwombing low end pressure felt in dub sides by Scientist, Prince Jammy and King Tubby.”⁴¹ The St Paul’s Carnival and reggae-friendly community centres in the area also continued to champion reggae sound system culture, with the Trinity Centre re-opening successfully in 2001 following financial struggles.⁴² The city’s larger musical exports were thrust into the mainstream media spotlight, including jungle/drum ‘n’ bass crews Full Cycle and Reprazent, hip-hop MC Tricky, Massive Attack, and local band Portishead (whose engineer contributed to the production of *Blue Lines*).⁴³

The postmillennial scene and steppa dub (2000–)

In the new millennium, the bass culture of Bristol continues to be strongly shaped by dub in the form of drum ‘n’ bass, and to a lesser extent dubstep and grime.⁴⁴ I will briefly highlight dubstep and grime here given their importance in Dubkasm’s and Gorgon Sound’s styles of dub. Martin Clark describes how DJ-producer Pinch (Rob Ellis) was inspired to grow the dubstep scene in Bristol early in the genre’s history after attending the influential club night FWD at London’s Plastic People in 2003.⁴⁵ Pinch was already running club night Context with a deliberately “mixed music policy”, often scheduling dub, dubstep, and jungle DJs together.⁴⁶ In subsequent years he set up the more dubstep-centric night Subloaded (2004) and record label Tectonic (2005), the latter of which has released several records at the boundaries between dub, techno, and dubstep, with Clark noting the influence of the Berlin techno scene on Pinch’s tastes.⁴⁷ The 2006 documentary *Living Inside the Speaker* serves

⁴¹ Webb, “Bristol Blues and Roots”, paras 10, 12.

⁴² Matt Robson, “Trinity Centre”.

⁴³ Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 320–321.

⁴⁴ Dave Jenkins, “An oral history of Bristol drum’n’bass”, Red Bull, 11 July 2019 (accessed 3 September 2023), <https://www.redbull.com/gb-en/bristol-drum-n-bass-history>.

⁴⁵ Martin Clark, “Grime / Dubstep”, *Pitchfork*, 3 October 2007 (accessed 3 September 2023), <https://pitchfork.com/features/grime-dubstep/6702-grime-dubstep/>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

as a unique snapshot of the budding Bristol scene at the time, showing a range of interviews with Pinch, Appleblim, and Peverelist (among many others) at Rooted Records, a vinyl outlet that played a key social role in the scene as Big Apple Records did in London.⁴⁸ Around this time Rob Smith began a dubstep side project under the moniker RSD, and producers working in a hybrid space between grime and dubstep such as Joker, Gemmy, and Jakes also became established.⁴⁹ It is notable that Bristol blogger Gutterbreakz identifies a “grimier sound” within dubstep in a 2005 interview with Pinch, reflecting the blurred boundary between the two genres and their long-standing flows of influence and collaboration in both Bristol and London.⁵⁰ In this decade the Bristol bass scene also established an unlikely connection to Japan through the late Naoki Iijima, owner of Tokyo record store Disc Shop Zero; the store opened in 1999 and Iijima frequently visited Bristol to see friends such as DJ Stryda of Dubkasm and collect trip-hop, dub, reggae, jungle, and dubstep records for his local customers.⁵¹

In the 2010s, DJ-producer duo Kahn and Neek—who comprise Gorgon Sound—have continued developing a grime-inflected dubstep scene in Bristol. They run a small record label called Bandulu and work alongside other artists such as Boofy (of the record label Sector 7) and mixed-genre collective Young Echo. All of these artists again draw influences from grime, though dub remains ever present, with Kahn and Neek noting the mentoring role that Rob Smith played early in their careers.⁵² Reggae sound system culture

⁴⁸ *Living Inside the Speaker – Dubstep: Bristol*, DVD, dir. by Michael Thomas and Mark Walker (Bristol: Rooted Records, 2006).

⁴⁹ FACT Magazine, “Punch Drunk collect five years of Bristol dubstep classics”, *FACT*, 22 September 2010 (accessed 3 September 2023), <https://www.factmag.com/2010/09/22/punch-drunk-collect-five-years-of-bristol-dubstep-classics-on-worth-the-weight/>.

⁵⁰ Gutterbreakz, “DJ Pinch: Interview and Mix”, 17 February 2005 (accessed 3 September 2023), <https://gutterbreakz.blogspot.com/2005/02/dj-pinch-interview-mix.html>.

⁵¹ A collaborative album was produced by Bristol bass music artists as a fundraiser for E-Jima’s family shortly after his passing in March 2020. This was not the only relationship Bristol bass culture has cultivated with Japan however; for example, DJ Milo of The Wild Bunch frequently toured there in the 1980s, collecting recordings and feeding into the musical experiences he would later bring to trip-hop band Massive Attack. See: Kyle MacNeill, “How a Tokyo record shop owner brought Bristol bass to Japan”, Red Bull Music, 1 April 2020 (accessed 19 April 2020), <https://www.redbull.com/gb-en/how-naoki-e-jima-took-bristol-bass-to-tokyo>; Chemam, Massive Attack, 58.

⁵² Oli Warwick, “Keepers Of The Flame: An interview with Kahn & Neek”, *Juno Daily*, 25 March 2013 (accessed 10 June 2021), <https://www.juno.co.uk/junodaily/2013/03/25/keepers-of-the-flame-an-interview-with-kahn-neek/>.

also continues to thrive despite threats to the nightlife economy and the impact of COVID-19. Crews from the 1980s such as Jah Lokko and younger generation sound systems such as Firmly Rooted and Green King, as well as artists such as DJ Sasha Steppa, continue to perform across the city, at events such as Carnival, Love Saves the Day festival, and the Bristol Dub Club at The Black Swan.

One final element of Bristol's bass culture I wish to identify in this brief history is steppa dub: a subgenre that is popular throughout the UK and informs the dub styles of Bristol acts like Dubkasm and Gorgon Sound. To "step" in Jamaican slang is to dance, and in turn steppa dub (also called "stepper" dub or simply "steppers") is characterised by its danceable four-by-four drum grooves. Kick drum hits land on each beat of the bar in common time (at speeds ranging from 110 to 150 BPM) but with snare hits typically accenting the third beat, creating a half-step rhythmic feel as introduced in Chapter 1 with dubstep. Steppa dub tracks are produced as either dub versions and "designer dub" records, that is, original compositions.⁵³ The timbral and textural framework of the music usually includes synthesised bass and drum machine sounds or sampled drums, with occasional vocal performances and considerable variation in the other instrumental layers. Production in the subgenre is also modern in the sense that artists will regularly go beyond the traditional reggae focus on the guitar, piano, and acoustic drum kit, instead adopting a wider range of synthesised and sampled timbres, which often quote bass musics like dubstep and grime. Steppa dub does however predate postmillennial bass music. Four-by-four grooves in a style known as "discobeat" were common during the roots reggae period, and producers such as the Iration Steppas in Leeds contributed to the steppa dub scene throughout the 1990s, having been influenced by the similarly groove-centric genres Chicago house and Detroit techno.⁵⁴ [Audio Example 3.1](#) is a representative example of the style popularised by Iration

⁵³ Veal, *Dub*, 228.

⁵⁴ Anniss, *Join the Future*, 127–135; Chris Alderton, "Mark Iration: "People love the fascination of a sound system but it's very hard work"", *hyponik*, 22 January 2020 (accessed 10 November 2021), <https://hyponik.com/features/mark-iration-people-love-the-fascination-of-a-sound-system-but-its-very-hard-work/>.

Steppas in their track “Mistikal Warrior” (1994). A saturated, synthesised bass line dominates the texture punctuated by short washes of echo, reverb, and other effects, and a four-by-four drum groove (with a quintessentially dub-like rimshot snare sample) carries the pulse. [Audio Example 3.2](#), “Find Jah Way” (2012) by Gorgon Sound, shows how this style is adapted by newer artists. The duo uses a “gliding squares” synthesiser lead and distorted 808 bass line characteristic of grime, and in using percussion samples with a much faster attack and decay, creates an overall punchier or “angular” timbral profile reflective of postmillennial bass music.⁵⁵

In DJ performance, because steppa dub’s straightforward four-by-four kick patterns resemble the grooves of house and techno, the music lends itself well to both dancing and mixing; DJs are afforded many opportunities to embellish or improvise over the music. This DJ-friendly design and the stylistic variation possible within the subgenre have seemingly made it popular amongst young sound system audiences in Britain. This is true of Bristol, with sound systems such as Jah Lokko and Firmly Rooted frequently playing steppa dub to young, student-filled crowds at events such as Teachings in Dub at the Trinity Centre (run by Dubkasm’s DJ Stryda). In these settings, adherence to a traditional roots-reggae sound palette may be less important to audiences than enjoying dub as one of many available options within a broader continuum of bass music. This is further reflected in steppa dub’s connection to Leeds: Iration Steppas are one of the subgenre’s major purveyors, having operated their own sound system and record label for decades and contributed to the long-running club night SubDub since the 1990s.⁵⁶ When dubstep and grime expanded the creative possibilities of bass music in the early 2000s, SubDub platformed these genres and

⁵⁵ For deeper explanations of these timbres, see: Attack Magazine, “Grime Synth Basics”, 7 August 2014 (accessed 30 October 2023), <https://www.attackmagazine.com/technique/tutorials/grime-synth-basics/>; Perevedentseva, “Something for Your Mind, Your Body and Your Soul”, 158.

Regarding “808 bass”, this refers to a synthesised bass sound native to the Roland TR-808 drum machine, a canonical analogue instrument that has been influential throughout popular music, especially techno, since 1980. See: Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 64–65.

⁵⁶ Anniss, *Join the Future*, 127–135.

hosted them side-by-side with roots reggae and steppa dub, much like Stryda does at the annual “Weekender” edition of Teachings in Dub.⁵⁷

Interrogating “the Bristol sound”

According to Webb, Massive Attack and the artists in their milieu (namely Portishead and Reprazent) can be credited for catalysing the beginning of the “trip-hop” scene and “Bristol sound” discourse that dominated reception of the city’s music in the 1990s.⁵⁸ Musicologist Jeff Wragg documents how “trip-hop” was initially coined in a 1994 *Mixmag* article in relation to the instrumental aesthetics of US hip-hop producer DJ Shadow.⁵⁹ It quickly gained traction as a catch-all term for the bass-forward and relatively slow, meditative, “trippy” beats of Massive Attack and Portishead.⁶⁰ Both bands proceeded to be nominated for and win multiple British music awards throughout the rest of the decade, and Massive Attack became known for their outspoken views on political and environmental issues.⁶¹ The album *New Forms* by drum ‘n’ bass DJ Roni Size with the Reprazent crew—who drew on influences from dub, jungle, jazz, and hip-hop—won the Mercury Prize in 1997, another landmark moment for this increasingly critically acclaimed “Bristol sound”.⁶² According to Simon Reynolds in 1999, “trip-hop”—a term used by some commentators interchangeably with “the Bristol sound”—was at the time a “handy tag” that evoked “what it supposedly describe[d]: a spacey, downtempo form of hip-hop that’s mostly abstract and instrumental”.⁶³ He further described its aesthetic as “high on atmospherics, low on attitude [...] designed for headphone listening as opposed to parties, reverie rather than revelry”.⁶⁴ The Bristol groups

⁵⁷ It is also notable that steppa dub is a mainstay of dub performances at Outlook Festival, the next Chapter’s case study; three of the festival’s founding organisers are from Leeds including SubDub promoter Simon Scott. See: Dave Jenkins, “The History of Outlook Festival”, *UKF*, 11 April 2018 (accessed 8 February 2020), <https://ukf.com/words/the-history-of-outlook-festival/21705>.

⁵⁸ Webb, “Interrogating the Production of Sound and Place”,

⁵⁹ Jeff Wragg, “Just Don’t Call it Trip Hop: Reconciling the Bristol sound style with the trip hop genre”, *Organised Sound* 21, no. 1 (2016): 41–42.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Chemam, *Out of the Comfort Zone*, 115–124.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶³ Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 319.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

leading this scene all had distinct styles, however, and thus tended to reject “trip-hop” as a reductive label: Massive Attack were a self-consciously hybrid act, Portishead were often stylistically closer to cinematic rock than hip-hop, and Roni Size’s primary background was in jungle.⁶⁵

In response to these issues and the ongoing social significance of “the Bristol sound”, Bristol’s popular music heritage has been the subject of several research projects. These include Webb’s cited above and Paul Sullivan’s survey of the Bristol scene in *Remixology*, which are predominantly journalistic in methodology and scope; two projects by media scholars Michelle Henning and Rehan Hyder, which have more detailed historical and theoretical approaches but are less musically precise; and Wragg’s, where he comparatively analyses several “trip-hop” recordings to observe differences of style and genre.⁶⁶ In Henning’s and Hyder’s view, “the Bristol sound” is largely a “social construction”, and they argue perceptively that it plays into a process of canonisation through which Bristol music has come to be perceived as less diverse than it really is.⁶⁷ They define “the Bristol sound” loosely as “an eclectic mix of dub reggae, punk and soul, jazz and hip hop, and characterised by a heavy bass, use of sampling and a laid-back beat”, not dissimilar to Reynolds’ description above.⁶⁸ Wragg is more specific in arguing for a three-part genre system where instrumental hip-hop, “post trip-hop”, and “the Bristol sound” each constitute

⁶⁵ Wragg, “Just Don’t Call it Trip Hop”, 41–42.

⁶⁶ Webb, “Interrogating the Production of Sound and Place”; Sullivan, *Remixology*, 147–167; Michelle Henning & Rehan Hyder, “Locating the ‘Bristol Sound’: Archiving Music as Everyday Life”, in *Sites of Popular Music Heritage: Memories, Histories, Places*, ed. Sara Cohen *et al.* (London; New York: Routledge, 2014), 97–111; Rehan Hyder, “Black Music and Cultural Exchange in Bristol”, in *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, 85–100.

⁶⁷ Henning & Hyder, “Locating the ‘Bristol Sound’”, 98. As musicologist Sarah Cohen shows in relation to The Beatles and the so-called “Liverpool sound”, this issue is indeed not uncommon in the British music press and the treatment of British cities’ musical heritage in media and music historiography more broadly. See: Sara Cohen, “Identity, Place and the ‘Liverpool Sound’”, in *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, ed. Martin Stokes (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 117–34; see also Sarah Cohen, *Decline, Renewal and the City in Popular Music Culture: Beyond the Beatles* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* Webb similarly defines “the Bristol sound” by simply listing the stylistic gestures it hybridises: “a combination of slow hip-hop beats, heavy dub-reggae-influenced bass lines, big string arrangements that were either sampled from film soundtracks or composed, indie/alternate rock guitar lines, jazz trumpet or sax flourishes, and soulful/jazz-influenced vocals.” Webb, “Interrogating the Production of Sound and Place”, 59.

distinct subgenres within “trip-hop” as a wider category.⁶⁹ In doing so, he identifies specific practices that artists associated with “the Bristol sound” typically employ, such as feeding a bass guitar signal into an “overdriven preamp that fuses the note with distorted noise” to create “grainy” timbres, and manipulating the sound stage of the recording by positioning instruments “closer” or “further” from the listener to create an “otherworldly impression”.⁷⁰

While they provide valuable historical and musical context, these scholarly assessments of “the Bristol sound” consistently understate the importance of dub in the city, particularly its live performance elements. Wragg’s analysis in leaves out the influence of Jamaican sound system practice on the techniques he analyses in “trip-hop” recordings; his study also treats “the Bristol sound” uncritically as a category, taking it largely for granted that Massive Attack, Portishead, Tricky, and should or can be grouped together stylistically. Yet, for example, Daddy G has summarised Massive Attack’s style as a combination of hip-hop’s sampling and rapping with the bass pressure of the sound system dances they attended growing up.⁷¹ Dub-reggae artists including producer Mad Professor and singer Horace Andy have also been frequent collaborators with Massive Attack, reflecting the impulse towards dub latent in the band’s music.⁷² Indeed, much of the genealogy of “trip-hop” can be traced to dub and live sound system culture, as for example in Reprazent’s emphasis on reggae-style toasting and MCing in their live performances of primarily instrumental music.⁷³ Even Massive Attack’s sample-based beat design inspired by hip-hop can be read as an extension of the remix culture that Jamaican dub engineers innovated in the roots reggae era, with the wider influence of reggae on hip-hop being well documented

⁶⁹ Wragg, “Just Don’t Call it Trip Hop”, 43.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

⁷¹ Bristol Archive Records, “Daddy G”, interview by Peter Kirk in August 2004, 1 January 2010 (accessed 19 September 2020), http://www.bristolarchiverecords.com/people/people_Daddy_G.html; see also Sullivan, “The Bristol Sound”, in *Remixology*, 147–167.

⁷² Chemam, *Out of the Comfort Zone*, 117, 82.

⁷³ See, for example: Ilija Petreski, “Roni Size Reprazent - Brown Paper Bag (Live @ Later with Jools Holland 1997)”, YouTube, 26 October 2012 (accessed 1 February 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JaeJAvHVmA>.

(some of its pioneers such as DJ Kool Herc migrated to New York from Kingston in the 1960s).⁷⁴

Ultimately, the problem with “the Bristol sound” and the scholarly engagement with it so far is that its musical make-up is too often discussed in relation to loose stylistic categories. Conceptual and technical strategies, especially as they relate to performance, are rarely addressed (though Wragg’s analysis is considerably detailed). “The Bristol sound” does not descend *only* from the dub diaspora, though I will show through the analysis below that a major foundation of its bass culture is dub’s underlying principle of fragmentation/rupture. I aim to understand more precisely how “the Bristol sound” comes live in DJ performance and artists’ leveraging of practices such as versioning, rewinds, bass drops, and (as Veal terms it) the “macrocomposition” of sound system performance.⁷⁵ The benefit of this approach is that focuses on elucidating DJs’ creative principles more than surface-level resonances between genres like reggae and “trip-hop”. In turn, I suggest it has the potential to unlock more interpretive and critical possibilities not only in relation to “the Bristol sound” but more broadly in research on the long history of city-sound relations in EDM, from Berlin techno and Chicago house to the Los Angeles “beat scene”.⁷⁶

“The Bristol sound” at Boiler Room, London, 2015

In 2015, the music broadcasting platform Boiler Room hosted a livestreamed club night dedicated to dub and dubstep, powered by Sinai sound system from Sheffield.⁷⁷ The event was curated by London dubstep pioneer and DJ-producer Mala, who performed as the

⁷⁴ Wayne Marshall, “Kool Herc”, in *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture*, ed. Mickey Hess (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), 1–26; see also Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 21–40.

⁷⁵ Veal, *Dub*, 64–80.

⁷⁶ See, for example: Simon Reynolds, “A Tale of Three Cities: Detroit Techno, Chicago House and New York Garage”, in *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture*, updated Edition (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012), 1–33; Mike D’Errico, “Compression Aesthetics: Transducing Segregation in the Los Angeles Beat Scene”, in *Electronic Cities: Music, Policies and Space in the 21st Century*, ed. Sébastien Darchen, Damien Charrieras, & John Willsteed (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 115–30.

⁷⁷ Boiler Room, “Deep Medi”.

headliner alongside three acts associated with his Deep Medi record label, including Dubkasm and Gorgon Sound from Bristol. As introduced above, Dubkasm have been established in Bristol's dub scene since the 1990s. Gorgon Sound represent a younger generation, producing and performing dub with influences from postmillennial bass music. These duos are frequent collaborators and tend to perform at the same events locally. The DJ sets, recorded live and published online by Boiler Room, make for an effective case study of how "the Bristol sound" comes to life in performance for several reasons. First, based on my years of living in Bristol and attending their in-person shows, these are typical performances representing each duo's style as producers and performers as well as the common ground between them. Both artists perform with vinyl and dubplate records, for example, but with divergent mixing techniques. Second, I choose this Boiler Room event because of its overlapping mediations of music, space, and place, that are ripe for critical investigation in relation to "the Bristol sound". Mala's curation has an implied geographical framing, showcasing artists on the Deep Medi roster from three different cities including two distinct artists from Bristol. Yet the performances were livestreamed from London, raising the question of how and to what extent the performances express a sense of "the Bristol sound", to a presumably mostly non-Bristolian audience (both in person and after the fact online).

It is worth also briefly reflecting on Boiler Room's status as an influential force in EDM culture over the last decade. The primary product of Boiler Room (henceforth BR) is organising club nights in London and around the world, broadcasting the DJ performances for free online (on YouTube and their website) and monetising the events through advertising. They showcase a range of EDM subcultures, having initially focused on UK bass music, house, and techno but expanding in recent years to include reggae, jazz, and more. The company was established in 2011 and today they have over 3 million YouTube subscribers, billions of views on their website, and have livestreamed from locations as distinct as Gaza and Seoul.⁷⁸ DJs aspire to appear on the platform, which has played a

⁷⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/boilerroom> and <https://boilerroom.tv/>, accessed 3 September 2023.

significant role in launching new artists' careers (as with DJ Sherelle's viral 2019 set, for example).⁷⁹ While BR's videography has become more sophisticated over time, its broadcasts generally revolve around a singular, static, webcam-like shot facing the DJ, a style that critics such as *Time Out* praise for its simple DIY aesthetics: "the artists are [...] the sole attraction at Boiler Room: attendees are positioned behind the decks in a bedroom DJ style set-up so that the selector is always the main figure in view."⁸⁰ Musicologist Guillaume Heuguet similarly argues that this spatial and visual arrangement, shown in **Figure 11** below, is effective at creating a sense of candid, relatable "bedroom DJ" intimacy: the impression is that "the DJ is a participant in a cultural scene that the video merely captures" (despite most broadcasts being carefully curated).⁸¹



Figure 11 Visual composition of a Boiler Room broadcast. Dubkasm DJ Set, 2015.

⁷⁹ Tanya Akinola, "'Flying the flag': Sherelle reflects on an incredible 2019", *gal-dem*, 6 December 2019 (accessed 3 September 2023), <https://gal-dem.com/sherelle-interview-boiler-room-2019/>.

⁸⁰ Kate Hutchison, "Welcome to the Boiler Room", *Time Out*, 18 April 2011 (accessed 1 October 2021), <https://web.archive.org/web/20130209102148/https://www.timeout.com/london/clubs/welcome-to-the-boiler-room>.

⁸¹ Guillaume Heuguet, "When Club Culture Goes Online: The Case of Boiler Room", *Dancecult* 8, no. 1 (2016): 80.

Indeed, BR's focus on free, accessible, DIY-style live video prefigured the dominance of user-generated live videos on social networks like Instagram today. Its successful streaming model also reflects similar "platform capitalist" projects of the last decade such as Spotify that have transformed the music industry.⁸² Like most digital platforms, BR's public presence is almost entirely online and events are broadcast for free; DJs provide the primary creative labour while their performances are monetised through advertising. As such, the platform is increasingly being criticised for exploiting DJs, and Black popular music in general. A 2020 statement by BR implied the company had only instated a policy against inviting artists to "play for free" in June of that year, and elsewhere BR was criticised for receiving nearly £1 million from the UK's COVID-19 Recovery Fund despite not "turning a profit over" in the preceding years.⁸³ A *Mixmag* article further notes that BR has in the past failed to pay DJs or charge them a "pay to play" fee, perpetuating discrimination in the industry by "pricing out the less privileged, who can't afford to finance their own trips while they try to make their name."⁸⁴ Together, these issues mean that BR must be read as part of the wider, ongoing transformation of bass culture (and popular music in general) on the internet by platform capitalists, a topic I will return to more explicitly in Chapter 5's digital ethnography with an online dubstep community.

Dubkasm: Dub in Bristol

Dubkasm are committed to producing and performing dub in the spirit of the roots reggae era. In an interview they recall being inspired by sneaking into a Jah Shaka sound system

⁸² Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Martin Scherzinger, "The Political Economy of Streaming", in *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Monique Ingalls, & David Trippett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 274–297.

⁸³ Boiler Room (@boilerroomtv), Twitter, 19 October 2020 (accessed 1 October 2021), <https://twitter.com/boilerroomtv/status/1318136682869346306>; Amateur At Play, "Boiler Room and what Blaise Bellville won't want to talk about...", *Amateur's House*, 20 October 2020 (accessed 1 October 2021), <https://amateuratplay.com/2020/10/20/boiler-room-and-what-blaise-bellville-wont-want-to-talk-about/>.

⁸⁴ The Secret DJ, "'Paying to Play' is a Genuine Threat to Dance Music Culture", *Mixmag*, 13 April 2018 (accessed 1 October 2021), <https://mixmag.net/feature/the-secret-dj-pay-to-play/>.

dance at the Malcolm X Centre as teenagers, after which they began collecting records and learning music.⁸⁵ In 1994, they joined forces as Dubkasm, and Stryda started performing as a radio DJ on his show *Sufferah's Choice* soon after in 1996.⁸⁶ Stryda sought interviews with reggae and dub artists across Britain and sent recordings of the show to as many sound system crews as possible, such as the Iration Steppas in Leeds; this attracted more interest in the Bristol dub scene as a result.⁸⁷ In 2007, Stryda established an event called *Teachings in Dub (TID)* which initially ran at Stokes Croft venue *Clockwork* in partnership with Pinch's dubstep event *Subloaded* (which took the upstairs room while TID played downstairs).⁸⁸ TID now hosts an event approximately every two months and since the early 2010s has been at the Trinity Centre, which accommodates crowds of up to 700 people. It has become one of the UK's longest-running and most successful dub-reggae events, comparable to *SubDub* in Leeds. Local crews who perform at TID include *Qualitex* and *Bassi*, though more established touring sound systems are typically the headline act, such as *Aba Shanti-I*, *Iration Steppas*, the late *Jah Shaka*, and occasionally also acts from further afield in Europe such as *Green Light Sound System* (Barcelona) and *OBF* (France). *Dubkasm* themselves will perform at TID once or twice a year, and they frequently recruit Bristol-based sound systems such as *Firmly Rooted* to provide the audio. In interviews, Stryda describes how TID is conceived as deliberately educational; he aims to expose younger audiences to the Bristol scene and dub in general, a motivation reflected in TID being originally founded in collaboration with the Bristol Reggae Society at the University of Bristol.⁸⁹ TID's original location in Stokes Croft and partnership with the already established *Subloaded* gave it valuable geographical and musical proximity in this regard, introducing newcomers to a wider bass culture. As Stryda

⁸⁵ Dubkasm, "The Dubkasm Story", Vimeo, April 2010 (accessed 1 September 2021), <https://vimeo.com/9319845>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Vibronics, "Life in Dub Podcast #15 Stryda Dubkasm", Soundcloud, 14 July 2020 (accessed 1 September 2021), <https://soundcloud.com/vibronics/life-in-dub-podcast-15-stryda-dubkasm-hosted-by-steve-vibronics>.

⁸⁸ Morris, "Behind the scenes with Stryda"; Sammy Jones, "Interview: Teachings in Dub", *Bristol 24/7*, 8 November 2017 (accessed 1 September 2021), <https://www.bristol247.com/culture/music/interview-teachings-dub/>.

⁸⁹ Morris, "Behind the scenes with Stryda".

explains, in the early years of TID, ““A lot of people came for dubstep as that sound had just been established [...] But they would venture downstairs and hear the Teachings room for the first time – sometimes hear a reggae soundsystem for the first time – and slowly people latched onto that.”⁹⁰

As performers, Dubkasm have a clear division of labour. DJ Stryda controls the selection and mixing of records and simultaneously engages the crowd as an MC. Digistep plays the saxophone, playing live solos over instrumental records for example, and uses a variety of hardware instruments such as a dub siren and delay/echo unit to embellish Stryda’s mixing. Given this thesis’s focus on turntable performance, most of my analysis will focus on Stryda’s actions, though this is not to diminish Digistep’s contributions. Stylistically, Dubkasm’s investment in roots-era reggae and the educational motivation behind TID occasionally manifests in Stryda’s work as an MC. He occasionally speaks to the audience directly about the roots of bass music being in 1970s Jamaican sound system culture, and reflexively draws attention to Dubkasm’s performing with analogue technologies in the spirit of that culture. Relatedly, Stryda approaches DJ performance with the traditional style of a selector, usually playing records one at a time to direct collective attention to the selection of records itself more than the transitions between records.

Given the importance Dubkasm place on selection, it is useful to begin with the macro-level structure of their Boiler Room performance. Over 59 minutes Stryda plays 15 records in total, ten of which are by Dubkasm, with the remainder including roots-reggae artists such as Dennis Brown and remixes of Dubkasm by other artists, including the event’s curator Mala. **Table 3** below is a form chart showing the full track list, the time at which each track enters the mix, and the techniques Stryda uses to transition out of each record into the next. There are nine interpolations between tracks including a saxophone solo by Digistep and seven improvisations by Stryda as MC. The table also shows my analysis of the performance’s overall structure; I divide the set into four sections, the Warm-up, Hype,

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Break, and Finale, determining the boundaries between these primarily subjectively through my interpretation of major changes in mood and pace (as outlined in the Methodology).⁹¹

The tempo graph in **Figure 12** below maps the average tempo of each track over the course of the set and highlights key moments that relate to each section.

Track no. and name	Time in	BPM	Cut or smooth transition?	Section
1. Dread Lion	01:28	134	Smooth: Filter FX & saxophone improv.	Warm-up
<i>Saxophone solo</i>	05:37			
2. Roots and Culture (Dubkasm dub)	06:07	147	Smooth: Volume fade	
<i>MC: Welcome</i>	09:54			
3. Zulu Dawn	10:22	121	Cut	Hype
<i>MC: "Sound system business"</i>	14:38	N/A		
4. Babylon Ambush	15:15	120	Smooth: Volume fade	
5. Build Bridges Instead	19:31	157	Cut	
<i>MC: "Out of Jamaica, out of Bristol"</i>	22:21			
6. Higher Meds ft. YT	22:28	157	Cut	
<i>MC: "Big up UK reggae artists"</i>	25:06			
7. Higher Meds ft. YT & Solo Banton (Version)	25:15	157	Cut	
8. Emotion ft. Rudy Lee (Dub version)	30:26	140	Cut	
<i>MC: "Not a mixin' affair"</i>	32:55			Break
9. "Ishan dub" (dubplate)	33:13	140	Cut	

⁹¹ Note that I use "warm-up" and "hype" because they match the language used colloquially by EDM listeners to describe the opening and climactic moments of live sets, respectively. Hype has also been theorised by Malcolm James as one of the sonic intimacies of DJ performance in 1990s jungle (see *Sonic Intimacy*, 73), which I will return to in Chapter 5. The Break and Finale are simply functional terms, describing transitional and conclusive sections, respectively.

MC: "Foundation reggae artists"	36:41			
10. Promised Land	37:14	134	Smooth: Volume fade	
11. Destination Highrise	40:09	149	Cut	
MC: "Respect out to Mala"	46:00			
12. Victory! (Mala remix)	46:23	137	Cut	Finale ("Victory!" showcase)
13. Victory! (Original mix)	50:06	137	Cut	
Crowd sings "Victory!" melody	52:20			
14. Victory! (Dub version)	52:46	137	Cut	
15. Dread (Dubkasm Dub 1)	55:49	141	N/A	

Table 3 Form chart, Dubkasm DJ set.

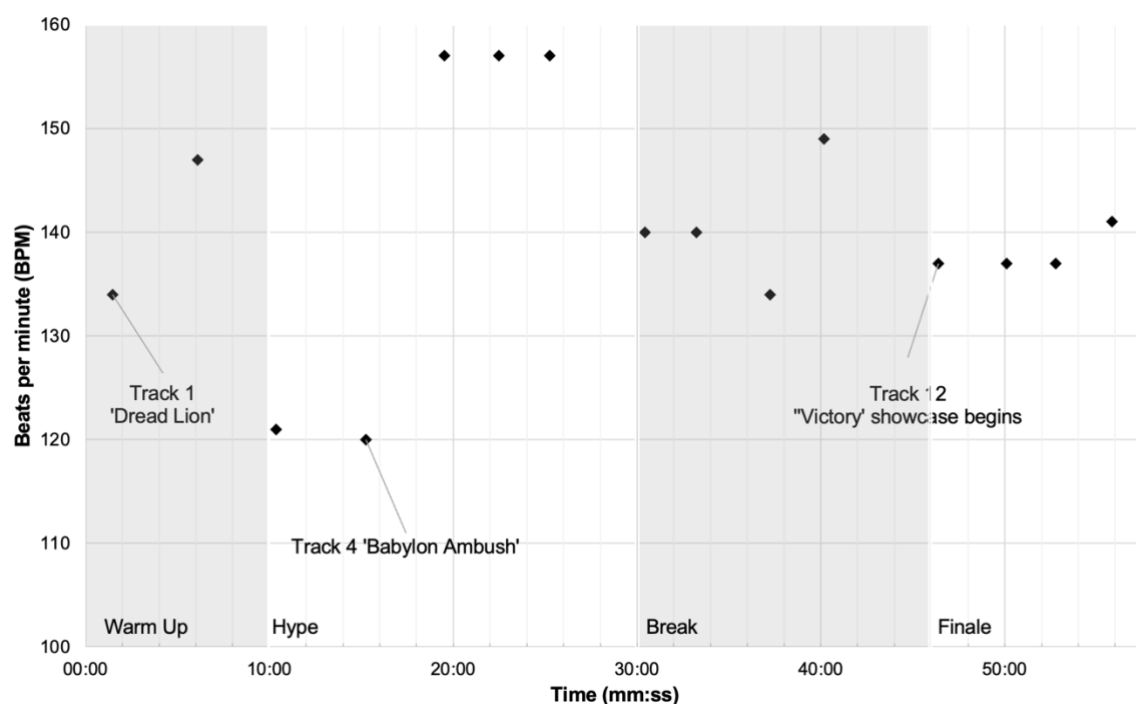


Figure 12 Tempo graph, Dubkasm DJ set.

The first notable observation about Dubkasm's set at the macro level is Stryda's decision to perform mostly Dubkasm's own music. While this does express what I call *Bristol dub*, a localised reinterpretation of a once Jamaica-specific tradition, the overriding tendency in the set is towards performing with and about roots-era dub and reggae. In other words, the set may be built with records specific to "the Bristol sound", but the communication of reggae tradition takes priority and thus evokes a sense of *dub in Bristol*, evincing Dubkasm's understanding of bass culture as a larger imagined community: a global dub diaspora.

The selector style is central to DJ Stryda's presentation of dub in Bristol. He predominantly uses cuts, instantly removing the sound of records from the mix by lifting the needle from the record, lowering its volume on the mixer, or using the pause/play button on the turntable. This approach obviates the need for Stryda to smoothly synchronise the tempo, key, or beat pattern of each record with the next one. It also creates a necessarily jagged flow of sound for listeners—though Digistep's saxophone solos frequently smooth over what would otherwise be even sharper contrasts—and a non-linear tempo contour that would be drastically unconventional in other EDM settings. The scattered data points in **Figure 12** depict a loose relationship between tempo and structure. Stryda clearly prioritises style and mood over any linear progression from slower to faster records, which might typically correlate with—but does not strictly predetermine—increasing excitement in the audience. For example, the warm-up section contains records at three different speeds of 134, 147, and 120 BPM. The transition into the Hype section then juxtaposes the set's slowest and fastest moments, with the Hype section initially consistent at 157 BPM before slowing down to 140 BPM, where Stryda stabilises the tempo for the remainder of the set.

In beginning the performance with "Dread Lion" by The Upsetters (produced by Lee "Scratch" Perry in 1976), the refrain of "the roots" in the record's melancholic opening sets the tone for the roots reggae-inspired performance that is to come. Stryda plays the record with a classic bass drop technique, shown in a 49-second excerpt in [Video Example 3.1](#) (01:27–02:16 in the original recording). "Dread Lion" enters the mix with a high-pass filter already active on its channel on the mixer, as seen from the blue flashing button near the

centre of the frame. Stryda is using a filter to cut frequencies below approximately 200 Hz. This builds anticipation for the bass line, just barely audible through the filter, until he deactivates it at 00:43 (02:10 in the original recording), in the second bar of the “Dread Lion” chorus. This reintroduces the full weight of the bass and enacts a simple but effective bass drop, the timing of which synchronises with the reggae song’s characteristically syncopated rhythm. Stryda also leverages here the affordances of the mixer’s interface in that the filter is (de)activated instantly at the tap of a button, equivalent to a frequency-band “mute switch” on older-generation analogue mixers; dub engineers and selectors used mute switches in the roots era to break instrumental tracks into fragments and play with the affect of amplified bass (both live and in the studio).⁹² **Figure 13** below visualises the frequency content of this bass drop with a spectrogram, showing the deactivation of the high-pass filter and resulting bass impact. The Warm-up section continues with the second track, another nod to roots reggae in the form of Dubkasm’s own version of Mikey Dread’s “Roots and Culture” produced by Michael Campbell (1982): a well-known riddim that has been dubbed and versioned many times.

⁹² Using, for example, a channel EQ knob rather than filter button to perform a bass drop would require a relatively slower motion involving twisting the wrist and fingers, making it more difficult to achieve the same dramatic effect. See: Veal, *Dub*, 64.

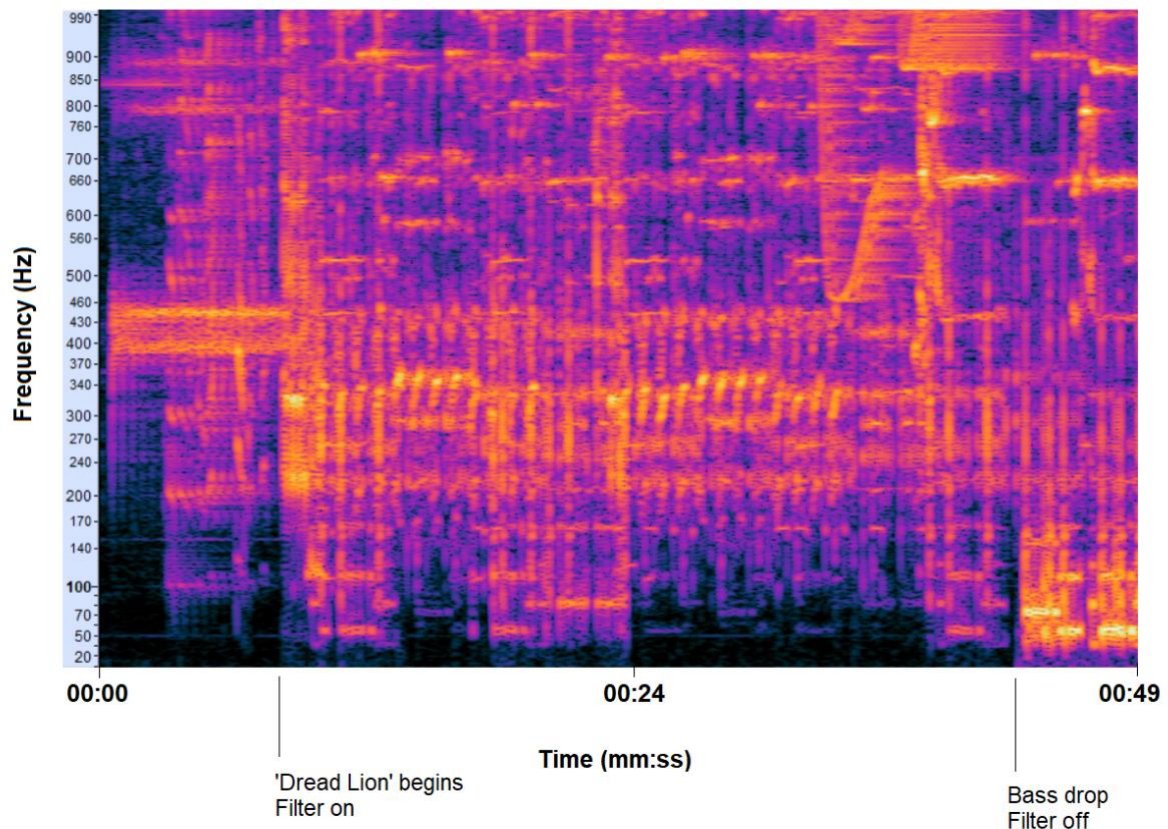


Figure 13 Spectrogram, “Dread Lion” bass drop, Dubkasm DJ set.

The Hype section then begins as the roots reggae selection ends, with “Zulu Dawn” by Dubkasm & Iration Steppas in track 3. Stylistically, the set has arrived in a modern (read: post-roots era) style of dub. “Zulu Dawn” is slow, brooding, and atmospherically other-worldly in its use of echo and metallic percussion sounds (which Digistep accentuates with effects units), though the chants of “Zulu warrior” nevertheless reference Rastafarian Pan-Africanism. The moment that truly affirms this section as Hype, however, is the entry of track 4, “Babylon Ambush”. This record is another collaboration between Dubkasm and Iration Steppas with a similar timbral palette to “Zulu Dawn”. Stryda briefly uses the filter to perform another bass drop during the record’s introduction, and here, the aggressively rising bass line seems to have a material impact on the crowd, leading to the first rewind of the set.

DJ Stryda’s rewinding of “Babylon Ambush” is shown in [Video Example 3.2](#) (15:15–16:32 in the original). A spectrogram illustrates the process in **Figure 14** below. Over the

course of a few seconds Stryda creates a sharp contrast in low-frequency pressure by filtering “Babylon Ambush”, performing a bass drop, then a rewind shortly thereafter. From the recording, it is difficult to confirm whether Stryda felt compelled to rewind the record because of a response in the crowd—some cheers are audible in the recording, and a few excited raised hands can be seen bustling at the time—or if he chose to initiate it himself. The latter case would fit with Alex de Lacey’s finding in his study of grime improvisation that DJs will sometimes rewind a record “in recognition of the riddim” without the co-sign of an MC or the audience: a “DJ’s wheel”.⁹³ This alternative, DJ-led variant of the rewind is fitting for Stryda’s long radio career, where rewinds are commonly performed according to the DJ’s intuition rather than direct feedback from the audience—who may occasionally participate via text message or phone call but are not comparable to an in-person audience. Yet, to perform a DJ’s wheel before a live audience is risky, since listeners—or co-performers, such as Digistep in this case—may feel the moment is an unsanctioned disruption of musical flow more than it is an exciting catalyst of forward motion. De Lacey observes that in grime, a DJ’s wheel can stoke frustration or disappointment in MCs if they “didn’t deserve that reload”, potentially also derailing the building of energy during a performance by leaving “others with a restricted set of options moving forward”.⁹⁴ In Dubkasm’s set, given the noticeable (though small) crowd reaction, Stryda’s rewind is likely somewhere in between a conventional rewind and a DJ’s wheel. He may have already felt compelled to play the record again but only delivered the gesture once a few audience members expressed appreciation for the bass line.

⁹³ de Lacey, *Level Up*, 89.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 90–91.

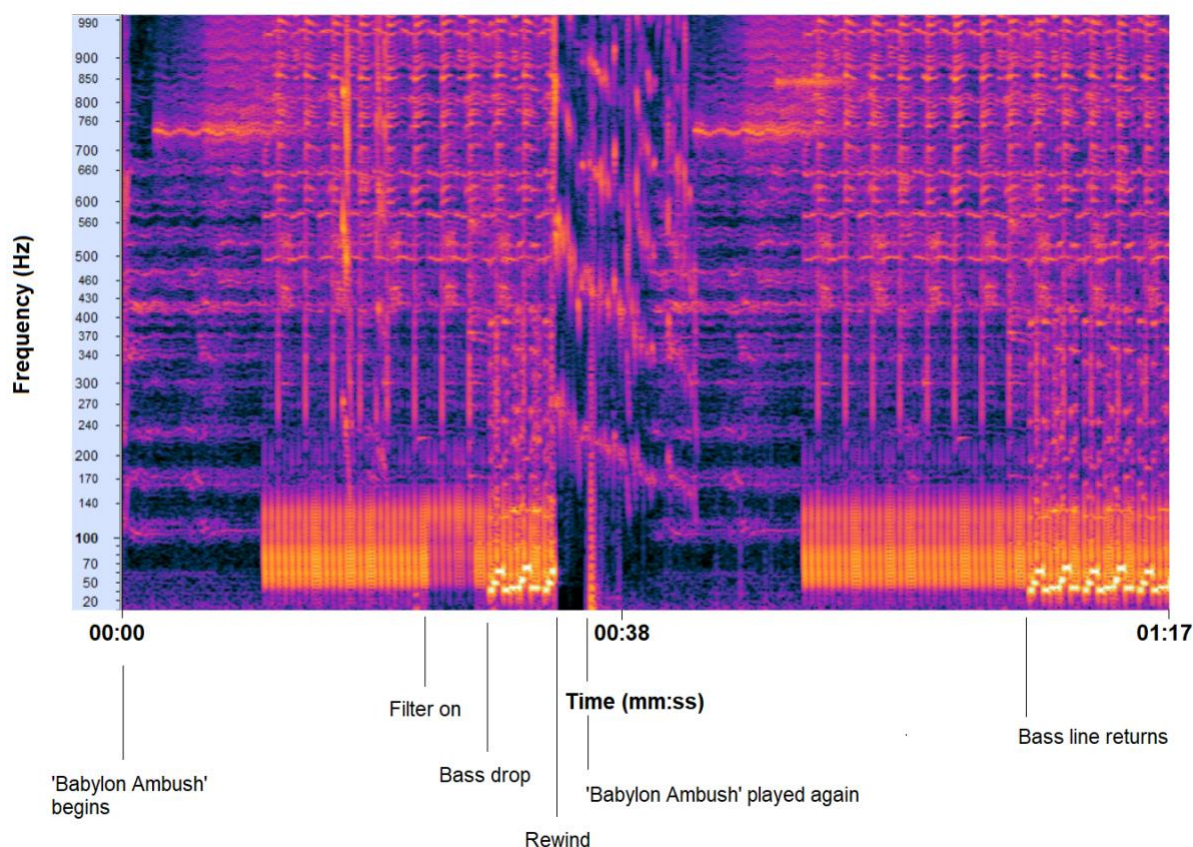


Figure 14 Spectrogram, “Babylon Ambush” bass drop and rewind, Dubkasm DJ set.

After “Babylon Ambush”, the Hype section turns to much faster tempos and high-energy steppa dub records. The section peaks at 157 BPM for three tracks in a row (5, 6, and 7) then returns to 140 BPM at track 8, marking a new Break section that forms a penultimate rest period before the Finale. During the Break, Stryda interpolates as MC, commenting “it’s not a mixin’ affair, it’s a selectin’ affair”. This signals to the audience that the gaps between records are intentional: Stryda has traditional reasons for cutting between each record in selector style. Stryda then brings this analogue formatist discourse to a zenith with another interpolation between tracks 9 and 10. I suggest the context of the club night is important here, as Dubkasm were scheduled to play first in the series of four sets and Stryda appears to want to set the tone for the rest of the evening:

Digistep at the mixin' board. And when I say the mixin' board, I mean full analogue console. Not a laptop and a mouse business, a proper console, that's where we've cut after cut. Right now, we always like to lay respect and give respect to the foundation reggae artists and sound system culture that laid way to all this music that we're going to enjoy tonight.⁹⁵

While this toast is clearly an expression of Stryda's educational tone as an MC, embodied in the name and ethos of his event series *Teachings in Dub*, it is arguably also a response to the nature of Boiler Room as an online-offline platform with global reach. In my experience, Stryda is rarely this explicit in drawing attention to his mixing in an analogue format or the duo's dedication to roots reggae culture in live performance. By extension, he appears to take advantage of the livestream here as an opportunity to disseminate knowledge about dub to potentially tens of thousands of online listeners unfamiliar with "the Bristol sound" or bass culture more broadly. Stryda's selection supports this view, as he follows the toast about reggae foundations with "Promised Land" (1979), a well-known record by Aswad and Dennis Brown. Juxtaposing "Promised Land" with more modern dub records before and after it, Stryda effectively creates a musical microcosm of the dub diaspora: his selection literally oscillates between *Bristol dub* ("Ishan Dub" and "Destination Highrise", tracks 9 and 11) and an example of *dub in Bristol* ("Promised Land", track 10).

Lastly, the Finale arrives with a three-part excursion through three dub versions of "Victory!" (2013), Dubkasm's most sought-after record. Most of the instrumental track's identity is in its anthemic brass-section chorus, and to a lesser extent the solo saxophone melodies performed by Digistep, lending the dub composition a reggae song-like feel. Stryda runs each "Victory!" record at 137 BPM, down considerably from 149 BPM in "Destination Highrise", a seemingly dual strategic move: the slower tempo signals that the set has arrived at its conclusion, and "Victory!" is so popular that playing it too far outside its original tempo could disappoint listeners. As the original "Victory!" dubplate is played at 50:56, a moment of DJ-audience affinity happens as Stryda cuts the record from the mix and sings the chorus

⁹⁵ Boiler Room, "Dubkasm", 36:41–37:12.

melody of “Victory!” to the crowd. Pointing his microphone outward, Stryda invites the crowd to sing the melody back and they do so in call and response. This simple but effective gesture all but concludes the performance. Stryda then launches the final record at 55:48, a Dubkasm version of “Dread” (2012) by Kahn, which he rewinds a few bars into the track’s bass drop as with “Babylon Ambush” earlier. Kahn is also one half of Gorgon Sound, foreshadowing—at least for listeners with knowledge of the scene—the exploration of Bristol dub that is to come in their set.

Gorgon Sound: Bristol dub

Kahn and Neek produce and perform music at the boundaries of dubstep and grime, with Gorgon Sound being a side project dedicated to dub they established in 2012 (their breakout year as artists in general).⁹⁶ The duo began their careers in the 2000s having been exposed to reggae, dub, soul, and other Black popular musics through the Bristol scene and their families.⁹⁷ In 2006, Neek started a club night at which Kahn became a resident DJ; they became collaborators shortly thereafter.⁹⁸ With common interests in EDM and the sound systems of St Paul’s Carnival and Stryda’s Teachings in Dub, they developed fluency across bass music early in their careers.⁹⁹ Since breaking out they have become successful independent artists, regularly producing remixes for other artists and touring outside the UK, and releasing a full-length album in 2023. The duo’s skills as DJs have also been recognised by dance music institutions, for example in producing a mix for *Fabriclive* (2016) and BBC Radio 1’s Essential Mix (2017).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Joe Mills, “Interview: Gorgon Sound”, *hyponik*, 17 June 2016 (accessed 10 June 2021), <https://hyponik.com/features/interview-gorgon-sound/>.

⁹⁷ Kirsti Weir, “Biography: Kahn & Neek”, *Fabric*, 18 November 2016 (accessed 10 June 2021), <https://www.fabriclondon.com/blog/view/biography-kahn-neek>.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*; Mills, “Interview: Gorgon Sound”.

¹⁰⁰ Angus Finlayson, “Kahn & Neek - Fabriclive 90”, *Resident Advisor*, 8 December 2016 (accessed 10 June 2021), <https://ra.co/reviews/20236>; BBC Radio 1, “Radio 1’s Essential Mix – Kahn & Neek”, 8 April 2017 (accessed 3 September 2023), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08kv1r1>.

Kahn and Neek's musical identity has two main elements. First, they embrace the polystylism and overlapping musical traditions of Bristol bass culture. As a reviewer of their *Fabriclive* mix writes, their music and live performances articulate a "tension between tradition and innovation".¹⁰¹ This is particularly evident in their approach to DJing, where they perform strictly with vinyl and dubplate records but will blend records sequentially, crafting transitions in a manner more resonant with the modern EDM DJ than the roots reggae selector. Second, they regularly borrow from the instrumental aesthetics of grime in their productions, repurposing (or juxtaposing in live performance) the genre's characteristically "metallic" or hard timbres—often the result of compressed drum machine samples and distorted square wave synthesiser leads—within the frameworks of dub and dubstep.¹⁰² These hybrid approaches also manifest in Gorgon Sound's output. The duo are candid about their vision for the project; a press release from 2015 describes it as focused on treating the "material" of dub records "in hands-on style and fashion, strictly offline business – taking things back to the roots [...] No fuss, just a sound system, turntables and some good vibrations to dance to."¹⁰³ Echoing Stryda's remarks to the Boiler Room audience about performing with "no laptop and a mouse business", Kahn remarks in a 2016 interview: "[w]hen you see people just playing dubplates, it sets a standard. I can't really rock up with a laptop can I? You put the work in and do it properly. It's a tradition."¹⁰⁴ The Gorgon Sound project is also conceived and presented with an explicitly DIY work ethic. For example, their releases have included limited sets of cassette tape and vinyl records with hand-stamped sleeves that are made available only to a handful of Bristol record stores before a small batch of copies are sold online.

Turning to Gorgon Sound's Boiler Room set, as shown in the below form chart (**Table 4**), the set consists of 15 tracks. Two thirds of these are by Bristol artists and about

¹⁰¹ Finlayson, "Kahn & Neek - Fabriclive 90".

¹⁰² Maria Perevedentseva, "Something for Your Mind, Your Body and Your Soul. Timbre and Meaning in Electronic Dance Music", PhD thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London (2022), 153.

¹⁰³ Tape Echo Bristol, "Peng Sound 007: Gorgon Sound Remixes", 2 November 2015 (accessed 1 September 2021), <https://tape-echo.com/news/peng-sound-007-gorgon-sound-remixes/>.

¹⁰⁴ Warwick, "Keepers Of The Flame".

half are by Gorgon Sound, including two remixes by Kahn; the set is also hosted by Rider Shafique, an MC and recording artist who performs in a wide range of UK bass scenes. In line with Gorgon Sound's modern mixing style, nearly two-thirds of the transitions between tracks are beat matched or smoothed over with filter and delay effects. There is a tighter, somewhat linear correlation between tempo and structure than in Dubkasm's set, as illustrated in the tempo graph below (**Figure 15**). I identify three sections here, a Warm Up, Hype, and Finale, with the boundaries again determined by changes in tempo and mood. In the Warm Up, the tempo is consistently 130 BPM before suddenly rising to 140 BPM in what becomes the Hype section; it then peaks at 148 BPM in the Finale.

Track no. and name	Time in	BPM	Cut or mixed into next track?	Technique(s)	Section
1. Echo Dub	00:31	130	Mixed	Beat match & EQ	Warm-Up
2. Heartical Dub	05:25	130	Cut	Power-down	
3. Righteous Dub (Version)	07:57	130	Cut	Power-down	
4. Way Mi Defend	15:10	130	Mixed	Beat match & EQ	
5. Late Night Blues	17:38	130	Mixed	Beat match & EQ	
6. Goth Dub	22:11	130	Hybrid	Filter & delay FX into cut	
7. "Militant"	25:14	140	Hybrid	Beat match, EQ, & back spin	Hype
8. "Leng"	28:10	140	Mixed	Beat match & EQ	
9. 16" Skink	30:47	140	Cut	Filter & delay FX	
10. "Trodden"	33:37	142	Mixed	Beat match & EQ	
11. "Embrace"	36:42	142	Cut	Delay FX	

12. Find Jah Way (Dub Version)	39:48	145	Mixed	Beat match & EQ	Finale
13. Counterattack	42:41	145	Mixed	Beat match & EQ	
14. The Tunnel	46:36	147	Mixed	Beat match, filter, & EQ	
15. Bullet A'Go Fly	49:20	148	N/A	N/A	

Table 4 Form chart, Gorgon Sound DJ Set.

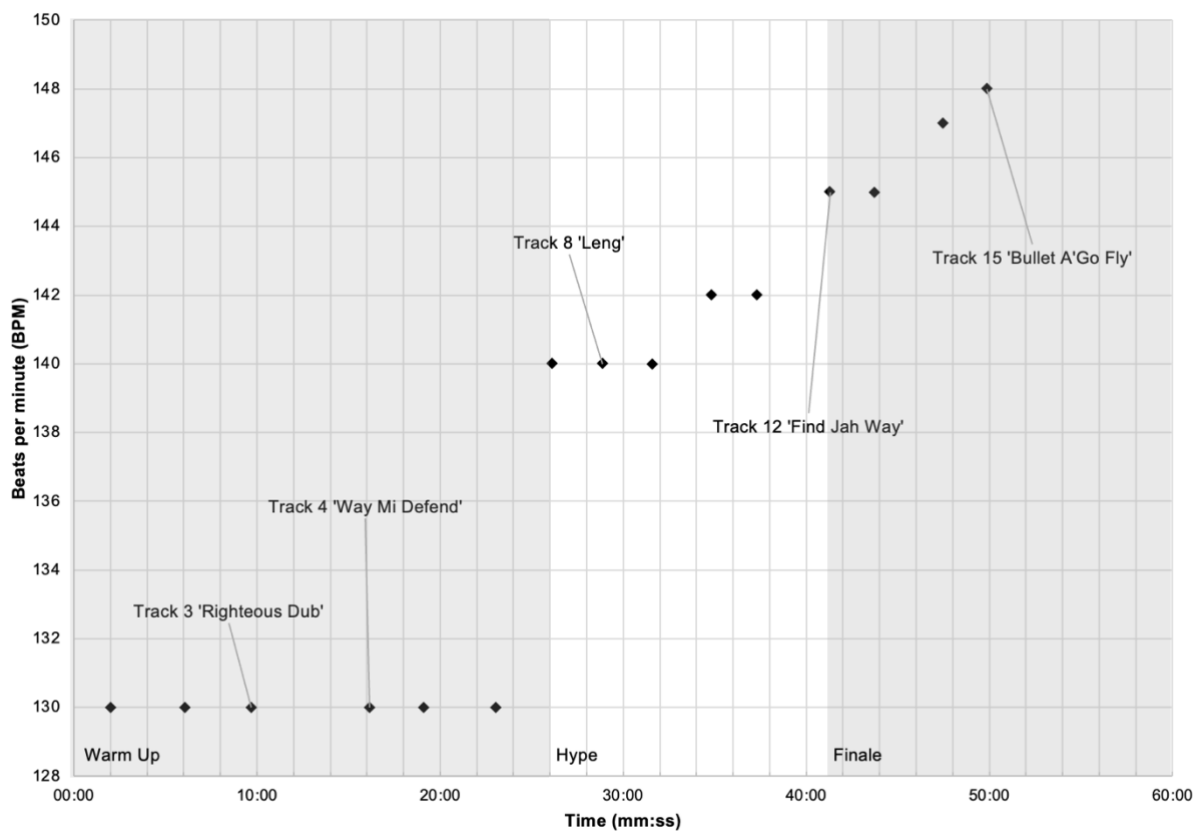


Figure 15 Tempo graph, Gorgon Sound DJ Set.

Gorgon Sound's relationship with tempo and groove differs significantly from Dubkasm's. During the Warm-up, Gorgon Sound seemingly work with a prepared selection of tracks around the same tempo, employing beat matching to create a continuous sonic

surface. [Video Example 3.3](#) (17:23–18:41 in the original) shows how this occurs in straightforward fashion between tracks 4 and 5, “Way Mi Defend” and “Late Night Blues” respectively. The excerpt begins with “Way Mi Defend” playing on the fourth channel of the mixer. Kahn is cueing “Late Night Blues” on the left-hand turntable, which corresponds to the first of four channels on the mixer, as evidenced by the yellow “cue” light above the channel’s volume fader (indicating he is listening to that channel in his headphones). Kahn scratches the record back and forth in time with the pulse of the music with his left hand, and simultaneously uses his right hand to reduce the mid- and low-frequency content of the first channel, in anticipation of the kick drum pattern and bass line of “Late Night Blues” about to enter the mix, which he does not want to muddy the overall sound. At 00:15, Kahn releases “Late Night Blues” and it formally enters the mix as track 5. Over the next 50 seconds, he gradually increases the volume of track 5 by moving up the first channel fader while toning down the bass of track 4 with the EQ control, and by 01:08 the transition is complete.

There are two processes at play in this example: Gorgon Sound’s straightforward beat matching of the two tracks in sequence, and the cyclic groove of the steppa dub music being played. These processes converge in Gorgon Sound leveraging what Butler calls the musical technology of “grooving” in EDM performance, introduced in Chapter 1.¹⁰⁵

Specifically, Gorgon Sound take advantage of steppa dub’s “autotelic” patterning, a type of groove “designed to lead the listener to expect its beginning to follow its ending”, which affords them the opportunity to create a continuous blend between the two tracks.¹⁰⁶ This sonic continuity is not a consistent theme of the set overall, however; as the above form chart shows, they perform three different types of transition during the Warm Up alone. Tracks 1, 4, and 5 are mixed via beat matching and EQ as in the present example but tracks 2 and 3 are removed from the mix by Gorgon Sound powering down the turntable; track 6 is simply faded out. As in the Mala b2b Loefah performance in Chapter 1, the power-down

¹⁰⁵ Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs*, 207–219.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

technique here stands out as a hip-hop-like gesture where a nominally extra-musical artefact is recontextualised as a sonic texture useful for transitioning between records.

Gorgon Sound's power-down transition out of track 3 "Righteous Dub" is shown in [Video Example 3.4](#), a 32-second excerpt (14:43–15:15). Kahn, positioned at the left turntable, uses both hands to cut the mid- and low-frequency content of "Righteous Dub" using EQ. He activates the same filter used by Dubkasm to perform bass drops, gradually increasing the cut-off frequency from approximately 150 Hz to 500 Hz before powering down the turntable at 00:18. At the right-hand turntable, Neek is simultaneously using the mixer's echo effects to embellish the transition, accentuating the stuttering of the slowing record. As "Righteous Dub" crawls to an end, Kahn slides down the volume fader of the first channel at 00:27 to cut it from the mix, and the transition is complete as Neek simultaneously fades in track 4, "Way Mi Defend". **Figure 16** below visualises this passage with a spectrogram, showing Kahn's filtering as well as the stuttering timbre and descending pitch contour of the transition into track 4.

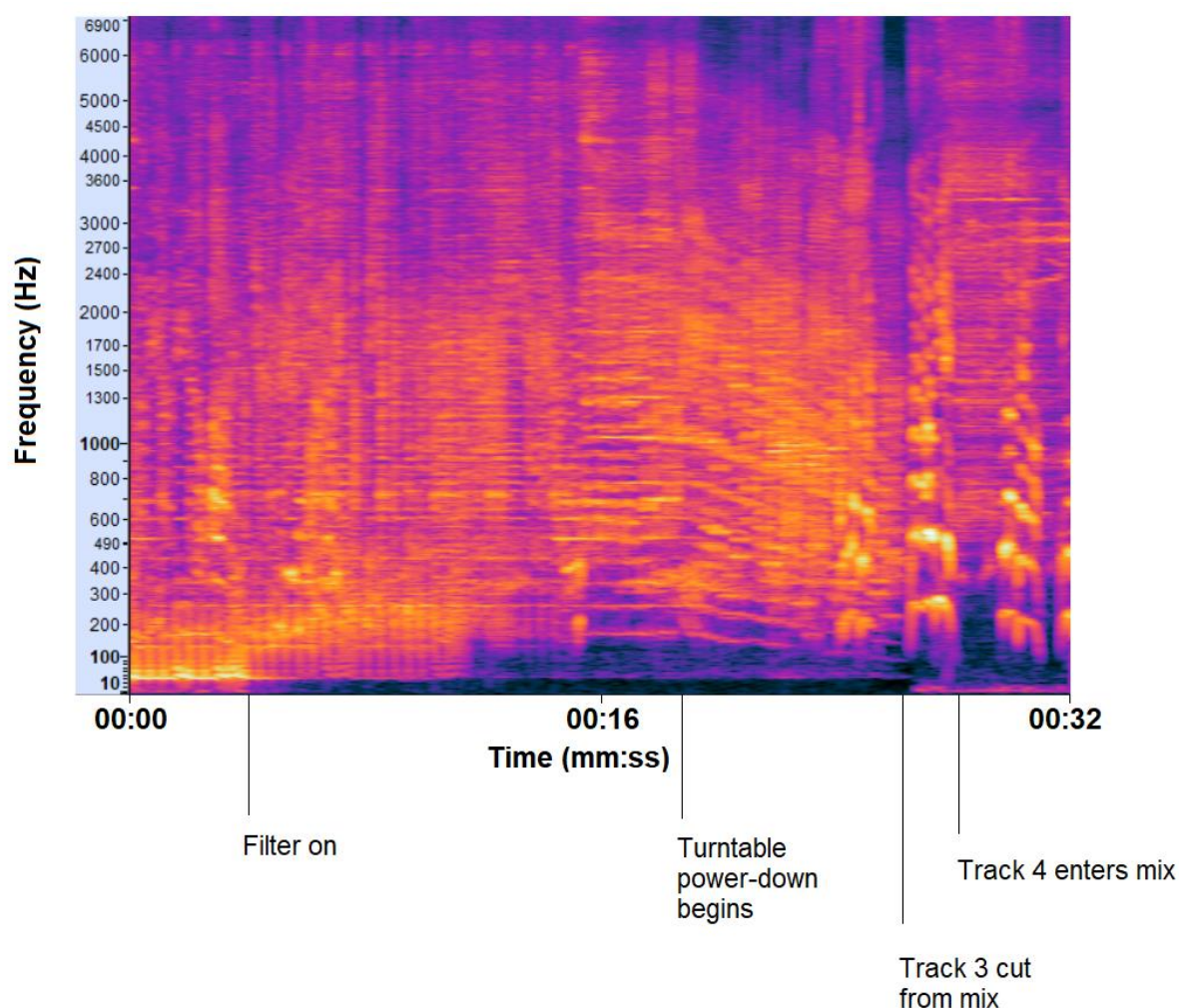


Figure 16 Spectrogram, “Righteous Dub” transition, Gorgon Sound DJ set.

The end of the Warm-up comes between tracks 6 and 7 with a markedly simple transition. “Goth Dub” is gradually faded down in volume at 130 BPM while “Militant” is simultaneously faded in at 140 BPM, with no embellishments. This creates an audible clash of tempos and keys and there is no attempt at beat matching the records, perhaps reflecting the improvised nature of the DJ set, and again speaking to Gorgon Sound’s articulation of a tension between traditional and modern mixing styles.

Regardless, the sharp tempo increase of 10 BPM in “Militant” immediately signals the beginning of a new, higher energy Hype section. A few minutes in, the transition from “Militant” into track 8 “Leng” uses a simple back spin technique on the turntable, leading to

the first climactic moment of the set. Shown in [Video Example 3.5](#) (27:57–29:09), this passage contains several coordinated, improvised gestures involving both Gorgon Sound DJs. The excerpt begins with Neek at the right-hand turntable, where he increases the mid- and high-frequency EQ controls and fades up the volume of “Leng” to thicken its presence in the mix. At 00:21, Kahn begins turning down the bass of “Militant” with his right hand and Neek simultaneously brings “Leng” into the mix. Then at 00:26, in time with the end of a 16-bar section in both records, Kahn rapidly rewinds “Militant” on the left turntable with his left hand and slams the volume fader down shortly after. “Militant” is cut from the mix and the pre-chorus section of “Leng” then leads to the drop and a vibrant crowd reaction. In response, Kahn suddenly emerges from digging in his record bag for the next tune to stop the record, as Rider Shafique exclaims “pull up!” **Figure 17** below illustrates this sequence with a spectrogram; Shafique’s voice enters the mix at a low register, anticipating the bass drop of “Leng” which arrives shortly after with even greater low-frequency power.

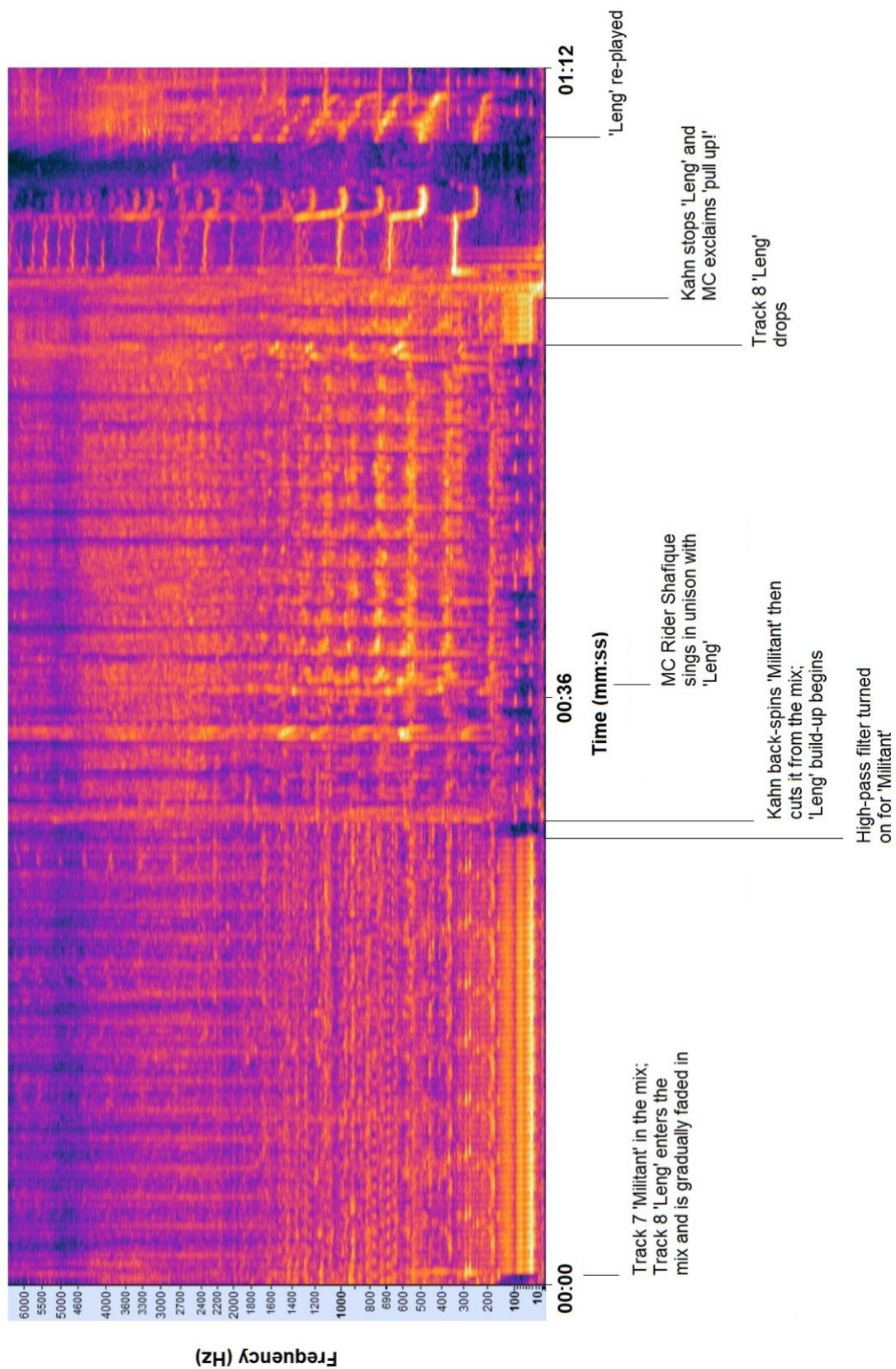


Figure 17 Spectrogram, “Leng” transition and rewind, Gorgon Sound DJ set.

After the rewind for “Leng”, Gorgon Sound’s set gathers pace and energy in leading to the Finale. The Finale begins as the tempo reaches 145 BPM with track 12 “Find Jah Way”, the second climactic moment of the set. This is one of Gorgon Sound’s earliest releases and a crowd favourite at live shows. Predictably, “Find Jah Way” receives an intense reaction in the crowd, but Gorgon Sound choose not to rewind it, suggesting they value continuity more than rupture at this late stage of the performance. The set then reaches a third and final peak at 148 BPM with track 15, Gorgon Sound’s remix of “Bullet A’Go Fly”, a lively vocal track that combines elements of grime and ragga in the rhythmic template of steppa dub.¹⁰⁷ “Bullet A’Go Fly” leads to the second rewind of the set when an audience member—possibly a friend of Gorgon Sound’s or simply enthusiastic dancer—reaches underneath Kahn and pauses the turntable (at 50:01 in the original recording). Reflecting his experience and professionalism as a DJ, Kahn reacts to the sudden stoppage instinctively with a backspin of the record, making the pause less jarring for listeners and possibly even sound deliberate.

Comparative discussion

Overall, the Gorgon Sound and Dubkasm performances have much in common. Both are resolutely analogue in format and incorporate aspects of the selector style by letting each record play for long durations. Both also use a combination of cuts and beat-matched transitions, as well as more creative transitional techniques such as the turntable power-down, in mixing a selection of largely steppa dub beats. Each duo also relies on a core selection of their own records, a shared expression of *Bristol dub* and “the Bristol sound”.

Where differences arise, then, is in the role of the MC. For Dubkasm, DJ Stryda’s toasting is practically inseparable from his voice as a DJ, as he announces records and

¹⁰⁷ Ragga otherwise known as raggamuffin is a genre born from Jamaican dancehall music (not to be confused with Jamaican dance *halls*, the general term used for sound system dances). Ragga emerged with dancehall after the roots reggae era ended in 1985; the genre is notable for its fast vocal performances, and like dancehall typically combines synthesised bass with punchy drum machine beats.

engages with the audience in traditional selector style, leveraging his years of experience as a radio host. By contrast, Gorgon Sound's voice is contained solely in their mixing and selection, with Rider Shafique playing a supportive role as MC, primarily working to energise the crowd and embellish the DJ set. Dubkasm also craft an educational presentation of *dub in Bristol* by including reggae songs from the roots era, while Gorgon Sound perform a selection of *Bristol dub*, exploring how the dub diaspora has expanded and fostered new forms of bass music, particularly grime. These differences are underscored by the MCs' differing expressions of space and place, in turn speaking to intersections of imagined community and "translocal" scene formation in "the Bristol sound".¹⁰⁸ Stryda frequently draws attention to the Bristol-made records he includes in his selection, emphasising to the global BR audience that his set is, in effect, an expression of "the Bristol sound". By contrast, Rider Shafique refers to Gorgon Sound's audience through the imagined community of London, frequently exclaiming "London!" throughout set. The underlying message of Stryda's approach is "Boiler Room, listen to how we do *dub in Bristol*", but by the time Gorgon Sound take the stage, this has transformed into "listen to our *Bristol dub*".

Conclusion

This chapter has examined bass culture in the city through the lens of "the Bristol sound" and DJ sets by two dub acts with distinct, though related, performance strategies. I offered a short history of Bristol's bass culture and dub-inflected music scenes, suggesting a re-theorisation of "the Bristol sound" as a localised expression of dub-diasporic bass culture. The chapter then considered how this bass culture takes shape in performance at the hands of Dubkasm and Gorgon Sound, who use their knowledge and experience with bass culture to articulate different versions of the same relationship between music and place: a continuum between *dub in Bristol* and *Bristol dub*. These expressions correspond to,

¹⁰⁸ Richard Peterson & Andy Bennett, "Introducing Music Scenes", in *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, ed. Bennett & Peterson (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 6–7.

respectively, affiliations with roots-era dub and postmillennial bass music, though the continuum is fluid and as I have aimed to show, both duos express dub in/of Bristol. Finally, I suggest Bristol bass culture functions akin to a hybrid “translocal” scene, where the city’s mediation of bass, space, and place is readily mobilised through DJ performance and broadcast platforms like Boiler Room. This relates to broader themes of imagined community in global bass culture, where the geographically bounded scenes of cities such as Bristol and London also become mobile on the European festival circuit, which I will explore in the context of Outlook Festival in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Outlook: Bass culture in the festival environment

How does bass culture manifest in the environment of a music festival? This chapter will address this question in the context of Outlook Festival, an event held annually in Croatia since 2008 catering primarily to UK bass music audiences.¹ Pivoting from the previous chapter's emphasis on DJ performance, here I will focus on Outlook's sound system-centric design, where dub-diasporic traditions and sonic materialisms—especially dominance and immersion—are prioritised over intricate stage designs and other popular music festival conventions. Drawing on fieldwork conducted at the 2022 edition of the event held in England, interviews with festival participants, and media sources, the chapter will argue that Outlook is a microcosm of contemporary UK bass culture, offering insights into how bass contributes to the wider remaking of space and place at bass music festivals overall. To these ends, I will engage with what festival researcher Chris Anderton calls the problematic “countercultural carnivalesque” narrative in music festival studies, asking what happens when the *raison d'être* of a music festival hinges not on drug-related transformational experience, expressive performing arts, or participatory politics, but something more singular: amplified bass.² Following a critique of festival studies and an introduction to my methodological orientation of “sensory/sensual” ethnomusicology, I will develop answers to this question by considering specific musical and social practices observed in and around Outlook Festival.³ The discussion will proceed through three major themes: Outlook's purportedly genre-less celebration of bass and “vibes”, the sonic immersion of the festival's

¹ An earlier and substantially shorter version of this chapter was originally published as “Outlook Festival: A Celebration of Sound System Culture”, *Dancecult* 14, no. 1 (2022): <https://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2022.14.01.06>.

² Chris Anderton, *Music Festivals in the UK: Beyond the Carnavalesque* (London; New York: Routledge, 2019), 19.

³ Peter McMurray, “On Serendipity: Or, Toward a Sensual Ethnography”, in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz & William Cheng (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 380–96.

former site known as The Fort, and how sonic dominance arose in the noise and sound issues that marred the 2022 UK event.⁴

Music festival studies: Beyond the countercultural carnivalesque

Music festivals are fundamentally spatial and multisensory. They involve the temporary transformation of public or private space for one or more days of live music, dancing, and creative expression. Music is a key ingredient: audiences are sold on concentrated programmes of DJs and bands they can witness performing in quick succession. Sound permeates the festival environment, from tinny mobile devices blaring alongside tents and the distant vibrations of sound systems felt across campgrounds late into the night, to the often tinnitus-inducing pressure of street-corner reggae systems (such as at Carnival) or main stage loudspeakers (at the likes of Glastonbury). Specialised sound system events such as Outlook Festival are emblematic of this, and arguably also constitute a unique type of festival (audiophile festivals, perhaps?), prioritising sound quality and sub-bass amplification to such a degree that they are—perhaps deliberately—unremarkable in many other aspects of their design.

Music festival studies, however, have little to say about musical performance at festivals or the sonic materiality of the festival environment, including in (ethno)musicology. Aspects of counterculture, tourism, sustainability, and drug use, among other themes, are high priorities, examined through a broadly sociological lens. When music-specific questions are considered, pop, rock, and jazz festivals receive most scholarly attention; hip-hop and reggae festivals have yet to be explored in detail beyond historical or social studies of Carnival; and when electronic dance music is the focus, sociological themes find more favour than musical or sonic specificity.⁵

⁴ Robin James, “No Genre, Just Vibes”, *It’s Her Factory*, 15 November 2021 (accessed 1 December 2021), <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2021/11/no-genre-just-vibes/>.

⁵ Two essay collections, which I discuss below, are representative of these problems: Graham St John (Ed.), *Weekend Societies: Electronic Dance Music Festivals and Event-Cultures* (London; New York:

A further problem in this field is that, as business and cultural scholar Chris Anderton argues, music festival studies over-rely on a stereotyped understanding of festival culture stemming from mid-to-late twentieth century rock and pop counterculture, at the expense of understanding other types of popular music festival and their histories.⁶ In general, contemporary popular music festivals are an evolution of the trans-Atlantic hippie and rock phenomenon of the late 1960s, symbolised by events like the 1969 Woodstock festival. This culture proliferated internationally in subsequent decades, especially in the warehouse party culture of 1970s and 80s Britain and the acid house rave scene that followed in the 1990s.⁷ Anderton explains that these events coalesced around a set of countercultural practices including “anti-authoritarianism, experimentation with sexual relationships, and the public consumption of drugs such as marijuana”, as well as “expression of youth solidarity in opposition to the traditional values of commercial pop music culture”.⁸ Parties on open farmland, alternative (non-Western) spirituality, transgressive behaviours such as nudity, and social or environmental activism were also central. In EDM, the “rave credo” PLUR, meaning peace, love, unity, and respect, gained prominence during the 1990s as a kind of countercultural motto, and it remains closely associated with contemporary EDM festivals.⁹ Solidifying these practices and ideals in the public consciousness were mediatised depictions of festival life such as the film *Glastonbury Fayre* (1972), reaching global audiences and as Anderton puts it, reproducing “the popular media conception of a hippie music festival”.¹⁰

Bloomsbury, 2017); George McKay (Ed.), *The Pop Festival: History, Music, Media, Culture* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helena Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁷ Anderton, *Music Festivals in the UK*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9. Today, festival “after movies” published to YouTube for large-scale EDM events such as Tomorrowland play a similar role in perpetuating a particular vision of festival culture.

While countercultural practices and ideals have undoubtedly been important to the development of popular music festivals globally, as Anderton shows, their prominence in the media and the festival studies literature reveals a dominant narrative that obscures alternative approaches to (and experiences of) the popular music festival. Specifically, philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's framework of the "carnavalesque" is frequently recruited as a means of historicising—and arguably also legitimising—festival counterculture as part of a longer European tradition. Carnavalesque festivals involve the integration of music, food, dance, and other expressive forms to create an "inverted world of excess, mockery and critique" every year, traditionally occurring before Lent.¹¹ But the political potency of carnivalesque practices in this sense can be disputed: as Anderton highlights, researchers often neglect the state-sanctioned temporary nature of carnival, and Bakhtin himself likely "over-privileged the radical potential of the carnivalesque".¹² The festival studies literature thus emerges as privileging countercultural practices that may be less countercultural than they appear, and, as Anderton writes, these "images and ideas continue to have currency in popular and academic readings of music festivals, even as the music festival sector has become more regulated, professional and commercial over the past 20 years".¹³ Indeed, music festivals have become increasingly diverse in their artistic, social, and political construction since the new millennium, especially in EDM. A one-size-fits-all "countercultural carnivalesque" lens is not viable.

The need for music festival studies to broaden its scope is made more pronounced when considering the lack of music and sound-specific research in the field.¹⁴ A representative study in this regard is a 2017 essay collection on EDM festivals edited by

¹¹ Anderton, *Music Festivals in the UK*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴ Sergio Pisfil's investigation of the sonics of Woodstock Festival is a promising study that can pave the way for further sound-specific research in the field, but even this study falls short of exploring specific aspects of sonic experience and performance, instead focusing on cultural history and "the live sound industry". See: Pisfil, "Woodstock and the Live Sound Industry in the Late 1960s", *Popular Music and Society* 43, no. 2 (2020): 176–187.

anthropologist Graham St John.¹⁵ The text traverses issues such as belonging, racism, and the “transformational logic” of festivals in EDM, primarily through ethnographic participant-observation and interviews. Alice O’Grady’s study of “alternative forms of democratic participation and well-being” at outdoor UK festivals takes it as read that such EDM events can be “loud” and require work to prevent noise pollution.¹⁶ Similarly, in the 2015 essay anthology *The Pop Festival*, Anna Dvinge is the only scholar to touch on interactions between sound and space in her study of the Detroit Jazz Festival, drawing on Feld’s acoustemology to observe how “the music almost reverberates off the buildings, in a resounding of the urban topos”.¹⁷ In the same collection, Joanne Cummings and Jacinta Herborn examine the extreme practice of “moshing” in festival audiences, focusing on questions of embodiment and identity while deliberately excluding discussion of music, claiming that popular music studies “privileges the discussion of body in response to the ‘sound’ of music” (as discussed in the Introduction, the opposite is generally true).¹⁸

Of course, scholars working outside of music studies should not be expected to specialise in music research; nevertheless, such studies tend to reproduce unhelpful assumptions or general truisms about festivals. The impression is that music’s main (and only) purpose is to reflect social identity, facilitate self-expression, and generally support other activities that are already countercultural, transformative, or idiosyncratic, such that other aspects of sound and music in the festival environment may not require detailed investigation. Cultural geographer Michelle Duffy identifies the issue precisely when she argues that, in the context of music festivals, the material power of music and performance is not limited to mere “constructions of identity that are associated with specific cultural groups

¹⁵ Graham St John, *Weekend Societies: Electronic Dance Music Festivals and Event-Cultures* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

¹⁶ Alice O’Grady, “Dancing Outdoors: DiY Ethics and Democratised Practices of Well-being on the UK Alternative Festival Circuit”, in *Weekend Societies*, 137–158.

¹⁷ Anna Dvinge, “Musicking in motor city: Reconfiguring urban space at the Detroit Jazz Festival”, in *The Pop Festival: History, Music, Media, Culture*, ed. George McKay (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 191–192.

¹⁸ Joanne Cummings and Jacinta Herborn, “Festival bodies: The corporeality of the contemporary music festival scene in Australia”, in *The Pop Festival*, 112.

or lifestyles [...] It is not simply that music and sound represent identity, and therefore notions of belonging [...] subjectivities are constituted within the very *unfolding* of the sonic event”.¹⁹

Overall, as a scholar and fan interested in Outlook Festival’s celebration of sound systems and sub-bass, I find the music festival studies literature alienating in its tendency to centre the countercultural carnivalesque (and sociological readings of its practices). What do festivals *sound like*—in the crowd, campsite, or backstage? How do the sound systems interact with the various kinds of environments that outdoor festivals occupy, from city streets and abandoned forts to open farmland and beach-front resorts? Are there alternative forms of counterculture at play in the seemingly apolitical, hedonistic, or material aspects of a festival—in the vibrations of dubplate records, the musicking of sound systems crews, or movements of the crowd, for example? What can we learn about music festivals by investigating sound system events such as Outlook, and conversely, what do festivals like Outlook teach us about bass music and sound system culture more broadly? Indeed, many other questions also arise here that are beyond the scope of the present chapter. Which DJs perform at EDM festivals, what do they play, and in what spaces? How do artists navigate the particular performance setting of a festival, as opposed to a night club or community hall, for example? Which DJ performances are the most impactful, for whom, and why?

Sound, space, participation, affect

To begin answering some of these questions, I want to briefly consider two intellectual orientations that informed my fieldwork at Outlook UK 2022. First, in contrast to the more social and performance-oriented approach of the digital ethnography I undertook with dubstep community Real Heads (see Chapter 5), here I sought to document the sensory experience of sonic dominance and immersion that Outlook Festival is renowned for. In pursuing this phenomenological agenda I drew on a recent essay by ethnomusicologist

¹⁹ Michelle Duffy, “The Emotional Ecologies of Festivals”, in *The Festivalization of Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor, and Ian Woodward (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 229, 232. Emphasis original.

Peter McMurray on the place of sonic experience in ethnographic research.²⁰ Focusing on the “sensuality” of sound in a way that precedes knowledge or sound-as-knowing, McMurray proposes an approach that gives in “to the pleasure of spectatorship [...] while also actively resisting the allure of interpretation, or at least of interpretation prior to savoring the pleasures and power of description.”²¹ In other words, sensual ethnography does not reject knowing but rather “revels in the pleasures and pains of the world prior to indulging the pleasures of telling what it all means.”²² This orientation offers a fresh perspective on frameworks relevant to bass culture like Henriques’ sonic dominance, which itself is in close dialogue with Feld’s acoustemology as a kind of knowing-through-sound. Because much of Henriques’ work is dedicated to the epistemology of reggae sound systems (often dwelling on Greek philosophical concepts like rhetoric) and explication of their performance techniques, the “sensual” dimension of that musicking tends to be, as McMurray would frame it, kept “arms-length away [...] but never so far that it moves out of visible and audible range”.²³

In working against the grain of the countercultural carnivalesque and attempting to centre sound more concretely in festival research, I thus worked inductively, bringing to the fore of my participant-observation the immediate pleasures and pains of Outlook’s specialised sound systems and immersive acoustic spaces. While this research could have entailed alternative modes of representation (such as a sonic rather than written document), I chose to focus on thick description for two reasons. I aimed to be consistent with my use of this approach in the other case study chapters; and Outlook has yet to be examined academically, such that a written baseline of knowledge may better support future research on bass music festivals than a more experimental format. As McMurray also explains, the aim of this methodological orientation is embracing serendipity and the senses while

²⁰ Peter McMurray, “On Serendipity: Or, Toward a Sensual Ethnography”, in *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz & William Cheng (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 380–96.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 387.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

gathering data regardless of its representational format thereafter: a sensual ethnography can “be ‘iconophobic’ or iconophilic, soundscapey, or as silent as a PDF.”²⁴

My second major orientation here concerns participation and immersion in the festival environment. In Julian Henriques and Beatrice Ferrara’s study of Notting Hill Carnival, the authors discuss how the dub-reggae sound systems located on street corners or crossroads are typically positioned at ground level, surrounding the audience in circular or triangular arrangements.²⁵ Such arrangements produce immersive space and encourage a kind of meditative awareness that is prized in bass culture: sound is projected inwards to the audience, directing collective attention “towards their own dancing, each other and the sounding itself.”²⁶ This immersion contributes to the remaking of space and place at Notting Hill, with sound systems turning streets into dance halls and a pocket of urban London into Carnival (a process D’Errico pithily summarises as “reclaiming public space by reworking sonic space”), but a participatory effect is often also palpable.²⁷ The inward projection of sound systems means selectors and engineers are often equally as immersed in the soundscape as their audience, a flattening of social and sensory hierarchy that Henriques discusses at length in terms of sonic dominance.²⁸

Participatory culture is an important theme in music festival studies. A monograph by management researcher Roxy Robinson investigates questions of creative participation in relation to the collectivist design and politics of Burning Man festival in Las Vegas and similar “boutique” festivals in Britain.²⁹ The framework Robinson develops to do so is the continuum between presentational and participatory modes of performance first coined by ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino.³⁰ This continuum contends that musical communication

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Henriques & Ferrara, “The Sounding of Notting Hill Carnival”, 140.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 140–141.

²⁷ To a lesser extent, the calypso and steel pan bands of Carnival and its main-stage spaces not powered by specialist sound systems play a role in this process as well.

²⁸ Henriques, “Sonic dominance”, 467.

²⁹ Roxy Robinson, *Music Festivals and the Politics of Participation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016).

³⁰ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

in performance can be one-directional and hierarchical at one extreme, as in the concert halls of European art music, or egalitarian and social at another, as in the Shona performance Turino investigated in Zimbabwe.³¹ For Robinson, the participatory-presentational continuum in a festival setting hinges on “authorship”: the question of “whether audiences directly influence event content, which may be the arts, organization or infrastructure.”³² Robinson mostly investigates events with a high degree of co-authorship, where music is only one of several arts on offer and attendees are simultaneously producers and consumers, or “prosumers”, of the festival.³³ The study also passes some value judgement on strictly presentational pop festivals where main-stage live performance is usually the sole creative activity. For instance, in an historical overview of “boutique” British festivals, Robinson praises events such as Secret Garden Party for attracting audiences “through line-ups and the introduction of an array of art installations, activities, homeopathies, non-musical performances, [and] décor”, while lamenting the “formulaic production of shows that were principally focused on high profile, main stage, ticket-selling bands or DJs’.”³⁴ Can there be an alternative to these two extremes? Is the sonic immersion of a predominantly presentational music festival not capable of engendering a participatory performance space?

I suggest the participatory-presentational continuum of festivals can be nuanced by being thought together with the immersion-spectacle continuum of performance (and distinction between the DJ-as-affect-engineer and DJ-of-signs) that I introduced in Chapter 2.³⁵ Combining these frameworks results in a two-dimensional continuum that allows music festivals to be positioned along axes of participatory-presentational *and* immersive-spectacular performance, facilitating a wider range of interpretive and critical possibilities. The framework is presented schematically in **Figure 18** below with some examples. It

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Robinson, *Music Festivals and the Politics of Participation*, 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, 110–111.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁵ Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 171; Rietveld, “Journey to the Light?”.

visualises how, for instance, a festival can be highly participatory in incorporating attendees as co-authors yet engage primarily with visual meaning and regimes of signification, or, by contrast, prioritise the material affects of sound and dance while limiting the audience’s opportunities to participate creatively.

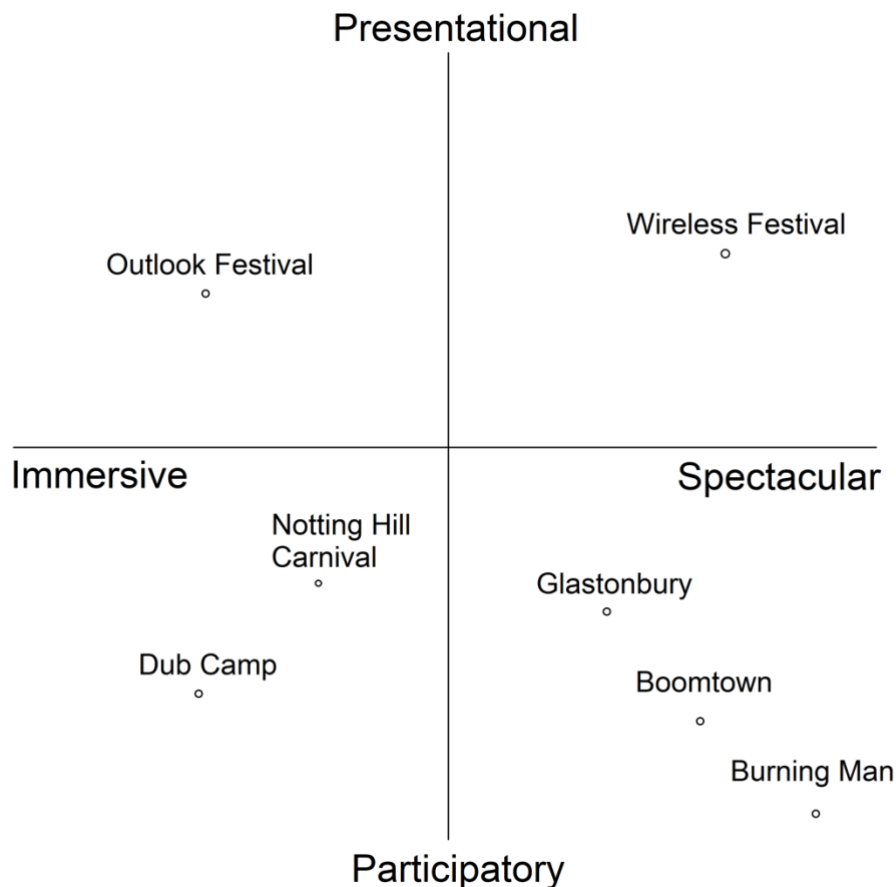


Figure 18 Axes of participatory-presentational and immersive-spectacular performance, with examples of popular music festivals.

Outlook Festival’s relative position along these axes illustrates how it is indeed a far cry from Burning Man’s “no spectators” ideology and principles of “radical inclusion”, or Boomtown’s spectacular stage design and costumes.³⁶ In an article building on the work of Arjun Appadurai, Jasper Chalcraft and Paolo Magaudda suggest participatory arts festivals

³⁶ Robinson, *Music Festivals and the Politics of Participation*, 115–116.

conjure a complex “festivalscape” where “a variety of ‘-scapes’ (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes) are constantly at play”; in this light, a specialised sound system festival such as Outlook revolves almost solely around intersections of “soundscape”.³⁷ Yet Outlook is not a purely immersive and participatory bass festival either. Taking a birds-eye view of Outlook’s stages, they usually engender a mixture of immersion/spectacle and participation/presentation. The SubDub arena where dub-reggae sound systems perform, for example, has always used muted lighting and a very low stage, if either of these are present at all. By contrast, the main stage and opening concerts, where headline acts outside of EDM usually perform, are typically filled with light and smoke effects and use a sound system in two vertical line arrays to project sound at the audience. Furthermore, Outlook hardly distances itself from the visual spectacle of social media and EDM festivals. “Festival Highlights” videos published annually to Outlook’s YouTube channel, for example, articulate a misogynistic male gaze by showing slow-motion shots of bikini-clad women on the beach to promote the festival as a Mediterranean summer holiday destination.³⁸ This complicates Outlook Festival’s vying for a niche in the festival market as, to quote the event’s most commonly used tag line during the 2010s, “Europe’s biggest celebration of sound system culture”.³⁹

Outlook Festival: Bass culture microcosm

As introduced above, Outlook Festival is a multi-day bass music festival held in coastal Croatia every year since 2008. I chose to study the event because it represents a microcosm, and ideal case study, of contemporary UK bass culture for several reasons. First, Outlook’s programming includes mainstay genres such as dub, reggae, jungle, drum

³⁷ Jasper Chalcraft & Paolo Magaudo, ““Space is the Place”: The global localities of the Sónar and WOMAD music festivals”, in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, ed. Gerard Delanty *et al.* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011): 173–189.

³⁸ Outlook Festival, “Outlook Festival 2015 Highlights”, YouTube, 20 November 2015 (accessed 1 October 2022), <https://youtu.be/9uIL-AHVgsU>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

'n' bass, garage, and grime. It also emerged at the cusp of dubstep's sensational rise into the EDM mainstream and has remained committed to the genre's subcultural (British) roots, such that ambassadors like MC Sgt Pokes still consider it a dubstep event "at its heart".⁴⁰ Second, Outlook has a reputation for investing in sound quality, structuring its stages around specialist sound systems generally from the British and European dub-reggae scenes. For example, Jah Shaka, Channel One, and Iration Steppas are regular performers. Younger generations of dub-inspired sound systems such as Sinai and Firmly Rooted are increasingly powering their own stages (sometimes also curating the acts who play there), alongside other specialist audio providers such as Neuron Audio and Void Acoustics. Outlook can thus be understood as an event run by and for audiophiles; bass enthusiasts continue to travel from around the world to attend each year.

Outlook was established by a group of five event promoters in Britain, some of whom were already organising successful multi-genre sound system dances such as SubDub in Leeds.⁴¹ The first festival was a collaborative event with local promoters at a beach-front village with approximately 800 participants. It featured DJs such as Digital Mystikz and Gilles Peterson and was successful enough that the group returned to organise another event in 2009. From 2010 to 2013, having moved to a new site in Pula on Croatia's Istrian peninsula, Outlook quickly became established as a leading bass music festival. It expanded significantly, hosting approximately 4,000 attendees in 2010 and 11,000 the following year. The festival has since settled on an average audience size of 10,000 to 15,000 and a duration of four days, with participants camping onsite or staying in nearby accommodation. Most performers are DJs; talks and film screenings are occasionally held; and "launch parties" are hosted annually around the world to promote the festival in Europe, South Asia, Australasia, and more.⁴² Outlook also operates within a larger ecosystem of bass music

⁴⁰ Duploc, "Outlook Festival 2018: A Dubstep Guide", *Duploc*, 5 September 2018 (accessed 9 February 2020), <https://duploc.com/outlook-2018>.

⁴¹ Dave Jenkins, "The History of Outlook Festival", *UKF*, 11 April 2018 (accessed 9 February 2020), <https://ukf.com/words/the-history-of-outlook-festival/21705>.

⁴² Andrew Ryce, "Outlook Festival announces global tour", *Resident Advisor*, 28 February 2012 (accessed 15 October 2023), <https://ra.co/news/15916>.

events, both in Croatia and further afield, and is thus not necessarily unique in its programming—nor is it the largest or most successful event of its kind.⁴³

Indeed, the most distinguishing feature of Outlook remains its close relationship with, as one reviewer puts it, “golden-era dubstep, drum & bass, [and] UK garage”.⁴⁴ I would learn from attending the 2022 festival that “golden-era” in this sense is code for these genres’ subcultural formations prior to (or outside of) their assimilation into mainstream EDM. Yet Outlook does not have a straightforward relationship with genre, in that its programming has gradually expanded beyond the consensus boundaries of bass music while remaining committed to being a “celebration of sound system culture”. For example, headline acts have included hip-hop innovator Grandmaster Flash and more recently neo-soul singer Jorja Smith. From 2013 to 2019, the festival has also held an opening concert by “the Outlook Orchestra” who perform re-orchestrated renditions of hip-hop, drum ‘n’ bass, and reggae songs.⁴⁵ These decisions speak to the festival’s vision of bass culture as a broad church, with many attendees sharing in a genre-less or post-genre interpretation of bass culture centred on material concerns with vibration and the technologies that (re)produce it. A memorable experience on my first day of fieldwork at Outlook UK 2022 brought this to light. As I waited for a shuttle bus to arrive, I befriended Nik, a dancehall fan and computer programmer from New York, who in discussing which acts we were excited to hear told me: “I don’t really believe in genre. I’m just interested in bass”.⁴⁶

I have routinely encountered comments such as Nik’s in dub-diasporic music scenes, where the unifying thread of bass culture is said to be a particular affect or frequency register. Post-genre discourse of this kind is a relatively recent development in popular music but has a long history in bass culture, as symbolised by Mikey Dread’s oft-cited

⁴³ The festival takes cues, for example, from established dub festivals elsewhere in Europe such as Dub Camp and Rototom Sunsplash; in the UK, the likes of Notting Hill Carnival and Boomtown are comparable in their programming and have significantly larger audiences.

⁴⁴ Matt Unicomb, “Outlook Festival 2018”, *Resident Advisor*, 14 September 2018 (accessed 9 February 2020), <https://www.residentadvisor.net/reviews/23079>.

⁴⁵ Outlook Festival, “The Outlook Orchestra – Live from Pula Amphitheatre”, YouTube, 6 September 2017 (accessed 15 October 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpnFTdT5rsM>.

⁴⁶ Interview by author, 27 July 2022.

remark that “you have to *feel* sound system to know what sound system is about”.⁴⁷ Broadly, the claim is that “genre is dead” and musical production and consumption are (or should be) oriented around “vibe”—a particular mood, feeling, or atmosphere—instead of out-dated constructions like genre and style.⁴⁸ This position is most visible today in the strategy of major streaming platforms such as Apple Music, who curate playlists around activities and moods with tag-lines stating “the most exciting sound right now isn’t found within the boundaries of traditional genres”.⁴⁹ Research by Garcia and philosopher Robin James identifies that vibe discourses have roots in African and European twentieth-century countercultures, particularly their interests in “cosmological vibration” and the transduction of vibration through sound reproduction technology, though these discourses are now increasingly co-opted by brands, as Apple Music’s usage indicates.⁵⁰ Investigating vernacular manifestations of vibe in the techno scenes of Paris and Berlin, Garcia further shows how vibes can be synonymous with affects in that they are shaped by visceral shared experience, such as the beating of a kick drum, and give rise to a collective atmosphere and synchronous dance movements.⁵¹ Listeners feel their way through and “attune” themselves to the vibe and may interpret the physical encounter with music in divergent ways, or “fail to resonate with it” entirely, depending on their prior experience and culturally-situated knowledge.⁵² James also usefully distinguishes “vibe” from “vibration” by arguing that the former is spatial, emerging from the alignment of people and things, while the latter is temporal, based on frequencies and the technologies that (re)produce them.⁵³ Yet as Garcia emphasises, both converge through social practices of attunement.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Mikey Dread, in *Musically Mad*, 03:00–03:30. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Eric Drott, “The End(s) of Genre”, *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 1 (2013): 1–45; Robin James, “Is the post- in post-identity the post- in post-genre?”, *Popular Music* 36, no. 1 (2017): 21–32.

⁴⁹ Robin James, “No Genre, Just Vibes”, *It’s Her Factory*, 15 November 2021 (accessed 1 December 2021), <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2021/11/no-genre-just-vibes/>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; Garcia, “Feeling the vibe”, 27–28.

⁵¹ Garcia, “Feeling the vibe”, 29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵³ Robin James, “Is a vibe a vibration?”, *it’s her factory*, 21 January 2022 (accessed 1 September 2022), <https://itsherfactory.substack.com/p/is-a-vibe-a-vibration>.

⁵⁴ Garcia, “Feeling the vibe”, 28.

The bass festival environment brings to life the messy overlap of vibes/vibration as both temporal and spatial. Outlook Festival, where the main priority is low-frequency vibration—from which affective vibe emerges—stands out as a concentrated site of post-genre vibes come alive. And yet, Outlook Festival is not genre-less. This is most evident by looking at its “sister festival” Dimensions, established in 2012 by the same organisers specifically to cater to fans of house, techno, and more experimental styles of EDM.⁵⁵ Traditionally held at the same site in Pula immediately before Outlook, Dimensions is plainly a business manoeuvre (why not run a second festival when you have already incurred costs and will occupy the same site for weeks?), but it also invites critical analysis of how the boundaries of bass music are negotiated. By what criteria are house, techno, and related genres of EDM distinct from bass music? The organisers might argue that the separation of the two festivals reflects each category of music having distinct audiences. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the groove-centric design of disco-related genres in EDM does distinguish them from bass genres both compositionally and in performance, given the importance of sonic fragmentation/rupture to dub-diasporic music. But it is notable that DJs who perform at Outlook frequently also play at Dimensions and vice versa; during fieldwork I met several participants who had attended both.⁵⁶ Furthermore, when I listened to sound systems such as Iration Steppas from Leeds at Outlook UK 2022, I was struck by the meditative bass loops of steppa dub, a subgenre known for its danceable four-by-four kick drum patterns that are frequently paired with dubby bass melodies. (Iration Steppas themselves have said that acid house records imported from Chicago and elsewhere in the US were a major influence on their early tastes; frontman Mark Iration was striving to become a Chicago house DJ before pivoting to steppa dub later in the 1990s.⁵⁷) This and other experiences at smaller

⁵⁵ Big Up Magazine, “Dimensions Festival 2012 Program”, *Issuu*, 13 September 2012 (accessed 1 August 2022), <https://issuu.com/bigupmagazine/docs/dimensionsprogram2012>.

⁵⁶ Public data on this matter are unfortunately not available, and Outlook have yet to respond to my requests for interview.

⁵⁷ *Ina Vanguard Style: A documentary on Iration Steppas*, directed by Rico O.B.F. & Fabio Manozzi (Lyon: Dubquake Records, 2022), <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/inavanguardstyle>. See also: Anniss, *Join the Future*, 127–135, 239–272.

stages which dedicated entire evenings to house music problematise the distinction between the programming of Outlook and Dimensions, affirming that bass music, like most EDM categories, is difficult to distil and socially contingent. More importantly, it underscores the methodological value of ethnography and other methods, such as performance analysis, for understanding the vibes and vibrations of bass music on the terms of its localised bass cultures.

Low-end architecture: Fort Punta Christo and The Moat

In 2010, Outlook Festival moved to a new site in Pula that would become an icon of the event: Fort Punta Christo, an abandoned nineteenth-century naval base turned music venue. The Fort was a strategic asset of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before falling into disuse until 1980.⁵⁸ In 2013, an opening concert was held in the nearby ancient Roman amphitheatre, the Pula Arena, solidifying the role of such structures in the festival's design and marketing appeal. Reflecting this, from 2014, Outlook produced "Site Walkthrough" videos showcasing the Pula Arena and each stage at The Fort until they left the site in 2020.⁵⁹ In their first year at The Fort, Outlook's organisers cleared old overgrowth and transformed pockets of space into several unique sound system arenas enclosed by ruins and stone walls, including underground tunnels and a nearby beach stage.⁶⁰ In an interview, Vedran Meniga, organiser of Seasplash festival established in Croatia in 2003—an important precursor to the success of Outlook later that decade—cites the aftermath of the Yugoslavian civil war as the wider context for these privately funded restoration efforts.⁶¹ Over two decades, they transformed Pula into Croatia's "capital of bass".⁶² "In 1993 when we first started there were no venues,

⁵⁸ Big Up Magazine, "Dimensions Festival 2012 Program", Issuu, 13 September 2012 (accessed 1 August 2022), <https://issuu.com/bigupmagazine/docs/dimensionsprogram2012>; Istria Culture, "The Punta Christo Fortress", 2015 (accessed 1 October 2022), <https://www.istria-culture.com/en/the-punta-christo-fortress-i143>.

⁵⁹ Outlook Festival, "Outlook Festival 2018 - Site Walkthrough (Fort Punta Christo)", YouTube, 3 May 2018 (accessed 1 September 2022), <https://youtu.be/yhTqd6pU4h8>.

⁶⁰ Jenkins, "The History of Outlook Festival".

⁶¹ Mark Rowlands, "Croatia's Capital of Bass", *Time Out*, 24 May 2019 (accessed 1 October 2022), <https://www.timeout.com/croatia/things-to-do/croatias-capital-of-bass>.

⁶² *Ibid.*

no music media. Everything was destroyed”, he states, adding, “people were using it [The Fort] as a garbage dump, taking its stones to build new houses.”⁶³ The Fort has since become a prime example of what Anderton calls the “cyclic place” of music festivals and ethnomusicologist Andrew Mall’s theorisation of ephemeral scene formation in remote locations, where festivals “substantiate imagined communities that might otherwise lack a local, material infrastructure.”⁶⁴ The Fort is temporarily transformed and invested with meaning by attendees making their yearly “festival pilgrimage”, and through media like festival highlight reels and strategies like Outlook’s launch parties, a sense of imagined community—tethered to shared bass experience at The Fort—is sustained outside the event itself.⁶⁵

While The Fort was effective at driving sales, perhaps imparting a sense of timeless significance to the music performed within, it still carries a cult following amongst Outlook fans today for musical and affective reasons. This following is sometimes light-hearted, as when a Facebook user suggested audiences “would be safe from the virus in the fort” after the 2020 festival was cancelled due to COVID-19.⁶⁶ The Fort is also revered by some fans as emblematic of bass culture in the vein of the DJ-as-affect-engineer. Its gritty neglected spaces have acoustic properties distinct from those of both conventional outdoor festivals and indoor dance venues, and resemble the dark, tight, immersive pockets of post-industrial

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Anderton, *Music Festivals in the UK*, 111–113; Andrew Mall, “Music Festivals, Ephemeral Places, and Scenes: Interdependence at Cornerstone Festival”, *Journal of the Society for American Music* 14, no. 1 (2020): 53–54.

⁶⁵ Mall, “Music Festivals, Ephemeral Places, and Scenes”, 60.

To a lesser extent, the Fort can also be read as an example of what Garcia identifies as “post-industrial neo-romanticism” in the “techno-tourism” of urban Berlin. While Pula and Berlin are not comparable in their tourist economies, the fandom and imagined community around The Fort resemble Garcia’s finding that techno tourism “fetishizes the gritty and the illicit as authentic” and results in “once-devalued characteristics [being] converted into valuable, profit-making factors in a post-Fordist economy”. This is especially evident in Outlook’s frequent use of language like “raving in an abandoned fort” in their marketing materials. The Fort’s symbolism as a former imperialist structure also resonates with the layered discourses of “sonic warfare” that permeate bass culture, such as the traditional practice of sound clashes in reggae where rival sound systems deploy “war dubs” as musical weapons against each other. See: Garcia, “Techno-Tourism and Post-Industrial Neo-Romanticism in Berlin’s Electronic Dance Music Scenes”, *Tourist Studies* 16 (3): 289; Cooper, *Sound Clash*, 35; Zuberi, “Worries in the Dance”, 189.

⁶⁶ Outlook Festival, “An Important Update from Outlook Origins”, Facebook, 30 April 2020 (accessed 1 October 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/outlookfestival/photos/10156813504341227/>.

London that are core to the mythology of bass music genres prominent at Outlook (especially dubstep, and to a lesser extent jungle).⁶⁷ A review of the 2016 festival, for example, paints an extreme picture of bass experience at The Moat, a popular stage set in a canal surrounding the fortress:

This area should be accompanied with a warning. The Moat has a sound system that feels like it was constructed by Nasa engineers on acid. It is certainly not for the faint hearted, the bass is so powerful it lifts you off your feet and defies gravity. If you cannot handle it you may pass out, possibly vomit or leave in tears [...] Our advice would be to stay back and approach the DJ booth with caution[.]⁶⁸

Indeed, numerous Outlook UK attendees who had been to The Moat described to me how partying there was an intense and sometimes challenging experience. For some it was transformative: “you go in there and come out a different person”. **Figure 19** below shows The Moat following its restoration around 2010. The audience would enter via a staircase perpendicular to a long passage in the canal, with a stage located at the end of the passage, and speaker stacks positioned at regular intervals along the length of the space. A DJ set by drum ‘n’ bass artist Filip Motovunski at Outlook Festival 2019 uploaded to YouTube also offers useful perspective.⁶⁹ The first two minutes of the video, shot in black-and-white, are like an impressionistic audiovisual sketch, depicting hundreds of ravers enclosed by tall, rugged walls in a long, dark, ominous space, the soundscape filled with abstract synthetic timbres, jagged breakbeats, and sub-bass. These shots corroborate the claims I heard that entering the space could be extremely difficult, as large crowds attracted by the mystique of a medieval moat would swarm the staircase, which served as the sole entrance and exit to the stage and was dimly lit, making movement inefficient. However, opinions about sound quality at The Moat vary. For example, Zane, an attendee of the 2019 festival I met in the online dubstep community Real Heads (to be discussed in Chapter 5), argued: it “was alright

⁶⁷ D’Errico, “Electronic Dance Music in the Dubstep Era”, 5–6; Melville, *It’s a London Thing*, 190–191.

⁶⁸ April Brown, “Dust ‘n’ Bass: Outlook 2016 reviewed”, *gal-dem*, 27 September 2016 (accessed 15 October 2022), <https://gal-dem.com/outlook-festival-review/>.

⁶⁹ Filip Motovunski, “Filip Motovunski & MC Joe Raygun | Outlook Festival 2019 | The Moat”, YouTube, 28 February 2020 (accessed 1 October 2022), https://youtu.be/FNd_msvZavk.

if you were past the halfway point but Sinai Sound in the SubDub Arena was uncomparably [sic] the best—it was a whole new dimension”.⁷⁰



Figure 19 The Moat, Outlook Festival 2011, Fort Punta Christo. Copyright: Indigo Burns. Reproduced with permission.

Several scholars of EDM and affect such as Garcia, Jasen, and Goodman have written about the capacity for vibration, and low-frequency sound in particular, to generate “unhoming” affects and various senses of anxiety or dread: bad vibes.⁷¹ As the Outlook review cited above attests, these vibes are less negative emotions than they are visceral bodily experiences that may strike as nausea or distress before participants can make sense of them through language and emotion (with the dissociative effects of drugs like ketamine, popular amongst UK bass music audiences, likely also playing a role here). The above conversation I had about The Moat’s capacity to convert you into “a different person” was

⁷⁰ Interview with author, 27 March 2023.

⁷¹ Garcia, “Feeling the vibe”, 30–31; Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 50–51; Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 63–67.

emblematic of this; after a few minutes it struck me that this person had not explained to me whether they *enjoyed* The Moat. Perhaps it simply did not matter: the feeling of immersion in extreme bass pressure was enough to make visiting The Moat worth it.

Such experiences are difficult to verify empirically, but the literature surrounding them aligns with discourses about The Fort and The Moat that I have witnessed amongst Outlook fans. The clear connection here is to Spencer's "EDM" research where bass music listeners express feelings of sobriety, shock, disgust, or nausea in the festival environment, with followers of dubstep producer SNAILS even crafting the subgenre label "vomitstep" for the deliberately "filthy" timbres of his music.⁷² These examples are far removed from the bass culture of Outlook Festival in terms of audience and musical style—Outlook firmly positioned itself on the side of authentic (read: British) dubstep when the genre went mainstream in the late 2000s—though their findings nevertheless resonate with the kinds of vibes that participants suggest are facilitated by bass experience at The Moat. In turn, these observations speak to the wider point that, in eliciting affective responses that entail neither collective cohesion nor individual bliss, bass music challenges received tropes about EDM's musical and social identity: it demands a wider, more nuanced assessment of what it means to perform and consume EDM. Filtered through dub's underlying principle of fragmentation/rupture, for some listeners, bass music is enlisted in their "cathartic consumption of musical 'filth'", evoking the "inane, humorous, or obscene" as much as it affords the hedonistic pursuit of aesthetic and sensory pleasure.⁷³

Sinai Arena: Sonic dominance and the politics of noise

Over the last five years, Outlook Festival has changed considerably. A 2017 review suggested the event has been steadily losing British attendees—who typically make up the largest portion of its audience—in recent years, and a 2019 article observed apparent cost-

⁷² Spencer, "Music to Vomit to", 160.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 170, 161.

cutting measures and poor quality sound.⁷⁴ The closing of a chapter that was Outlook's final year at The Fort in 2019 was further underlined by the upheavals of 2020: the UK left the European Union in January and that year's festival was subsequently cancelled due to COVID-19. In 2021, the festival moved to a smaller venue in Tisno, rebranded as Outlook Origins. A new edition of Outlook was also held for the first time in the UK in 2022, a likely response to Brexit and strategic move allowing the organisers to host UK-based sound systems more affordably.

Indeed, issues with sound quality and strict limits on loudness are a recurring theme in the reception of Outlook Festival since it left Fort Punta Christo. I experienced these problems first hand at the 2022 UK event at what I felt was the most intriguing stage: the Sinai Arena in the main festival site (pictured in **Figure 20** below). This stage was powered by Sinai Sound System from Sheffield. Sinai's reputation precedes it, with their sound respected across dub-diasporic and other EDM scenes.

⁷⁴ Bridget Minamore, "Ten Years In, Who Does Outlook Festival Serve?", *VICE*, 18 September 2017 (accessed 1 July 2020), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xwgxdw/outlook-festival-2017-review>; Chris James, "Outlook Festival 2019 – The Final Fort", *OHANAMAG*, 3 October 2019 (accessed 15 May 2020), <https://www.ohanamag.com/events/outlook-festival-the-final-fort/>.



Figure 20 The Sinai Arena, Outlook UK 2022. Copyright: Ivan Mouraviev (author).

Arriving at the Sinai Arena on Thursday (the first day of Outlook UK 2022), I am filled with anticipation. Headline acts such as Skream are among the many DJs set to play here over the weekend; expectations are high. However, entering the arena, I am immediately unsure of the sound quality. The stage is an open tent covering an area of about 30 square meters, with four speaker stacks, one in each corner, padded by haybales (see **Figure 21** below). There is a raised stage in the centre. It's quiet: groups of dancers are having free-flowing conversations without earplugs on, going against the unspoken but ingrained expectation that a bass music event should be so loud as to prohibit speaking more than a few words at a time. This has multiple flow-on effects. While I can hear kicks and sub-bass lines, I hardly feel them. The sound is also oddly directional, with bass pressure drastically fluctuating depending on where I stand. More dancers than usual are filling the space immediately around the speaker stacks, apparently in search of a more tactile or immersive bass experience. Further distracting me from the music are some strange high-frequency reflections that I attribute to reverberation created by the tent's architecture. In our interview

after the festival, Nik described his experience of the Sinai Arena: it was “like we were listening to someone’s boombox at times [...] it wasn’t worth even hanging out there”.⁷⁵



Figure 21 Sinai Sound System, Sinai Arena, Outlook UK 2022. Copyright: Ivan Mouraviev (author).

When I meet Sinai’s owner-operator, Huw Williams, outside the tent on Sunday afternoon (the last day of the festival), he’s chatting casually with a group of friends. I gingerly spark up a conversation about the sound issues, wary that he may have already spent the entire weekend fielding questions and complaints from disappointed festival goers. But Huw is more than up for it. He explains how the apparent reverberation effect was most likely because they set the rear speakers about 16 dB quieter than the front pair, with the aim of drawing the crowd to the front and preventing noise from escaping at the back. Huw also explains the extent of police and noise control presence at the festival, describing how, by Sunday morning, there were multiple wireless sound detectors dotted around the site,

⁷⁵ Interview by author, 27 July 2022.

with police ready to “shut down the entire event” should a signal exceeding 98 dB be detected.

Later on Sunday evening, the festival is nearly over and rumours are circulating that the number of noise complaints received by the organisers are in the hundreds. A blog post published by a local council on Friday states that the festival is implementing “[r]emoval of sub-bass elements from the loudspeaker systems”.⁷⁶ Festival staff with earpieces are hovering behind DJs to keep overzealous performers from pushing the volume too high. Outlook announces online that Sunday night’s schedule has been brought forward by four hours, making the festival end at midnight rather than 4 am, “to show respect and consideration for our local environment”. People are rightly annoyed, but many dancers are also seemingly unaware of the last-minute change and continue to happily rave to a range of genres across each stage. Frustration still bubbles up, though. During one of the final dubstep takeovers at The Tiltyard stage, a few members of the crowd start shouting towards the DJ, gesturing with upward-pointed index finger asking them to turn it up. Though these exclamations are initially brushed off as drunk antics, they lead to a final memorable moment. MC SGT Pokes eventually replies, mid-performance: “you know we can’t do that, you’ve been here all weekend [...] Focus on the unity. The unity is bigger”.

After the festival, predictably, fans took to social media to reflect on the sound issues. Several discussion threads emerged in a prominent dubstep-oriented Facebook group, including a review of the festival to which Sinai Sound System responded. One comment by Sinai confirmed that “At one point the master was on -18db with the back stacks on an additional -15db, so [the speakers were] basically not [turned] on”. Regarding sub bass, they added: “I had a 90hz high pass filter and was strangled by noise restrictions [...] we all had the same restrictions, and it was up to the operators as to whether they obeyed the rules. We did, to the letter. I won’t say if the others did.” Another comment by Sinai highlighted how dangerous rumours of poor sound quality can be for a sound system crew, given how closely

⁷⁶ Mark Robinson, “Outlook Festival”, Wrenbury-cum-Frith Parish Council, 1 July 2022 (accessed 10 August 2022), <https://www.wrenbury-pc.gov.uk/2022/07/outlook-festival-2/>.

ted it is to their identity and commercial viability: “[t]he 4 point setup [of the Sinai Arena tent] wasn’t my idea, and was designed by the site noise team. Basically, it made me look bad, like this post right here, and it still makes me angry daily that it low key ruined my reputation”.

To put the noise complaints about Outlook UK 2022 in perspective, Reading Festival, the total attendance of which was over 100,000 in 2019, reportedly only stoked 95 complaints, 30 of which were about noise.⁷⁷ Similarly, there were reportedly 37 noise complaints for the 2019 Glastonbury Festival, an event attended by over 200,000 people.⁷⁸ Although I could not confirm rumours with a representative of Outlook Festival (they have yet to accept my invitation to interview), if there indeed were at least 30 noise complaints from the first night of the festival alone, Outlook UK 2022 likely had a significant impact on local residents in Cheshire and the surrounding, largely rural and wealthy, areas.

In his study of outdoor music festivals in the UK, Anderton discusses the deep associations between English and British identity and the preservation of an “idyllic” rural countryside that should be enjoyed “through solitary and quiet pursuits”.⁷⁹ He notes that “for much of the 1970s and 1980s, the countercultural conception of the rural was in conflict with the more conservative image of the countryside [...] and [it] gave rise to objections from those who regarded outdoor music festivals as representing unwelcome noise (literally and metaphorically) in an ordered landscape”.⁸⁰ The “rural idyll” is a slippery, unqualified concept but this has not stopped it being embraced as a “patriotic mythology”, one that Anderton argues has functioned “as a key symbolic resource for the government and media”.⁸¹ The study suggests that as outdoor popular music festivals have become more mainstream since

⁷⁷ Hugh Fort, “Reading Festival 2021: Anti-vaxxers, urinating in the street and “louder than ever” noise among nearly 100 complaints”, Berkshire Live, 29 November 2021 (accessed 1 October 2022), www.getreading.co.uk/news/reading-berkshire-news/reading-festival-2021-anti-vaxxers-22263122.

⁷⁸ Christian Eede, “Glastonbury 2020 must reduce noise levels, says council report”, DJ Mag, 14 January 2020 (accessed 1 October 2022), <https://djmag.com/news/glastonbury-2020-must-reduce-noise-levels-says-council-report>.

⁷⁹ Anderton, *Music Festivals in the UK*, 128–129.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

the 1990s, rural landowners and communities have become more accepting of, and commercially involved with, such events; this is reflected in Cholmondeley Castle allowing Outlook UK to host the festival on their grounds. Anderton also coins the term “cyclic place” to illustrate the ephemeral-but-regular nature of outdoor music festivals that occupy the same site each year temporarily, lending an ongoing sense of familiarity and affiliation amongst festival participants, which Mall brings into dialogue with scene and genre theory.⁸² But both these projects by Anderton and Mall are socially and geographically oriented, leaving questions open about how specialised sound system events attempting to push extreme volumes for multiple days fit into this discourse. For the first Outlook Festival in the UK, “cyclic place” may not materialise as a positive shared experience given how much it disturbed Cheshire and nearby communities (although The Fort lives on in collective memory). Indeed, several Outlook UK attendees I spoke to at the event were surprised by the choice of site to begin with, with Huw of Sinai suggesting the event may have been set to fail from the beginning by being situated “in the poshest possible part of an already really posh area”.

Like Britishness and the rural, bass culture and noise have a multifaceted relationship. An understanding of sound system events as fundamentally noisy, not just sonically but as disrupting the status quo of public and private life, is reflexively woven into the vernacular of bass musics around the world. This sometimes appears superficially, as in the naming of contemporary music festivals such as Noisily and Noise Fest, but elsewhere it is culturally potent, as in classic hip-hop tracks such as Public Enemy’s “Bring the Noise” (1988), which opens with the rhetorical line “bass! How low can you go?”⁸³ In the literature, Tricia Rose identifies rap as a bass-heavy force designed to “occupy public space”, and she reworks racist assumptions about the genre as unintelligible “noise” as her point of departure for investigating the music’s social and sonic power—a lot of which stems from the

⁸² *Ibid.*, 111–114; Andrew Mall, “Music Festivals, Ephemeral Places, and Scenes: Interdependence at Cornerstone Festival”, *Journal of the Society for American Music* 14, no. 1 (2020): 51–69.

⁸³ Public Enemy, “Bring the Noise”, CD, *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* (New York: Def Jam Recordings CK 44303, 1988).

deployment of saturated bass lines.⁸⁴ Furthermore, as Cheng finds in his more recent study “Black Noise, White Ears”, the bassweight of hip-hop played by Black youth in public continues to be perceived by white subjects as a threatening, noisy “sonic weapon” that in some cases provokes lethal, racist gun violence.⁸⁵

Scholarship on reggae sound systems similarly works with noise as a lens through which the materiality of bass culture can be understood. Henriques’ sonic dominance is the prime example, positioning reggae dance halls (at least in Jamaica during the roots era) as embracing “*livity*” in the streets where “a cacophony of sound” is standard fare and “sonic privacy is impossible”.⁸⁶ The sound system session absorbs and culturally reconfigures this experience into a sonic epistemology that disrupts the colonial primacy of text and vision. From the perspective of dominant power structures and bourgeois conservative “middle-class criticism”, the sonic dominance of this bass culture is always already noisy.⁸⁷ The amplified bass frequencies that drive the melody, rhythm, and materiality of the music are also the calling card of its noisiness. As established in Chapter 2, higher frequencies are easily attenuated by walls and other materials (and already understated in the music at the compositional level anyway), leaving bass lines to travel furthest and make the most impact as “noise”. Indeed, numerous scholars have discussed what we can learn about societal power from the ways in which music and/as noise are controlled, and the racist over-policing of Black popular music in Britain, under the pretence of preventing violent crime, is also increasingly well documented.⁸⁸ What remains less well understood, however, is the specific roles that bass and sound systems play in this landscape of political tension and subcultural practice.

⁸⁴ Rose, *Black Noise*, 62–63, 118–119, 144.

⁸⁵ Cheng, “Black Noise, White Ears”.

⁸⁶ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 7–8.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 16, 210.

⁸⁸ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Marie Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2017); Fatsis, “Policing the beats”.

When SP:MC shouted “make some noise” throughout drum ‘n’ bass artist Skeptical’s DJ set on Friday night at Outlook UK, much like other MCs did throughout the festival, his vocal performance carried both symbolic and material power. The tone was existential; to “make some noise” at a bass music festival is for the audience to bring it to life and affirm its sonic and political purpose. Likewise, SGT Pokes’ call for unity late in the day on Sunday in the face of pent-up frustration from the crowd struck me as a reference to the sonic immersion (and discourse around it) that is so prized in bass culture: the way in which sub-bass “permeates and modulates” the spaces it fills, creating, as Jasen puts it, a palpable “swimmingness” that “binds bodies together (putting them literally *on the same wavelength*)”.⁸⁹ The problem, unfortunately, was that SGT Pokes’ call for unity was unsuccessful, mostly functioning as a symbolic gesture. He stoked a few cheers, hugs, and handshakes in the crowd, but the material unity provided by bassweight remained inert, the sonic weapons of the festival defeated by the power of regulation.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored a range of questions and issues regarding bass culture in the music festival environment, using Outlook as a case study. I presented a critique of the festival studies literature, arguing that the field can benefit from more explicit engagement with the sonic materiality of, and live performances at, popular music festivals, with a view to moving past mere re-affirmations of the “countercultural carnivalesque” status quo. Music festivals are arguably noisy sonic environments before anything else, with sound systems playing a crucial role in the remaking of space and place and forging of imagined community that goes on within—and indeed beyond—their boundaries. Outlook offers insights into how these processes take shape in the context of a festival fixated on bass experience and specialist sound systems. Drawing on the findings of my sensory ethnography and critical engagement with a variety of sources, I analysed the sonic and social dimensions of The

⁸⁹ Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 22, 130. Emphasis original.

Fort and Sinai Arena, revealing bass culture in the festival environment as affording affective experiences that ranged from nauseating to impotent. Fetishistic revelling in the sonic dominance of amplified sub-bass was not necessarily a foregone conclusion. The countercultural carnivalesque of the popular music festival and EDM's rave motto "PLUR" is here brought down to earth, a sobering reminder that sonic affect is neither utopian nor apolitical by default.

Chapter 5: Real Heads: Bass culture on the internet

If bass culture is a sonic materialist practice, how does it take shape in the abstract space of the internet? When DJ performance and musical community move online, what can they teach us more broadly about the transformation of sonic intimacy in the twenty-first century? In this chapter I address these questions by presenting a digital ethnography conducted with Real Heads, a dubstep-centric EDM community on the social media platform Discord.¹ Specifically, Real Heads are a group of DJs, producers, and fans invested in the sounds, spaces, and practices of early dubstep, when the genre first emerged in London in 2001–2006 and was thriving in emergent social networks of the young internet, but had yet to be assimilated into mainstream EDM.

I chose to conduct an ethnography in Real Heads because, as an affinity group whose online sociality parallels that of early dubstep web spaces, it represents an ideal case study of bass culture on the internet. While Real Heads have diverse interests beyond dubstep, and the community is not deliberately designed to replicate aspects of early dubstep, I will show how this parallel nevertheless emerges through inherited practices, traditions, and regimes of subcultural capital (enabled by the readily available historical sources, both primary and secondary, on the internet about the genre). These connections will be explored in the context of Fruit Sessions, a weekly broadcast of DJ sets by Real Heads hosted on the livestreaming site Twitch that began during COVID-19 and continues today as a valued social tradition. Fruit Sessions warrants critical attention both as a form of online bass music performance that develops the sonic materialisms of early dubstep radio, and more broadly as a communal musicking project working largely outside of professional and institutional standards—what sociologist Nick Prior would term “new amateur” musicianship.² In doing so, the chapter will build on the materialist framework of sonic

¹ The name of the community has been changed to protect its anonymity, but the intended meaning is preserved: that the server is a space for authentic bass music fans.

² Nick Prior, “New Amateurs Revisited: Popular Music, Digital Technology, and the Fate of Cultural Production”, in *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, second edition, ed. Laura Grindstaff *et al.* (London; New York: Routledge, 2019), 340–48.

intimacy introduced in Chapter 2, as well as Wayne Marshall's historicisation of bass in "treble culture", and the "platformization" of bass music on the internet.³ It will also make a contribution to the study of net-native musical subcultures, addressing, as Raquel Campos Valverde writes, how "music matters in online sociality", and speaking to Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth's question of how "the internet changes what a music genre is in the twenty-first century".⁴

The chapter proceeds as follows. I will first outline the practical, conceptual, and ethical aspects of the ethnography. The next section will situate Real Heads in its wider context as one of several dubstep-centric online communities formed over the last decade, partly in reaction against the mainstreaming of the genre and its transgression of sonic materialism. This leads to a discussion of Real Heads' structure and sociality, in which I will explore the central role that dubstep heritage plays in the community's regime of subcultural capital. The second half of the chapter will turn to Fruit Sessions as a case study that connects the chapter's interrelated threads. Weaving together ethnography, performance analysis, and theory, I will address in turn questions of sonic intimacy in internet-mediated DJ performance, the tensions between bass and "treble culture", and platformisation.

Digital ethnography: Methods, concepts, ethics

My digital ethnography with Real Heads consisted of four months of participant-observation in May–August 2022, and nine semi-structured online interviews conducted up to May 2023. I kept a detailed diary and observed life in Real Heads in three settings: discussions of dubstep in any context; the oversight and social environment of Fruit Sessions; and the DJ

³ James, *Sonic Intimacy*; Marshall, "Treble culture"; Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, & José van Dijck, "Platformisation", *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 4 (2019): <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425>; Nieborg & Poell, "The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity", *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4275–92.

⁴ Raquel Campos Valverde, "Online Musicking for Humanity: The Role of Imagined Listening and the Moral Economies of Music Sharing on Social Media", *Popular Music* 41, no. 2 (2022): 194–215; Georgina Born & Christopher Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre", *Music and Letters* 98 (4): 601–47.

performances in Fruit Sessions itself. I recruited interviewees to depict a broad cross-section of the community in terms of how long they had been a member. Each interviewee also had at least some experience performing on Fruit Sessions and could be considered an active member, which I defined as participating in any discussion more than once a week.

Working in Real Heads as a digital field site, it became clear the community is a complex network of people, spaces, music, and ideas rather than a singular virtual space. To understand this I drew on the work of Jenna Burrell, who lends precision to the slippery notion of “the field” in digital ethnography by treating research sites as networks comprised of overlapping, changeable relations.⁵ Since networks tend to be layered and expansive, a digital ethnography is rarely exhaustive and its boundaries are best defined by a time limit (as with my project) or when new encounters confirm old findings.⁶ As a 2015 study by Daniel Allington and colleagues also finds, the “ostensibly ‘placeless’ medium” of the streaming and social network platform Soundcloud—a vital tool for Real Heads and other bass music communities—tends to reflect offline geopolitical inequalities, a reminder that digital networks always have material roots.⁷ Thus, while notions of virtual space/place remain important to digital ethnography and are at times relevant in this case study, especially given Real Heads’ connection to dubstep as a subculture specific to south London, I found the network model most useful.⁸ Real Heads is a community of DJs, producers, and listeners using Discord as a central node in a wider web of links between other nominally external platforms. For example, Fruit Sessions were organised internally

⁵ Burrell, “The Fieldsite as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research”, in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, ed. Larissa Hjorth *et al.* (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 56.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Daniel Allington, Byron Dueck, & Anna Jordanous, “Networks of Value in Electronic Music: SoundCloud, London, and the Importance of Place”, *Cultural Trends* 24, no. 3 (2015): 211.

⁸ This approach is informed by a recent digital ethnography of musical circulation in Spotify and Jekyll (a subcultural file-sharing group) by musicologist Blake Durham, co-authored by Born. Durham treats these platforms as relational “polymedia” that are defined less by their spatial imaginaries than by their affordances and links to other platforms. Durham also documents a tight-knit sociality in Jekyll that mirrors the patterns of subcultural exclusivity and informal musicking I observe in Real Heads. See: Blake Durham & Georgina Born, “Online Music Consumption and the Formalisation of Informality: Exchange, Labour and Sociality in Two Music Platforms”, in *Music and Digital Media: A Planetary Anthology*, ed. Georgina Born (London: UCL Press, 2022), 177–219.

within Discord but broadcast publicly on Twitch with a different chatroom environment. The leisure and labour practices of the community frequently linked to other EDM-specific Discord groups and spaces on Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, Soundcloud, Bandcamp, and YouTube. These platforms were integral to how members shared music, exchanged knowledge, and promoted their creative outputs as “new amateur” musicians.⁹ Facebook in particular gave me a comparative view of Real Heads as one of several “real” dubstep groups established during the 2010s, where new amateur musicianship and early dubstep fandom are present but without the intimate sociality afforded by Discord’s closed-community design.¹⁰

I joined Real Heads in March 2020 in the wake of COVID-19, but only became an active member in late 2021. This was ironically when Britain’s social distancing restrictions were being lifted. I felt motivated to re-invest in being a DJ for the first time since the pandemic and thus looked to Discord as a space to share work-in-progress material and keep up with dubstep, as someone with few personal connections in the scene—an experience I learned was not uncommon amongst Real Heads. I gradually became more involved in the server’s communal projects such as Fruit Sessions and made my researcher status known. This process helped establish trust and, once fieldwork began, provided a valuable insider view of social and musical practices, which I was also able to consider from the perspective of a practicing DJ in the community. My participant-observation frequently slipped into being a researcher-performer thinking analytically about my own and others’ DJ performances, and I will accordingly use first-person and analytical writing to enrich the ethnography.¹¹ Building trust also meant that the boundaries between my research and

⁹ Prior, “New Amateurs Revisited”.

To be clear, many Real Heads are members of these other social media groups, platforms, and networks my fieldwork drew me to, but they are also autonomous communities/spaces with their own structure and identity.

¹⁰ These differences in platform sociality are touched on in a recent case study: see Jason Ng & Steven Gamble, “Hip-Hop Producer-Hosts, Beat Battles, and Online Music Production Communities on Twitch”, *First Monday* 27, no. 6 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v27i6.12338>.

¹¹ First-person confessional writing in the humanities is increasingly referred to as “autoethnography”, and parts of this chapter could be considered as such. However, I do not formally adopt it as a method because centring my subjective experience is not essential for achieving my goal of illuminating the communal practices and DJ culture of Real Heads. Autoethnography also requires a

leisure became increasingly blurred. For example, I lived in Bristol for the duration of the ethnography, and within weeks of becoming active I was invited to a mix session by another Bristol-based member, shortly after which I performed as a guest DJ on their radio show and attended a local club night with members from elsewhere in England. These experiences were a reminder of the extent to which the project, a form of “fieldwork at home”, was always connected to my personal life and membership in Real Heads, with the two being mutually influential rather than a hindering conflict of interest.¹²

No brostep allowed: “Real” dubstep discourse and communities online

I now turn to the mainstream manifestation of dubstep, pejoratively termed “brostep” in opposition to “real” dubstep, and how it became the “constitutive outside” against which Real Heads and other communities like it define themselves online.¹³ More than mere posturing between fans, “real” dubstep discourse offers a window into what happens when the mainstreaming of a bass music genre also entails its “treblification”: a threat to its sonic materiality and hence *raison d’être*.¹⁴

The tipping point in dubstep’s mainstreaming came in January 2006. DJ Mary Anne Hobbs hosted a show on BBC Radio 1 titled “Dubstep Warz” featuring leading dubstep artists of the day, with seven DJs playing short sets over two hours.¹⁵ Thousands of listeners re-distributed Dub Warz and exposed the genre to a global audience via Myspace, the

more serious commitment to self-reflexivity than suggested by its ubiquity in current scholarship. I am guided here by ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong’s study of taiko drumming, which she defines as “necessarily autoethnographic” with the caveat that “I also locate myself in my ethnographic logos *without making myself its focus*”. See: Deborah Wong, *Louder and Faster: Pain, Joy, and the Body Politic in Asian American Taiko* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 16. Emphasis added.

¹² Jonathan Stock & Chou Chiener, “Fieldwork at Home: European and Asian Perspectives”, in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz & Timothy Cooley, second edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 110–113.

¹³ Born’s notion of a “constitutive outside”, developed in dialogue with Judith Butler and Stuart Hall, is a useful concept for exploring how musical publics define themselves by what they exclude, whether sonically, socially, or ideologically. Born, “For a Relational Musicology”, 221–222.

¹⁴ Marshall, “Treble Culture”, 44.

¹⁵ BBC Radio 1, “Mary Anne Hobbs, Dubstep Warz 2006”, BBC, 10 January 2006 (accessed 9 January 2023), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00ts0ld>.

recently founded YouTube and Dubstep Forum (DSF), and DIY mix archive site Barefiles (amongst other smaller blogs and fora).¹⁶ Of these web spaces, DSF is the largest and most direct predecessor to Real Heads. It is also a rare resource that remains online despite formally closing in 2015, reflecting the investment “real” dubstep fans have in preserving the genre’s history.¹⁷ The forum was established in 2005 by Ivan “Dubway” Kovacevic in Croatia, foreshadowing the connection UK dubstep would forge with Croatia via Outlook Festival by the end of the decade.¹⁸ DSF’s stated goal was “[b]ringing music lovers together [...] as an experiment of positivity” under the banner of “Global bass culture”.¹⁹ When Dubstep Warz was initially announced on DSF by Distance, a DJ-producer who was set to play on the show, the forum was already approaching a total membership of 10,000.²⁰ As journalist Richard Akingbehin discusses, Distance’s post stimulated a feedback loop that built initial anticipation for the broadcast, during which Hobbs shouted out “all the crew posting on Dubstep Forum”, with DSF seeing a surge in activity in the following weeks.²¹

Dubstep Warz catalysed a process that would not only transform dubstep but also spur the development of the North American “EDM” industry. This process impacted popular musical culture to such an extent that in musicologist Mike D’Errico’s assessment, EDM after Dubstep Warz constitutes a “dubstep era”.²² By the end of the 2000s, artists such as Britney Spears were capitalising on dubstep as a stylistic trend in chart music; British DJs including Caspa, Skream, and Benga began playing to sold-out arenas and festivals; and North American “EDM” artist Skrillex, a former punk-rocker, became the face of dubstep

¹⁶ Laurent Fintoni, “On a natural charge: How dubstep took over the world”, Red Bull Music, 18 January 2018 (accessed 16 January 2023), <https://www.redbull.com/gb-en/on-a-natural-charge-how-dubstep-went-global>.

¹⁷ The DSF founder explains his explicitly archival intentions in an interview: “I decided to freeze it and preserve it [...] There are a lot of high quality discussions for music culture historians and enthusiasts who want to know about [...] the origin of the sound.” See: Richard Akingbehin, “Ancient Memories: Revisiting Dubstep Forum”, Resident Advisor, 28 October 2020 (accessed 1 May 2023), <https://ra.co/features/3771>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² D’Errico, “Electronic Dance Music in the Dubstep Era”.

internationally when he released his first EP in 2010.²³ In these contexts, dubstep was effectively transformed into a different genre, undergoing drastic changes in its stylistic and spectral make-up. Skrillex in particular popularised a “maximalist” aesthetic of timbral and melodic complexity that was a far cry from UK dubstep’s emphasis on sub-bass pressure, harmonic stasis, and virtual space.²⁴ Dubstep as “EDM” carried an “overriding affect” of “hardness”, writes D’Errico, as producers layered synthesiser oscillators and modulation effects to “colonize the soundscape” and create “filthy” timbres, often deliberately designed to shock or disgust listeners (recall Spencer’s interviewees describing dubstep as “like vomitstep [...] it makes you want to vomit, it’s so nasty”, for example).²⁵ This rapid stylistic evolution was mediated by social networks that were themselves developing and expanding at pace (especially YouTube), such that dubstep circulated “more like a ‘meme’ than a music genre”, as many net-native subcultures do today.²⁶ British dubstep vocalist SGT Pokes summarises this process as an “accelerated [...] hyper culture” in which dubstep “did 30 years of UK music in the space of a few years. It did the punk soundsystem thing, it had a DIY culture and dubplate culture and it went international and commercial [...] All of a sudden Britney Spears is working with Rusko.”²⁷

Although dubstep has fallen out of fashion in recent years, its sensationalised transformation in the “EDM” industry has had a lasting effect on DJs and fans committed to the genre’s subcultural roots. During the 2010s, online communities converged on a shared understanding of “real” dubstep in opposition to its mainstream other, with the distinction between these categories still routinely debated.²⁸ The term “real” dubstep was established

²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; Edward Spencer, “Music to Vomit to: The Dubstep Drop, the Bass Face, and the Sound of the Social Web”, in *Cultural Approaches to Disgust and the Visceral*, ed. Max Rynnänen, Heidi Kosonen, & Susanne Ylönen (London; New York: Routledge, 2023), 161.

²⁶ Born & Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave”, 634.

²⁷ Dave Jenkins, “SGT Pokes and the Story of Croydub”, UKF, 22 May 2018 (accessed 30 March 2023), <https://ukf.com/words/sgt-pokes-and-the-story-of-croydub/21998>.

²⁸ See, for example: u/[deleted], “What is the line between true dubstep and brostep?”, Reddit, 6 March 2019 (accessed 1 May 2023), https://www.reddit.com/r/realdubstep/comments/ay3qqy/what_is_the_line_between_true_dubstep_and_brostep/.

in 2011 with the founding of the Reddit community *r/realdubstep* at the height of brostep's popularity. The forum's description lists canonical British artists and labels such as Skream and DMZ as a guide to what is deemed acceptable for discussion, reading: "[t]his is a community about dubstep music and culture. The sounds that come from the fusion of break beat, 2 step garage, dub reggae and more. [...] If you're looking for the dirtier side of dubstep, please check */r/dubstep*."²⁹ The implications of delineating one kind of music as more "real" than another is not entirely lost on the community. One member, for example, argues that "real" dubstep "can't grow [...] because the scene is full of pretentious zealots [...] I get it, your genre was bastardised, but [...] [You're a] Bunch of old wankers trying to tell everyone how to act and police their music tastes".³⁰ In these spaces, dubstep's mainstream manifestation is named brostep, reflecting a perception that the music's aesthetics invoke hypermasculine aggression and are popular among young, male "frat-bro" audiences.³¹ A lively discussion thread on DSF started in late 2009 at the cusp of dubstep's mainstream expansion offers valuable insights into these views.³² The original poster writes, for example, that to "real" dubstep fans, brostep sounds like an "unpalatable mush of midrange madness" and "pissing contest", framing it as a laddish game of one-upmanship between DJs and producers who hunger insatiably for ever-filthier bass drops.³³ This is despite British dubstep also being a scene dominated by men, and dance music ethnographer Christabel Stirling's observation that "EDM" festivals saw dubstep audiences approach gender parity for the first time.³⁴

A range of similar communities were established on Facebook in the 2010s, the most prominent of which include Shitty Tune Share For Us Wastes Who Like Dubstep (henceforth

²⁹ www.reddit.com/r/realdubstep, n. d. (accessed 1 April 2023).

³⁰ u/DesignatedChemist, "Why is this called real dubstep?", Reddit, 29 July 2021 (accessed 7 February 2023), https://www.reddit.com/r/realdubstep/comments/otmoc5/why_is_this_called_real_dubstep/.

³¹ D'Errico, "Electronic Dance Music in the Dubstep Era", 9.

³² spacer, "brostep", Dubstep Forum, 4 October 2009 (accessed 1 May 2023), <https://www.dubstepforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=1432779>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Stirling, "'Beyond the Dancefloor?'"", 142.

Shitty Dubstep), Memeplates at roughly 139.6bpm (henceforth Memeplates), and Dubstep Vinyl Collectors. Of these, Shitty Dubstep most closely resembles the long-form asynchronous discussions housed in DSF and the mixed types of interaction seen in Real Heads. Alongside memes and community in-jokes, users share new dubstep releases, discuss current issues in the scene, and promote their own music, often linking to a wider ecosystem of YouTube channels such as Dubstep Classics and GetDarker which upload rare recordings and early dubstep ephemera. Unlike r/realdubstep, however, the Facebook groups noted here only tacitly imply their relationship with “real” dubstep as part of a wider regime of subcultural capital, in the Bordieuan sense (as elucidated in Sarah Thornton’s classic study).³⁵ In Shitty Dubstep, this manifests as the stipulation “no brostep” in the group description. Dubstep Vinyl Collectors is largely self-selecting since mainstream dubstep releases tend to circulate only via digital formats. By contrast, the “139.6bpm” in Memeplates is a play on dubstep’s standardised tempo of 140 BPM, a niche reference targeting the tendency for “real” dubstep enthusiasts to be musicians with a technical, and at times pedantic understanding of genre.

Defining “real” dubstep

“Real” dubstep thus functions as a discursive mechanism by which fans distinguish their tastes and identity online, but how do these communities make sense of the dubstep-brostep dichotomy musically? As the r/realdubstep description indicates, “real” dubstep is generally defined as any music that adheres stylistically to the British dubstep canon. However, “real” dubstep is often more precisely defined by what it is not: brostep. Brostep is criticised for its preoccupation with broad-spectrum synthesiser sounds that detract from or downplay sub-bass, and that in turn the music performed live does not require sound systems capable of producing extreme sub-bass. As a DSF member in the above-cited thread writes, a “real” dubstep experience is “when the sub bass hits and you feel it rumble in your chest and you

³⁵ Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 24–27.

just zone out [...] [if] it kinda just wails away on midrange like there's no tomorrow, its gonna be hard to get that same effect".³⁶ This reference to tactile bass experience and frequency content highlights how brostep's mid-range stylistic elements make it significantly more audible on earbuds, phones, and other devices with a limited bass response, making the music accessible entirely outside of clubs—whereas “real” dubstep is difficult to divorce from its performance at live sound system events and the dub-diasporic traditions that power them. “Real” dubstep thus emerges as being as much about subcultural exclusivity as it is a pursuit of extreme amplification and tactile bass experience. If the music no longer requires expensive, labour intensive specialist sound systems to make its low end tangible, is it dubstep at all? This perspective was raised in my interview with Nate, a DJ-producer and moderator of Real Heads. Asked how he would define bass music, Nate noted the importance of having the necessary “hardware” to amplify sub-bass in a live setting and push equipment to its limits:

[It's] music that has an emphasis on the frequencies that correspond to a physical sensation when they're played loud and live. And then the culture revolves around reproducing those experiences. You know, *the hardware that you need to make loud, low waves*. And then the ways that you can turn that up to eleven."³⁷

In turn, the divide between “real” dubstep and brostep is an example of the tension between bass culture and “treble culture”, which ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall historicises in a 2014 study.³⁸ Marshall identifies “treble culture” as a collection of practices and technologies developed over the last two decades that have seen music listening becoming increasingly “trebly” in its mediation by mobile phones, laptops, and earbuds, whilst popular music has (seemingly paradoxically) become more fixated on bass, as with, for example, the predominance of hip-hop in chart and club music.³⁹ Marshall cites several commentators relevant to the “real” dubstep scene, including late social theorist and critic

³⁶ tacospheros in spacer, “brostep”, <https://www.dubstepforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=1443830&hilit=midrange#p1443830>.

³⁷ Interview by author, 29 May 2022.

³⁸ Wayne Marshall, “Treble Culture”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies, Volume 2*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath & Jason Stanyek (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 43–76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Mark Fisher, who remarks that “[b]oth dubstep and minimal techno only achieve their full potency when played on a club soundsystem [...] none of this can be replicated at home, still less on iPod headphones”.⁴⁰ Dubstep pioneer Mala is also brought into the fold with his assessment of a feedback loop between the treblification of listening and the music produced for mobile technologies:

[...] youngsters [...] [are] listening to music mostly on their mobile phones. So you have to think that you have producers trying to recreate music and music’s made for this bandwidth and they only understand music sonically on that bandwidth. So actually this whole culture of compressed files and bad sound quality, is, to some extent having a knock on effect.⁴¹

An online discussion thread titled “dubstep education” expresses this view more strongly, with the author positioning sound system events as the “proper” dubstep environment directly in opposition to hearing brostep through YouTube “rips” (audio downloaded from the platform at lower streaming quality, rather than the original file’s higher quality).⁴² “That’s why brostep is so repulsive to proper dubstep fans”, they write, adding, “[n]ot only is it musically different [...] the culture behind it is also very different. Real dubstep is “meditate on bassweight”, while brostep is ‘yeah d00d, this shit i ripped off youtube is so filthy’”.⁴³

Bass music can be successfully produced and disseminated in a trebly manner, however, even when sub-bass is dominant compositional element. A case in point is grime, which first circulated in an informal “gift economy” via mobile phones and YouTube videos such that producers adapted the music’s sonics for playback in these contexts (see Chapter 2).⁴⁴ It is also notable that the generally low audio quality of streaming sites like Soundcloud and YouTube has been pivotal to dubstep’s dissemination and growth, with the “real” dubstep scene today continuing to gravitate around, for example, channels that upload “rips” of rare dubplate and vinyl records. Indeed, several of my Real Heads interviewees speak

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴² Phigure, “Dubstep education. Get to know what REAL dubstep is, not this brostep crap.”, *OddFutureTalk*, 4 May 2011, Internet Archive snapshot 12 November 2020 (accessed 1 October 2023), <https://web.archive.org/web/20201112021447/http://www.oddfuturetalk.com/forums/topic/1110-dubstep-education-get-to-know-what-real-dubstep-is-not-this-brostep-crap/>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Marshall, “Treble Culture”, 62–63; James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 97–99.

about discovering dubstep on the internet at an early age before attending sound system dances or listening with audiophilic gear was possible. For example, Sir Ebral, a DJ and occasional Fruit Sessions participant, remarks:

The funny thing is—obviously dubstep is a bass driven genre—but I had no clue. I was one of those listening on my laptop speakers. A lot of people are put off because they don't catch the bass. I still loved the sound without experiencing the bass. [...] I still do it now. I don't feel like I must hear the bass right away. [...] As long as everything else pleases my ears, then I know the bass will be fine.⁴⁵

Nate shares a similar experience, describing how he first heard dubstep through “phone speakers or shitty in-ears [headphones] [...] You have to be some kind of weirdo like me to hear DMZ for the first time on a phone speaker and go, ‘oh yeah’ [laughs], and be like, ‘what’s that?’ I really don’t know why I liked it so much.”⁴⁶

As such, “real” dubstep has developed, like most postmillennial bass music, alongside “trebly” listening media and the internet in a manner that is co-constitutive rather than dichotomous. Today’s dubstep DJs and fans are literate in the mobile technologies, digital media, and “lossy” audio formats like the MP3 through which bass music and EDM are often filtered by default.⁴⁷ Put another way, the treble culture of mobile and internet listening is not necessarily incompatible with the bass culture of “real” dubstep, even if streaming audio and the virtual environments of Twitch and Discord might seem antithetical to it at first glance. Livestreamed “real” dubstep DJ performances—already encountered to some extent with Boiler Room in Chapter 3—thus warrant critical attention as an evolution of the bass culture-treble culture relationship, which I will turn to shortly below in the context of Fruit Sessions.

Being a Real Head: Dubstep heritage and subcultural capital

How does “real” dubstep play out within Real Heads? Some notes on the community’s structure and how Discord works are useful at this juncture. First is size and intimacy: Real

⁴⁵ Interview by author, 4 March 2023.

⁴⁶ Interview by author, 29 May 2022.

⁴⁷ Marshall, “Treble Culture”, 52–53.

Heads houses a wide range of members and discussions, but the core of the community is small and tight-knit.

As of 2023 there are 800 members. These are mostly young men with a diverse range of identities, living in countries including Puerto Rico, New Zealand, The Netherlands, and India, though most are in Europe, Britain, and the US. About 100 members are active, and approximately 20 interact daily. The group, or “server” in Discord’s terminology, is private, meaning new members can only join through a direct invite from an existing member.⁴⁸ Active members often address each other by their real names, flowing freely from chat about everyday life to debates about politics or the dubstep canon. About a third of all members are electronic music DJs and/or producers, some of whom perform regularly on radio, release music on established independent labels, and go on tour—but practically all choose not to pursue music full-time or told me they could not earn a living doing so. Nevertheless, these members altruistically share information on music production, DJing, and independent entrepreneurship. A smaller group arrange in-person meetings at dubstep events in the UK a few times a year. These intimate relations are not necessarily atypical for niche interest groups on Discord, but they differ substantially from the more anonymous, asynchronous sociality found in “real” dubstep groups on Reddit and Facebook.

Discord servers are organised by channels, where most interaction occurs in voice- or text-based channels. Text channels allow the embedding of links, GIFs, emotes, and files as well as the creation of nested “threads” and “forum channels” that can house conversations arranged by topic. This makes Discord a hybrid social media tool that combines the peer moderation and ephemeral nature of channel-based instant messaging with the asynchronous interaction and community-oriented features of web forums like DSF. In Real Heads, the server structure (designed and managed by a small team of moderators) is almost entirely text channels with a range of intended functions. These allow members to engage in often collaborative and reciprocal social exchanges like Fruit Sessions. The main

⁴⁸ Public servers, by contrast, are publicly indexed by Discord and third party search engines, making them discoverable online and generally less likely to develop a robust sense of community.

channel #heads-speak is for broadly music-focused chat and is the default landing area for new members. Below #heads-speak in the user interface are ten narrower music-specific channels. The most important of these are #music-share, #mix-share, and #new-releases, channels dominated by members sharing links to tracks, albums and playlists on music streaming sites (especially Bandcamp and Soundcloud). This behaviour plays a powerful role in individuals' expression of their identity and subcultural capital, occasionally blooming into fleshed-out conversation about the latest dubstep releases or appreciation for other genres. Also important are #production-chat and #show-off-tunes-and-feedback, used for discussion of music production strategies and members' work-in-progress tracks, respectively. In #events, members either share recordings of club nights they have attended or organise in-person meetings at upcoming events. For DJs, #sync-or-spin is the channel dedicated to organising Fruit Sessions and general DJ chat. The channel #arrivals is for vinyl DJs to share celebratory photos of newly purchased records, though many Real Heads use digital turntables because of the prohibitive costs of analogue media. A #dubstep-lore channel also sees conversation occur on average two to three times a month when someone shares material about early dubstep's history.

When I asked interviewees "what does it mean to be a Real Head?" there was little consensus. The owner of the server, Kar, stated that he chose the name Real Heads as a joke, and this is borne out by the responses of other interviewees as well as the ironic use of similar terms such as "tru hed" across online dubstep communities.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, over the course of my fieldwork it became clear that knowledge and appreciation for "real" dubstep—which I think together here as "dubstep heritage"—was a uniting factor, enmeshed in the community's wider regime of subcultural capital. The main fabric of this regime is "no brostep" which, unlike in Shitty Dubstep, is not explicitly stated in Real Heads. New

⁴⁹ A post in the Memeplates group, for example, satirises the idea of an old-school dubstep DJ who cut their teeth at the turn of the millennium: "To DJ dubstep in the early 00s, You had to arrive early, know how to connect, [...] have courage, intelligence, be an authentic musical encyclopedia [...] Tru-hedz is a virtuous knowledgeable musicologist with polite and fine tastes forever.. [sic]". See: <https://facebook.com/groups/1885888211672773/posts/3257264581201789/> (accessed 10 March 2023).

members are not required to agree to an official rule against the discussion or sharing of brostep when joining, but brostep and North American “EDM” in general are nevertheless excluded through social enforcement. “No brostep” is the invisible rule governing new members that they must discover on their own: having some knowledge of or investment in “real” dubstep is a soft prerequisite for participating in the community.⁵⁰

A pointed illustration of the community’s enforcement of “real” dubstep authenticity occurred in early 2022. Kar had added Real Heads to several third-party indexing websites such as Disboard, which allow the public to browse servers by category and join even if a server is invite-only. This led to an unusually large influx of new users who, in seeing Real Heads listed as a dubstep community, joined on the assumption that dubstep’s mainstream manifestations would be welcome. Although the community has never had a formal initiation process (some Discord communities ask new users to introduce themselves in a dedicated channel after agreeing to the rules, for example), what resulted was a tongue-in-cheek hazing ritual in #heads-speak where established members would ask “what kind of dubstep do you like?” or “favourite dubstep song?” When a new member responded, predictably, by sharing music that fell outside the bounds of “real” dubstep, this was viewed as an irredeemable faux-pas and they were quickly made to feel unwelcome. Such moments reveal how “real” dubstep fans’ defence of the precise boundaries of their genre often becomes snobbish, though they also reflect more widespread behaviour especially in online EDM discourse. As several musicologists argue, the “bottom-up” metadata-driven tagging system of platforms like Soundcloud and Bandcamp enables users to become “critic-fans”, differentiating individual tracks at ever more granular levels of specificity and subgenre.⁵¹

Notably, some Real Heads did prefer a more compassionate approach. Nate, for example, describes in our interview that “if they obviously don’t know the unspoken rule of

⁵⁰ To some extent, this rule is visible to new members in that the community’s most animated discussions typically revolve around early dubstep, and “EDM”/brostep never appear in the music channels. But given the community also has wider interests, this would not always be legible.

⁵¹ Christopher Charles, “Genre in Practice: Categories, Metadata and Music-Making in Psytrance Culture”, *Dancecult* 12, no. 1 (2020): 26; Thomas Johnson, “Analyzing Genre in Post-Millennial Popular Music”, PhD thesis, City University of New York (2018), 122.

what kind of music is OK and what isn't, then I'm not going to go and tell them that their music's shit."⁵² Lacu, a frequent Fruit Sessions participant, shares a similar sentiment, noting his dislike for the "snobbery" of some resolutely anti-brostep Real Heads: "who am I to say what is and isn't good, you know? [...] People just have a total dismissal of anything that doesn't fit with these specific ideas, despite being open to really experimental weird stuff in other genres."⁵³ By contrast, Zane, also a regular DJ on Fruit Sessions, argues new members have a role to play in respecting the intentions of the server: "if you're not going to take the time to [...] get an idea of what the community's like, and then just throw yourself out there posting something without taking the time to get familiar with what's going on around you, then I think you deserve to be made fun of."⁵⁴

Another striking example of "real" dubstep's positioning in Real Heads is in the server's iconography, showing how subcultural capital can operate in a visual register. The server's main icon by which users identify it in Discord's user interface borrows directly from that of Big Apple Records (1992–2004), a fondly remembered Croydon record store which played a pivotal role in the 1990s "dark garage" scene from which dubstep would emerge a short time later (see Chapter 1).⁵⁵ When a new member joins the server, they are greeted with a screen showing the server's icon in the centre, lifted from Big Apple's cartoonish banana peel logo, and a photograph in the background showing a group of dubstep DJs (see **Figures 22 and 23** below).⁵⁶ Taken in 2006 at Third Base, the venue where the influential DMZ parties were hosted, the photo is a who's who of the British dubstep canon: Martin Clark compares it to a similarly composed photo of canonical jazz artists taken in

⁵² Interview by author, 29 May 2022.

⁵³ Interview by author, 16 March 2023.

⁵⁴ Interview by author, 27 March 2023.

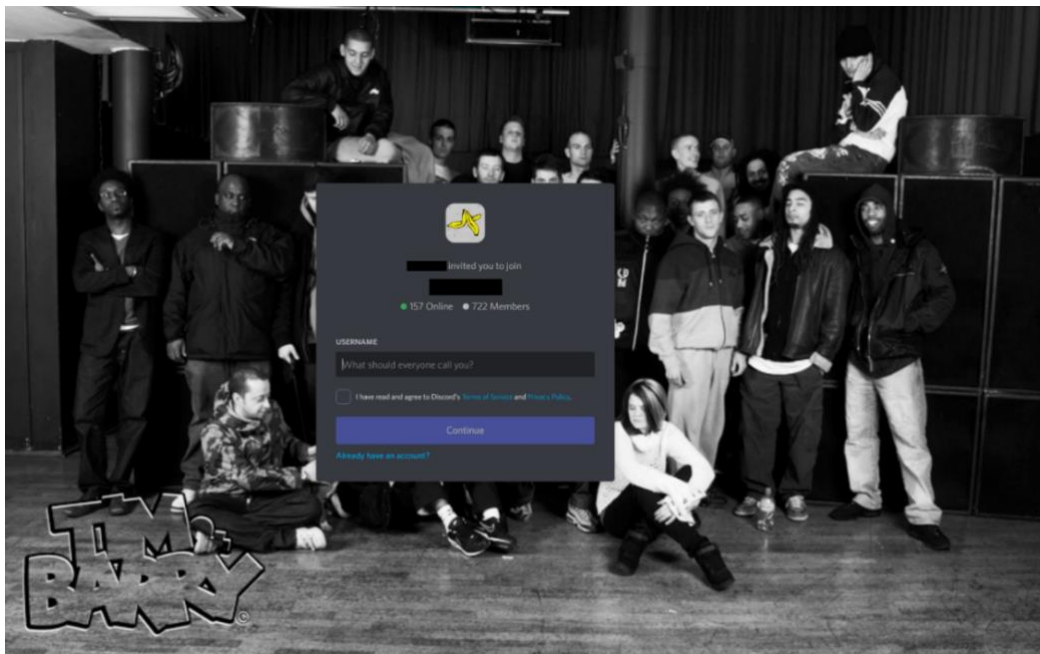
⁵⁵ Big Apple Records, "Bit of Apple history, some thoughts and some shouts", Facebook, 27 September 2020 (accessed 8 February 2023), https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0a3JEaMA6vTL9AhoPSoHbuF58LiBe1kRZEg4XniHKH6jfAGegWEZZdraQ8soJmBeCl&id=1479277789023969.

⁵⁶ The use of subcultural iconography also extends to two custom emotes in the server. These show, respectively, Mala of Digital Mystikz, and Rastafarian prophet Haile Selassie (a nod to the influence of Jamaican dub on UK bass culture).

1958, “A Great Day in Harlem”.⁵⁷ These images immediately communicate a particular sense of place: that you are entering a record store-like virtual hang out for “real” dubstep heads.



Figure 22 Big Apple Records' logo (left) and its former storefront (right). Copyright: John Kennedy. Reproduced with permission.



⁵⁷ Martin Clark, “A great day in Brixton”, *Blackdown*, 31 October 2008 (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://blackdownsoundboy.blogspot.com/2008/10/great-day-in-brixton.html?m=1>.

Figure 23 The Real Heads splash page shown to new members.

In our interview, Nate relates the server's iconography directly to "secret knowledge". As he frames it, "[t]he banana itself is basically a dog whistle to people who would know what that is. [...] right from the outset, someone who joins the server is going to see that banana and either they're gonna know what it is or they're not. That's quite a large part of the identity of the server I think."⁵⁸ Nate is surprisingly plain here in stating that being a Real Head is about belonging to an exclusive subculture, though this perspective is not universal. Lacu, for example, suggests the server's network of relationships parallel what Big Apple did for early dubstep: "[It's] A community of like minded people who support each other, who help each other learn [...] When one person gets a platform [...] they'll promote the other people from the server, use their tunes [in DJ sets]. As long as they're alright [laughs]."⁵⁹ This connection to Big Apple is significant given the prominent role it plays in Real Heads' iconography, and because Big Apple indeed sustained a network of relationships, DIY musicking projects, and radio-centric DJ culture not dissimilar to those found in Real Heads. However, Real Heads mirrors Big Apple's sociality in a distinctly more decentralised pattern, in a relationship that is more evolutionary than directly analogous. For example, Big Apple's archival material on Facebook shows that it was a laddish, homosocial, and racially mixed social network like Real Heads, yet the network also gravitated for some time almost entirely around DJ Hatcha. Hatcha worked behind the counter at Big Apple and was the central tastemaker for the fledgling dubstep scene in the years approximately 2001–2004, as he mentored younger artists such as Skream, attracted DJs from local pirate stations to the store, and would play the latest dubplates at key events like FWD.⁶⁰ As attested to by garage

⁵⁸ Interview by author, 29 May 2022.

⁵⁹ Interview by author, 16 March 2023.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*; Emma Warren, "Interview with Artwork AKA Menta", *GetDarker*, 27 October 2007 (accessed 1 February 2023), <https://getdarker.com/interviews/interview-with-artwork-aka-menta/>; Artwork, "Magnetic Man: a brief history of dubstep", *The Guardian*, 10 September 2010 (accessed 10 March 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2010/sep/10/magnetic-man-dubstep>.

producer Artwork, who worked in the studio above Big Apple and to a lesser extent also mentored younger dubstep artists there, the environment was such that “[w]e were all making records for Hatcha to spin and meeting in the record shop to discuss the sound we were making. It was a bit like a bass university”.⁶¹

“Where bass matters”: Fruit Sessions and performing dubstep online

Every Sunday, a small group of Real Heads—some of them DJs, some listeners—hang out on the livestreaming website Twitch to enjoy performances by members of the community over a few hours. For the remainder of the chapter, I will explore this weekly ritual of community musicking that began early in the COVID-19 pandemic but continues today as a small but valued performance tradition, named Fruit Sundays as another play on the Big Apple logo (and thus nod to Real Heads’ regime of subcultural capital).⁶² The discussion will enter into dialogue with emerging research on DJing, collectivity, and mediated sonic intimacy in the radio cultures of London bass genres like jungle and grime, and lead to a wider consideration of bass culture on the internet today.⁶³ Stations such as the internet-based Sub FM and the (now licensed) pirate Rinse FM have provided important space for DJs and their “micro-massive” audiences in these and other genres since the 1990s.⁶⁴ Sub FM’s tag line “where bass matters” attests to how a particular sense of sonic materiality and shared space is central to these stations’ communities.⁶⁵ In the context of grime, musicologist Alex de Lacey also shows how they have fostered collectivity for a “Black counterpublic” in response to decades of over-policing and exclusion from public spaces and dominant channels of distribution.⁶⁶ My aim is to show how Fruit Sessions is an internet- and

⁶¹ Warren, “Interview with Artwork AKA Menta”.

⁶² As with Real Heads, the name of Fruit Sessions has been changed to protect the community’s privacy while preserving the intended meaning.

⁶³ James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 55–80; de Lacey, *Level Up*.

⁶⁴ James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 65–66.

⁶⁵ www.sub.fm (accessed 10 March 2023).

⁶⁶ Alex de Lacey, “Pirate Mentality: How London Radio Has Shaped Creative Practice in Grime Music”, *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 19, no. 1 (2021): 201–202.

dubstep-specific offshoot of this vital performance tradition in UK bass culture. Real Heads DJs draw on the practices of early dubstep pirate and internet radio and in turn reproduce these stations' sense of place. Yet they also relocate the illicit and/or decentralised social networks of earlier radio forms to the digital platforms of Discord and Twitch, where bass culture encounters new performance contexts and socialities that scholars have only recently started to interrogate.

Fruit Sessions: Context, structure, values

Fruit Sessions began in early 2020 as a creative outlet for DJs in Real Heads and a social activity for the community during COVID-19. The project was initiated by Nate, who explains that it evolved from a simpler, jukebox-like group listening activity within Discord called gunfinga radio, where users would hang out in the same voice channel with their microphones muted and queue songs by submitting text-based commands to an integrated streaming app. The sound quality of these sessions was poor and Nate envisioned the community hosting a series of live DJ sets instead, eventually becoming inspired to create Fruit Sessions. He established a Twitch channel called "Fruit Sounds", describing the project as an "international community" committed to "underground bass music and real dubstep", inviting viewers to join the "open deck sessions" and join Real Heads via a public invite link. As the project continued into 2021 and became a weekly fixture, it settled on a standardised format. Up to six or seven DJs would each perform a one-hour set from home on a Sunday, with broadcasts running from approximately 18:00 to midnight GMT to accommodate the large percentage of Real Heads living in Europe or the US. The arrangement was equivalent to an open mic. Any Real Head with the necessary equipment and internet connectivity could participate by putting their name forward in [#sync-or-spin](#). During fieldwork, there were approximately ten regular DJ participants and up to 20 other members who regularly joined as viewers. Members interested in performing regularly could assign themselves the Discord role "Fruity", allowing them to be notified when someone wanted to arrange a broadcast by

typing “@Fruity” in #sync-or-spin. To arrange a broadcast in any given week, someone—often but not always a moderator—tagged the Fruity role a few hours or days in advance to check the number of willing participants. Less than three available DJs usually meant that week’s broadcast was cancelled. There was no system or requirement for the broadcasts to be recorded, although near the end of fieldwork, DJs increasingly decided to record and archive their sets on YouTube or Soundcloud on their own volition, sharing recordings in #mix-share or #sync-or-spin the next day (often, but not always, as a way to fill-in members who missed the live broadcast). DJs performed on a range of formats, with some opting for vinyl or vinyl-digital hybrid sets, but most participants used digital players (CDJs or MIDI-based controllers).

In my interviews with Fruit Sessions DJs, the question of whether and how the project was promoted beyond Real Heads and its significance to participants during the pandemic prompted lively discussion. The move to Twitch made all broadcasts public by default (the platform has never allowed users to create private livestreams), with Nate noting how this made broadcasts more accessible, since anyone could tune in without access to Discord or Real Heads. Small promotional efforts were occasionally made, and some sessions in 2020 were especially popular, reaching an approximate peak of 50 viewers. Lacu reflects: “towards the latter half of the pandemic, loads of us would be on. It was really good, you’d be fighting for a spot.”⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Nate explains that growth was not a goal; the project was initially only “a lockdown thing” aimed at members who missed being able to go out to raves. This is corroborated by Zane, for whom Fruit Sessions and other broadcasts like it on Twitch was a valued substitute for going out: “it was a great community thing that helped a lot of people when they couldn’t hear live music and see their friends.”⁶⁸ Lacu

⁶⁷ Interview by author, 16 March 2023.

⁶⁸ Interview by author, 27 March 2023.

Another notable aspect of Fruit Sessions’ functioning as a substitute for clubbing during the pandemic is that, during fieldwork, I observed how the flow of some broadcasts resembled the macro-level flow of energy, tempo, and style that I typically experienced at in-person bass music events. Often, those playing earlier in the schedule would opt for slower tempos and textures as a kind of warm-up to ease the audience into the broadcast, playing, for example, dub, house, or techno tracks at 120–140 BPM, while later DJs would play garage, dubstep, drum ‘n’ bass, or jungle at or above 140

similarly enjoyed Fruit Sessions and the server overall as a communal space during the pandemic: “[i]t felt like connecting with people. [...] I was home all day with no job because I was furloughed. [...] [Then] I found a community of people who were into the same music as me.”⁶⁹

Fruit Sessions also entailed advantages for participating DJs musically. As Nate describes, it was an opportunity to practice regularly and gather feedback:

I feel for a lot of people it was, or at least certainly for some of the raver people who were in the Discord, at least they appreciated that, more than the gunfinga radio thing. [...] And for me it was fun. It was a good way to DJ because—obviously there were no club nights to play at—so it was just a way to keep DJing to people, not just to myself, [and] have a bit of feedback. That made it enjoyable.⁷⁰

Relatedly, for Lacu, a productive tension arose for him in knowing the audience consisted mostly of his peers:

It almost to an extent feels like you’re playing in front of people, even though you’re not. [...] You would start to get a little bit nervous if you’re playing in front of other people. I think particularly because they were peers and you know that they’re other DJs, the only people that are watching are other DJs who DJ the same music as you. It’s not like it’s just a bunch of punters having a drink sitting on their phone or talking to their mates or something. Like, if they’re watching it, they’re *watching it*, generally.

Zane echoes these perspectives, describing how Fruit Sessions facilitated a mixture of fun, musical experimentation, and community:

I’ll very freely play my new music not necessarily knowing if it’s going to work right, because you’ve never played that song before. So I think it’s a good environment to test out new tracks, obviously throw in some old ones, and have a bit of a reaction in the crowd. Which helps you gauge some of the new stuff you haven’t played before. But yeah, it’s just fun. A fun way to hang out with people and share music. A bit of practice, bit of community.⁷¹

Thus Fruit Sessions developed during 2021 and 2022 into an established tradition enjoyed by a small subset of Real Heads as an informal, social practice arena, likely explaining why it continues to run despite the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

BPM. This practice can be found throughout EDM; Fikentscher for instance observes house DJs in the New York scene prioritising certain subgenres depending on the time of night they play. See: “*You Better Work!*”, 83.

⁶⁹ Interview by author, 16 March 2023.

⁷⁰ Interview by author, 29 May 2022.

⁷¹ Interview by author, 27 March 2023.

Another notable aspect of Fruit Sessions is its inclusive tone, alluded to above in Zane's remarks about the freedom he experienced with genre experimentation. Longer-term members and more experienced DJs always expressed enthusiastic support for newcomers to the broadcast regardless of their skill level, often emphasising that addressing the audience with a microphone or using a camera not a requirement: this meant beginners could productively focus only on performing. Attesting to this, I and another interviewee, Sir Ebral, had our first experience as a livestreaming performer on Fruit Sessions in 2022, with both of us continuing to perform monthly throughout the year.⁷² An inclusive tone typically also characterised the sociality of the Twitch chat, where most conversation consisted of positive reinforcement through the use of emotes, colloquial expressions like "big up", or people asking for the "ID" of a track they did not recognise (which occasionally developed into fleshed-out conversation). To a lesser extent, inclusivity also extended to the musical content of DJ sets, in that there was rarely formal gatekeeping of genre. UK bass music mainstays including garage, dub, dubstep, jungle, drum 'n' bass and genres on the periphery of bass music like house, techno, and footwork were all played regularly. However, Real Heads being a dubstep-centric community meant dubstep was the focus of most DJ sets. The unspoken etiquette, of course, was "no brostep", as Nate explains:

When we started [...] we just booked people, so to speak, who were probably not going to play the stuff that we considered to be the in-group of tunes. 'Cause there definitely is boundaries to the scene, particularly surrounding the history of brostep and dubstep. I guess we have had a couple of people play some brosteppy stuff. [...] But we didn't really gatekeep them exactly. We didn't tell them you have to stop playing this stuff. But in the chat people would definitely be like, uh, cringe [laughs].⁷³

The musical programming of Fruit Sessions was therefore to some extent governed by self-selection. DJs had to already be members of the server in order be included and were

⁷² A "stream assets" pack was also developed by Nate for newly participating DJs, offering them pre-designed graphics to enhance the visual component of their stream. I found this further reduced the barrier to entry and added to the inclusive atmosphere of the project by decreasing the required workload, although the graphics' secondary purpose was for Fruit Sessions to have a consistent visual identity as the public face of Real Heads.

⁷³ Interview by author, 29 May 2022.

typically already familiar with “in-group” tastes, with the soft power of “real” dubstep—as the authentic other of brostep and/as “EDM”—socially enforced through sarcasm or ridicule.

5 for the reload: Internet-mediated sonic intimacy

It’s Fruit Sessions on a Sunday and Axle is in the mix. As usual, he is playing a hybrid set using mostly vinyl records and a few digital tracks. There are eight viewers on the Twitch stream, with three or four regulars from the server hanging out in the chat, sharing occasional reactions to the performance. “Sick mix so far”, says one user; another enters a series of excited Twitch emotes. The current record being played is a familiar entry in the UK dubstep canon, J:Kenzo’s “Ruffhouse”, and Axle has cued another record on the left turntable.⁷⁴ We reach the “Ruffhouse” breakdown, a DJ-friendly 16-bar section amenable to blending with other records, consisting of a thin texture with only hi-hats and a plucky synth ostinato. Axle slides up the fader for the left turntable, bringing the new record gradually into the mix. The melody entering the mix creates a bubbling anticipation: it is instantly recognisable to me and others in the chat as the lead synth line of Leftflow’s “Cluedub”, with its “wobble” envelope filter, triplet quaver rhythm, and descending stepwise pitch contour (transcribed in **Figure 24** below) all borrowing from canonical dubstep producer Coki.⁷⁵ Axle has timed the entry of “Cluedub” perfectly, with the 16 bar section before its drop overlapping exactly with the 16 bar breakdown of “Ruffhouse” (see **Figure 25** below for a schematic representation). This style of mixing is suggestive of the technique known as a double drop—where the “drop” section of two records are synchronised, typically with the bass line of one record filtered out—but with simplicity being a signature of Axle’s style, he instead opts for the straightforward route, fading out “Ruffhouse” just before “Cluedub” drops. The “Cluedub” drop then hits like a truck. The synth melody is now pitched down and doubled, running at a mid-range and sub-bass register. A hyped reaction in the chat is imminent, but

⁷⁴ J:Kenzo, “Ruffhouse”, *Ruffhouse / Therapy*, 12” single (London: Tempa 062, 2011).

⁷⁵ Leftflow, “Cluedub”, *Cluedub / Boa / Cluedub (Skeptical Remix)*, 12” single (London: System Music 026, 2019).

instead of words or emotes, the crowd simply types one number: “5”. A few more 5s stream in, and as another user types the Twitch text command “!5”, a customised chat bot for the Fruit Sessions channel is also triggered to send the phrase “⚠ 5 ⚠ 5 ⚠ 5 ⚠”. Having faded out “Ruffhouse” and completed mixing these two records, Axle turns away from the decks and toward his laptop, seeing a flood of 5s in the chat. He knows exactly what is happening: the crowd is calling for a rewind. Axle turns around to stop “Cluedub”, scratching it back and forth slightly to punctuate the moment, before re-cueing the record to be played from the top.



Figure 24 Lead synth and bass melody of “Cluedub” by Leftflow.

	Breakdown															
	Intro								Drop							
Bar no.	0	2	4	6	8	10	12	16	18	20	22	24	26	28	30	32
Time mm:ss (original)	41:37				41:50				42:03				42:16	42:20		
Time mm:ss (excerpt)	00:00				00:13				00:26				00:39	00:43		
	'Cluedub' enters mix								'Ruffhouse' faded out of mix							
									'Cluedub' rewind							

Figure 25 Schematic representation of Axle mixing “Ruffhouse” into “Cluedub”.⁷⁶

In dubstep radio, “5 for the reload” has been a cherished tradition and mechanism for audience-performer interaction since the early 2000s. Listeners ask the DJ to rewind the record by simply stating “5”—or many 5s if the energy of the moment demands it—using the chat function of an internet station, or less commonly by sending an SMS to the phone line

⁷⁶ The increasing and decreasing colour gradients in this diagram represent Axle fading in and out the volume of each track, respectively. I do not have audio here because Axle did not record his set; I produced the analysis after the fact from my field notes.

of a terrestrial station. Given the centrality of the rewind in bass culture and its power to enact sonic rupture in performance—as discussed in Chapter 1, and represented in the above analytical vignette—it is unsurprising that “5 for the reload” has been adopted in several bass music scenes. Nevertheless, the practice is particularly well-regarded in dubstep and embedded in livestreaming contexts like Fruit Sessions because of its inception in the long-running Gourmet Beats radio show hosted by North American dubstep pioneer DJ Joe Nice. Journalist and author Laurent Fintoni addresses this in a cultural history of the rewind, noting how “5 for the reload” came about spontaneously during one of Joe Nice’s shows on internet station Sub FM:

“I don’t remember what tune I was playing,” Joe recalls, “but the chatroom was going crazy, and I said, “I need 5 for the reload” expecting to see the word [rewind] five times in the chat.” Instead, [audience member] Dave Q went straight for the number. “I just put in a “5” and that was an instant rewind. It became the thing that you just write “5” if you want a pull up.”⁷⁷

This origin story is significant given Sub FM’s dual importance in Real Heads. Since its inception in 2004, the station has both shaped the careers of leading dubstep performers like Joe Nice and served as a reputable training ground for amateur and part-time DJs in the scene.⁷⁸ Sub FM was established by London-based garage DJ Whistla—incidentally also a member of Real Heads—who notes in interviews that his experience of organising (and performing on) pirate stations in the 1990s directly informed the project of Sub FM.⁷⁹ A snapshot of Sub FM’s website from 2010 describes the station as “a community of like-minded people who love bass music” and, despite being a legal internet station, invokes pirate radio as a marker of legitimacy and subcultural capital with the tagline “giving you the best in online pirate soundz”.⁸⁰ This connection to “pirate soundz” also matters because a

⁷⁷ Laurent Fintoni, “Wheel It Up: History of the Rewind”, *Cuepoint*, 23 January 2015 (accessed 3 February 2023), <https://medium.com/cuepoint/wheel-it-up-history-of-the-rewind-21fdcff243d9>.

⁷⁸ For example, during fieldwork I noted at least seven Real Heads members who hosted a regular show on Sub FM. Several DJs including me joined the station specifically because we developed the confidence in performing regularly to an online audience at Fruit Sessions, and later felt comfortable applying to Sub FM with the knowledge others in the community had already successfully done so.

⁷⁹ Martin Clark, “Wot do u call it: future garage?”, *Blackdown*, 28 November 2009 (accessed 17 March 2023), <https://blackdownsoundboy.blogspot.com/2009/11/wot-do-u-call-it-future-garage.html>.

⁸⁰ Sub FM, n. d., Internet Archive snapshot, 25 August 2010 (accessed 17 March 2023), <https://web.archive.org/web/20100825194646/http://www.sub.fm/>.

likely predecessor to “5 for the reload” is a similar practice developed in the 1990s on pirate radio: as media scholar Matthew Fuller discusses, a flurry of calls dropped after the first ring would act as a code to pirate DJs that listeners wanted a rewind.⁸¹ For Fuller, this ritual rendered the audience-performance relationship tangible, drawing both parties out of abstract “airwaves” and into a shared grounded place, even if the illegal, ephemeral nature of pirate radio meant stations were never rooted in the same location for long. He writes: “[t]he message is not so much that people simply want to listen to the track but that *they are out there*, that the listening is being done collectively, that there is *hype* about a certain track, and [...] a system of feedback and production to intensify it.”⁸²

It is precisely this feedback system that came alive in Fruit Sessions moments like the one described above. As such, “5 for the reload” is a prime opportunity to consider Fruit Sessions in terms of the sonic materialisms being investigated in this thesis, the relevant starting point being Malcolm James’ sonic intimacy. In addition to covering reggae and grime, James’ study explores the pirate radio media ecology of London’s 1990s jungle scene. He notably echoes Fuller in using “hype” to theorise pirate radio as engendering a particular sonic intimacy for its participants.⁸³ Jungle DJs helped people feel “they were known and heard by others [...] in a fractured and sped-up society”, argues James, with hype assuming multiple forms, from listeners “feeling the rave” in their living room after a long day at work, to DJs gauging the presence of their audience as they shout out their postcode, and crews savouring the rush of seeing a broadcast through unscathed by authorities.⁸⁴ Stations such as Rinse FM mediated similar experiences for the dubstep and grime scenes of the early millennium.⁸⁵

In Fruit Sessions broadcast safely and legally from participants’ bedrooms via Twitch, the stakes of hype are markedly transformed. The hyper-local collectivity of pirate radio is

⁸¹ Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 50.

⁸² Fuller, *Media Ecologies*, 50. Emphasis added.

⁸³ James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 65.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 73–76.

⁸⁵ Macpherson, “Jungle, Garage and Grime”.

arguably watered down in the global reach and anonymity of the internet, and the shared labour of operating an illicit station is dissipated and individualised across Real Heads' bedroom studios. The racialised geography of London and pirate radio's concomitant fostering of a Black counterpublic is also a less material concern for a globally dispersed group of bass music fans online. More accurately, then, Fruit Sessions involves a different *kind* of hype.

This observation is underscored by the internet-specific sociality that the rewind takes on in the context of a streaming platform like Twitch. For example, I found that the vitality of "5 for the reload" moments was brought to light by their absence during quiet broadcasts, when only a few DJs were available and audience participation was low. There was an unspoken ethos in this regard where most DJs would only rewind a track if they registered 5s from at least two different audience members, as with the Axle example above. In fact, this invisible threshold of DJ-audience intimacy is embedded in Joe Nice's anecdote about how "5 for the reload" came about: the listeners serendipitously misinterpreted his demand as a request to type the number 5, but Joe's intention was, seemingly, to instead sense the crowd's size and energy as though it were a face-to-face set. In other words, he wanted *at least five* people to ask for a rewind, otherwise it would not have been appropriate to perform one.

Indeed, the particular sonic intimacy engendered by "5 for the reload" invites critical reflection on how the internet can act not only as a tool for musical dissemination but foster new creative practices in unexpected ways. In a 2006 article, Clark comments on Joe Nice's bravado and stage presence as a DJ, noting how he would "motion to the crowd for reloads (using his own terminology, "5")" even in the club environment.⁸⁶ This reveals an unexpected line of influence from the internet to offline practice, as Joe Nice catalysed the movement of a practice specific to online radio into club performance very early in the history of dubstep—offering an additional perspective on the long historical relationship between recording

⁸⁶ Martin Clark, "The Month in Grime / Dubstep", *Pitchfork*, 8 March 2006 (accessed 17 March 2023), <https://pitchfork.com/features/grime-dubstep/6279-the-month-in-grime-dubstep/>.

technology and “liveness” in popular music (as Philip Auslander theorises, live performances have come to replicate their studio-recorded counterparts over time).⁸⁷ In this sense, “5 for the reload” and Fruit Sessions more broadly might be understood within a broader continuum of net-native musical subcultures that includes genres like vaporwave, where, as Born and Haworth show, “the net itself becomes central to the creative practices defining the genre, acting as shared horizon of meaning, content medium, production studio, and means of distribution.”⁸⁸

New amateur musicianship and platformisation

To bring this chapter to a close, I want to briefly situate Fruit Sessions and its sonic intimacy within a cluster of related research on music and the internet. Starting with the emerging body of literature on DJs’ adaptive strategies during COVID-19, my case study so far affirms the findings of several studies, but Real Heads are nevertheless distinct in their straddling of the professional and hobbyist arenas as new amateur musicians. In general, researchers have found that for DJs whose music-related income was affected by COVID-19, streaming to an audience of social media followers or friends manifested similar responses. These included: difficulties in navigating broadcasting software, unfamiliar digital equipment, and copyright restrictions; a newfound appreciation for prolonged at-home practice sessions and “the business side” of being a DJ; disappointment in the gig-economy style monetisation of digital platforms; and nervous excitement about playing to virtual audiences and/or other DJ peers.⁸⁹ Few of these responses correspond to those of my Fruit Sessions interviewees.

⁸⁷ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, second edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁸⁸ Born & Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave”, 605, 633–641.

⁸⁹ Samantha Warren, “Good Vibes Friday: Reflections on Livestreaming During the COVID-19 Lockdown”, *Dancecult* 12, no. 1 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2020.12.01.05>; Frances Howard *et al.*, “‘It’s Turned Me from a Professional to a ‘Bedroom DJ’ Once Again’: COVID-19 and New Forms of Inequality for Young Music-Makers”, *YOUNG* 29, no. 4 (2021): 417–32; Mark Campbell & Ayşe Barut, “#djlife During the Pandemic: Reflections from DJs Rearranging Relations and Improvising Continuity”, *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 14, no. 2–3 (2021): <https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/6340/6334>.

Most are already familiar with the listening contexts of internet radio and livestreamed DJing, are not reliant on music as employment, and are uninterested in monetising or promoting Fruit Sessions beyond the existing audience of Real Heads.⁹⁰ The interviewees include a regularly performing DJ and venue co-owner (Zane), three record label managers and independent DJ-producers (TJ, Nate, Axle), and several DJ-producers who held radio residencies and/or managed small, independent record labels (Nate, Lacu, Sir Ebral, and Axle). When I ask these members about music as a full-time occupation, they consistently state that this is either not financially viable, or that they choose not to pursue music professionally because it would “become a job” and jeopardise the enjoyability of their practice. As such, I suggest Fruit Sessions participants epitomise the digital-era new amateur musician, speaking to ways in which the conventional amateur/professional dichotomy is radically changing. More than mere DIY hobbyists, they are, as Prior puts it, “[t]echnologically literate, seriously engaged, and committed practitioners [...] working to professional standards but often without the infrastructural support or conventional credentials accorded to professionals [...] [in] self-organized cultural milieus.”⁹¹

More precisely, I argue Fruit Sessions represents an emergent DJ culture that warrants critical attention in popular music studies, where new amateur musicians housed in relatively small, closed-group, interactive settings lead DIY projects like Fruit Sessions via Discord, Twitch, and related platforms. The wider context for this emergent DJ culture is the imbrication of bass culture with the internet, new media, and twenty-first century “platform capitalism” or “platformisation”.⁹² One important aspect of platformisation is how it shapes music’s social mediation online. Fruit Sessions is located on the interactive, community-oriented livestreaming site Twitch, and more generally the bass music performed and

⁹⁰ The collectivity of Fruit Sessions also contrasts starkly with one study’s finding that young musicians felt their practice became “an individual rather than collective endeavour devoid of audiences” during the pandemic, characterised by “an introspective logic” where “live streaming gigs seemed a lot more effort than playing a real show [...] [lacking] atmosphere and felt unnatural”. See: Howard *et al.*, “It’s Turned Me from a Professional to a ‘Bedroom DJ’ Once Again”, 424–427.

⁹¹ Prior, “New amateurs revisited”, 343.

⁹² Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Malden, MA; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Nieborg & Poell, “The platformization of cultural production”.

produced by Real Heads circulates primarily via independent record labels on Soundcloud and Bandcamp, platforms that some consumers enshrine as “emancipatory” spaces for “alternative” creative expression.⁹³ The social stakes of bass music’s circulation on these platforms is brought into sharp relief when compared to more mainstream modes of online music circulation. Valverde’s study of Spanish migrants’ listening practices, for example, shows how “the tacit cultural norm” of streaming-based musicking on Facebook is asynchronous “imagined listening” that displaces actual listening, with the “non-stop liveness” and “ever-changing algorithmic maze” of Spotify and YouTube encouraging fleeting engagement with images and songs.⁹⁴ A project like Fruit Sessions opposes nearly every aspect of these media relations. Listening occurs as a synchronous, weekly ritual where music is curated by DJs and the audience is a known, limited group of friends or acquaintances (although asynchronous imagined listening is certainly present in channels such as #mix-share).

In a recent study, Jason Ng and Steven Gamble document how, increasingly since COVID-19, electronic music artists are broadcasting themselves on Twitch as “producer-hosts”, fostering participatory communities of new amateur musicians.⁹⁵ Ng and Gamble show how “producer-hosts” exhibit expansive digital media literacy and an identity that is “part disk jockey, part critic, [and] part entertainer”, reflecting the portfolio-based entrepreneurship undertaken by many artists today, including some Real Heads.⁹⁶ A notable strategy that hip-hop producer-hosts in Ng and Gamble’s case study use to cultivate an audience is running informal communal beat-making events, such as a “sample flip” challenge, where viewers are invited to create tracks from a pool of sounds designated by the producer-host.⁹⁷ These events are typically organised by the producer-host within a

⁹³ David Hesmondhalgh, Ellis Jones, & Andreas Rauh, “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms”, *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (2019): 1.

⁹⁴ Valverde, “Online Musicking for Humanity”, 203.

⁹⁵ Jason Ng & Steven Gamble, “Hip-Hop Producer-Hosts, Beat Battles, and Online Music Production Communities on Twitch”, *First Monday* 27, no. 6 (2022): 1–21.

⁹⁶ Hannah Gerber quoted in *ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

Discord community that they themselves oversee. While such Discord communities can fashion identities of their own the producer-host nevertheless takes a leading role in shaping their overarching sociality. Real Heads thus demonstrates how such musical publics can take shape in a more peer-led manner and engage in DJ-centric activities like Fruit Sessions.⁹⁸ In my interview with TJ, a dubstep label manager and occasional Fruit Sessions participant, he further suggested Real Heads allows its members to “be themselves” more than would be the case for members in the “official” environment of, for example, a Discord server led by dubstep producer-hosts Ternion Sound.⁹⁹

Overall, these perspectives attest to a nuanced push-and-pull in platformisation between the affordances of a platform and the agency musicians have in building a particular kind of community on it. Platformisation can have positive effects; during fieldwork, at least, many Real Heads commented on Discord’s unintrusive, advertising-free monetisation model as an advantage it holds over other social media. Certainly, Ng and Gamble’s research shows that Discord and Twitch are popular amongst small subcultural affinity groups because of their community-oriented features, such as crowdfunding and peer moderation. However, Discord, Twitch, and other platforms important to the emergent online bass culture I have analysed here continue to exploit the “free labour” of (or more accurately the data generated by) “prosumers”.¹⁰⁰ Production and consumption collapse into “prosumption” as Fruit Sessions is necessarily also part of the user-generated content that Twitch (acquired by Amazon for \$1 billion in 2014) deploys to farm data, target advertising, and sustain their business model.¹⁰¹ As James’ research highlights, the “manufacturer designated” design of digital platforms also fails to provide the intimate relations of craft and experimentation that once characterised bass cultures like reggae and, to a lesser extent, jungle.¹⁰² He writes: “[t]he form of mutuality and gifting that has long existed in black

⁹⁸ The server has also self-organised several music production challenges similar to those documented by Ng and Gamble.

⁹⁹ Interview by author, 29 March 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, 36–38.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 89.

diasporic sound culture [is] co-opted into their systems of prosumption that capitalized precisely on the forms of cooperation that had formerly persisted beneath profiteering.”¹⁰³

Bass culture on the internet warrants further research, as the implications of exploitative platform capitalism and the creative potential of Twitch and Discord for livestreamed performance and community building have yet to be fully understood.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have illuminated several ways in which contemporary bass culture takes shape on the internet, through the lens of a “real” dubstep community. In working towards a musicology of bass culture, my focus has been on weaving together ethnography, analysis, and theory to examine the online social life of “real” dubstep and how Real Heads are engaging in a new kind of web-mediated, platformised DJ culture. Whereas Marshall posits “treble culture” as a “suggestive foil” to bass culture, I have aimed to show how in the case of dubstep, rather than existing in a paradoxical relationship, bass and treble culture are co-constitutive. The discursive negotiation of dubstep’s boundaries and its circulation via the internet have been integral to its identity from the beginning as a genre with a hybrid online-offline geography. The internet also allows for the sonic materiality of bass musics like dubstep to be a potent affective experience even when mediated by layers of digital platforms, lossy audio compression, and mobile listening technologies. My analysis of the internet-specific practice “5 for the reload” shows, in this regard, how livestreamed DJ performance can afford a sense of co-presence and affective hype despite operating outside the visceral materiality of live sound system events—materiality that, on first glance, should be a non-negotiable aspect of live performance for “real” dubstep heads. Bass culture on the internet, especially in the context of platforms like Discord and Twitch, remains

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 103.

underexplored territory in popular music studies, but this chapter has aimed to offer some insights and productive paths forward for future research.

Conclusion: Towards a musicology of bass culture

This thesis represents the first concerted effort to work towards a musicology of bass culture. I have taken a rhizomatic journey through bass music, how DJs perform it, and the material affects it engenders. With a focus on dub and dubstep, I have explored how contemporary bass culture comes alive in three kinds of space: the city, festival, and online community. The connective tissue between these case studies is undoubtedly dub and its dual principle of fragmentation/rupture. In asking how DJs manifest fragmentation/rupture in live performance, the thesis has offered a variegated musicological snapshot of today's dub diaspora. In this chapter, I will use my findings and fragmentation/rupture as a critical springboard for reflection on topics important to music studies today, engaging with three clusters of ideas: (1) post-genre vibes and technologies of performance; (2) sound, affect, society, and method; and (3) PLUR and EDM orthodoxy. In doing so, I will reflect on the limitations of my project, the future research paths it opens, and what it ultimately means to develop a musicology of bass culture.

Post-genre vibes and technologies of performance

I began this study by establishing how fragmentation/rupture functions in bass music as a relational *technology* of performance (in Butler's sense). From Mala to Dubkasm to Real Heads, in contexts as distinct as "the Bristol sound" and a dubstep-centric community on Discord, DJs leverage the affordances of bass music to punctuate the narrative of their sets and deliver affective impact. In pursuing the mutation of fragmentation/rupture in postmillennial dubstep like a dub "virus" (as Goodman once put it), I have shown how this performative technology can be integrated even in genres whose relationship with reggae is more an instance of convergent evolution than direct ancestry.¹ Dubstep is, of course, indebted to the integration of Jamaican sound system culture with British dance music since

¹ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 155.

the 1970s, but its stylistic make-up is related more closely to grime, garage, and the “hardcore continuum” of breakbeat music in 1990s London than it is to reggae.²

In turn, questions can be raised about the nature of the dub diaspora and notions of musical genre and scene more broadly. What does it mean for dub and dubstep to have distinct styles but share performance spaces and work with the same performative technology, as dub and punk did in the late 1970s, for example?³ When DJs and even entire festivals like Outlook organise performance around the “vibes” and vibrations of sound systems more than stylistic conventions of instrumentation or harmony, what can we learn about the transformation—and in some circles, apparent wholesale rejection—of genre in the twenty-first century? Is fragmentation/rupture itself a relational “vibe”—a *vibe technology* perhaps—where the affordances of EDM enable DJs to perform in particular ways, and thus contribute to the formation of “alliances” of people, sounds, and affects?⁴ What are the implications of DJs or institutions potentially abusing this technology to instil bad vibes, or the predominantly young, white, male EDM audiences of UK bass music appropriating the technology for their own purposes, far removed from its roots in the Black diasporic experience of exile? To what extent is the urge to transcend genre and reconfigure music around vibe also, as Robin James analyses, a “preference for incorporating all differences into one heterogeneous mix”: a convenient slide from post-genre practice into post-racial ideology where DJs need not concern themselves with traditionally fixed categories like race?⁵ Does this very thesis partake in such a racialised erasure, by pursuing a musicology of bass culture that prioritises fragmentation/rupture and strategies of DJ performance over more traditional norms like genre?

While addressing all these questions adequately requires a larger project, I can offer a few responses here. First, it should be underlined that vibe as an affective, relational

² Gilbert, “Break/Flow/Escapes/Capture”.

³ Veal, *Dub*, 225; see also Jayna Brown, “Tricky and the Bug: Dub, Punk, and the Abject”, *Social Text* 31, no. 3 (2013): 75–93.

⁴ James, “No Genre, Just Vibes”; Born, “Music and the Materialization of Identities”, 382.

⁵ James, “Is the Post- in Post-Identity the Post- in Post-Genre?”, 29–31.

mediation between sound and people has a long history in EDM and the dub diaspora. It has been relevant to Black diasporic cultures for far longer than is suggested by the recent rise of post-genre discourse in more dominant spheres of popular musical culture, such as the curation of playlists around mood in major streaming services and the very origin of the term “bass music” in the online “EDM” discourse of the early 2010s.⁶ This reality is attested to by the productive collaboration between dub and punk subcultures in the twentieth century noted above, and, for example, by Malcolm James in his historicisation of vibe as reggae’s central sonic intimacy.⁷

Second, the findings of this thesis point plainly to the persistent importance of genre in bass music. I shed light on the fierce, often self-righteous commitment to defending “real” dubstep in Real Heads, as well as Outlook’s separation of the UK bass genres from house in its “sister” festival Dimensions, only for fragmentation/rupture and groove to be fluidly articulated by acts like the Iration Steppas at the 2022 UK festival. In turn, my project affirms the consensus across genre theory and popular music studies that genre is a complex assemblage contingent on social processes: the result of mediations between real-time musical practice and wider formations of (imagined) community, identity, and institutions.⁸ There is no reason why, as David Brackett discusses with twentieth-century popular music, a general category like bass music does not simply function as a genre that contains within it many narrower delineations or “levels” of genre.⁹

⁶ The emergence of “bass music” discourse from the North American “EDM” industry is evidenced by public Google Trends data, which tracks the popularity of search terms on the platform since 2008. Comparing YouTube searches for “bass music”, “bass culture”, and “vibe” shows roughly coincident peaks in 2011, shortly after Skrillex’s first dubstep EP was released in October 2010. See: Google Trends, n. d. (accessed 1 October 2023),

https://trends.google.com/trends/explore/TIMESERIES/1698245400?hl=en-GB&tz=-60&date=all_2008&geo=GB&qprop=youtube&hl=en-GB&q=bass+music,bass+culture,vibe&sni=3.

⁷ James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 46; see also Fikentscher, “*You Better Work!*”, 9, 81.

⁸ Born, “Music and the materialization of identities”, 384; Charles, “Genre in Practice”, 25; Franco Fabbri, “How Genres are Born, Change, Die: Conventions, Communities and Diachronic Processes”, in *Critical Musicological Reflections*, ed. Stan Hawkins (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 179–191; Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 20–29; Kembrew McLeod, “Genres, Subgenres, Sub-Subgenres and More: Musical and Social Differentiation Within Electronic/Dance Music Communities”, *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13, no. 1 (2001): 59–75.

⁹ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 8.

Yet my illumination of fragmentation/rupture in different musical contexts at distinct geographical scales still demands an assessment of the “plausible” and contested kinds of bass music I proposed in the Introduction. Future research could nuance scholarly understanding of bass culture and/as the dub diaspora by examining how and why musics like metal, punk, and even jazz resonate with its practices and traditions. Dubstep in particular has well-known, though not well-documented, resonances with heavy metal, a genre that has received considerable musicological attention over the last fifteen years.¹⁰ These genres share an investment in extreme aesthetic-affective experience, namely through sonic qualities like “weight”, “hardness”, and “heaviness” and a consistent emphasis on distorted bass (with all their sticky masculine associations), which Jan Herbst and Mark Mynett analyse in a recent essay.¹¹ Dubstep and metal audiences overlap considerably, with Spencer observing metal-like moshing at North American “EDM” festivals, where it is not uncommon to also hear metal guitar riffs in the dubstep DJs play (and in their occasional inclusion of metal songs in live sets).¹²

The connection to raves is crucial here, because more than having shared aesthetic strategies in the studio, dubstep and metal revel in the sonic dominance of bass—and the fragmentation/rupture of that experience at the hands of the DJ or band—as heard through massive sound systems. Thus my point in highlighting such seemingly unexpected musical convergences is not that they herald a new post-genre era. Rather, the ways in which performers leverage technologies like fragmentation/rupture to engender sonic dominance—or immersion, intimacy, and other affects—in the live setting demands more critical attention *as a dimension of* genre. Musicologists of all stripes could benefit from approaching genre through the framework of performative technologies I have advanced here, not least

¹⁰ Andy Brown *et al.* (eds), *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹¹ Jan-Peter Herbst & Mark Mynett, “Toward a Systematic Understanding of “Heaviness” in Metal Music Production”, *Rock Music Studies* 10, no. 1 (2023): 16–37.

¹² Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”, 12–15, 92–95.

because, as I have emphasised throughout the preceding pages, live performance and DJing in particular remain understudied in musicology.

Sound, affect, society, and method

DJ performance does not, of course, occur in a vacuum, and so I now turn to questions of affect and the social. The foregoing case studies have demonstrated that bass music's fragmentation/rupture is mediated, per Born, by intersecting planes of social activity.¹³ These intersections include imagined community, place, and identity, as I found with "the Bristol sound" and Outlook Festival's time at The Fort, and more layered intersections of online-offline community, sonic experience, and subcultural institutions, as with the performance of "real" dubstep in Real Heads. The material fact of a 30 Hz wave rippling clothes and resonating chests unites dub and dubstep, but that unity is always shaped by learned traditions, socially formed taste, and the legacy of reggae in Britain. More than merely reaffirming that context matters, this finding serves as a rejoinder to the popular position in bass culture research (and sound studies more broadly) that vibration can affect our subjectivity before it is mediated by language, identity, politics, or culture.¹⁴

Beyond this, I have aimed to show that tactile bass perception is built into bass music to such an extent that its materialisms are always already socially embedded. Techniques such as rewinds and bass drops, and the low end built into genres like dub and dubstep, are, in this sense, prime examples of what Garcia calls the "affective aesthetic" of some EDM forms, in which the tactile perception of sound and its social mediation converge to engender "embodied relationality".¹⁵ Put more plainly, bass music DJs tend to be familiar with how bass tickles, resonates, or compels their body and the ways in which people move to its rhythms; in turn, they craft strategies to replicate those experiences or find new ways of accessing them, as the material converges with the social. As I have shown, DJs will also

¹³ Born, "Music and the materialization of identities", 378.

¹⁴ Goodman, Jasen, and Cox are the main examples of scholars who pursue this view.

¹⁵ Garcia, "Feeling the vibe", 30; see also Garcia, "Beats, flesh, and grain".

happily *take away* bass experience, fragmenting or rupturing what would typically be a continuous flow of sound in more canonical EDM settings, enlisting the crowd to pause and feel it again. As they say in reggae, if the tune is nice, we play it twice. Bass culture is, then, a striking illustration of Brian Kane's pithy observation (informed by Sterne) about music, the body, and affect:

As listeners acquire new skills, much of the cognitive effort involved in the initial training is offloaded onto the body. At the same time, bodily capacities constitute both the basis upon which training occurs and the ground for potential future cultivation. [...] *The capacities of the body are cultivated at the same time that cultures become embodied.*"¹⁶

There are methodological implications here. The convergence of sound and the social within an affective aesthetic speaks to the importance of studying both sides of the equation: the "bass" and the "culture" in bass culture. In connecting, for example, the immersion of early dubstep parties like FWD and DMZ to the sonic dominance that DJs deliver to ravers at Outlook Festival, or the hype Real Heads share in livestreams, this project has demonstrated the value of bringing methods like DJ performance analysis and spectrogram visualisation into dialogue with fieldwork. In addition to moving past the uncritical mystification of low frequencies that some researchers perpetuate, this approach affirms that the instinct in musicology (since the upheavals of the 1990s) to always situate music socially and culturally has not been for naught. From this perspective, the musicology of bass culture presented in this thesis is not a radically new (sub)discipline, and indeed I have not framed this way. It does, however, advance modes of research that have been relatively slow to develop in popular music studies (per Eliot Bates' summary of these issues a decade ago), particularly in using a methodology that grapples with affect, the analysis of recorded sound, and music's social mediation—including on the internet.¹⁷ Musicologists are gradually paying more attention to these lines of research, which are only becoming more

¹⁶ Kane, "Sound Studies without Auditory Culture", 8. Emphasis original.

¹⁷ Eliot Bates, "Popular Music Studies and the Problems of Sound, Society and Method", *IASPM Journal* 3, no. 2 (2013): 15–32.

pertinent as the ways we produce and consume music continue to transform at pace in the new millennium.

PLUR and EDM orthodoxy

Finally, I want to reflect on how this thesis positions bass music in the wider world of EDM. I contend that music of the dub diaspora, especially in its impulse toward sonic fragmentation/rupture, does not align with EDM's stereotyped identity. Despite prevailing sentiments, the ideal DJ set does not have to produce a seamless flow of sound, facilitate euphoric highs, or revert listeners to a romantic utopian womb where the singular political message is peace, love, unity, and respect (PLUR). I worked against the grain of this stereotype not to prove that bass culture cannot or should not engender these modes of experience; it certainly can. Instead my aim has been to ask, and to invite future researchers to be more candid about, what (a musicology of) bass culture tell us about EDM's many different sounds, affects, strategies, and spaces.

To this end, my case studies have shown how DJ performance in bass music engenders a range of materialisms and affects. Some are profoundly grounded in local space and place ("the Bristol sound"), others are physically extreme and personally transformative (Outlook Festival), or laden with hype and tradition despite being filtered through layers of "trebly" media (Real Heads). An underlying theme, most strongly expressed in the Outlook chapter, is that the fragmented musical flow of live bass music can produce unexpected affects that are not necessarily always pleasurable. As Spencer shows in exploring dubstep as "music to vomit to", bass music utterly destabilises "idealist accounts of the musically visceral".¹⁸ This again raises the potential, as noted above, for future research that thinks critically about EDM, affect, performance, and genre. What if we read bass music/culture as including, for example, heavy metal (where Black creativity has

¹⁸ Spencer, "Music to Vomit to", 160.

historically also been marginalised)? Literary scholar Ronald Bogue has read subgenres like death metal in Deleuzian terms, discussing how the music manifests “a deterritorialisation of the diverse refrains of contemporary industrial machine culture”.¹⁹ He explains that it tends to be “experienced as an unrelenting, high-speed assault of low frequency and mid-range pulses grouped in massive blocks or slabs of sound” with a “quite limited harmonic palette”.²⁰ Keith Khan-Harris has also spoken to extreme metal’s capacity to feel simultaneously “disturbing” and “empowering”, working ambivalently with “the abject [...] that which is formless, disgusting, terrifying and threatening”.²¹ Revealingly, both these analyses could smoothly slot into a critical reading of dub or dubstep’s sonics and affects, where scholars also take an interest in expressions of “filth” and Deleuzian “unhomings”.²² There are fundamental differences between EDM and metal, of course, not least of which includes the ability for DJs to manipulate recorded sound in ways that a guitarist cannot. Still, bass culture may be larger and more diverse than its dub-diasporic roots indicate, and the Black creativity of bass music offers more than escapist Afrofuturism or bodily bassweight. EDM and popular music studies can only be enriched by future research that engages with these cross-cultural, cross-genre resonances and moves past the customary study of EDM and popular music as romantic expressions of emotion, identity, and rebellion.

A further point is that this thesis does not prove bass culture to be a pure reversal of EDM’s utopian impulse and gravitation around groove. It is not, in the final analysis, a depressing dystopia of bass. I am wary of implying in this Conclusion a negative association between Jamaican music and something like “music to vomit to” in Spencer’s research. As Caspar Melville asserts in his history of London’s sound system cultures, the “moral economy” of the dub diaspora remains motivated by “core values of security and mutual recognition”, symbolised in the widespread use of “safe” and “respect” as greetings in local

¹⁹ Ronald Bogue, “Violence in Three Shades of Metal: Death, Doom and Black”, in *Deleuze and Music*, ed. Ian Buchanan & Marcel Swiboda (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 100.

²⁰ Ibid., 102.

²¹ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2007), 29.

²² Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 51; James, *Sonic Intimacy*, 93.

scenes, inherited from the lexicon of reggae (though communities still have work to do in welcoming queer participants, for example).²³ Indeed, the reality on the ground is closer to Gilroy's eloquent illustration of how Black diasporic music produces utopian space through sound, one that I regularly return to in reflecting on what bass culture is and does. He explains that the space produced by Black music "can be a negative utopia; *it can say that the way to free yourself here is to accept just how bad the world can be*. The music facilitates that encounter [...] with another way of being and thinking and loving and desiring, and experiencing things."²⁴ This is the crux of bass music's pursuit of feelings like sonic dominance and DJs' fragmentation and rupture of sound in performance. Bass culture embraces the weight, dread, and warfare of daily life. It revels in the sound system's ability to temporarily transduce, or reterritorialise, those experiences into something safe and enjoyable, yet still potentially unsettling or dark. As Veal has also said of dub's impulse toward discontinuity, "fragmentation is, for very concrete reasons, a central coping mechanism of our time", reflecting our "age of information overload [...] in which cultural codes of all kinds are being deconstructed, reconstructed, and recombined at an unprecedented rate."²⁵ Recalling Mala's indirect nod to capitalist realism in dubstep, then, bass culture is a sobering, deeply pleasurable, and at times extreme materialist practice: "[i]t's not an evil or menacing kind of dark, *it's more just like life is*".²⁶

In his recent book on sound, affect, and social resonance in EDM, Garcia observes that the commercialised strain of dubstep that took off in North America a decade ago seemed well suited to the socioeconomic struggles instilled by the 2008 financial crisis.²⁷ He suggests dubstep played a role "similar to what acid house played in Margaret Thatcher's United Kingdom [...] a means of experiencing a sense of collective utopian future at a time when individual life narratives of upward mobility no longer seemed certain."²⁸ My third and

²³ Melville, *It's a London Thing*, 2.

²⁴ Bass Culture Research. "Bass Culture: Paul Gilroy (part two)".

²⁵ Veal, *Dub*, 259.

²⁶ Red Bull Music Academy, "Mala talks Digital Mystikz".

²⁷ Garcia-Mispireta, *Together, Somehow*, 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

final remark in this section is that, in primarily exploring the subcultural spheres of dub and dubstep, this thesis has spotlighted an alternative to the aspirations of the bass music and/as “EDM” moment. In this alternative, at a time when the economic crises of COVID-19 and 2008 linger like an endlessly spinning locked groove, some audiences are turning to the dissociative effects of drugs such as ketamine, a mildly hallucinogenic anaesthetic, to supplement the “coping mechanism” of bass music’s fragmentation/rupture. Recreational drugs will likely always be relevant to subcultural music scenes, though what is significant here is how disassociation in bass culture appears to displace the established relationship EDM has with the euphoria or transcendence—and by extension, PLUR—on offer with more conventional rave drugs such as ecstasy. As Reynolds observes in his history of rave, ketamine and depressant drugs have fractured previously united music scenes into antagonistic “tribes”, and though several DJs I spoke to during fieldwork described ketamine as the ideal “bass drug”, Reynolds notes its effects can also be “antisocial verging on autistic, and it certainly doesn’t make you wanna dance”.²⁹ These issues highlight another angle of potential future research that connects the sonic de/reterritorialisation of live bass music to that circulating socially and psychosomatically in its music scenes, to deepen our understanding of the relationship between sound and affect—both in EDM and beyond.

Closing remarks

In addition to the future research paths noted above, there is more work to do in understanding bass culture. This starts with the limitations of my thesis. Partly due to pandemic restrictions, I did not centre the voices of as many participants as I could have, especially women. That said, the project’s findings around online DJ performance—especially on sonic intimacy and hype in the Real Heads community—offer a valuable window into how bass culture adapted to life with COVID-19. Beyond this, the case studies

²⁹ Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 313.

and examples have been limited to two relatively niche subcultures in dub and dubstep, and a general focus on the UK. But bass culture is thriving in the global South, where UK bass genres are significantly less dominant socially and economically (though Jamaican dub lurks beneath the surface of cultural practice), and “treble culture” likely takes a markedly different form given global inequalities in internet and resource access. A current large-scale project led by Julian Henriques looking at sound system culture and performance in Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia is promising in these regards, and will build on existing research efforts.³⁰ It is also notable that bass culture research is not yet in substantial dialogue with hip-hop studies despite hip-hop’s dub-diasporic tendencies in both production and performance. Still, the recent graduate work I have worked with in this project—especially de Lacey’s hybrid ethnographic and performance studies approach to grime—is hopefully a sign of this niche sub-field’s widening scope and productive future.³¹

This thesis is only the beginning of the musicology of bass culture. It is less a prescriptive claim about how such a musicology should proceed than a proof of concept: a demonstration of how bass culture works, why it deserves more attention, and some suggested paths for progress. I have shown bass culture to be a fruitful object of study that offers insights into what it is like to feel sound more than hear it, and to leverage that feeling and its affects in live performance. When bass enthusiasts say that understanding their music and culture requires feeling the vibrations of a sound system, they mean it. It pays to stay a while and listen.

³⁰ Henriques, “Black Knowledge and Street Technology [SST Research 1.0]”; Font-Navarette, “Bass 101”; Josh Kun, “The Aesthetics of Allá: Listening Like a Sonidero”, in *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, ed. Ronald Radano & Tejumola Olaniyan (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2016), 95–115.

³¹ de Lacey, *Level Up*; Spencer, “The Drop and The Fall”; Perevedentseva, “Something for Your Mind, Your Body and Your Soul”.

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Appendices

Notes on methods

In this project, I used Audacity version 3.3.3 on Windows 10. Audacity is open-source software available for free online at <https://www.audacityteam.org/> under the terms of a GNU General Public License. To create spectrograms, I followed these steps:

1. Import the audio file into a new project.
2. Downmix the stereo track to mono under Tracks > Mix > Mix Stereo Down to Mono.
3. Select the “Spectrogram” view in the track’s drop-down menu.
4. Apply these spectrogram settings, also through the track’s drop-down menu:
 - a. Scale: Mel (default)
 - b. Min. frequency: 0. This allows maximum visibility of the sub-bass register (<100 Hz).
 - c. Max. frequency: Variable, depending on the most relevant frequency content of the example.
 - d. Algorithm: Frequencies (default); Window size 32768; Window type Hahn (default); Zero padding factor 1 (default). These settings maximise the clarity of the image.
 - e. All other settings default.

I then saved screenshots of the resulting spectrograms and annotated the images using Microsoft Paint.

Some further notes. The waveform graph Figure 3 was taken as a screenshot from Audacity’s default waveform view when importing an audio file. All tempo graphs were created in Microsoft Excel, as was the schematic diagram Figure 27. The score notation transcriptions, Figures 6 and 24, were created with the MuseScore software version 4.1.1, available online at <https://musescore.org/en>.

Glossary

beat matching – The process by which a DJ synchronises the tempo and beat structure of two or more simultaneously playing **tracks**, to smooth the transition between them and/or create musical interest. Considered an essential skill in modern EDM performance.

channel – A discrete passage on a **mixer** through which the audio signal of an input source, such as a turntable or microphone, passes. Leads to outputs, such as loudspeakers and headphones. Most **mixers** have four channels as standard. This allows the DJ to **mix** multiple sound sources simultaneously.

compression – A process in music production that involves reducing the dynamic range of a sound while maintaining its original overall volume. This typically achieves a greater sense of loudness and fullness in music. It can be done with a hardware or software compressor.

crossfader – A subtype of **faders** on **mixers**. Allows the DJ to adjust the output signal of the **mixer** rapidly between two designated **channels**, usually with a horizontal motion. Commonly used in hip-hop and dub.

cut, cutting – A DJ technique where the performer rapidly and rhythmically increases and decreases the volume of multiple **tracks** in the **mix**. Creates the impression that the music is being cut or chopped in pieces. Also refers more simply to the removal of a sound from a DJ **mix**.

dance hall – The traditional Jamaican term for an outdoor or indoor space in which reggae sound systems play to a dancing audience. Not to be confused with *dancehall*, a genre of Jamaican dance music (sometimes also known as “ragga”) that emerged in 1985 and largely displaced the popularity of reggae and dub thereafter.

deck – an informal name for a turntable.

delay – A process in music production that involves repeating an input signal after a specified time delay, usually also at a specified rhythm e.g. at a crotchet or quaver pulse. The repetitions are modulated by a feedback control ranging from 0% (no repeats) to 100% (infinite repeats). Commonly used in dub in conjunction with **echo** and **reverb** to exaggerate the sense of space in a recording’s **sound stage**.

digital audio workstation (DAW) – A software program that allows a music **producer** to record, edit, and manipulate many **channels** of audio simultaneously. The most common DAWs in EDM are Ableton Live, Fruity Loops, and Logic Pro, though in this project I mostly use Audacity.

Digital Mystikz – a DJ-**producer** duo comprised of pioneering UK dubstep artists Mala and Coki. Not to be confused with *DMZ*, a record label and collective that Mala and Coki

established alongside Loefah and SGT Pokes. This collective organised the influential “DMZ” parties at Brixton Mass from 2005–2011.

double drop – A DJ technique that involves synchronising the instrumental climaxes of two simultaneously playing **tracks** for dramatic effect.

drums and bass – A term referring to a style of reggae **production** in which the full instrumental texture of a song is reduced to its essential rhythmic and low-frequency components. Not to be confused with drum ‘n’ bass, a genre of dance music that emerged out of **jungle** in the late 1990s.

drum machine – A hardware or software instrument that allows the user to sequence various in-built synthesised percussion sounds (occasionally also bass or other instruments) to create looping beats. The Roland TR-808 is the renowned drum machine used in genres such as techno, grime, and dancehall.

echo – An acoustic phenomenon where one hears a distinct repetition of a sound after it reflects from a surface. Often replicated in electronic music through digital or analogue echo instruments. Not to be confused with **delay** or **reverb**.

“EDM” – A term this thesis uses, explicitly with the quotation marks, to denote a cluster of genres specific to the North American music industry. These genres emerged around the time that dubstep became globally popular in the late 2000s. Not to be confused with EDM, the general acronym.

equalisation, EQ – A process that involves adjusting the frequency content of a signal according to specific bands of frequencies. On DJ **mixers**, is usually controlled by three rotating knobs corresponding to frequency bands centred on 70 Hz (low), 1 kHz (mid), and 13 kHz (high).

fader – A tactile interface on a DJ **mixer** corresponding to a specific **channel**. Allows the performer to adjust the volume of the signal with a continuous hand motion, usually vertically.

filter – A process in music production that involves removing frequencies below a specified threshold from an audio signal. Usually also introduces resonance at the cutoff frequency to accentuate the movement of the threshold. On DJ **mixers**, is typically controlled by a rotating knob.

garage – Also known as UK garage, a genre of EDM that emerged in mid-1990s London. It hybridises the styles of Chicago house and New York garage with syncopated, swung beats at a tempo of approximately 130 beats per minute. Places a generally high emphasis on instrumental and vocal melodies.

grime – A genre of EDM born in late 1990s east London. A hybrid of electro, hip-hop, jungle, hardcore, UK garage, and other genres. Led by MCs who rap over beats with

aggressive timbres, synthesised bass, and sampled/synthesised percussion around 140 BPM.

jungle – A primarily instrumental genre of EDM that emerged from the hardcore scene of early 1990s London. Based primarily on the sampling of breakbeats from funk and soul records. Has a fast, syncopated, complex rhythmic profile around 160–170 BPM and generally thin texture that prioritises percussion and sub-bass.

mix – Refers to the sonic result of a DJ playing two or more records simultaneously, with the process itself being mixing. Also refers to an entire DJ performance, used in this sense synonymously with **set**. Not to be confused with a **mixer**. Outside of DJing, mix is used synonymously with **sound stage** to denote the mixture of sounds within a studio recording, such as with dub's **drums and bass** mixes.

mixer – A hardware instrument used by DJs to **mix** multiple **channels** of audio together simultaneously. Often contains many advanced functions that manipulate audio signals, such as **filters**. Not to be confused with **mix**, **mixing**.

producer – An individual musician in EDM who composes **tracks**, also called productions. Usually works with a **digital audio workstation (DAW)**. Not to be confused with the more traditional role of a music producer in popular music, who typically makes creative decisions for other artists and leads larger projects.

cueing – Also known as slip cueing, a DJ technique that involves listening to a **track** with headphones on a **mixer**, prior to introducing the **track** into the **mix**. Often combined with **beat matching** to craft a creative and deliberate moment of entry for the **track**.

reverb – An acoustic phenomenon referring to how a sound reverberates, at a much shorter time scale than **echo**, due to its natural reflections off surfaces and objects in the environment. In music production, refers to the artificial shaping of a sound's reflections through a hardware or software reverb unit, such that signals with typically low reflections can sound highly reverberated and vice versa.

saturation – A process in music production that combines harmonic distortion with **compression** to add character to a sound.

session – The traditional Jamaican term for the live performance events where reggae sound systems and dancers gather. Used synonymously with *dance*, *party*, and *club night*.

set – Refers to the set of **tracks** a DJ plays in a given performance, in other words the overall sonic result or the basic musical text of DJing. Usually at least one hour long in EDM. Not to be confused with the narrower use of “set” for the collective equipment of a reggae sound system.

sound stage – A term in music production research describing the sense of virtual space in a musical recording, usually in a singular **track** as composed by a **producer**. Can be

shaped in different ways depending on the positioning of microphones at the time of recording. Also affected by the positioning of instrumental layers through techniques such as panning.

spectrum, spectral – Refers to the frequency content of an audio signal or piece of music. Often used in discussing spectrograms.

track – The basic musical work in EDM. A through-composed piece stored in digital or analogue media that DJs use as the building block of performance. Used synonymously with *record*, *composition*, *tune*, and *production*.

wobble bass – A stylistic gesture and timbral topic characteristic of early dubstep. Creates the impression of musical movement by modulating a bass line with a low-frequency oscillator (LFO), which itself modulates the attack, decay, volume, resonance, distortion, or other property of the signal at a regular speed (usually up to 20 Hz).