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198 CONTEMPORARY ARTS AND LEARNING, 198 RAILTON ROAD SE24 OJT

After *The Beauty Shop* (2008) *Rockers, Soulheads & Lovers* is the second project developed by writer, playwright, artist/curator Michael McMillan for 198 Contemporary Arts & Learning. Michael's work includes the widely acclaimed *The West Indian Front Room*, and more recently *Doing Nothing is Not an Option* (Peckham Platform, 2015), and *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960-1990* (Guildhall Art Gallery, 2015–16).

"WAKE THE TOWN AND TELL THE PEOPLE!" U ROY

Working with Dubmorphology (Gary Stewart & Trevor Mattison), Michael drew on his lived experience and research of sound system culture, spending several months gathering contributions from people in London. With extracts from oral history interviews that are projected in the exhibition, Michael provides an overview of London's sound system culture from the 1960s to the early 1980s based on this collective research.

When Post War 'West Indian' migrants, the Windrush generation, felt the coldness of the weather and the people, told to go back to their own country, and saw signs saying 'No dogs, No coloured, No Irish', they must have said to themselves, 'why did we come here, let's get back on the boat'. Barred from English pubs and clubs, and rarely hearing their music on the radio, many of them, after working all week, would entertain themselves with the 'Blue Spot' (originally Blaupunkt) radiogram in the front room. House Parties began in the home (later called Shebeens and Blues parties) and 'playing out' at these were some of the first sound systems ('sounds') like Duke Reid, Count Suckle and Duke Vin. They took their names from the mobile homemade Hi Fi's that entertained the people at outdoor 'lawn' dances back in Jamaica.

"Sir Coxsone play to make Black people eat - whether somebody want help to pay their mortgage, raise money to send somebody college, or even send back home."

LLOYDIE COXSONE (Sir Coxsone Outernational)

Over here, wherever black people had settled these sounds created an environment, sometimes racially mixed and equitable, where party goers could free up themselves, drink a stout, 'Life Long beer', or bottle of Babycham, and dance with each other to music they knew. There might be a nominal charge to enter a Blues party or Shebeen, in someone's basement, where drinks and homemade African-Caribbean food were sold by resourceful women. Often running until daylight, neighbours would complain about the loud music, and the police would arrive.

"The funniest thing is that when the police came to tell us to turn down the music, the women would give them some curry goat, and they would turn red because they weren't used to the pepper. Then the women would take the police hat put it on their own head and wine-up with them."

VERONICA BARNES (Nottingham)

From the 1960s through to the 1980s, sounds 'played out' in clubs in and around London, such as the *Metro Youth Club* (Ladbroke Grove), *Q Club/Peoples Club* (Paddington), *Roaring Twenties/Colombos* (Garnaby St), *100 Club* (Oxford St), *Four Aces* (Dalston), *All Nations Club* (Hackney), *Phebies* (Stoke Newington), *Cubies* (Dalston), *Douglas* (Clapton), *Bouncing Ball* (Peckham), *Ball Hal* (Streatham), *Night Moves* (Shoreditch), *The Africa Centre* (Covent Garden).

As sound technology developed more music was imported from Jamaica, such as Bluebeat, Ska, Rocksteady and later Reggae, and custom-made sounds became integrated collectives with specialist roles.

The 'operator' ran the sound system, the 'engineer' technically maintained it, and would 'string up' wardrobe size 'House of Joy' speakers, KT88 glass valve power and bespoke pre-amps, and a single turntable with the 'box boys'. Then the 'selector'/DJ, like Jah Vego on Duke Vin or Festus on Sir Coxsone, would 'drop' a 'tune': the A side vocal of either a 7in or 12in vinyl record followed by the B side 'dub' instrumental version, while the 'toaster'/MC 'chatted' over the mic exciting the crowd. And if the crowd loved a tune they would bawl 'rewind!' or 'haul and pull up!'

A sound's predigree was based on how much 'weight'/bass it could drop and access to acetate exclusive blank label 'pre-releases'/'dub-plates' and later 'specials'. These were sourced through networks in London, or studios like Channel One or Studio One, or producers like King Tubby's, Joe Gibbs and Prince Jammy's in Jamaica. Dubplates and specials were sonic weapons in 'challenges'/'clashes' between sounds. There are legendary stories of sound's having to 'sign off', and pack up and go home, if the dub-plate/special or weight 'dropped' by a competing sound was too much to bear.

Rivalry between sounds could get violent at times though the bravado was more or a show to entertain the crowd with many sounds sharing equipment, and collaborating with each other. Meanwhile, equipment was becoming more powerful and sophisticated with power and pre-amps built by innovative engineers like Karl 'Legs the Giant' from Birmingham. Amongst sound system aficionados, the wattage of a sound's power amp symbolised their prowess, and was part of the promotion for an up-and-coming challenge.

"There are too many sound systems to mention, but some from London include: Admiral Ken, Sir Coxsone, Sufferah, Unity, Lord Koos, Moa Ambassa, Jah Shaka, Java, Fatman, Soferno B, Federal, King Original; from Birmingham, Quaker City, Mafia Tone, Jungle Man, Wassifa, from Nottingham, V-Rocket, Sir Gilton, Quattro, Earthquake amongst many others from Manchester, Leeds, Bristol."

MYKAEL RILEY (former Steel Pulse/Univ. of Westminister)

Who feels it knows it, and stepping into a sound system dance was/is a sensory experience: thumping bass in the chest, guys shanking with each other, a posse of girls rocking, weed smoke in the air, the toaster/MC chants 'Jah!' and the crowd responds, 'Rastafari!'. There might be tension with parents to go out, but being born and or raised in the UK, like myself, we were young, rebellious, and sexy, and found ways to escape regardless. Going to a dance was/is an event for 'ravers' (not be confused with the 1980s warehouse rave scene) requiring careful preparation: last minute appointment at the hairdressers, barbers or with the hot iron comb, then the girls would step out looking the 'crisp biscuit' in a pleated 'dub-skirt' and an Italian silk blouse, or the guys in a Gabicci top and Farah slacks, both wearing the iconic Bally Shoes of course.

This was the only place they could experience music that spoke to them, which they might look for in a record shop the next day. Besides, British pop music largely ignored them, and with a few exceptions, they didn't hear Reggae, Soul or Funk on the radio (until Tommy Vance, David Rodigan, and Greg Edward's ***Soul Spectrum*** on Capital Radio, and Tony Williams and Steve Bernard on BBC Radio London) or see themselves on ***Tops of the Pops***. These young, gifted and black young people experienced police brutality, SUS laws (stop and search), unemployment, racist attacks, and being criminalised in the media. Yet this was the moment of black radical politics, Pan-Africanism and Rastafari, and Reggae resonated with what many black youth (male and female) felt about living 'inna Babylon'. British urban culture was also being Jamaicanized, and if someone thought we were Jamaican, which they did anyway, we usually wouldn't deny it, even though my parents came from St Vincent & the Grenadines.

The 1970s was the full of subcultures like Punk, and followers like myself, of sounds like Jah Shaka, who played 'Roots'/'Stepper' Reggae and Dub, were Rockers. Followers of funk sounds like Mastermind, Rappattack, and Norman Jay (Good Times) were Soulheads. Then Lover's Rock arrived, and the sonic landscape changed. Sound system culture had become militant and macho, and sounds like Sir Coxsone found that playing Motown styled Soul attracted more women to the dance. They ran talent contests at ***Four Aces***, and a young winner, Louisa Mark recorded a cover of Robert Parker's 1967 Southern Soul tune, ***Caught in a Lie*** in 1974. Produced by Dennis Bovell for Sir Coxsone, ***Caught in a Lie*** became the first classic Lovers Rock tune.

TURN OVER SELECTOR ▶▶

"Sir George (Hackney) like Maxi Priest and other Lovers Rock's singers were responsible for a lot of the children being made in that era because that was the music we played."

ANTHONY BRIGHTLY (Sir George)

This British-born Reggae genre typically had romantic lyrics sung over a warm melodic bass by young female and male singers like Carroll Thompson, Winston Reedy, and Janet Jay with her 1979 hit ***Silly Games***. Lover's Rock resonated with a socially aspirational generation, and men and women wanted/want to dance with each other leaving shadows of themselves on the wallpaper in many House/Blues parties. It also empowered women to take ownership of the dance and the dance floor, by, with, and for themselves, forging sisterhood.

By the early 1980s, Bob Marley was dead, and Dancehall had arrived. British Reggae bands like Matumbi, Aswad, Steel Pulse, Misty in Roots and UB40 popularised Reggae music. Meanwhile, British born Saxon Studio and Jazzie B (Soul II Soul) could hold their own in the diaspora with the 'double chat' lyrics, and a fresh distinctly Black British sound. Sound system culture was/is often represented as a male domain, yet many women ran Blues parties, ran sounds like Donna Harley-Moore (Sista Kulcha), June Reid and Ade Rosenior-Patten (Nzinga Sounds), and still do, like Valerie Robinson 'Lady V' (V-Rocket). They, and DJs like Lorna Gee and DJ Elayne, transcended patriarchal prejudices from men and women, through their intimate knowledge of the music, and how to address their audience.

"There were codes about who you danced with in a party. Someone would be eyeing you up, and the next thing they're standing beside you asking for a dance. If they couldn't dance then you'd signal to your friends to avoid them or we'd disappear to the toilets."

HEATHER DOLPHIN (Brent)

In the 1980s, some sounds created pirate radio stations with some eventually licensed like Choice FM, which was later bought by Capital Radio. Sound system culture in the UK has had a significant, yet rarely acknowledged, influence on British music and dance culture. Through Reggae, bass culture has shaken the foundations of British society with disenchanted white working class youths becoming affected/infected, such as the Mods and Skinheads, in awe of the Rude Boys, dancing to Ska in a racially mixed ***Ram Jam Club*** (Brixton), or reggae tinged Punk tunes and ***Rock Against Racism***. Sound system culture has also gone 'outernational' migrating across the diaspora with the Jamaican DJ Kool Herc playing his sound in the Bronx, New York and giving birth to Hip Hop. In a globalised/postcolonial world where black music and culture has been/is appropriated, the universality of Reggae has inspired sounds in Brazil, Europe, Japan and Africa. In Britain, sound system culture continues to provide a fertile ground for numerous other Reggae & Funk-derived genres to sprout roots and grow: Jazz-Funk, Jungle, Garage, Funky-House, Grime, Drum & Bass, Dub-Step. . .and so it goes on.

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Give thanx & praises to all those who worked on Rockers, Soulheads & Lovers too numerous to mention, including New Art Exchange (Nottingham), and 198 Contemporary Arts & Learning. A future exploration of sound system culture will be developed with Autograph ABP, London.

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