

BLING-BLING FOR RASTAFARI: HOW JAMAICANS DEAL WITH HIP-HOP

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ABSTRACT

From “modern blackness” to “foreign mind,” cosmopolitanism to pan-Africanism, radical remixology to outright mimicry, hip-hop in Jamaica embodies the myriad ways Jamaicans embrace, reject, and incorporate foreign yet familiar forms. Seemingly deep contradictions can emerge in such engagements, as when, for instance, hip-hop-generation Rastafarians claim conspicuous consumption as a tool for advancement. Examining the lines that Jamaican artists and audiences draw between “authentic” local expression and a “bow” to the foreign demonstrates how music mediates identity and subjectivity in contemporary Jamaica. Through historical perspective, musical analysis, and ethnography, this essay seeks to illustrate the contingent, shifting limits of such commonplace appropriations.

Hip-hop, as with any number of African-American cultural forms before it, offers a range of compelling and contradictory significations to Jamaican artists and audiences. From “modern blackness” to “foreign mind,” transnational cosmopolitanism to militant pan-Africanism, radical remixology to outright mimicry, hip-hop in Jamaica embodies the myriad ways that Jamaicans embrace, reject, and incorporate foreign yet familiar forms. Empowered by, even as it is critical of US political, economic, and cultural dominance, hip-hop resonates across the Jamaican soundscape as a suggestive symbol of the contradictions facing a nation whose citizenry increasingly resides abroad, whose promise of post-colonial self-determination remains elusive, and whose internal conflicts — in particular, the persistence of vast inequalities that correlate all too well with an entrenched “pigmentocracy” —

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undermine any overarching, or at least state-sponsored, sense of national belonging. In this sense, hip-hop serves as one set of cultural practices among many through which some Jamaicans — in particular, lower-class blacks — have asserted, since well before independence in 1962, a brand of cultural politics that anthropologist Deborah Thomas calls “modern blackness” (2004). But as with many of the practices Thomas identifies with modern blackness, hip-hop’s resonance in Jamaica is complex, and the enduring ambivalence around local engagements with something as “foreign” as it is “black” draws attention to tenacious, if fluid, lines of community in contemporary Jamaica.

Although the figuration of modern blackness provides a compelling lens through which to view Jamaicans’ embrace of so-called foreign resources, Jamaican performers’ discourse about such appropriations suggests that the embrace cannot happen wholesale. Rather, artists strive to project a Jamaicanness that maintains coherence despite, and even *through*, engagement with the foreign. Not every engagement with African-American music necessarily constitutes an unambiguous expression of modern blackness in Jamaica today, nor does every expression of modern blackness create a position that other lower-class blacks recognize as advancing their best interests. Middle- and upper-class Jamaican youths’ embrace of hip-hop can just as easily be read as articulating an identification with a transnational elite, and lower-class Jamaican youths must reconcile their love of hip-hop with intense local preferences for sounds and styles that are identified as unambiguously Jamaican (despite such symbols’ typically hybrid roots). Accordingly, Jamaican artists and audiences demonstrate a deep ambivalence about as complex a cultural resource as hip-hop. Even among those Jamaicans who fully embrace hip-hop—who regularly watch videos on BET, who “bus” a shot” every time a selector plays 50 Cent at a dance, and who collect and circulate CD-R’s of the latest stateside hits — there is a sense that one can go too far in this embrace, that one can lose oneself in the music too much and end up deracinated, a terrible fate in such a roots-conscious place. Examining the lines that Jamaican artists and audiences continue to draw between “authentic” local expression and something too closely resembling a bow to the foreign, one can understand with greater nuance the ways music mediates questions of identity and subjectivity in contemporary Jamaica.

The longstanding and increasing interplay between dancehall and hip-hop, or Jamaican and American music more generally, brings such issues to the fore, as we can observe the way that musical style — i.e., the deployment of musical figures as cultural signifiers with specific connotations, whether of nation, race, class, etc. — works to draw the lines of community. In the context of local performances, strong associations produced by certain rhythmic patterns, melodies, formal structures, and rhetorical figures illustrate the limits, for some, of cosmopolitan, transnational, and/or diasporic appropriations. Seemingly deep contradictions can appear to emerge in such appropriative gestures, as when, for instance, hip-hop-generation Rastafarians claim conspicuous consumption and capital accumulation as new technologies for advancement. Bringing together historical perspective, musical analysis, and ethnographic evidence (i.e., interviews and collaborative recordings) and reading one of these ethnographic encounters as a complex site of performance and negotiation, this essay seeks to illustrate the contingent, shifting limits of such commonplace appropriations.

Hip-hop Inna Dancehall: Using America, Producing Jamaica

When I first traveled to Jamaica, I was immediately struck by hip-hop's presence there, which suggests that my own ideas about Jamaicans' engagements with products, practices, and ideas marked as American were in need of revision. For one, I should not have been so surprised considering hip-hop's contemporary global prominence. But I admit that I expected to find a preponderance of more "local" music. In the land of reggae — one of the world's most popular musical styles and a significant source of national pride, not to mention profit — hip-hop's current ubiquity is remarkable. Although roots reggae's distinctive "one-drop" (i.e., the sparse, defining rhythm of most Bob Marley songs) and dancehall's unmistakable 3+3+2 (e.g., the minimal "bomp bomp" structure that most 90s dancehall adheres to) still resound around Kingston and across the island, the hip-hop beats blaring from car stereos, from the mini-soundsystems of roadside CD vendors, and in the dancehalls themselves indicate that Bounty Killer and Beenie Man, never mind Bob Marley, have met serious competition in Jay Z, Nelly, 50 Cent, and other Top 40 rappers. Some of dancehall's

biggest stars — in particular, Elephant Man and Wayne Marshall (not to be confused with the author of this essay) — routinely score local hits with their own versions of hip-hop favorites. And DJs such as Bling Dawg and Vybz Kartel made names for themselves by seamlessly incorporating hip-hop flow into dancehall style. Sean Paul became a national darling of sorts thanks to his US chart successes, as well as the inroads he made into the lucrative, globally popular hip-hop scene.¹ His (temporary) status as a favorite collaborator of top American hip-hop and R&B acts had many a DJ — even those critical of his uptown background — hoping that such exposure would translate to greater access for other Jamaican artists to the substantial, sought-after American market. When I asked some students at Tivoli Gardens High School in the spring of 2003 who their favorite artists were, the answers — Wayne Marshall, Sean Paul, and 50 Cent — seemed to say more about the projection of Jamaica on the world's stage (and the effects of “global” media on local perceptions) than about traditional class conflicts and tastes. Indeed, BET and MTV tend to outshine local television offerings (though the recent advent of several Jamaican music video stations marks a possibly significant shift), and several radio stations devote sizeable portions of their programming to contemporary American hip-hop and R&B.²

This is not to say that reggae is no longer king in Jamaica, but it is to call for a more subtle appreciation of the interplay between foreign and familiar in the production of “national” culture (and thus of nation itself). No doubt reggae remains Jamaica's national music *par excellence*. Indeed, the story of the music is, at this point, inextricable from Jamaica's post-independence history, and vice versa. The conventional story of Jamaican music tends to proceed as an unbroken narrative of “indigenous” development ever since ska, as if to confirm Jamaica's independence, ebulliently turning its back on American R&B in the early 60s. But hip-hop's contemporary presence in Jamaica offers a clear example of outside influence.

- 1 From Sean Paul's most recent album, *Dutty Rock* (2002), “Gimme the Light” peaked at number 7 on Billboard's Hot 100 and the follow-up single, “Get Busy,” reached number 1.
- 2 Indeed, in the years since I originally researched and wrote portions of this essay, a number of local video stations, including RETV and HypeTV have added a great deal of popular, local content to the range of music video offerings available in Jamaica. It remains to be seen what sort of impact the recently announced Tempo (i.e., MTV-Caribbean) will have on the local mediascape.

Moreover, it is only the latest instance: jazz and R&B continued to infuse ska even after it coalesced as a recognizably distinctive style; soul informed the shift to rocksteady; funk worked its way into roots and dub reggae; disco inspired the "rockers" drum pattern; and hip-hop has influenced dancehall even as it has, in turn, borrowed heavily from Jamaican DJ poetics and reggae production aesthetics.³

Despite this longstanding history of incorporation, the established narrative of Jamaican music refuses much more than an originary nod to American musical influence. From Bilby 1995 to Lewin 1998 to Stolzoff 2000, one finds a consistent — and important — emphasis on local traditions, but, especially in the post-independence period, this focus comes at the expense of considering longstanding and significant engagements with "foreign" music. Such an emphasis creates a somewhat seamless and rather powerful narrative about local creation and the distinctive cultural resources of Jamaica (not to mention the modern Jamaican nation), but it also overlooks crucial cultural practices and social shifts. Jamaica's diasporic citizenry, (post-)colonial history, and geographical location make it a conduit for culture from the outside, and travel — often for work — to Central America, the greater Caribbean, the US and the UK has continually contributed to local ideas and practices. Although it would be foolish to attempt to interpret local engagements with foreign styles without reference to centuries of practice, scholars' focus on the traditional and journalists' reproductions of deeply nationalist myths around reggae (e.g., Bradley 2000) conspire such that Jamaicans' enduring engagements with so-called foreign music — and the significance of such for Jamaican musical traditions and cultural politics — remains an untold story. As a result, the dominant narrative of Jamaican music, in quintessentially nationalist form, distorts the complicated story of Jamaican cultural and social flows, missing the interplay between routes and roots — in the process overlooking not only the cultural politics of modern blackness but the ways such practices find their limits, rubbing against other discourses and ideologies. As Stuart Hall notes with regard to Jamaican culture, this myopia can create dangerous distortions: "If you think of culture always as a return to

3 See David Katz's *Solid Foundation* (2003) for a treasure-trove of examples detailing the various American artists and styles that have inspired Jamaican musicians to innovate *within* the reggae tradition.

roots — R-O-O-T-S — you're missing the point. I think of culture as routes — R-O-U-T-E-S — the various routes by which people travel, culture travels, culture moves, culture develops, culture changes, cultures migrate, etc." (Paul 2005).

As with rhythm & blues, soul, rock, disco, funk, pop, and other American and African-American popular forms, Jamaican musicians have broadened reggae's sonic palette and articulated certain kinds of community relationships by borrowing stylistic features from hip-hop. The incorporation of hip-hop style into reggae has been occurring, unevenly, for over two decades now, dating from a surprisingly early cover of the first commercially-released rap record, the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" (1979). Welton Irie's "Hotter Reggae Music" (1980) was released only a few months after the Sugar Hill Gang's hit, and Irie's version stays remarkably faithful to the lyrics and flow (i.e., rhythmic delivery) of the original even while embodying local, dancehall style.⁴ Over the course of the 80s and 90s dancehall artists routinely incorporated rap style into their productions. And although it is sometimes difficult to tell who is borrowing from whom, given the circularity of this exchange, sometimes there are clear lineages. Red Dragon's "Hol' A Fresh" (1987), for example, puts a striking emphasis on the word *fresh* that recalls hip-hop DJs' (or turntablists') scratching of same word, a popular hip-hop slang term since the early-80s, as featured on such tracks as Mantronix's "Get Stupid 'Fresh'" (1985) and "Fresh Is the Word" (1985).⁵ A more recent example, Beenie Man's international smash, "Who Am I (Sim Simma)" (1997), not only employs a sample that producer Jeremy Harding lifted from hip-hop band The Roots' "Section" (1996), but Beenie's catchy chorus — "Sim Simma/Who got the keys to my Bimma?" — echoes Missy Elliott's hit, "Supa Dupa Fly" (1997), released earlier the same year: "Beep Beep/Who got the keys to the Jeep?" Reggae artists continue this practice into the present, and artists such as Vybz Kartel expect both the local dancehall massive and the international hip-hop audience to appreciate the seamless allusions to hip-hop songs that the DJ weaves into his lyrics: e.g., the passing reference, "But I like the way you shake it right thurr," from

4 Shortly thereafter, General Echo's "Rapping Dub Style" offered another localized version of rap's first big hit.

5 Of course, that Kurtis Mantronik himself is of Jamaican heritage only draws our attention once again to the circular character of this interplay.

"Picture This" (2004) subtly cites rapper Chingy's "Right Thurr" (2003), illustrating the degree to which hip-hop slang has penetrated Jamaican youth parlance.

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" 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. A closer examination of hip-hop, 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 what 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."⁶

- 6 Readers may note a consistent inconsistency in my transcriptions of Jamaican speech. The task of representing the distinctive sound of various forms of Jamaican English is fraught with challenges. On the one hand, I do not want to distort the sound or the meanings of my collaborators — a term I prefer over "informant" or "subject" — by imposing "standard" spellings on distinctive and often symbolic pronunciations. On the other, I am wary of obscuring my analysis via incomprehensible transcriptions, not to mention falling into the trap of employing a form of representation that smacks — at least in the US — of minstrel-ish mockery. I take a partial cue then from L. Emilie Adams, whose book, *Understanding Jamaican Patois*, features a meditation on the task. For the majority of her text, Adams employs what she calls an "imperfect and incomplete system" (7), only partially phonetic. I find her explanation of the system rather sensible: "A true indication of pronunciation is given only in the spelling of peculiarly Afro-Jamaican words, or where the Afro-Jamaican pronunciation diverges appreciably from the standard English pronunciation, or where there is some danger of confusion between the two juxtaposed systems" (ibid.). In some cases,

Even Jamaicans who seek to maintain their identity as "reggae artists" are increasingly drawn to hybridized musical styles, often in order to communicate with a perceived international (i.e., US) audience. One DJ with whom I collaborated, as we worked on a track together, asked me to place the snare drums squarely on beats 2 and 4 and to avoid any semblance of a 3+3+2 — dancehall's distinctive rhythmic accent. He did not want a dancehall sound. He wanted what he called an "international sound," which, stylistically, amounted to hip-hop. Today, dancehall's incorporation of hip-hop style most frequently takes the form of sampled or versioned materials (e.g., adapted choruses and flows, covers and parodies of popular songs using un-licensed instrumentals, etc.), as well as more subtle stylistic influence (e.g., on 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, for instance, and who peppered their yard slang with references to "mami's" — essentially a Nuyorican coinage — and "playahaters.") For all of hip-hop's popularity, 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 admitted to incorporating *some* stylistic features from hip-hop into their own style, but generally they expressed a sense that a wholesale embrace of such a foreign music was simply not for them, was somehow not right.

None of my collaborators would go so far as to say that a Jamaican who rapped was not "keeping it real," so to speak.⁷ As another Kingston-based DJ, Raw-Raw, put it: "If someone lives in

such as Rashorne's verse, I provide a side-by-side "translation" in order to facilitate comprehension and bring into relief the distinctive and often significant qualities of certain speech acts. (see p. 61).

- 7 As mentioned in the previous note, I employ the term collaborator to signal a different sort of relationship between the researcher and the researched. It is an appropriate term, moreover, as will be demonstrated below, since most of my so-called "informants" — a term much too close to the dancehall denigration *informer* — were indeed collaborating with me in the recording studio. Producing hip-hop and reggae recordings in Kingston constituted one of my primary ethnographic procedures.

Jamaica and him wan' rap like him born in Brooklyn, I have no comment on that beca' — whatever you feel [is valid]." In other words, Raw-Raw would not want to tell a performer what is in or out of bounds regarding their mode of expression. Yet, this apparent generosity about Jamaican performers' embrace of styles marked as non-local is not necessarily shared by all. When I asked Raw-Raw 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 Kingston-based artists assented that such a stylistic strategy implies a serious trade-off. A singjay named Dami D equated the decision to write a rap song with "put[ting] away all pride." At the same time, he attributed the phenomenon of Jamaican rappers to hip-hop's powerful ability to inspire people, or in his words: "That show, say, that hip-hop, it dedeh for really uplift the youth dem."

Many Jamaicans view homegrown hip-hop performers as confused about their cultural identity, making an implicit equation between musical practice and national attachment. As Wasp put it, "I just be a man weh stick to my culture, still. Our culture is like, reggae, dancehall, seen? From your yard, man, 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 to identify with roots reggae or dancehall; hip-hop is not an option). Thus, part of the reception of hip-hop in Jamaica, at least in terms of who can perform in a hip-hop style, flows from enduring beliefs about cultural propriety and national boundaries, about what one can and cannot do as part of a local community. Despite the range of significations that hip-hop in Jamaica carries, it remains, at least in some sense, foreign — which, given its hybrid and fairly Jamaican roots, not to mention the number of Jamaicans now living in the US, perhaps speaks more to the tenacity of nationalist ideologies than anything else. Wasp gives voice to the tension and incongruity of embracing something perceived to have come from the outside. Despite himself being a reggae artist of the hip-hop generation, as influenced by Tupac as by Beenie Man, he ultimately stated that a Jamaican who decides to express himself completely 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?" A connection to the local thus remains paramount despite Jamaicans'

longstanding (and perhaps increasing) fluency with so-called foreign forms.

Conceptualizing Jamaicans' embrace of hip-hop as a locally-accented *use* of America, as Deborah Thomas suggests, may help to make sense of the perplexities swirling around such appropriations. While Thomas acknowledges, for instance, that "aspects of modern blackness appear to reproduce some of the discourses regarding consumerism and individualism that are associated with neoliberal capitalism" (14), she reconciles the apparent contradiction of employing such seemingly derivative discourses by shifting our frame of reference to more specific, local acts:

[I]f we reorient our vision of politics in a way that decenters totalizing revolutionary narratives and pays special attention to very locally grounded negotiations, incorporations, and rejections, we are able to more clearly conceptualize the ways people confront and revise both structural and ideological source systems of power and domination. From this perspective, black Jamaicans *use* 'America' to simultaneously critique, selectively appropriate, and creatively redefine those aspects of the dominant capitalist ethos that they believe benefit themselves and their communities, both materially and psychologically. (Thomas: 14; emphasis in original).

Indeed, if one examines hip-hop in Jamaica from the perspective Thomas provides here — a perspective grounded in her own historical and ethnographic research and resonant with mine — certain contradictions around national musical provenance, imaginary as they may be, recede in importance next to questions about the local meanings of such practices. Moreover, even seemingly irreconcilable incompatibilities, such as those between Rastafarians' traditional critique of capitalism and materialism and hip-hop's "bling-bling" celebration of conspicuous consumption, might be understood as expressing something other than a lack of coherence or integrity or the end of an influential era of oppositional cultural politics.⁸

8 *Bling-bling* is a quasi-onomatopoeic, metonymic term for the shine of jewelry. It was popularized in the late 90s by the New Orleans-based Cash Money Millionaires. It endures as a symbolic expression — and not just in hip-hop, but in dancehall, soca, and other popular global forms that have been influenced by the language of hip-hop.

Crafting Community "In di Dance"

Of the various practices Thomas associates with modern blackness — among them, urban cosmopolitanism, transnational citizenship, and conspicuous consumption — perhaps none better symbolizes the tensions around what she describes as a new orientation for many Jamaicans than the embrace of hip-hop's "bling-bling" ethos by Jamaicans living in Jamaica, and in particular by Kingston-based Rastafarians who, historically, have expressed an "outernational," pan-African orientation and an embrace of available (and, one presumes, compatible) technologies, ideas, and practices alongside an often explicit antagonism to the glamorous materialism of Babylon, of Western capitalism, the system held responsible for creation and perpetuation of the state of exile and exploitation in which millions of descendents of African slaves still live.

In order to explore further the perceived, and musically-mediated, borders between "authentic" local appropriations of American style and what would be perceived as "foreign mind" — perhaps a kind of "mental slavery" (to borrow from Rastafarian parlance) — I turn now to a specific ethnographic moment: a recording session that I participated in with three brethren from the Twelve Tribes of Israel, whose headquarters on Hope Road stood just across the street from my place of residence while living in Kingston in early 2003. With the vignette — based on a journal entry made shortly after the recording — and analysis that follows, I seek to illustrate and explore the ways certain limits on Jamaican uses of the foreign take musical form, mediate social relations, and perform various kinds of cultural work in contemporary Jamaica.⁹ In the process, I hope to reflect on some of my own assumptions about such boundaries and to make sense of the encounter — and what struck me initially as contradiction — through the critical and historical perspectives advanced to this point in the essay. Ultimately, with this intentionally provocative example, I mean to explore the latent tensions and redemptive possibilities of contemporary Jamaican uses of hip-hop.

9 While conducting research in Jamaica from January to June 2003, and again in the summer of 2004, I kept an online journal of my recordings, observations, and analyses: <<http://www.wayneandwax.org/blog.html>>

[run tune!]¹⁰

"It's gone too hip-hop again," said Damian, his brethren, Fiya Rhed, nodding in assent. Rashorne, a gentle guy with a raspy voice, looked on with interest but did not add his opinion, despite being the vocalist, or DJ, for whom we were building a *riddim*.¹¹ I turned back to my computer, about to remove the stuttering, double-time hi-hat line I just added to a beat that had sounded enough like dancehall reggae only moments before. Suddenly, they reconsidered: "Wait a minute," Damian said, apparently intrigued by the mix of styles, "It can work." For the next hour or so we continued to negotiate the sonic boundaries of hip-hop and reggae, I pulling toward hip-hop almost subconsciously, having honed my skills as a producer in the style of sample-based rap traditionalists, with Damian and Fiya Rhed pushing toward a sound more "Jamaican," more appropriate, perhaps, for a DJ representing the Twelve Tribes of Israel, one of the largest groups on the organized side of the Rastafarian movement. Placing snare drums on beats 2 and 4 of each measure had created too duple — too American — a feel, so instead I added syncopated handclaps to evoke dancehall's distinctive, dominant rhythmic pattern.¹² To make the bassline "dubbier" I added a number of quickly repeated (sixteenth) notes,

10 The following section is drawn largely from my weblog (see previous note). I have chosen to set it off as a performance/recording of sorts by employing as "bookends" the terms used in dancehall performance to call for the playing (i.e., *run tune*) and rewind (i.e., *pull up*) of a record. After the *pull up*, rather than to *wheel and come again* (i.e., to replay the selection), I will instead replay the encounter in analytical terms.

11 *Riddim* (sometimes *rhythm*) is Jamaican parlance for *beat* (to employ the hip-hop term) — which is to say, the accompanying musical track over which a vocalist DJs, raps, or sings. Also, whereas *DJ* in hip-hop parlance refers to the musician operating the turntables, in Jamaica *DJ* is equivalent to *rapper*, except of course that it signifies a Jamaican style of rapping, which entails rhythmic, melodic, timbral, and linguistic features that differentiate it from, much as it has been influenced by, its American counterpart. *Selector* is the Jamaican equivalent of hip-hop's turntable-based *DJ*, though contemporary selectors might as easily operate a CD player or a laptop.

12 In other words, I created what musicologists or musicians might call a 3+3+2 subdivision of the half-measure at the eighth-note level — a polyrhythmic pattern common to Caribbean music more generally and strongly associated with dancehall reggae, especially since the days of the early 90s and the "bomp bomp" minimalism that followed.

including the ever important "pick-up" accent just before each beat. I combined a rimshot with the kick drum in imitation of classic reggae drumming technique, and I employed what I considered a reggae-resonant synthesizer — a little bit "chintzy," to my ears — in order to flesh out the texture.¹³ Each step of the way, I made adjustments according to the brethren's reactions.

All in all, the interaction was a powerful lesson in style and sensibility, and I took note of which musical features in particular connoted Jamaican, as opposed to American, style. When we finally settled on a mix that seemed to satisfy all, Rashorne stepped up to the microphone and launched into the first of many takes of his tune, "In di Dance":

Now mi bankbook gettin' fatta /	They say, "Tat for tit, and tit for
Girls dem gettin' hotta /	tatter" /
Dem say, "tat fi tit, an' tit fi tatta" /	To me, "Big Ras," whom the girls
Ova big Ras, weh di girls dem	flatter /
a flatta, /	Monday, we drive the [Cadillac]
Yo, Monday, we rollin' in di Esc-y-	Escalade-r /
lator /	Tuesday, the [Lincoln] Navigator /
Chuesday, it's di Navigator / Yo, di	The Benz and BMW can wait until
Benz and Bimma dem can stay until	later . . .
later . . .	
Now my bankbook's getting fatter /	
Girls are getting hotter /	

Having wrestled for hours over the placement of kicks and snares, the rhythms of hi-hats and basslines, the timbres of samples and synthesizers — and all that these sonic details suggest — I was first surprised and then delighted by the irony that Rashorne's lyrics and delivery seemed to be caught in their own struggle between hip-hop and reggae. As his affirmations of Rastafari and Jamaican dancehall culture alternated with a celebration of luxury SUVs and expensive liquor, it was clear that I was not the only one bringing hip-hop into the mix. At the end of the night, having finished an

13 By "chintzy" I mean that the timbre of synthesizer seemed consistent with the predilection for 1980s-era synthesizers ushered in by the *Sleng Teng* riddim in 1985. The combination of a kick drum and rimshot I refer to here as "classic" can be heard on many a reggae recording from the 60s and 70s, especially in the "one drop" style favored by "roots" reggae musicians.

initial version of "In di Dance" (the title itself a nod to American rapper 50 Cent's "In the Club"), I reflected on what seemed to be an ethnographic microcosm of the various tensions and paradoxes swirling around hip-hop in Jamaica today.¹⁴

[pull up!]

Contemporary hip-hop's endorsement of conspicuous consumption appears to contradict rather strongly one of Rastafari's most common tenets: a rejection of the oppressive conditions, physical and psychological, of Babylon. According to Ennis Barrington Edmonds, "Globally, Babylon is that worldly state of affairs in which the struggle for power and possessions takes precedence over the cultivation of human freedom and the concern for human dignity" (1998: 24). Randal Hepner essentially equates "chanting down Babylon" — recall Rashorne's lyric in the chorus, "listen to the words weh di [which the] Rastaman *chant*" — with "signify[ing] to themselves and others their rejection of a world based on crass, materialistic values..." (1998: 211). Rex Nettleford couches the stance in more specifically anti-American terms, arguing that Rastafarians emphasize self-reliance over "a North American consumption pattern" and "living within one's means versus the wanton overconsumption of the ostentatious *nouveaux riches*" (1998: 316). If the US is frequently equated with Babylon, whose materialistic values seem so embraced by mainstream American hip-hop artists, Rashorne's hip-hop-accented celebration of luxury goods would appear to contradict commonly held Rastafarian notions of the good life, or *livity* — "a code of relationships with God, nature, and society" (Chevannes 1994: 169).

From the opening line about his expanding "bankbook" to the litany of luxury vehicles, each casually assigned a day of the week for driving (or to use Rashorne's hip-hop-inflected term *rollin'*), the young DJ seems to embrace wholeheartedly American hip-hop's preoccupation with ostentatious displays of wealth. Remarkably, during our recording session, some of Rashorne's most materialistic lyrics surfaced in moments when he appeared to forget his lines, veering off in extemporaneous "freestyle" verses that seemed to fall

14 One can hear a finished mix of the song at <<http://www.wayneandwax.com/music/in-di-dance.mp3>>.

even more egregiously into the clichés of contemporary hip-hop.¹⁵ Two freestyle moments stand out in particular for their progression from Jamaican to American points of reference, complete with African-American slang and hip-hop flow. In one instance, Rashorne's freestyle moved in non-sequitur fashion from devout Rastafarian maxims through more earthy, Jamaican-dancehall sentiments to an American hip-hop-accented preoccupation with money which seemed ultimately, and significantly, to trip up the performance itself: "Givin' thanks and praises to the Almighty/you on the dancefloor, moving hardcore/money fi flow, yo, you know it's all dough/it's all dough, it's on the flo'/money a flow, money a flow . . ." In another instance, Rashorne transformed the pre-composed phrase "sippin' on some roots" — an endorsement of the "natural" tonics favored by Rastafarians — into an endorsement of two of the preferred, pricey beverages of contemporary hip-hop stars: "sippin' on Hennessy mix up with Mo' [Moët Champagne]."

During such moments, I was often left wondering whether Rashorne was simply refashioning American hip-hop for his own use or falling prey to its attractive, materialistic rhetoric. Rather than some subliminal surrender to black Babylon's bling, however, Rashorne's freestyles — and, for that matter, his pre-composed lyrics — seem to signal a more deliberate deployment of stock phrases and patterns. Perhaps we can compare Rashorne's appropriation of hip-hop to Rastafarians' adoption and revision of the Bible, about which Stuart Hall observes:

[Rastafarians] had to turn the text upside-down, to get a meaning which fit their experience . . . They learned to speak a new language. And they spoke it with a vengeance . . . They did

- 15 Freestyle, or extemporaneous rap, offers an interesting medium for observing the relationship between composition and what we might call "lyrical vocabulary." In particular, by demanding spontaneous exposition, freestyle exposes the way that language—in the form of stock phrases — can determine the content and underlying philosophy of one's lyrics. Typically, individual artists will return to a set of idiosyncratic tropes during a freestyle — a crutch perhaps, but also a necessary strategy in a challenging practice. Particularly striking in my experience with freestyle in Jamaica was the recurrence of certain phrases, especially when the freestyle veered into American rap-style verse. Again and again, I heard references to "representin'," "keepin' it real," and "playa-hatin'." These phrases are strong markers — if not clichés — of mid- to late-90s hip-hop (clearly a formative period for hip-hop's influence on a generation of Jamaicans), and, although they have fallen somewhat out of vogue in the US, they frequently emerge in the freestyles and compositions of hip-hop-influenced Jamaican artists. It is no surprise, for instance, that "playa-haters" make repeat appearances in Rashorne's song, and in the pre-composed sections at that.

not assume that their only cultural resources lay in the past . . . They did not go back and try to recover some absolutely pure "folk culture," untouched by history, as if that would be the only way they could learn to speak. No, they made use of modern media to broadcast their message. (1996: 143)

Indeed, recent reports have shown that even the militantly anti-materialist Bobo camp in Nine Miles, Bull Bay, now features a small computer lab, while Rastafarian scholars consulted for the *Observer* article discuss the embrace of computers, the Internet, television, and even money as "vital tools," consistent with a long ("African") history of technological innovation, through which Rastafarians are advancing themselves, their families, their communities, and their ideas.¹⁶ In the same way, we might hear Rashorne's song as employing a newly accented vocabulary through which the DJ can communicate with the wider world of transnational Jamaican society, the pan-African Rastafarian movement, and the overlapping global audiences — and international markets — of hip-hop and reggae, not to mention with other Kingstonians who are as enmeshed in the overlapping worlds of dancehall and hip-hop as Rashorne is.

Thus, the apparent contradiction of a young Rastafarian extolling symbols of material wealth should not be too quickly seized upon as an indication of local values crumbling beneath the force of American imperial power. At the most obvious level, "In di Dance" represents, at least from Rashorne's perspective, a fully coherent statement. Although Rashorne borrows forms, phrases, and symbols from hip-hop, he deploys them in a way consistent with his understanding of himself as a Rastafarian and a (black) Jamaican. A close examination of Rashorne's rhetorical strategies and their context reveals an underlying logic. For one, he places himself within an African-American and Afro-Caribbean tradition — alongside performers such as Sammy Davis Jr., James Brown, and hip-hop's Cash Money Millionaires — wherein those traditionally denied access to opportunity and prosperity, in turn, flaunt symbols of affluence to confront the status quo. Thus, for Rashorne, hip-hop's ostentatious displays of wealth, or "bling-bling," rather than endorsing the social order, stands in direct opposition to

16 See "Laptop Dreads" (<http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/lifestyle/html/20060624T160000-0500_107643_OBS_LAPTOP_DREADS_.asp>). Accessed 25 June 2006.

Babylon — especially if we view this moment as one of the “locally grounded negotiations” that Thomas contrasts with “totalizing revolutionary narratives” in her call for interpreters of Jamaican cultural practices to re-orient their understanding of politics (Thomas 2004: 14).

For another, Rashorne’s embrace of bling-bling “infrapolitics,” if you will, is additionally locally grounded because of the way that flashy style or conspicuous consumption dovetails with dancehall sartorial practices more generally.¹⁷ What Kingsley Stewart calls “the pre-eminence of the external” in dancehall style represents a common strategy through which young, disenfranchised Jamaicans make themselves visible within the dancehall and project their existence to the larger world. From loud music to loud clothing to explicit lyrics—and, one might add, big cars — Kingsley notes that “There is an overarching and strong drive in dancehall to make the unseen visible” (24). In this sense, we can compare some Jamaicans’ adoption of hip-hop style to the “homeboy cosmopolitanism” that Manthia Diawara attributes to young people of color in contemporary Greenwich Village — a cultural politics of public display, of undeniable visibility, which Diawara compares to his and his peers’ adoption of James Brown’s style during the 1960s and 70s in West Africa. For Diawara, hip-hop’s commodification, ostentatiousness, and worldwide appeal “are an expression of poor people’s desire for the good life” (1998: 238). Hip-hop’s embrace by young Jamaicans is thus consistent with a broader cultural pattern across the Caribbean, whereby American popular culture — disseminated both by mass media and diasporic connections — has come to dominate the imaginations of young people yearning for the freedom and wealth denied to them in post- and neo-colonial circumstances and symbolized by the sensual sounds and images of African-Americans flaunting their power to consume. What Deborah Thomas calls “radical consumerism,” such tactics constitute another facet of modern blackness by projecting “an insistence that consumption is a creative, potentially liberatory process and that the ability to both influence and reflect global style is, in fact, an important public power” (Thomas 2004: 250).

17 I borrow the term *infrapolitics* from Robin D. G. Kelley (1993), who employs it as a means of recovering the political import of everyday oppositional practices in the Jim Crow South.

Because the preoccupation with bling in contemporary dancehall is a matter of fashion — and a psychological-sartorial practice inextricable from local cultural politics — it is not insignificant that Rashorne would choose to amplify his voice by using terms with no small currency. Another of my collaborators referred to bling-bling songs, and gun tunes alike, as “bubblegum.” He explained that there was an undeniable demand in the dancehall to hear these familiar themes, and he felt that one of the most likely ways to succeed as a recording artist was to play to these expectations. This is, of course, true of the popular music industry in a more general sense. Pop calls for — and is perhaps inseparable from — the reproduction of clichés in sensual terms, adorned with the latest stylistic markers. In a market system, all symbolism aside, it should not come as a surprise that performers tend to recycle clichés in order to play to the sense of what is popular or perceived as “current” (for that is where the currency flows). Given this tendency, it is important to interrogate such clichés when they arise. In the case of individual performances, much can be gleaned by the ways that artists play with the formulae of the day.

It is telling that Rashorne’s deployment of hip-hop’s clichés often verges on parody. Not only are his boasts almost always incredibly excessive, he seems to display a patent lack of interest in the objects he glorifies: his corruption of “Escalade” to “Esc-y-lator” stands in stark contrast to the almost obsessive specifics of some American rappers’ descriptions of their prized possessions. All of this suggests that Rashorne self-consciously employs these symbols of power, and these gestures to the wider world, in order to give more currency to the song’s simple and fundamental point of glorification: having fun at a dance. Rashorne revels in the positive images of his brethren and sistren enjoying themselves and looking good — “jumping” and “prancing” — and he underscores the importance of community with the first-person-plural subject of the chorus: “Find *we* in di dance.” The focus on the dancehall and on individual consumption, moreover, draws our attention to the cultural turn in political practice in Jamaica and elsewhere. Of course, the withdrawal from state politics, or “politricks,” and the investment of energies and resources into cultural practices is something that Rastafarians long ago established as foundational to their social stance. Despite the trappings of bling-bling boasting, Rashorne puts forward a stance that seems, from his angle, rather

consistent with the Rastafarian notion of livity. The juxtaposition of forms and practices in "In di Dance" points to synthesis, coherence, and an underlying logic of identity, as much as it may suggest paradox and fracture.

Rashorne's denial of any contradiction in his song serves to confirm his own belief in the coherence of what he has to say. When I attempted to push him on the issue a few days after we made the recording, he answered my questions in a way that expressed his lack of concern with the tensions I had observed:

W: You express a strong element of Rastafari in your music. Do you ever feel like that's in tension with some of the major themes of hip-hop or dancehall?

R: Well ... music is jus' music, y'know. Seen? And whether ... you a do Rastafari music inna a hip-hop way, or you a do it R&B, or you a do it jazz, seen? Or you a do it blues, seen? Or you a do it funky, you see-me-a-say? Or even if you do it rock 'n' roll, it still remain music.

W: And it doesn't matter if it's about sufferation or flossin'?

R: No. It no matter, a still music.

W: They come under the same umbrella?

R: Yeah. Still music. It jus' one ting, y'know: music. A seven note, y'know.

Directing the conversation toward the transcendent qualities of music, Rashorne indicates that, for him, there is no tension here. He draws on the language of hip-hop and reggae in the same manner that he selects notes from a scale. Ultimately, Rashorne is seeking to make music, and through that music — regardless of genre or style—to express himself and Rastafari. Music's embodiment of the Rastafarian triumvirate — word, sound, and power — would seem to speak for itself as far as Rashorne is concerned. In the chorus to a second song that we recorded together, he underlined the inherent (and inviolable?) unity of his performance, expression, and philosophy: "Everything I do a jus' Rastafari / Everything I say a jus' Rastafari."

Rashorne's claiming of hip-hop's symbols for Rastafari represents a powerful move. Although there may be no contradiction as far as Rashorne is concerned, his strategy does appear to create tension for a number of possible listeners. One

obvious, though perhaps paradoxical, target of Rasthorne's stance is Babylon itself (which includes such embodiments of power as members of the police force, politicians, and elites of all sorts). Parading through Kingston's streets in large, expensive vehicles, engaging in extravagant consumption, and simply possessing the capital from which power flows in Babylon, all represent oppositional practices for someone like Rasthorne, who as a Rastafarian and a black Jamaican is associated with a marginal underclass—despite Rastafari's cultural prominence and spread to the middle- and upper-classes.

Indeed, the spread of Rastafari from Jamaica's lower-class to its middle-class and beyond, ultimately finding devotees worldwide, is one reminder of the ways that Rastafari has changed since its inception and has embraced music and technology to facilitate the spread of Rastafarian critiques and perspectives. Since the movement began, Rastafarians have had to accommodate themselves and their vision to a number of significant events: from the crises in direction after the raid of Pinnacle in 1954 and Claudius Henry's highly publicized and highly disappointing attempt at repatriation (and possibly revolt) in 1959; to violent, state-sponsored repression throughout the 60s; to political appropriation in the early 70s; to the deposition, arrest, and death of Haile Selassie in the mid-70s. For many Rastafarians, such events precipitated a turn inward, where the return from exile could be accomplished in spiritual rather than literal terms. In this context of change and accommodation, it makes sense that young Rastafarians today, like Jamaican youth more generally, embrace the latest oppositional stances available and appealing within the African diaspora, despite what may seem like inherent contradictions in merging such practices as conspicuous consumption with Rastafari's traditional rejection of materialism. Kingsley Stewart argues that, for dancehall participants, "The ideal self is a shifting, fluid, adaptive, malleable self" (Stewart 2002: 25). Such a position, according to Stewart, allows for the reconciling of seemingly conflicting sentiments, "such as deejay Sizzla invoking praises to Haile Selassie and graphically explaining the details of his alleged conquests of the female genitalia, all in the same sentence" (*ibid.*). Arguing that such a stance in dancehall is an extension of broader cultural mores, he goes on to place such practices in the greater context of Jamaican society: "Jamaicans throughout history have a

heritage and a legacy of creating multiple, dynamic selves to survive and make sense of their realities" (Stewart 2002: 26).

Despite such an ability for adaptation, however, Rastafarianism, as with any religion, has its orthodoxies, and Rashorne's position perhaps also challenges Rastafarians with a different conception of livity and of Babylon. Of course, considering the individualist orientation of the Rastafarian movement, it is not surprising that Rashorne would fashion his own conception of Rastafari, his own consistent practices, his own synthesis of the cultural resources available to him. For many, Rastafari is a faith and a movement which, as a matter of principle, resists institutions due to their inappropriate mediation of one's relationship to Jah. Such built-in individualism necessarily creates a degree of heterodoxy among Rastafarians. Indeed, many are critical of such organizations as the Twelve Tribes of Israel, of which Rashorne is a member.¹⁸ With the creation of formal organizations such as the Twelve Tribes, certain conventions of belief and practice prevail at the level of the group, despite what may be an overall ethos of inclusivity.¹⁹ For many this leads to the incorporation of ideologies incompatible with the traditional principles of Rastafari. For example, the Twelve Tribes, which for decades has served as "a haven for middle-class Rastas" (not to mention reggae musicians), is often characterized as espousing liberal values, such as "greater equality between the sexes" and "freedom for those who prefer not to grow the beard or wear dreadlocks" (Chevannes 1998: 66). Thus, Rashorne's affiliation with this particular order of Rastafari might shed some light on his seemingly idiosyncratic interpretation of

18 See, e.g., Jan van Dijk 1998.

19 Due to its focus on "religiosity and the cultivation of an African cultural consciousness and lifestyle," rather than "a commitment to more political and social goals" (Edmonds 2003: 70), some scholars categorize the Twelve Tribes of Israel as one of the "churchical," as opposed to "statical," Rastafarian organizations. In addition, Twelve Tribes has been one of the most popular groups internationally. It exerted a strong influence over the movement's spread in England and claims a worldwide membership, with headquarters in Ethiopia, Ghana, New Zealand, Sweden, Canada, and, among others, several in the US, including HQs in New York, Los Angeles, and Boston. Twelve Tribes brethren from overseas, especially from the United States, are regular visitors to the Kingston HQ. Thus, as a transnational group with close ties to the US, it is reasonable to expect that the organization facilitates the kind of cultural transmission — via the movement of people, goods, and ideas — that has made hip-hop, and other North American products and perspectives, so popular in Jamaica (and reggae so popular in, say, Brooklyn).

Rastafarian tenets. Rashorne's expression of his beliefs, as put forward by "In di Dance," not only seems consistent with certain bourgeois values but also seems to stand in glaring opposition — and perhaps in alluring challenge — to those Rastafarians not interested in embracing the liberal standards associated with the Twelve Tribes. Here then is yet another way to see Rashorne's embrace of hip-hop's symbols not as contradictory but as coherent, contingent, "locally grounded," and provocative.

Conclusion

Jamaicans of the hip-hop generation are making music that expresses their Jamaicanness in new ways, or perhaps expresses a new kind of Jamaicanness — one more reflective of current social and cultural realities and the imagined communities that flow from them. Facilitated and spurred by 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 asymmetrical movements and mixings of people, practices, commodities, and ideas fostered by this latest stage of "globalization." Seen in this socio-cultural context, dancehall, reggae and hip-hop emerge as intensely relational products of modern transnational circulation and integrated markets for labour and commodities. It is an oft-repeated assertion that almost as many Jamaicans now reside outside of Jamaica as on the island itself. Despite such a dispersed population, however, members of the Jamaican diaspora — thanks to revolutions in air travel and communications technologies — maintain close ties to friends, family, and associates back home. To some extent, Jamaica's ongoing formation as a nation — in both real and imagined terms — is as determined by Jamaicans living in Brooklyn, Boston, and Miami, and their musical practices and predilections, as by Jamaicans living in Kingston.²⁰ "Music is central to the diasporic experience," argues Mark Slobin, "linking homeland and here-land

20 Although it emphasizes more the effect of Jamaica's population and cultural flows on areas of the United States than vice versa, Orlando Patterson's, *"Ecumenical America: Global Culture and the American Cosmos"* (1994), serves to underscore the new conception of community emerging from late 20th century "peripheral" migration patterns and the "reverse colonization" of metropolises, which become re-oriented as "cosmopolises": "There is no traumatic transfer of

in an intricate network of sound" (1994: 243). And indeed, for the past three decades, the transnational circulation and combination of hip-hop and reggae have given shape and form to a Jamaican nation that well exceeds its geographical boundaries. Jamaicans' use of hip-hop and America, both on the island and in the diaspora, has been crucial to the fashioning of a cultural identity that makes sense of these new circumstances.

"Popular cultural production in contemporary Jamaica," argues Thomas, "must be positioned neither as a kind of contradictory 'false consciousness, nor as inherently or hopefully resistant or revolutionary. Instead, we must take note of its complexity and particularly the changing balance of power between the respectable state and popular culture" (262). Indeed, despite hip-hop's ability to signify a stance of modern blackness that pushes against the tacit exclusions of creole nationalism, it is clear that there remain self-policed and community-defined borders around the limits of "selective appropriation." Such limits demonstrate an alternative nationalism in operation and negotiation — one which makes pan-African, transnational, and anti-authoritarian articulations but which seems nevertheless to constitute a nationally "bounded" and imagined sense of community.

In a historical moment when many Jamaicans have shifted their metropolitan gaze to American cities and the glamorous lifestyles associated with them through the representations of Hollywood, cable TV, and mainstream hip-hop, a performance such as Rashorne's "In di Dance" illustrates in a particularly vivid manner some of the ways that hip-hop (and African-American culture more generally) draws the lines of community in Jamaica today. The cosmopolitanism one hears in contemporary Jamaican dancehall, and in songs such as Rashorne's, bears witness to these social and cultural changes. Ironically, Jamaicans draw on global sounds, especially those of the US, in order to affirm a local, even

national loyalty from the home country to the host polity, since home is readily accessible and national loyalty is a waning sentiment in what is increasingly a postnational world. Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Barbadian societies are no longer principally defined by the political-geographical units of Jamaica, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Barbados, but by *both* the populations and cultures of these units and their postnational colonies in the cosmopolis" (111, emphasis in original). Significantly, Patterson primarily employs reggae music to illustrate the new cultural products arising from these new social relationships.

oppositional, identity. The social signifiers of such international sounds — e.g., materialism — do not necessarily corrupt an internally coherent musical system that, for example, supports Rastafarians against Babylon. Hip-hop in Jamaica thus offers a rich, if freighted, resource for creative reinvention, another powerful text to turn upside-down. With regard to Rastafarians' use of the Bible, Stuart Hall notes that, "in turning the text upside-down they remade themselves" (1996:143). Taking transnational hip-hop as their text, many young Jamaicans appear eager to do the same.

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