

Hip-hop in Jamaica, Reggae in Boston: A Preliminary Comparison

My presentation this morning will attempt a somewhat sweeping, though hopefully suggestive, comparison between hip-hop in Jamaica and reggae in Boston. The lion's share of my ethnographic research has focused on Jamaica—and Kingston in particular—looking at the ways that Jamaican artists incorporate, reject, and make sense of hip-hop as a “foreign,” but compelling cultural resource. Since I returned to Cambridge last summer, however, I've been increasingly interested in the flipside: the ways that people in Boston—both Jamaican and non-Jamaican—embrace reggae as a dominant cultural orientation and expressive system. These two phenomena seem to represent different sides of the same coin, in a sense, and I've been working to get an understanding of the way that reggae's presence in Boston's soundscape compares to hip-hop's presence in Kingston's. They are, of course, qualitatively different in that one is an attempt at synthesis, the other reproduction. In both cases, though, local artists are dealing with a style that is marked as foreign but feels familiar—in the process, responding to and shaping ideas about identity, cultural propriety, and authenticity. I am curious about the ways that music—in particular, music that transcends its local moorings—gives shape and form to people's imaginations of self and community. What does it carry with it? How do people interpret its meanings? What are the implications of deploying stylistic features of a “foreign” music to project a local identity? I should note that these are preliminary remarks, and as such may present more questions than conclusions. I am still getting a sense of the terrain here, and today I would like to trace the emerging contours of this terrain primarily through anecdotes and the testimony of musicians that I have interviewed.

When I first traveled to Jamaica, I was struck by hip-hop's presence there. Perhaps I should not have been so surprised considering hip-hop's contemporary global prominence. But in the land that gave the world reggae, I guess I expected to find a preponderance of more “local” music. This is not to say that reggae is no longer king in Jamaica. On the contrary, reggae remains Jamaica's national music *par excellence*. The

story of the music is, at this point, inextricable from Jamaica's post-independence history, and vice versa. Still, what I observed in the clubs and streets of New Kingston during my first short visit was no fluke. Indeed, hip-hop has won the hearts and souls of many Jamaicans, especially the young and middle-class. Hip-hop comes to Jamaica, however, as a contradictory resource and, accordingly, it is received ambivalently. At once, hip-hop suggests a range of significations and subjectivities to Jamaicans: it is black, American, cosmopolitan, transnational, urbane, cool, successful, modern/futuristic, a prodigal son of reggae, but also decadent, cold, slow, thuggish, foreign.

As they did with rhythm & blues, soul, rock, disco, funk, pop, and other American popular forms, Jamaican musicians have broadened reggae's sonic palette by borrowing various stylistic features from hip-hop. This process of incorporation has been occurring, unevenly, for over two decades now, dating from a surprisingly early cover of the first commercially-released rap record—the Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* (which was released in 1979, only to be followed months later by Welton Irie's *Hotter Reggae Music* [1980], which stays rather faithful to the lyrics and flow of the original). Reggae artists continue this practice into the present—as heard in the latest crossover hit by Sean Paul or Elephant Man. Many young Jamaicans understand dancehall, the latest subgenre of reggae, as a direct product of hip-hop's influence on local styles. Creating such a lineage enriches the conventional narratives of hip-hop and reggae, which tend to downplay outside influence in favor of an emphasis on local innovation. According to the well-rehearsed histories of reggae and hip-hop, the two musics converge primarily during the mid-70s moment when Jamaican-immigrant Kool Herc introduced reggae's soundsystem technologies and techniques to the South Bronx and, as the story goes, gave birth to hip-hop. There is some recognition of crossover phenomena in the 80s and 90s, but generally the story is that reggae retreated into Kingston's dancehalls and embraced old, Afro-Jamaican rhythms, while hip-hop looked to decades of African-American recordings for source material and squeezed everything into its fairly foursquare, "boom-bap" matrix. A closer examination of hip-hop recordings, however, demonstrates a consistent, and sometimes heavily influential, infusion of reggae style since its inception. And there is an increasing recognition, notwithstanding the popular assertion that Jamaican DJs created rap, that American rap style is responsible for dancehall's shift away from

reggae’s song forms. As a Kingston-based DJ named Wasp told me, “Rap, ‘pon a level now, come from reggae, seen. Dancehall now is a new ting weh come after rap, seen, so hip-hop get influence from reggae, but this wha we a do now—what Dami D a do, Beenie Man a do, Bounty a do, y’know—a dancehall, and that come from rap.” Facilitated and spurred by the large numbers of Jamaicans living in New York and other American cities—many of whom maintain close ties to family, friends, and associates back home—the rather constant feedback loop between hip-hop and reggae embodies the movements and mixings of people, practices, commodities, and ideas. Seen in this socio-cultural context, dancehall reggae and hip-hop emerge as intensely relational products of modern transnational circulation.

These days, dancehall’s incorporation of hip-hop style most frequently takes the form of sampled or versioned materials (e.g., adapted choruses and flows, remakes of popular songs using un-licensed instrumentals, etc.), as well as more subtle stylistic influence (e.g., timbres, textures, rhythms, themes). More recently, with the advent of cable television and the Internet in Jamaica, some young Jamaicans have adopted hip-hop style wholesale, calling themselves MCs or rappers—as opposed to DJs—and trading local stylistic markers for “foreign” ones. (I met a number of young Jamaicans who would shift seamlessly between speaking in patois and rapping in Brooklynese, and who peppered their yard slang with references to “mami’s”—essentially a Nuyorican coinage—and “playa-haters.”) Such a full embrace of “foreign” style is a contentious issue in Jamaica. Most of the performing artists I interviewed (who were largely young and lower middle-class) unabashedly admit to incorporating *some* stylistic features from hip-hop into their own style, but generally they express a sense that a wholesale embrace of such a foreign music was simply not for them, was somehow not right—which, nevertheless, is not to say inauthentic.

None of my collaborators would go so far as to say that a Jamaican who rapped was not “keeping it real,” so to speak. As another DJ, Raw Raw, put it: “If someone lives in Jamaica and him want rap like him born in Brooklyn, I have no comment on that beca’—whatever you feel [is acceptable/valid].” Raw Raw does not want to tell anyone what they can and cannot do. When I asked him how Jamaican audiences receive a Jamaican performer who raps in an American style, he noted that “they don’t like it” if

someone's style is not perceived as original. Other performers claimed that such a stylistic strategy implies a serious loss or trade-off. A singjay named Dami D equated the decision to write a rap song with "put[ting] away all pride." He sees the phenomenon of Jamaican rappers as a testament to hip-hop's ability to inspire people: (or, in his words) "That show, say, that hip-hop, it dedeh for really uplift the youth dem." It seems that many Jamaicans still view homegrown hip-hop performers as confused about their cultural identity. As Wasp put it, "I just a be a man weh stick to my culture, still. Our culture is like, reggae, dancehall, seen? From your yard, mon, is either you have a choice between reggae and dancehall, you see me a say" [which is to say: when you grow up in Jamaica, you can choose between roots reggae or dancehall]. So part of the reception of hip-hop in Jamaica, at least in terms of who can perform in a hip-hop style, flows from beliefs about cultural propriety and boundaries, what one can and cannot do as part of a local community. Wasp gives voice to the perceived incongruity of embracing and practicing something that comes from the outside. In our conversation, he ultimately suggested that a Jamaican who decides to express himself through American rap style might as well move north: "If a man live a yard and him a rap is like, me feel like him fi just go say, bomb, and just know say, yo, him fi go live in other heights, you know?"

So let's shift to other heights. Say, Boston, for example, which is home to a significant Jamaican population, especially in the Dorchester area. Of course, most of those living in Dorchester did not move there because they were rappers and had to flee the Jamaican culture police. They are there, generally, as a matter of economic and social necessity. After getting a better sense of what Jamaicans think about what is and is not proper Jamaican style, I've been curious about the ways that Jamaicans living outside of Jamaica decide which cultural practices are appropriate to adopt and which are not. How do people maintain ties to local Jamaican culture when so far away? How do they pick and choose from the new set of influences and resources that permeate their new environment? How do identifications shift? And how might music illustrate such complex processes?

The Caribbean Cultural Center, or 3Cs as many call it, is on Blue Hill Ave in the area of Dorchester where there resides a sizeable West Indian community. The club

holds well-attended, loud, Caribbean-style dances on weekend nights. After I returned from Jamaica, several people recommended that I go there, often describing it as the premier spot in Boston to experience reggae music. I went to 3Cs for the first time a few weeks ago. My friend, Andrew, and I got there at around 11 pm, which was clearly much too early for a Caribbean dance (as I should have known from my experience in Jamaica). The bar was not yet open and the large, school-cafeteria style room was nearly empty, save for the selectors and their turntables on the stage and the huge stacks of speakers which shook the room with ear-shattering decibel levels. (It was the loudest music I had experienced in a long time.) As my friend and I stood there, taking in the scene and the music and waiting for people to arrive, I observed that the wall behind the stage was lined with flags. From what I could tell, all Caribbean nations were represented. Beyond this, however, I also noticed that most of the European colonial powers' flags were displayed as well, including the French, the British, and, curiously, the Irish flag. (Although never a colonial power, the Irish did have a presence in the Caribbean as post-slavery wage laborers—a legacy preserved by place names like Irishtown in Jamaica.) Interestingly, four flags out of the collection of perhaps twenty were oversized—perhaps twice as large. These were the Union Jack, the Jamaican flag, the American flag, and the Israeli flag. I don't know why these flags are larger. Perhaps, commensurate with their ardent nationalism, those four only come in XL?

Whether or not the difference in sizes is coincidental, the symbolism was striking. Thanks largely to reggae's worldwide reach, Jamaica occupies a dominant reference point for the English-speaking Caribbean in the US and elsewhere. (The music at 3Cs, for instance, was about 90% Jamaican, with a little Trinidadian soca and some US pop thrown in.) And perhaps it goes without saying that for the Anglophone Caribbean, Great Britain is another major reference point. The presence of the American flag also seems somewhat obvious: despite their heritage, their connections to home, and even their salient nationalistic identification, most of the attendees at 3Cs are also Americans and usually identify as such, at least in part. The Israeli flag is more of a puzzle (and I still need to talk to someone at 3Cs about it). The only connection that I could make was that its central icon—the Star of David—is an important symbol for Rastafari, the Afrocentric, messianic Jamaican religion based on a re-imagining of the Hebrew bible.

As I stood there trying to process all of this symbolism, it occurred to me that the use of the Israeli flag in this context signified only slightly more explicitly the degree to which nation—and one’s identification with a particular nation/people/community—is often an effort based largely in the imagination. Although an identification with Israel, or at least its symbols, seems much more bizarre at first glance, it is perhaps no stranger than Jamaicans living in Boston identifying with England, the United States, or Jamaica for that matter.

At one point during the dance, the American flag fell to the floor. It was another apparent coincidence that seemed rather symbolic. One of the DJs struggled for several minutes with little success to get Old Glory back up. Soon others came over to assist him. In the process the flag fell again several times. After a number of failed attempts, it seemed as though some people were content to let it lie for the rest of the evening. Others persisted, though, and finally through a little ingenuity and teamwork, they were able to hang the flag once again. The effort and exchange seemed symbolic of the difficulties of maintaining simultaneous national identifications. Being at once Jamaican and American, and whatever else, is often more of a subconscious process than an explicit effort. Even so, like the fallen flag, such overlapping—and sometimes conflicting—allegiances can be a difficult thing to keep up.

This anecdote puts into focus some of the difficulties of maintaining a transnational identity, which is an increasingly common orientation for many Jamaicans. (It is estimated that between one-third and one-half of all Jamaicans now live outside of Jamaica.) In a similar way, non-Jamaican reggae performers and aficionados in the Boston area also seem to experience some difficulty when it comes to keeping up allegiances, maintaining traditions, and forging a coherent identity. Here again, latent tension abounds. Issues of race and class and cultural propriety seem to become more salient when we cross the river into Cambridge. Although audiences in Cambridge are frequently mixed racially and ethnically (e.g., among blacks, one finds both African-Americans and Jamaicans), the selectors are usually white. They negotiate the tension in performance, often by striking a delicate balance between faithfully emulating admired

performance models and projecting their own idiosyncratic and personally coherent vision of what reggae means to them.

Sometimes the negotiation takes the form of symbolic links—for instance, in naming practices. A Malden-based selector who spins frequently in Cambridge employs the tag, “Stout Style” in order to make imaginative links between himself (as an Irish-American) and Jamaica. As he explains, “There’s a lot of things I like about the stout itself to represent, you know, me. Guinness comes from Ireland, and it’s also big in Jamaica. So it’s like, I take that, like, you know, hey, maybe I can do the same thing, you know, being Irish roots and bust in Jamaica. And then, a Guinness is black with a little white top, and I’m white with a red top. So it teaches people don’t judge a book by its cover... There’s nuff meanings that reinforce its name to me.”

Perhaps the more significant realm of engagement and symbolic linkage, however, is musical performance. When I first started going to the reggae night at the Phoenix Landing in Central Square, I was surprised by the Jamaican-ness of the musical presentation. In stark contrast to the smooth mixes and unintrusive styles of most hip-hop and techno DJs (which is to say, turntablists), Cambridge reggae selectors more often jar uninitiated listeners with their stop-and-start techniques (their pull-ups and rewinds), their jumps across tempos and styles, and their loud, shrill, and constant talk-over, as they exhort the crowd, give information about a particular recording, or sing along to meaningful lyrics. More often than not, the selectors’ exhortations take the form of quick, thick Jamaican patois.

This latter practice is somewhat controversial in the Cambridge reggae community—and in the world of non-Jamaican reggae selectors more generally. For some, to change the very way you speak in performance seems disrespectful, as if one is caricaturing Jamaican speech. For others, it is a natural consequence of engaging with another cultural tradition. As one selector told me:

I think a lot of people, like David Rodigan [a white, British selector] for example, I think he’s made it clear that he won’t speak patois. He sees it like, he speaks English, so he’ll speak English. When I went to Korea [in the army], I was taught like it’s rude to not learn Korean and to learn the culture and to expect other people to understand you in English. So to me experiences like that have always taught me, you know, it’s like good to

absorb a culture and become part of it and not on your side of the line and say I was raised like this and I'm gonna just stay like this. If you open your mind, not just with language but with a lot of things you can open your mind and you can make choices and think in two different ways sometimes. Your vocabulary can expand and instead of being limited to just English you have English and patois... And part of it, I mean, anything in music is really things that you've heard that kinda come back. Even songs... All the musical notes come from somewhere... Things are used over. So I mean, when you absorb certain things... to me it's natural to, like, not limit myself and let it come back out... I mean, I'm in it so much now that, in the culture so much that when I hear things I'm not even aware that, I'm like, oh let me say it in patois, it's not like I'm like, let me try to fake something. It's like, if that's the way I'm thinking it that's the way I spit it out.

In justifying his performance style, this pro-patois selector underscores the positive, transformative experience of his deep engagement with reggae music, tying his recently acquired language skills to a new perception of the world. For him, Jamaican music and language have presented him with the tools to “think in two different ways sometimes,” fundamentally altering his understanding of self and other. Rather than leading to a kind of alienation or a fragmented sense of self, he emerges with a richer—and, for him, totally coherent—sense of things, despite the implicit critique of non-Jamaican selectors who choose not to toast in patois.

This example suggests one way that music mediates values, or more specifically the way music opens up debates and dialogues about what is important, what is true, and what is right. Significantly, non-Jamaican reggae selectors seem to identify most frequently and deeply with the most righteous reggae—the “militant,” “conscious,” “roots-and-culture” strain that explicitly emphasizes certain values, often associated with Rastafari. Sometimes the focus is on the broadly appealing, though sometimes vague, philosophy that one selector described as a “universal positive message.” This type of reggae is most clearly associated with Bob Marley, who appears to be many non-Jamaicans point of entry into reggae—although, as an overexposed internationalist, he rarely finds a place in most selectors’ repertoires anymore. At the other end of the spectrum, roots reggae can also espouse rather conservative values, prescribing subordinate roles for women and condoning violent homophobia, among other things. (Jamaica is, of course, sometimes a pretty conservative place, with old Protestant mores

still exerting much influence, even on oppositional cultural movements such as reggae and Rastafari.) Engaging the roots reggae tradition becomes a powerful means of making meaning, of connecting with shared values. Embracing the hardcore—as opposed to the more sentimental or worldly side of reggae—is also an effective, pre-emptive strategy for non-Jamaican selectors: by posing as firebrands, they can deflect, to some extent, accusations that they are appropriating something that is not theirs and does not pertain to them.

By aligning most clearly with reggae’s oppositional quality, Cambridge selectors attempt to chant down the status quo whose tacit system of privilege is a large part of what gets them on the stage in the first place. Such a stance seems to make sense in Cambridge, where generally leftist political currents tend to foreground issues of social and economic justice. At other times, however, there is significant tension between the commonly expressed values of Jamaica and Cambridge. I still find it ironic every time I’m at a Cambridge club and the selector sings along to an anti-gay anthem, often peppering the recording with additional expressions of solidarity. Few people in the audience seem to notice or understand—especially if these sentiments are voiced in patois. One selector that I asked about this told me quite plainly:

I’ve never been open to gayness or to the acceptance of gay people...It’s not like I’m like, oh there’s a hype in dancehall where it’s cool to burn out gay people, so like let me say some things...I believe it, so when I’m on the mic and if it’s prevalent in a song, and obviously in reggae it’s prevalent in a lot of songs, you know, it’ll hype me up, and I’m hyping back into the mic and giving back...I’m not going to hold back if it’s a message of truth no matter where it is...If anything, if I acknowledge the fact that it’s Cambridge, it’ll make me want to push the message even harder...why preach to the choir?

In a bit of counterpoint, another Cambridge-based selector explained that he generally shied away from playing records with anti-gay sentiments: “It’s just a matter of where you channel your energy,” he said, “That’s definitely not where I put my energy nor where I, really, want to see the music going.” Despite his uncommon stance on this issue, he maintains an allegiance to the fiery, righteous rhetoric of much roots reggae: “I’m all into burning out a new set of truths and rights in 2004,” he told me. He also

added that he occasionally plays and endorses records whose message he disagrees with if they seem like good musical choices at the time. Although he tends to spin records that are “intelligent” and stress more universal themes—“sufferation” anthems and “lonely-heart tunes,” for instance—at bottom, this selector admitted that he is mostly moved by basslines.

Viewed together, these selectors’ performance styles and aesthetic decisions constitute a kind of ongoing dialogue. The various interpretations and projections of Cambridge-based selectors illustrates that, as with hip-hop in Jamaica, reggae offers a range of compelling, and sometimes contradictory, significations outside of Jamaica: it is righteous, rebellious, universal and positive, black—but in a different and sometimes more accessible way than African-American music. It is cryptic, cliché, hardcore, authentic, exotic, and—at the same time—familiar. (Reggae *has* been part of Boston’s soundscape for a while now.) Selective in their repertory, and thoughtful about philosophical and political affinities, the Cambridge-based selectors I have interviewed come to reggae on their own terms—as opposed to a “second-hand” engagement, as one selector phrased it. Although they tend toward a somewhat conservative, traditionalist approach—as opposed to the mash-up eclecticists that constitute another interesting, local case study—they resist conforming to complete orthodoxy. In performance they attempt to show how the music is meaningful to them. They finish lines for singers and DJs, elaborate on themes, and link songs together in significant ways. Generally, these selectors are not so interested in playing the popular tunes of the day (which would actually be more consistent with contemporary Jamaican selector style); rather, they attempt to craft a meaningful sequence and a pleasurable—if not edifying—experience. Their departures from reggae selector orthodoxy appear to signal a desire not simply to copy what is compelling but to create a space for themselves to join in, participate, and share in a transnational, and often transcendental, experience. Among all of the Cambridge-based selectors with whom I spoke, there seems to be a shared recognition that exact reproduction is neither an authentic approach nor an attainable goal, especially so far removed from reggae’s original context, Jamaica—which remains its chief reference point and the primary source of production and innovation, and is a place, incidentally, that very few of these Cambridge selectors have visited.

I'd like to close with one last metaphor—this one drawn from Cambridge—for the serious challenge of maintaining cultural practices from a faraway place. On a Monday night last summer, not long after I had returned from Kingston, I was chatting up one of the selectors at the Phoenix Landing just before his set. As he moved to return to the DJ-stand, he went to give me a pound on the fist—Jamaican-style. Having already slipped back into Boston-style handshakes, however, I extended an open-hand. At the last moment, I realized that he was coming with a fist, so I made one. At the same time, he opened his hand to accommodate mine. It all ended in a slightly embarrassing finger-mush. “Oops,” I said, “I forgot.” “It always happens,” he said. “It always happens.”