Embodied Meaning in Jamaican Popular Music

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Any DJ could tell you that you don’t know what music really means until you see it in people’s bodies. A DJ establishes a relationship between audio recordings and the crowd, responding to the speed and intensity of their movements, the symbolism of physical attitudes and gestures, their vocalizations, and the simple presence or absence of different people at the site of musical engagement. Forging this dynamic relationship is neither curation nor translation, nor encoding/decoding of music: it is knowledge, recognition, and affirmation of a shared moment of trust and intimacy. Such collaborative accountability to a living audience provides a useful framework for understanding the value of ethnographic work in media studies.

Addressing bodies’ political and historical aspects allows a researcher to evaluate how particular physical actions and interactions situate actors in relation to power. When working in the global South, where gendered and racialized dynamics shape the interpretive tools of scholarship, properly situating people’s bodies helps to avoid replicating a colonial dynamic that defines the body by its use value, as an inchoate object to be counted and catalogued.

While engaging with popular music practitioners in Jamaica, the birthplace of DJ culture, my 13 years of DJ experience has been central to my ability to understand how people make meaning with music. My own practice, heavily shaped by the aesthetic approach of Jamaicans themselves, leads me beyond observation into collaboration and co-presence.

I focus on my embodied engagement with street dances: free, late-night musical events that occur on the sidewalks and streets of poor neighborhoods. As I traverse them in time and space, my own and others’ emotions during the course of fieldwork are a primary “interpretive resource” (Bhardwa 41 citing; Wilkins). The longer I spent in Jamaica—in recording studios and musical events but also riding buses, traveling through rich and poor neighborhoods, watching local television, and listening to the radio—the more I gathered resources that helped me make sense of particular musical moments. Combining these resources with material, embodied engagement with music reveals the meaning of particular musical
moments: different people’s presence and absence, their physical movements and capabilities allow me to situate musical engagement in relation to individuals, communities, and structures of power. The experiences described below demonstrate that while music structures ways of thinking and being (Hirschkind: 8; Oosterbaan), participants’ embodied personal and collective histories also contribute to music’s meaning.

Patwa: Embodying Geopolitical Histories

As I walk toward a street dance unfashionably early, a little before midnight on a Tuesday, I encounter the sound of vibrating bass first, then I come around the corner past a man selling fried fish from a home-built grill, flanked by a string of drink-sellers with coolers at their sides. He calls out in Patwa¹ to a potential customer. Ahead looms a ten-foot by fifteen-foot wall of speakers, from which the music already emanates at levels that make my arm hair stand up and my guts shake. Although loud, the mix of American R&B and pop feels familiar and not too exciting. Scattered clusters of people drink and stand along the side of the road or in the yards of houses without energetically occupying the space in numbers or movement. Over the next hour, women and men mostly in same-sex groups from late teens through mid-thirties converge and separate, while standing/drinking/chatting/watching/posing. The music shifts from smooth, slick, lush US pop and R&B to the sharper, syncopated, percussive, and minimal production style of Jamaican music from the 1990s in a genre called “dancehall” (distinct, in Jamaica, from reggae). The lyrics also shift from American-accented English to Patwa, matching the language I hear most people around me speaking. As the bass booms more percussively, my stance widens for balance, and my hips move in time to the heavy, syncopated beat. Others in the audience respond similarly, and also call out or raise a hand in the air when a particularly classic tune comes over the sound system.

I can remember how excited I was when I first heard dancehall in the 1990s in Massachusetts, although I couldn’t understand most of the lyrics. Now I am proud to mouth the lyrics and follow the Patwa language easily. As I sing along, I realize that the Jamaicans around me, now dancing with more energy and in larger numbers than before, have always understood Patwa. Their excitement and pleasure does not reflect my remembered excitement of discovery or current pleasure at achieving familiarity with this language and art form.
Patwa is formally recognized as Jamaican folk culture, but daily life in Jamaica reveals its racial and class politics: it is spoken much more in poor neighborhoods in Kingston than in rich ones. Jamaican news announcers do not speak in Patwa, nor is it common at festivals aimed at middle class Jamaicans or foreigners, nor do professors or students at the University of the West Indies speak it in public, nor high-ranking government officials (except when they reach for symbolic identification with the poor). In this way Patwa is identified with and embodied in poor, Black bodies and experiences, not elite institutions or personages (Iseke-Barnes). The pleasure at the street dance at hearing Patwa is the pleasure of hearing poor people’s voices amplified and given center stage.

This pleasure also has personal and geopolitical significance. For many here, 1990s dancehall is the music of their adolescence and youth. For me as well, the sharp sonic contrast between 1990s dancehall and the US pop recalls the excitement I felt when newly encountering dancehall back in 1990s Boston. However, I also feel a different Jamaican attitude in play: visible in movements like raised heads, chins thrusting forward, hands vigorously punching or pointing in the air, accompanied by shouts of what sound like vindication (“Yes, man!” “That’s right!”) as particularly popular songs from that era vibrate the loudspeakers. This triumph reflects a geopolitical awareness: the 1990s saw the second global moment for Jamaican popular music, punctuated by Jamaican dancehall star Shabba Ranks’ win—the first dancehall album to win—for “Best Reggae Album” at the 1992 Grammies. Local knowledge of dancehall’s historic relationship to American popular music (and America) celebrates the arrival of music featuring the voices and bodies of poor and Black Jamaicans on a global pop stage. On the island, colonial dynamics led Jamaican mainstream media to generally avoid music associated with the urban poor. This makes audiences’ pleasure politically disruptive in the face of the uneasy relationship elite Jamaicans have with popular culture that springs from a history of enslavement, marginalization, and violence.

Gunshot: Violence and Autonomy

Jamaican musical practitioners also performatively embody and reinterpret this history and current reality of violence and disruption. As the DJ plays Beenie Man’s 1990s hit “Girls Dem Sugar,” I see a few men around me leap into the air, wave “gun hands,” and shout “blaow blaow” (imitating the sound of a gun fired in the air in appreciation). In response
the DJ “pulls up” the record: pulling back on the vinyl disc so that it runs backward for a moment with a distinctive squealing sound, ending his move with a dramatic gesture, arm raised high as the song restarts. Both this physical intervention and the gun imagery and sounds that often accompany it, are much less common at upper-class venues. Gun references center a mediated performance of the marginalized but not entirely powerless “badman.” Although gangster-themed names date back at least to the 1960s, Jamaican emigrants from poor communities carried the Jamaican badman image and that of gun violence with which they were sadly familiar, into the global popular music scene in the 1990s. The significance of these violent references is complex. In Jamaica gun violence is not separate from state power, and was initially rooted in it: political parties in the 1970s armed their supporters’ neighborhoods and encouraged them to literally battle for political control. After the 1970s financial crises, politicians’ ability to control these areas weakened, and the armed groups became alternate sites of political authority, headed by “dons” who dispense violence but also food, water, medicine, and money for school. These neighborhoods controlled by dons are common sites of street dances, which are framed by this semi-autonomous politic. Jamaican popular music regularly evokes the badman or “don” image, often mediated by US popular culture: performers take names such as Al Capone, Dillinger, Bounty Killer, and Clint Eastwood. These images of violence and lawlessness in Jamaican popular music refer to poor people’s lived experience, but also evoke a hint of autonomy (although not by any means safe or egalitarian) from colonial norms, strictures and institutions (Gray). The badman, the don, and the gun hands evoke a sense of danger, but one identified with poor people’s experiences, and it also reflects a dialectical engagement with official power. In the dance, that tension also contributes to the excitement of the musical experience, marked by the squeal of a record playing backwards.

Back It Up: Decolonial Gender and Sexuality

As the DJ drops the popular tune “Back it Up” by Beenie Man, women in twos and threes gravitate to central positions on the dance floor. Beenie Man and the majority of singers are male, as are the DJs, videographers, and sound technicians that occupy more formal roles in relation to the music. At the same time, women dancers spectacularly assert their presence and refashion even the technical machinery of the sound system into props for their performances. The DJ calls “back it up, gal!”
while one woman climbs the ten-foot speaker tower and leaps off the top, landing in a split on the ground, from where she flexes her thighs and backside in time to the music. The extreme acrobatics and technical precision proclaim her authority and control over her body.

In other contexts, women’s dance moves, especially those centered on the rear end, could be read as participation in sexist commodification. Facing these performances in the street dance demands a viewer respect these ferociously fearless and exuberantly precise movements, and centers women’s own pleasure and expertise (Cooper; Hobson: 102; Noble: 114). This demand and re-centering has a political dimension in the face of colonial, white supremacist society, expressing Black female pride “in a resolutely erotic and urban mode, one that is routed in reclaiming the Black body’s aesthetic and social worth through class-specific racialized and gendered practices” (Noble: 116). Dancing that centers the lower body as a site of pleasure and power has a long lineage across the Caribbean and many parts of Africa and has historically been attacked and quashed by colonial authorities (Alexander; Bakare-Yusuf, “‘I Love Myself When I Am Dancing and Carrying on’”; Cosmic Yoruba; Ellis). Such dancing also contributes creatively to musical meaning. Thus, attending to the significance of bodily engagement with music resituates Black women as creative actors in music, further challenging a colonially-influenced hierarchy of agency and skill.4

As the DJ brings in another song lyrically celebrating heterosexual desire, women and men in the audience dance enthusiastically, but mainly solo or in groups with other same-sex dancers (Hope; Thomas: 252–253). Juxtaposing the audible music and the dancing bodies complicates the lyrics’ representation of Jamaican sexuality, revealing less colonized attitudes that also echo dance traditions reaching across the Diaspora.

Remix: Diasporic Survival and Triumphant Pleasure

At 4 am the introductory notes of the US pop hit “This is Why I’m Hot” (Mims) ring out over the sound system, only to be interrupted by Jamaican singer Junior Reid’s vocal signature: “Tu tu tweng!”—it’s a Jamaican remix! The crowd, much thicker at this point, heaves with excitement. The Blackout remix marks the night’s first peak. Reid’s voice continues over the American song’s instrumental backing track, and then the song introduces a sample of a Jamaican tune from the 1960s (Penn) followed closely by a clip of the horn section from the beloved and familiar “Stalag 17” instrumental (Collins), before re-introducing MIMS’ vocals for
a minute, bringing the Jamaican-American musical-historical dialogue full circle. As more Jamaican voices enter the remix, the crowd’s excitement rises. The next peak arrives when current dancehall artist Cham’s vocals are interjected into the song: the dancing crowd erupts in delight—screams, “gun hands” in the air, pounding on the DJ stage, and in one case blasting the air with a homemade flamethrower made of a lighter and a can of hairspray. The DJ rewinds the tune in response, starting the buildup from the first notes over again.

The Blackout remix heightens and condenses the narrative begun by the DJ in the early part of the night: generating tension and excitement from musically interjecting Jamaican voices into American pop. The orientation toward American pop struck me as loving but competitive, a pleasurable tension that energizes dancehall as a “plural desiring machine that appropriates global cultural flows just as much as it is appropriated by them” (Bakare-Yusuf, “Clashing Interpretations in Jamaican Dancehall Culture”: 173). When Jamaicans remake or alter American hits, the audience response both eclipses and depends on the existence of the American tune as a reference point. The audience relishes Jamaican musicians’ ability to alter or improve a US song in the face of a broader geopolitical dynamics that disadvantage Jamaicans.

Exile: How Diasporic Culture Flourishes

The physical experience of street dances also situates them in relation to class and global power. The discomforts of poor neighborhoods—the smell of a “gully” or open sewer, the potholes and relative darkness where streetlights are broken—reflect official neglect by the state. This neglect in fact provides some protection from scrutiny by the state, industry, and elite social norms. Disruptive language would trigger social and economic retaliation in upper class locations; re-use of public space would not be allowed in wealthy areas where zoning laws are enforced and where laws would also restrict the unlicensed food and drink vendors. The musical intertextuality that contradicts copyright law would also be less possible in formal, regulated sites of musical engagement (Mann; Manuel and Marshall; Toynbee). The street dance, outside of the direct control of dominant institutions, is able to center and even celebrate these violations of elite society, continually associating the music made there with the lives and livelihoods of the urban poor. This fact is best made evident through accounting for the physical and social experience of the street dance and its contrast with other sites of Jamaican daily life.
Embodying Ethical Ethnographic Scholarship

My scholarly work on music in Jamaica and beyond is informed not only by technical knowledge of DJ culture but also by a deep respect for collaborative creativity as a potentially liberatory experience. As I do in performance, I work to make my scholarship avoid curation, translation, or decoding of Jamaican popular music and instead center the participants so that outsiders like myself and other scholars learn their terms of engagement.

Especially in relation to dance music, the importance of the historically and culturally marked body cannot be overlooked. More seriously still, in places where the silencing and depersonalizing of human bodies have been the foundation for exploitation, it is crucial to respect and grant authority to people’s bodily experience and expression (Crockett; Harry; Segal).

In that light, we can revisit concerns that have wracked anthropology and other scholarly engagements with marginalized communities within and outside the global north. Such studies have historically served empire and the bureaucratic state, now overlaid with the atomizing and commodifying imperatives of the “content industry.” The practice of scholarship is not immune from this approach to culture. Curation, translation, and decoding all presume an authoritative gaze and ear, and a set of transactional relationships whose forms dominate and shape what music is curated, translated, or decoded into. Given that academic institutions depend on powerful state and private forces with roots in colonialism and imperialism, those forms are likely to be aligned with hegemonic power as well. Attending to physicality and bodies can help to maintain a focus on the lived experience of musicking as a force for particular communities and help us analyze when people are moving towards a liberatory experience, one where “the body is not defined by its use value” (Brown, “Buzz and Rumble”: 143). It is through maintaining an allegiance to the musical experiences’ embodied materiality that we can produce interpretations that are valid: I use “valid” here to identify knowledge that is true, but also respectfully and ethically produced. Thus, we may be able to critically unhook ourselves (somewhat) from the exploitative processes that overlay the production of academic and cultural expertise and see music’s meanings in a clearer light.

Notes

1. Patwa is a dialect spoken in Jamaica, especially among the poor. It is also the language of Jamaican folklore.
2. This is important knowledge for DJs, because the musical soundtrack to an audience’s adolescence usually provokes a strong emotional response.

3. I include dancers, watchers, technicians, DJs, photographers/video-graphers, vendors and everyone else who contributes to the musical moment in my definition of musical practitioner—because all of their activities around the street dance lend it meaning.

4. This hierarchy also influenced the way, in the US, scholars often misidentified jazz and blues as music that occurred only occurred in male-dominated spaces (Brown, *Babylon Girls* 2; Davis).

5. I am late to the DJ-scholar party, but proud to join the likes of Jeff Chang; Wayne Marshall; Ali Colleen Neff; and Oliver Wang.

**Works Cited**


Mims. This Is Why I’m Hot. Los Angeles, CA: Capitol Records, 2007. CD.


