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Natural Audiotopias: The Construction Of Sonic Space In Dub Reggae

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

Dub reggae is widely regarded as an early form of the remix. Dub artists modify previously recorded reggae songs by manipulating a song's individual tracks with a mixing board and layering them in aural effects such as reverb and echo. These effects are fundamentally spatial in quality, giving the listener an impression of vast open space. This paper is an analysis of the techniques utilized in dub's construction of sonic space as well as an investigation of the cultural meaning of those spaces. My analysis utilizes Josh Kun's theories about "audiotopias" (temporary aural spaces created through music) in order to study how sonic spaces create "new maps" that allow an individual to analyze their current social predicament. These "new maps," therefore, engender a "remapping" of reality, a reconstitutive process that parallels dub's emphasis on modification and alteration. This paper also argues that dub's audiotopias are implicitly natural, although they are constructed through modern recording technologies such as the echo chamber and the reverb unit. A final chapter applies these analytical techniques to one of dub's most popular musical offspring, hip hop.

Introduction

“When you hear dub you fly on the music. You put your heart, your body and your spirit into the music, you gonna fly. Because if it wasn’t for the music, oppression and taxes would kill you. They send taxes and oppression to hold you, a government to tell you what to do and use you like a robot. So they will torment you to death. So when you hear dub you hide from the fuckers there.”
(Lee “Scratch” Perry, quoted in Veal 201)

In 1976, *Melody Maker* published an article by music critic Richard Williams entitled “The Sound of Surprise.” Williams’ essay was a short but prescient description of the still-shockingly-new phenomenon of dub reggae. Williams prophetically noted that “there are possibilities inherent in this aberrant form which could perhaps resonate throughout other musics in the years to come” (145). Few scholars would now argue with Williams’ then-radical prediction, since dub arguably laid the groundwork for hip hop, electronic dance music, and remix culture in general. Like other electronic forms of pop music, dub artists (who are almost exclusively record producers) utilize studio technology when composing a piece, completely eschewing the use of traditional musical instruments.

Dub is unusual because no dub is actually “original.” All dubs are created from the previously recorded tracks of another reggae song. The tracks are separated into the various slots of a mixing board so that a producer can use the board’s sliders to add and

subtract them to the mix. Drums and bass function as the core of a dub, while the chordal instruments (guitars, organ, piano) occur only intermittently, dropped into the mix at the whim of the producer. Not surprisingly, dub is largely a producer's medium. Lee Perry, King Tubby, Prince Jammy and most other dub artists all started initially as record producers. Accordingly, dub does not rely on traditional instrumentation. The "instruments" required to create a dub are a mixing board and a variety of effects units: typically the tools of a studio technician, not an instrumentalist.

While dub's status as an early example of the remix is well known, the effects utilized by dub artists remain understudied. These effects and their implications form much of the basis for my research and subsequent analysis. Dub artists utilize two major effects: reverb and echo. Reverb is essentially a "canned" way of producing the sonic effects of performing in a giant hall or amphitheater. Most tracks, of course, are recorded in a tiny studio. Layering a track in reverb, however, gives the listener the impression that it was recorded in an open space. Echo has a similar effect on the listener, if only because of our tendency to associate echo with large caves. Both effects, then, have spatial implications.

Josh Kun theorized that music has the ability to create a temporarily inhabited quasi-utopian space, defining an "audiotopia" as "the space within and produced by a musical element that offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world" (23). Kun's theory is compelling, particularly his concept that audiotopias function as a series of "new maps" that "point us to the possible, not the impossible; they lead us not to another world, but back to coping with this one" (23). Kun's argument about "new maps" is oddly underutilized in the remainder of his book,

which seems more interested in exploring music's ability to allow seemingly contradictory styles and worldviews to coexist in an imagined space. Kun's reference to "new maps" is actually an extension of utopian theorist Ruth Levitas' idea that utopian thinking is less about "maps of the future" than it is about "adequate maps of the present," the implication being that such maps can bring about social change (Kun 23).

In my thesis, I will argue that dub creates similar sonic spaces and that dub artists' use of reverb and echo paint such spaces as *natural* (i.e. a part of nature), not artificial or man-made. These "natural audiotopias" offer their participants--almost all of whom are ghetto residents--"new maps" for understanding their social predicament. Dub's audiotopias, then, are not merely escapist. They possess a political element, as well. Dub, like hip hop, embraced its status as a "music of the ghetto." Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that artists like King Tubby sought to construct aural worlds of open space. Such spaces contained the hint of possibility, particularly when contrasted with the cramped Kingston ghettos.

Dub's "natural" aural spaces are constructed, somewhat ironically, through the use of modern technology. Reverb units and echo chambers, of course, are gadgets made possible thanks to industrialization and modernity, yet dub producers subvert their usage in order to create aural spaces for their listeners. This subversion is itself a kind of "remix," since it involves modifying the original intent of a mechanism. Dub producers are known for their abuse and misuse of expensive equipment, but such modifications are really a physical extension of their musical subversion. This theme of "remixing" runs throughout my analysis. Kun's "new maps" theory lends itself well to an application of such a theme. Accordingly, I will also argue that dub's audiotopias enable a "re-

mapping” of reality for its participants. Such “re-mapping” parallels the musical remix so integral to dub’s aesthetics. There are, therefore, three analytical levels of dub’s relationship to the remix. First, a dub is quite literally the remixed version of a preexisting song. Second, dub artists remix Western technologies by modifying and abusing audio equipment, pushing it beyond its original purpose and using it to establish a nonmechanical, natural audiotopia. Thirdly, dub functions phenomenologically as a way to remap and reorder reality by using its audiotopias to hint at the possibilities of alternate realities. Musically, the suggestion of different worlds is accomplished through the use of irregular, echoic rhythms. This “rhythmic decentering” undermines the established rhythm by offering rhythmic alternatives that parallel the alternative realities hinted at by dub’s audiotopias.

It is my belief that the “re-mapping/remixing” concept can also be applied to one of dub’s musical offspring, hip hop. I will argue that dub and hip hop share a desire for technological modification and manipulation, a trait that places them both within the greater remix culture. What dub accomplishes through mixing boards and reverb units, hip hop achieves through turntables and crossfaders. My analysis of dub is in many ways a “return to the source” in search of a theoretical approach that casts new light not only on the cultural meaning of dub itself, but also on the American (and indeed, global) musical genres it engendered.

Chapter 1 focuses primarily on the historical background of dub and its relationship to other Jamaican forms of popular music, particularly ska, rocksteady and roots reggae. This chapter includes a brief overview of the history of Jamaican music up-to-and-including early dub records. My historical analysis examines dub’s various

musical precedents, explaining such terms as “versioning” and “dub plates” by referencing particular musical texts. Chapter 1 also discusses the tumultuous history of post-independence Jamaica and its influence upon the island’s popular music. This chapter places a special emphasis on Jamaica’s economic plight and its political shift from market capitalism toward a socialized state under Prime Minister Michael Manley.

Chapter 2 is an in-depth analysis of technology and its relationship to dub. The chapter begins with a basic history of the reverb unit and the echo chamber from their arrival on the island through their extensive use on dub records. Since both machines eventually became an integral part of “the sound” of dub, the majority of the chapter examines the implications of such space-constructing effects. This chapter also analyzes how exactly reverb and echo create the illusion of vast space. The remainder of the chapter discusses how exactly dub producers utilize the mixing board as an instrument while examining the implications of their constant reprogramming and/or misusing of equipment in order to produce new sounds and new social maps.

Chapter 3 addresses much of the theoretical basis for my arguments. This chapter ties together the technological “re-mixing” arguments from the previous chapter and my theories about the function of dub’s “audiotopias.” Although such theories are discussed briefly in the previous chapters, Chapter 3 also forms the bulk of my theoretical argument that dub artists utilize technology to construct “natural” aural spaces that allow listeners to gain a greater understanding of their socio-economic reality.

Chapter 4 applies my theories to one of dub’s musical progeny, hip hop. In this chapter, I argue that the “re-mapping/remixing” concept articulates well to Tricia Rose’s theories about the transformation of technology in early hip hop. Hip hop’s innovators,

for instance, took outdated equipment and re-imagined its possibilities, resulting in a wholly new musical style. Obviously dub paved the way for “the remix,” but hip hop and dub also share a common relationship to technology. Both genres possess a limitless desire for modification and reprogramming. Hip hop also shares dub’s emphasis on rhythmic decentering. Chapter 4 examines the similarities between my discussion of rhythmic decentering and Tricia Rose’s theories about hip hop’s musical aesthetics.

Chapter 1

Tracing a history of dub is effectively impossible without reviewing the basic history of Jamaican pop music. Although works like Lloyd Bradley's *This is Reggae Music: The Story of Jamaica's Music* attempt an authoritative history of the island's musical evolution, the story of dub is often relegated to a single (albeit important) chapter. In some respects, this gap in dub's history is an unfortunate byproduct of undertaking such a massive task, given that navigating Jamaica's musical history is often a frustrating,--even maddening--task. Michael E. Veal's *Dub: Soundscapes & Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* fills in a number of these historical gaps but lacks an overarching thematic element to its history of the subgenre. Accordingly, this chapter attempts a history of Jamaican music with a bias towards analyzing the creation of dub and its evolution into a spatially-reconstitutive musical format.

The invention of the portable PA system effectively laid the groundwork for the Jamaican record industry. Even before the ska era, competing Jamaican "sound systems" would blast American blues and R&B from massive speaker sets on street corners, in public parks, and outside popular record stands (Veal 42). In the early days, competing "selectors" would rip the labels from imported American records, insuring that rival sound systems wouldn't be able to track down a popular song. The selectors would then christen the records with a new, invented name, throwing the other sound systems off the track.

Soon, however, Jamaican artists began releasing their own records. Early recordings were often modeled after the American R&B popular in the sound systems, but frequently emphasizing the upbeat instead of the more common downbeat. This type of “skipping” beat (found in Owen Gray’s “Midnight Track,” for instance) eventually combined with an unusual cymbal pattern to produce ska, the first Jamaican pop music. (As a number of authors have pointed out, the source of “the skip” is controversial. Jamaica’s indigenous folk music, mento, emphasizes the upbeat, but “the skip” is also present in the works of American R&B artist Rosco Gordon, a staple of the early sound systems.)

Ska’s popularity on the island skyrocketed, particularly after Jamaica gained its independence from Britain in 1962. Songs like Derrick Morgan’s “Forward March” and Jimmy Cliff’s “Miss Jamaica” expressed a newfound patriotism. The mood of the period was overwhelmingly optimistic. Ska even found its way to the 1964 World’s Fair, where Jamaica’s leaders were anxious to make a good impression. Consequently, local musician Byron Lee and his band (the Dragonaires) were sent to New York to show the world how to “dance the ska.” Millie Small even had an international hit with “My Boy Lollipop.” Music was well on its way to becoming Jamaica’s main export.

The sound systems quickly became tied to local recording companies, with certain systems (or “sounds,” in Jamaican patois) featuring particular artists. At Duke Reid’s Trojan sound system, dancers would groove to records by artists on the Treasure Isle label, while Coxsone Dodd’s Downbeat sound system played 45s from his own Studio One label (Veal 50). The owners and followers of “sounds” were so devoted (zealous, even) that rivalries between competing systems would sometimes turn violent (42).

According to ethnomusicologist Michael E. Veal, Reid in particular had a reputation as “a tough, streetwise man known to carry (and sometimes use) several firearms at once” (50). The competition between the “sounds” only intensified when the Jamaican record companies began giving out special, limited-edition records to their favorite sound systems.

These “specials” or “dub plates” were acetates: soft wax records meant for temporary demonstration, but often played publicly until they warped (Veal 53). Dub plates could be recorded, mixed, and debuted in a single day. Different sound systems, however, received different mixes, depending on the specifics of their speakers, mixing equipment, and audience (Veal 53). These different mixes gained substantial value because of their exclusivity, further increasing the competition between the sound systems (Veal 53).

Specials became popular soon after the advent of rocksteady, Jamaica’s second wave of popular music. While ska was upbeat (its optimism reflecting the island’s recent independence), rocksteady tunes were downtempo, even contemplative. The well-worn tale about rocksteady’s sudden appearance in the summer of 1966 is that the temperature was simply too hot for dancing to ska. Dancers quickly invented a lethargic half-time step that required less exertion. Local musicians followed their lead by slowing the tempo of their compositions. Musically, rocksteady was far more rhythmic than ska, with fewer instruments and a particular emphasis on fluid, melodic bass lines. Ska’s prominent piano was replaced with an electric organ. Vocally, soulful harmonies became the norm. Groups like the Melodians and the Paragons set the standard for smooth, sensual rocksteady.

However, it was an instrumental version of the Paragons' "On the Beach" that first drove crowds wild and ushered in the era of the dub. In 1967, Byron Smith (Duke Reid's engineer) accidentally gave an instrumental acetate of "On the Beach" to Rudolph "Ruddy" Redwood, a sound system deejay from Spanish Town (Bradley 312). Redwood debuted the dub plate later that night, surprising and delighting dancers who promptly began singing along (Maysles 96). "Versioning" soon became an essential part of any Jamaican release, with the a-side typically featuring a vocal performance and the b-side containing its instrumental version. "Versioning," however primitive by today's standards, effectively laid the groundwork for dub reggae.

The idea of mixing (or remixing, as we say today) a single song in multiple ways is essential to understanding dub. Classic dubs from Lee Perry, King Tubby, or Scientist are basically deconstructions of recognizable reggae hits. As previously stated, "dubs" were originally the instrumental flipside of a 45 rpm single. Eventually, however, record producers began to manipulate the various instrumental tracks at their disposal (drums, bass, guitar, vocals, etc.) by pulling them in and out of the mix and dropping them back in at unexpected intervals, sometimes saturating the tracks in reverb or echo.

By 1968, rocksteady was fading as tempos increased and artists favored a rougher, more energetic sound. Reggae was born. Like any musical genre, a significant (and likely futile) debate exists over the first reggae record. The Maytals were undoubtedly the first to use the term, although their hit "Do the Reggay" utilized an alternate spelling. It's fitting, however, that future dub artist Lee "Scratch" Perry often gets the credit for debuting reggae with his 1968 release "People Funny Boy." Perry stripped down rocksteady even further, emphasizing the bass and drums and disposing of

any type of vocal harmony. Besides Perry's sneering vocal and the manic, polyrhythmic interplay between the instruments, "People Funny Boy" also included the shrieking cries of an infant child. By all accounts, the song was a massive step forward. "People Funny Boy" may have created much of reggae's musical language, but Perry's unceasing desire for innovation soon led him away from vocal sides and toward instrumentals that pointed the way toward dub.

Perry and his band (the Upsetters) began recording what might be referred to as "proto-dub," albums heavy on spacy sound effects and moody instrumentals. Perry frequently applied ghostly echo to his voice when introducing songs, a stylistic trait that began with the release of "Clint Eastwood" in 1969. Perry's experimentation with "proto-dub" culminated in the 1972 recording of *Cloak and Dagger*. Although the British version of the album still examined (in biographer David Katz's phrase) "the outer limits of instrumental sound," the Jamaican release was in fact far more innovative (159). It was the first Jamaican LP to contain original instrumentals followed immediately by their dubs (160). *Cloak and Dagger* became a massive Jamaican hit and its status as a radical, even subversive recording was widely celebrated. Soon after its release, a group of pranksters illegally retuned Tichfield High School's radio transmitter to broadcast on the Jamaican Broadcasting Company's frequency. The record they beamed out to the entire island was *Cloak and Dagger*, a protest against the lack of local music on the tame, stuffy JBC (Salewicz 324). Meanwhile, Perry and the Upsetters continued to experiment. Within a year, they would release their first all-dub LP, *Blackboard Jungle Dub*.

In 1973, Perry still had yet to fully assemble his infamous home studio, the Black Ark. Consequently, he mixed much of his early dub recordings at the studio of Osbourne Ruddock, better known to reggae fans as King Tubby (or, alternately, King Tubbys). Tubby was originally known as the owner and operator of King Tubby's Hometown Hi-Fi, a sound system widely regarded as one of the best on the island. Tubby was an engineer at heart, continually tinkering with his sound equipment. He built his own amplifiers and mixing consoles, ensuring that his sound system remained a considerable musical force in Jamaica. By the early 1970s, Tubby was experimenting with dub, eventually acquiring the title "Dub Organizer" from a Lee Perry release that celebrated Tubby's prominence in the rapidly emerging subgenre (Katz 165). According to deejay Dillinger (who voiced "Dub Organizer"), artists would "go to King Tubbys for dub because he got the best dub in those days" (quoted in Katz 165).

Perry and Tubby weren't the only artists producing dub in the early 1970s, however. Full-length releases during this early period include Keith Hudson's *Pick a Dub*, Prince Buster's *The Message Dubwise* and Joe Gibbs' *Dub Serial* (Katz 171). By the end of 1974, dub was a widely acknowledged presence at both the sound systems and the record shops. Interestingly, its rise to prominence parallels a significant shift in Jamaican politics, away from the economic conservatism of the 1960s and toward the democratic socialist experiment that began with the 1972 elections. Understanding this shift (and its relationship to the popularity of dub) requires an examination of Jamaica's socio-political history during this period.

In *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds*, David Toop states that it's "no coincidence...that dub originated in a poor section of a city on a

Caribbean island” (116). Dub’s use of echo and reverb to create an aural impression of open space seems like a logical reaction to life inside the cramped Kingston ghettos. In the early 1970s, Kingston was one of the island’s two major urban centers (the other being Montego Bay). Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, an increasing number of Jamaicans emigrated away from the rural portions of the island and headed to the cities. Kingston, the home of dub, was frequently their destination (Austin 9). In the early 1970s, urban population density in the city’s ghettos averaged 25,000 people per square mile, an amount exponentially larger than the country’s average, 477 per square mile (Floyd 54). Unemployment was rampant, and poverty increased even after Prime Minister Michael Manley’s People’s National Party (PNP) instituted a minimum wage (Austin 10). The unemployment rate eventually peaked at 30% in 1979 (11).

Kingston was a tough city. Remembering his youth, Jimmy Cliff stated, “There are few people grown up in West Kingston haven’t seen anybody killed or seen a dead body. And that isn’t big talk, that’s just life” (Bradley 286). Poverty stricken and ridden with crime, Kingston was dangerous: even for reggae stars. King Tubby’s studio, for instance, was located in Waterhouse, a notorious ghetto where violence was a daily occurrence. In dub’s heyday, Waterhouse residents began calling the area “Firehouse” because of its predisposition to rioting, gunplay and crime. According to Michael Veal, Tubby and his fellow musicians would “often lock themselves in the studio until dawn while gunfire raged around them” (118). Tubby had reason to fear violence. During a trip to Morant Bay, a group of policemen fired seven bullets into his Hometown Hi-Fi sound system, effectively destroying it (Maysles 105). Tubby, sadly, would later become a victim of Waterhouse’s unrelenting violence. He was murdered in 1989.

Disillusioned with crime and economic insecurity, voters spoke loudly during the 1972 elections, when Michael Manley's PNP overwhelmingly defeated the ruling Jamaican Labor Party. (In the Jamaican parliamentary system, the JLP is the conservative party, despite its name.) 73.4% of the electorate voted for Manley's party. The PNP eventually gained 37 seats, while the JLP won only 16 (Floyd 147). Manley ran on a platform of reform, advocating a redistribution of wealth and increased government intervention in the private sector (Austin 13). The PNP's victory was due to a number of factors, including increased union membership (an addition of 70,000 workers during the 1960s), but Manley's overt (and innovative) appeals to the island's Rastafarian minority greatly increased his chances of electoral mandate (Tracy 25). Rastafari is a highly complex religion with a wide variety of sects, each with a divergent set of beliefs. However, a summary of Rastafarian history and beliefs is essential for understanding both dub and Jamaican history in general.

Rastafari would not exist, arguably, if not for the careers of two men: Marcus Garvey and Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. Garvey was a civil rights leader who founded UNIA (the United Negro Improvement Association) after leaving England for Jamaica in 1914. A fervent nationalist, Garvey advocated black pride and Pan-Africanism. Later emigrating to Harlem, Garvey sought to establish UNIA chapters throughout the United States. He eventually launched the "Black Star Line," a fleet of ships designed to ferry black Americans back to Africa. Due to his increased radicalism (and the fears of other black leaders as well as the FBI), Garvey was deported back to Jamaica in 1927.

Haile Selassie, in contrast, was the King of Ethiopia and the first black African leader in modern history. Rastafarians believe that Garvey prophesied Selassie's coronation and that Selassie (whose tribal name was Ras Tafari, "ras" meaning "king") was god ("Jah") incarnate. Rastas, as followers of Marcus Garvey, saw Africa as their motherland. Some attempted to return there, although most remained in Jamaica (Floyd 142). Rastafarianism became an integral part of Jamaican Pan-Africanism in the 1960s, as many island residents became aware of themselves as members of a third world, postcolonial nation (Tracy 24). Rastafari's emphasis on repatriation soon became less about a literal return to Africa than a symbolic, philosophical return to the motherland. Accordingly, Rastafarians frequently expressed solidarity with anticolonial armies overseas and fellow members of the black diaspora.

The majority of Jamaicans are not Rastafarian. (Haile Selassie, interestingly enough, remained a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox church until his death.) Jamaica's musicians, however, are overwhelmingly rastas, so the religion has had a massive influence upon the island's popular music. This influence began with the 1960 recording of "Oh Carolina" by the Folkes Brothers, a song which featured the drumming of local rasta musician Count Ossie. Rastafarian themes soon showed up in the music of the Skatalites, who gave their fiery ska instrumentals names like "Exodus," "King Solomon," and "Addis Ababa." Rasta concerns remained largely under the radar during the rocksteady and early reggae eras, but soon emerged stronger than ever when the Wailers' *Soul Rebels* album (which was produced by Lee Perry) became a massive Jamaican hit in 1970. Its songs (particularly Peter Tosh's "400 Years") were militant, deeply religious, and highly danceable. "Roots Reggae" was born.

The roots style, which emphasizes political, social, and religious (generally Rastafarian) concerns, became the most popular form of reggae during the 1970s. Indeed, the Western conception of reggae is based on this style, a stereotype probably due to Bob Marley's popularity in America and the United Kingdom. The relationship between dub and roots reggae is complicated and occasionally hazy, but the two styles are inexorably linked. Dub artists frequently mined roots albums for mixing material, a trend that eventually produced records like *Garvey's Ghost* (1976), a full-length dub companion piece to Burning Spear's classic roots album, *Marcus Garvey* (1975). The line between the two genres is further blurred in works like The Congos' *Heart of the Congos* (1977, produced by Lee "Scratch" Perry), an intensely Rastafarian album containing extended-length tracks that frequently metamorphosize into dub-style instrumental versions. For instance, the track "Ark of the Covenant" contains conventional lyrics until about four minutes into the song, when the vocals disappear and the song becomes--for all intents and purposes--a dub. Roots reggae and dub were both products of the Manley era's acceptance of Rastafarianism. Consequently, the two styles frequently emphasize political change and social justice.

As James F. Tracy notes in "Popular Communication and the Postcolonial Zeitgeist: On Reconsidering Roots Reggae and Dub," "The ascendance of Rastafarian ideals paralleled a national agenda of labor solidarity and the burgeoning socialism of the Michael Manley regime" (24). Rastafari had always been political, but its adherents were rarely involved in national politics ("politricks," in rasta patois) before the 1972 election. Manley's PNP learned to "appropriate Rastafarian rhetoric and symbols to capture the support of the nation's working class and poor" (Tracy 25). Whereas the JLP stressed the

island's status as a former British colony, Manley "encouraged the island's combined African and indigenous art, music, and dance" (Tracy 25). He even toured the island with the "Rod of Correction," a staff given to him by Haile Selassie himself.

Manley's populist appeal and socialist optimism influenced the popular music of the period. Dub artists, like other Rastafarians, tended to be firmly planted in the PNP camp. Both dub and the PNP exhibited an emphasis on "a different world." While dub offered an aural escape from the ghetto, Manley stressed that a better Jamaica was possible. Delroy Wilson's roots reggae classic "Better Must Come," for example, was selected as Manley's campaign song. Since both dub artists and the PNP emphasized Jamaica's possibilities, their ideological alliance is hardly coincidental. Manley himself recognized this affinity, stating in 1982 that his regime "worked to assist in the promotion of the cultural energy of the ghetto as expressed in reggae music" (Quoted in Tracy 25). Manley, in other words, acknowledged Rastafari's political awakening and its influence on both reggae and the 1972 election.

The Michael Manley era (from 1972-1980) is often regarded by historians as little more than a failed experiment in socialism. It's true that the JLP swept back into power in 1980, reversing the leftward trends of the 1970s and ushering in a more conservative decade with Edward Seaga at the helm. (Similar shifts were occurring in the United States and the United Kingdom at the same time. Staunch conservatives Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came to power in 1979 and 1980, respectively.) Manley's eight years as prime minister in the 1970s, however, were a "golden age" for dub. The socialist experiment may have failed, but the hope, optimism and cultural pride of the era undoubtedly influenced dub's radical re-interpretation of reggae. Without the PNP's

belief that “better must come” and their alliance with Jamaica’s long-ignored Rastafarian community, dub’s inspired emphasis on open space (and the possibilities within) may have remained largely unheard. Dub embraced its status as a “music of the ghetto” just as Jamaica acknowledged its status as a postcolonial, afro-diasporic nation. The social politics of the Manley era and the cultural politics of dub are inextricably tied together.

Chapter 2

In *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900-1960*, Peter Doyle argues that there is “an integral and enduring connection between what might be called “reverberancy” and the sacred” (43). Doyle reminds readers about the emphasis on reverberation in the architecture of cathedrals, ziggurats, and other temples while also mentioning that the “sacred cave” is an example of a “natural” religious space (42-3). Caves, after all, possess inherent reverberative and echoic qualities. Doyle’s assertion that *natural* reverberative spaces can possess sacred qualities has particular implications for Jamaica’s Rastafarians, whose belief in the “ital” (natural) stresses humanity’s spiritual connection to the earth. Since the advent of the recording industry, producers have sought to “harness the echo” (in Doyle’s phrase) by artificially reproducing the effect through the use of reverb units, echo boxes, and a variety of other technological gadgets designed to simulate space (38). “Harnessing the echo,” then, removes the effect from its original sacred space. The Jamaican genre of dub, however, frequently utilizes such effects to create the impression of open space and celebrates the possibilities therein. Rastafarianism, which has had an unusually strong influence upon dub reggae, emphasizes a religious *return to the natural* (typically represented by Africa). Dub artists provide a similar auditory departure. Their use of reverb and echo permits listeners to leave the tumultuous present and experience the possibilities offered by dub’s natural audiotopias.

This “departure” is accomplished largely through the use (and creative misuse) of two audio effects, reverb and echo. These effects are both *spatial* in nature. In other words, they simulate the sonic properties of an open space. In fact, the aural difference between them is largely dependent on the limits of the human ear. Reverb, for example, is actually a series of tiny echoes whose delay time is too small for the human ear to distinguish. Therefore, humans hear these echoes as a kind of ambience that resonates after the cessation of the original sound. Since reverb and echo are sonic traits typically experienced in a large, open space (like a cathedral or cave), dub artists utilize these effects to sonically construct alternate worlds. Their use of reverb and echo, however, is hardly typical. The effects they embrace are often misused in a kind of “technological remix” that parallels dub’s musical techniques. *Audiotopias* are constructed through the creative re-interpretation of studio mechanisms such as the spring reverb unit and the echo chamber. Not content to merely reproduce the accepted sonic use of such effects, dub producers remix not only the tracks at their disposal, but the standardized techniques of the recording studio.

Reverb is an audio effect that gives the aural impression of an open space, like a giant hall or a deep cave. Imagine, for example, a choral performance in a cathedral. Even after the chorus’ final notes, the chord hangs in the air for a few seconds before disintegrating into silence. That final chord’s slow decay is an example of reverb. Reverb does, of course, affect the entire performance but the effect is most apparent during a musical rest (a “break”) or at the end of a song. Since the beginning of the recording industry, engineers and producers have struggled to reproduce reverb on record. Creating the illusion of space proved to be a frustrating task, however, since most

songs are recorded “dry” in a tiny studio. Rising to the challenge, producers soon invented bizarre devices to “capture” reverb on record.

Noting that bathrooms often possessed highly reverberative acoustics, record producers would occasionally record vocal performers inside them. Despite its impracticality, this idea was essentially the birth of the reverb “unit.” In Jamaica, the earliest unit was built around 1960 by native Australian Graeme Goodall (“an unsung hero of the Jamaican recording industry,” according to Michael Veal) (49). While working for Federal studio, Goodall set up a speaker in the bathroom, miked it, and then sealed the room (Veal 71). The microphone was specially placed to record both the speaker’s output and the ambient sound of the bathroom. Therefore, any instrument running through the speaker would be drenched in reverb when recorded.

Goodall’s innovations were quickly forgotten, however, as cutting edge “spring” reverb units were brought to the island. These gadgets were large boxes with a metal spring inside. The spring modified any audio signal running through the unit, creating essentially the same effect as Goodall’s bathroom reverb with a lot less hassle. The units were portable enough to be used for live performances, particularly at outdoor dancehalls. Remembering King Tubby’s early use of the effect, deejay Dennis Alcapone stated “It was Tubby’s that introduce reverb in the dance. I never heard a thing like that, because reverb was mostly in the studios...It was just brilliant” (Salewicz 80). Tubby’s mechanical knowledge allowed him to continuously modify and customize his Fisher reverb unit. Michael “Dread” Campbell claimed that it quickly became so different that “the factory wouldn’t recognize it” (Maysles 101). Modified or not, spring reverb units were frequently abused by their owners. Dropping or violently striking one resulted in a

loud crashing sound. King Tubby and Lee Perry both enjoyed this effect and frequently included it in their dubs (Veal 76). (A typical example of “the crash” can be heard at the beginning of King Tubby’s “A Heavy Dub.”)

Reverb soon became an essential part of Jamaican popular music. The “wet” effect—tracks saturated with reverb—perfectly complimented the sunny sounds of ska and rocksteady in Jamaica’s post-independence 1960s. Desmond Dekker & the Aces’ rocksteady hit “Mother’s Young Gal,” for instance, features a heavily reverberative guitar line and occasional “breaks” during which the use of reverb is obvious (0:46, for instance). In dub, however, reverb was utilized for far more extreme purposes. As Michael Veal has noted, reverb “liberated the sound of the drum set,” pushing “the funky minimalism of reggae drumming to their foreground” (Veal 71). Reverb, therefore, not only added a spatial dimension to reggae, but also helped create the emphasis on drum and bass that became so integral to dub. Reverb’s main purpose, however, was to provide listeners with the illusion of space. Reverberative tracks were “open” both spatially and symbolically. Dub artists utilized reverb to construct sonic spaces that sounded as if they were free of human impediment and therefore full of possibility.

King Tubby’s use of reverb was notoriously extreme. One of his most famous mixes was August Pablo’s “King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown,” a dub of Jacob Miller’s “Baby, I Love You So” (both 1975). Tubby’s mix strips Miller’s lightweight love song to its core, completely deconstructing the original recording. Tubby raises the volume of the drum track, occasionally treating it with reverb to emphasize certain drum fills. For the first 20 seconds of the song, the reverberation is barely noticeable. At about 22 seconds in, however, the effect suddenly becomes audible as drummer Carlton Barrett

strikes a snare hit and the violent crack slowly decays into the mix. Tubby's percussive use of reverb "widens" the track, giving the listener an impression of deep canyons and limitless plains.

Echo, like reverb, is a spatial effect. Frequently associated with caves, an echo is essentially the delayed repetition of a sound. On record, echo can be simulated in a number of ways. Sam Phillips, for instance, famously used "slapback" echo on many of Sun Records' mid-50s hits. Echo, however, had already been utilized by Les Paul and Mary Ford on their landmark recording, "How High the Moon." Paul created echo by attaching a number of playback heads to a single tape recorder. By varying the speed of the tape, Paul could control the echoes' rate of return (Doyle 182). Les Paul's innovation was the beginning of "tape echo," an effect created by delaying an audio signal's return to the mix. By the mid-60s, tape echo was a fairly common recording technique. The Dave Clark Five used it, for example, on their 1964 hit, "Glad All Over." When touring, they brought along a Vox CO2 tape echo unit, one of the earliest portable echo boxes.

By the late 1960s, commercial echo boxes like the CO2 and the Echoplex were a staple of rock and roll groups. In Jamaica, however, they were still very rare. Jamaican producers frequently invented their own echo devices. According to Michael Veal, Sylvan Morris was the first to do so, having "fashioned a crude slapback echo effect by using both mechanical and handmade tape loops" (72). Similarly, Mikey Dread claims that King Tubby "made his first echo machine with two old tape recorders" (Bradley 320). Tubby's humble beginnings paid off. His Hometown Hi-Fi sound system (which utilized both reverb and echo) was soon regarded as the best in Jamaica. Dennis

Alcapone, a competitor of King Tubby's, remembered that "when introducing a music or advertising a dance, all his words would echo: it blow my mind" (Salewicz 80).

Alcapone's quote is telling. On record, Tubby frequently used his echo box to treat small snippets of a vocal track. In "King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown," for example, Miller's vocal is mostly absent. When it does return to mix, however, Tubby drenches it in ghostly echo. Miller's first "Baby, I..." (0:30) echoes at least six times, its interior rhythm striking an off-kilter counterpoint to the song's insistent, reverberative beat. Throughout the record, Earl "Chinna" Smith's noisy guitar chords and Augustus Pablo's fluid melodica lines violently echo through the mix, offering their own alternative rhythms. "King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown" is certainly a striking composition, particularly when compared to Jacob Miller's original. The fact that Tubby's echo box was self-constructed, however, makes "Rockers" even more compelling. King Tubby possessed the DIY ("do it yourself") aesthetic years before the punk movement made it hip. Indeed, his vast knowledge of electronics eventually allowed him to design his own studio. Lee "Scratch" Perry frequently recorded there in the early 1970s, taking full advantage of Tubby's gadgetry.

Eventually, however, Lee Perry struck out on his own. While constructing his home studio, however, Perry hired Tubby to design the circuitry for what would soon be christened "the Black Ark" (Bradley 325). Perry's studio was equipped with the infamous Roland Space Echo (RE 201), a commercially available echo box capable of stunning, otherworldly effects. As David Katz notes in *People Funny Boy: The Genius of Lee "Scratch" Perry*, the Space Echo "would prove especially useful on vocal mutations for dub tracks, allowing a message or certain words or syllables to echo seemingly to

infinity” (229). Perry’s use of the echo was, like Tubby’s, fundamentally arrhythmic. The echo often conflicted with the rhythm pattern (i.e. the “riddim” so integral to reggae) instead of complimenting it. In *Dub: Soundscapes & Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*, Michael Veal argues that dub artists use echo to “alternately reinforce or decenter sonic figures” (72). Perry and Tubby’s rhythmic decentering, then, is *purposely* disruptive.

Contemporary digital delay, in contrast, allows musicians to perfectly match echoes to a song’s tempo. This type of echo “reinforces” the rhythm, with echoes occurring at 8th or 16th note intervals, for instance. While it’s true that dub artists occasionally use delay for this purpose, generally the echoes (as in the Perry example) are arrhythmic. Veal argues that dub uses delay “to disjunct timings in order to spin jarring rhythmic tangents against the basic riddim” (72). Veal’s “decentering” is, interestingly, a fundamentally spatial concept. To decenter is, quite literally, “to move away from the middle.” While reverb gives listeners an aural impression of an open space, echo encourages them to “move away” from reality and “toward” the audiotopia hinted at through the reverb. Robert P. Mead addresses similar ideas in “Radiation Ruling the Nation: Aesthetics and Representation in the Globalization of Dub.” Mead asserts that within a dub “it is the listener who cannot retain the center, who must reprogram her expectations and cognitive sensory faculties” (30). Through reverb and echo, listeners depart this plane of existence and become aware of the “new maps” offered by dub’s audiotopias.

Although dub artists were on a constant search for striking new sounds, the technology at their disposal was often primitive, even by the standards of the 1970s.

Perry's Black Ark was originally equipped with an Alice mixer, "a small machine with limited capability" according to David Katz (175). By Perry's own admission, the Alice board probably cost less than 35 British pounds and was supposed to be used "for radio station balancing or maybe like a PA system" (Katz 176). "They weren't professional machines," Perry remarked, "they were only toys" (176). In its earliest incarnation, the Black Ark contained very few microphones. Perry was forced to use an AKG drum microphone when recording vocalists (176). The early days of the Black Ark were fruitful, however, and Perry soon struck gold with Junior Byles' "Curly Locks." Within a year, Susan Cadogan's Perry-produced "Hurt So Good" became a massive international hit.

Like Perry, King Tubby's mixing equipment was hardly top-of-the-line, at least initially. Tubby bought his 4 track mixing board secondhand from another Kingston studio, Dynamic (Veal 113). The board didn't even have mute buttons (Veal 114). In King Tubby's hands, however, the used mixer was transformed into a cutting edge instrument, complete with customized faders that "offered less resistance to the fingers" (Veal 114). Tubby also discovered a little used function of the board, a high-pass filter that allowed him to oscillate the tracks across the spectrum from 70 Hz to 7.5 kHz, creating a "whooshing" sound that became a staple of King Tubby dubs (Veal 114).

The mixing board was, of course, originally conceived as a piece of equipment that merely aided the recording process. It was certainly not considered an instrument. Dub, however, is a producer's medium, so the use of a producer's equipment (mixing boards, reverb units, echo boxes and other effects processors) quickly gained acceptance as a legitimate form of musical expression. Lee Perry, for instance, can be seen in the

1977 film *Roots, Rock, Reggae*, “playing” his Musitronics Super Phasing unit as a musical instrument, “making the kinds of facial grimaces typically reserved for lead guitarists,” according to Michael E. Veal (153). The back sleeve of *King Tubby Meets the Upsetter* (an early collaboration between the dub icons) didn’t even feature a picture of the two producers (Williams 146). Instead, it showed their mixing consoles (Williams 146).

Incorrect or extreme uses of equipment were common for the “dubwise” Kingston producers. King Tubby was constantly dropping his reverb unit in order to produce an abrupt, clanging sound that became one of his signature techniques (Veal 115). Lee Perry rarely used his phase-shifter subtly, often manipulating horn tracks by “reducing their brassiness to the thin sonority of a kazoo,” in Michael E. Veal’s memorable phrase. (153). Such nontraditional uses of equipment were undeniably original, however, and became an essential part of Perry’s Black Ark productions. King Tubby disciple Scientist also utilized mixing techniques that most professional producers would balk at. Scientist built entire dubs around the “bleed” from track-to-track (Veal 138). “Bleed” is the small amount of volume picked up on an incorrect track while recording (for instance, drums picked up by the vocalist’s microphone). Ordinarily, “bleed” is frowned upon since it can cause problems during the mixing process. Scientist, however, turned it into a signature element of his dubs. He would often manipulate the “bleed” using echo or reverb, creating a ghostly sound that is typical of his work (Veal 138).

In *Ocean of Sound*, David Toop notes that the limited technology employed by both Perry and Tubby soon became irrelevant, since in their hands it could be used to create “massive, towering exercises in sound sculpting” (153). For the first time, the

mixing board became a “pictorial instrument, establishing the illusion of a vast soundstage and then dropping instruments in and out as if they were characters in a drama” (Toop 153). Toop’s connection of mixing equipment and “sound sculpting” is fitting, since the manipulation of tracks (through the addition of reverb or echo, for instance) is essential to dub’s construction of sonic space. It’s important to remember, though, that the modification and abuse of equipment is also a type of remixing. Dub theorist Louis Chude-Sokei argues in “Dr. Satan’s Echo Chamber: Reggae, Technology and the Diaspora Process,” that dub is “an example of how cold, alienating Western technologies can be domesticated by those for whom it was not intended” (12). Just as dub artists remix popular reggae songs, then, they also “remix” equipment intended for use in “serious” Western studios. Dub producers succeed in producing natural aural spaces from “cold, alienating” equipment by deconstructing (and reconstructing) Western technologies. This “mechanical remix” has clear parallels with the advent of Hip Hop, when residents of the increasingly de-industrialized South Bronx began “playing” turntables. In the following chapter, I will outline why dub’s audiotopias are inherently natural and why dub remixes in a threefold sense: manipulating recorded tracks, studio technology, and (effectively) the listener’s perception of reality, all at the same time.

Chapter 3

A working definition of the word “nature” is necessary before discussing why dub’s audiotopias are coded as natural. In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams outlines the history of the word “nature,” which he acknowledges as “perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language” (219). For the sake of my analysis, however, we can rely on two interconnected definitions of nature from Williams’ work. While analyzing a passage from William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, he notes that nature is frequently defined as “the primitive condition before human society” from which “there has been a fall and a curse, requiring redemption” (222). Nature is, in effect, defined negatively. A space without human civilization is, therefore, natural. Williams wisely states, however, that a “range of meanings” exists within this seemingly simple definition (222). Nature is “at once innocent, unprovided, sure, unsure, fruitful, destructive, a pure force and tainted and cursed” (Williams 222). Nature can, therefore, be something frightening, particularly to the purveyors of Western civilization. Thus, the concept of nature gains curative properties. Nature has the ability to vanquish both “an obsolete or corrupt society” or “an ‘artificial’ or ‘mechanical’” one (Williams 223). In a phrase strikingly relevant to my discussion of dub, Williams emphasizes nature’s association with regeneration, noting that nature becomes “an alternative source for belief in the goodness of life and of humanity” and functions “as counterweight or as solace against a harsh ‘world’” (223). Dub’s audiotopias, I will argue, perform a similar role in Jamaican society.

The idea that technological mechanisms like the reverb unit and the echo box can be utilized to create *natural* aural spaces seems, at first, a bit counterintuitive. Technology, after all, gains an almost mystic reverence in dub music. The previously mentioned cover of *King Tubby Meets the Upsetter* suggests that the mechanisms are the stars and that their operators are largely irrelevant. Although this theme is prominent in the work of German electro innovators Kraftwerk (and is a common trope in contemporary electronic music), dub artists resist such a technologically dystopic interpretation of their work. Indeed, they seem fully capable of harmonizing the technological and the natural. Lee Perry once described dub music as “the master of logic, the master of science, the master of the earth, the master of the air, the master of the water, the master of fire” (Salewicz 89). Perry’s seamless connection of logic and science with nature apparently solidified when he was a youth. According to biographer David Katz, Perry “insisted his knowledge came entirely from nature” (8). As a young man, he worked in the Jamaican countryside dynamiting boulders. Perry later stated that “by throwing stones to stones I start to hear sounds” (Katz 11). The sound of the stones eventually led him to what he calls “King-stone,” the city where he promptly began his music career (Katz 11). For Perry, the divide between the technological and the natural is largely false. “The studio,” he contends, “must be like a living thing. The machine must be live and intelligent” (Toop 113).

Perry’s dub work often emphasized man’s primal connection to nature. The cover of *Super Ape* (1976), for instance, features a monstrous ape-like creature roaming through a tropical landscape. The lyrics to the album’s eponymous dub reflect the cover, stating “This is the ape-man/Trodding through creation.” *Super Ape*’s tracks, which

contain titles like “Croaking Lizard” and “Dread Lion” paint the picture of a thick primordial jungle. The sparse lyrics, when they do appear, are drenched in watery reverb and frequently emphasize a connection to Africa, the promised land. “Zion’s Blood,” for instance, reminds listeners that “African blood is flowing through my veins/so I and I shall never fade away.” Indeed, Perry himself would later claim to be “from the African jungle” (Katz 1). The cover, designed to resemble a comic book, instructs listeners to “DUB IT UP, blacker than DREAD.” Throughout *Super Ape*, David Katz asserts, “Perry was reaching back to the primordial dawning of mankind, celebrating a naturalistic period when survival was the game but in which the divisive destruction of racism and greed were virtually non-existent” (244). The album, although massively influential, was not for everyone. Rock critic Lester Bangs famously derided it as “almost totally unlistenable” in his essay, “How to Learn to Love Reggae” (Bangs 83).

Super Ape, while indisputably a creative milestone, owes much of its imagery to Perry’s devout adherence to Rastafarianism. The album emphasizes the “ital,” a Rastafarian concept meaning “natural,” “vital,” or “from the earth.” Rastafarians typically eschew red meat and pork, while some are devout vegetarians. Eating an “ital” diet symbolizes both an inner purity and a connection to the earth. Ganja, Rastafari’s holy sacrament, is the epitome of the ital. Ital meals, like ganja, are often shared collectively. All participants add a component to the “ital stew” and everyone partakes.

Lee Perry’s “Corn Fish Dub” (1976) lends itself to this discussion of the ital. “Corn Fish Dub” is a remix of Perry’s “Roast Fish and Corn Bread,” a vocal number dedicated to one of Perry’s favorite dishes. Although dubs are largely instrumental, it’s important to note that they are not *completely* devoid of lyrics. The few words that

survive the deconstruction process, therefore, gain greater significance and are worthy of examination. Typically, “Corn Fish Dub” (which is credited to Perry’s band the Upsetters) removes most of original song’s lyrics. In true Perry fashion, however, the nearly inaudible lyrics bubble underneath the surface of the recording, layered in echo and reverb. Eventually, Perry’s voice emerges out of the musical stew: “And from it vital, it ital.” After delivering (and repeating) the single line, Perry’s voice disappears and the lyric’s quiet babbling continues. Perry’s mix, which leaves traces of the original vocal, suggests to listeners that he has specifically chosen these few lines for inclusion in the dub.

Continuing to emphasize the rastaman’s connection with the earth, Perry’s echoed voice soon returns: “Peanut and dreadnaut, yeah.” The word “dreadnaut” is an example of the punning prevalent in the Rastafarian religion. The term may be understood either as a neologism meaning “spiritual adventurer” or simply as “dread knot,” a reference to the hairstyle common among Rastafarians. In Perry’s lyric, the dreadnaut (or “dread knot,” depending on your interpretation) is comparable to the lowly (but edible) peanut. The seemingly silly lyrics belie a fairly serious implication: we are inextricably connected to our food. We eat food and will some day become food. All, he suggests, will eventually return to the earth. Like the primordial jungle portrayed in *Super Ape*, “Corn Fish Dub” stresses humanity’s connection to the natural, the “ital.”

Similarly, King Tubby’s “African Sounds” (1975) cuts down its source’s lyrics into a simplified Rastafarian slogan, with a heavily echoed voice proclaiming, “Do I, African People/Do I, African Tribe?” Tubby then allows the same vocal line to repeat, but treats the “I” with echo, forcing the delayed signal to echo and distort as the bass &

drums continue the rhythm. The first line repeats at 1:25, but is followed by a slightly different conclusion: “African people, know your culture.” The song’s original verses are almost completely absent. The lyrics that remain form a highly simplified poem:

Do I, African People,
Do I, African Tribe?
Do I...
Do I, African People,
African people, know your culture.
...African People
Do I, Do I, African Tribe?
Do I...

This lyrical deconstruction (“the poetry of dub,” in Michael Veal’s phrase) is aided by King Tubby’s jarring use of echo and reverb to distort particular lines beyond intelligibility (64). The sparse lyrics remind listeners to “know your culture,” while the effects help create an “aural Africa,” a space in which an Afro-diasporic culture can safely exist. As in “King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown,” Tubby treats the drums with reverb in order to “widen” the track. The reverberative snare conjures up images of lightning (and its accompanying thunder), perhaps at the beginning of the African veldt’s rainy season. Not surprisingly, African imagery pervades dub’s song titles. Examples include Augustus Pablo’s “Addis-A-Baba,” King Tubby’s “Drums of Africa” and Joe Gibbs and the Professionals’ “Angolian Chant.” (Joe Gibbs, in fact, named an entire sequence of albums *African Dub All-Mighty*.)

Although echo is typically reserved for the chordal instruments (and the vocal), Tubby occasionally applies it arrhythmically to the drum track. This “decentering” of the rhythm enables the listener’s entrance into the audiotopia. As we leave “the middle”—the traditional, established “riddim”—we enter into a vast, sonic open space. For Rastafarians, Africa represents hope, equality and prosperity. Dub’s audiotopias offer those same traits. Whether it is the “aural Africa” portrayed both lyrically and musically in “African Sounds” or the mist-filled jungles implied by Perry’s *Super Ape*, dub posits natural audiotopias in direct opposition to the gritty ghetto realities of Kingston in the 1970s. Dub, like nature, functions as a “counterweight or as solace against a harsh ‘world’” (Williams 223).

The concept of “decentering” demonstrates precisely how listeners become aware of dub’s audiotopias as alternative spaces. In Chapter 2, I discussed briefly how echo primarily functions as an arrhythmic effect, violently pushing against the bass and drum foundation of a dub. A typical example of this technique occurs about 32 seconds into King Tubby and Soul Syndicate’s “Dub the Right Way.” By this point in the song, the regular rhythm has completely ceased. Tubby treats a vocal snippet with echo, causing it to repeat, distort, and form a rhythm of its own. After a few seconds, Tubby allows the bass and drums to return to the mix, re-establishing the earlier rhythm and therefore classifying the echoed fragment as a kind of radical departure from the regular throb of the dub. As previously stated, this use of echo is both purposely disruptive and extraordinarily common. Indeed, it occurs again later in the same track. At around 1:25, the rhythm drops out and Tubby treats another vocal line with echo, establishing a second counterrhythm. The bass and drums then return and the arrhythmic echoes play against

the song's rhythm in a jarring, asymmetrical battle. It is almost as if Tubby is acknowledging a world of rhythmic possibilities, not all of which can exist within a single song. Listeners experience this "decentering" of the rhythm as a kind of "view beyond the veil" at the possibilities beyond the Kingston ghetto. If dub's audiotopias are natural, rhythmic decentering is the bridge by which listeners experience the spatial shift into nature.

The phenomenological concept of figure-ground relations is helpful for understanding how listeners experience rhythmic decentering. Figure-ground relations examines how we sort through and classify experiences, giving certain phenomena more prominence in our perception while largely ignoring other aspects of an event. In other words, the study of figure-ground relations is essential for understanding our "organization of attention." In *Metal, Rock, and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience*, Harris M. Berger ethnographically profiles a number of jazz musicians in an attempt to identify their "organization of attention" during a performance. As Berger notes, "the everyday world of lived social experience is always *perspectival*" (123). "Some meanings," he argues, "stand out sharply illuminated, others wallow in the shadows, vague and colorless" (123). Beyond mere foreground and background, however, Berger subdivides the latter category into both *defining background* and *receding background*. The defining background includes "phenomena that are located just outside the center of attention, can easily shift into that center, and strongly color the other phenomena in experience" (124). The receding background, then, contains phenomena which are "dimly present for the subject" and have "only a minimal impact on the texture of the experience as a whole" (124). Although Berger's

work is concerned with the organization of attention among *performers*, his theories apply quite readily to an analysis of how *listeners* experience dub.

Rhythmic decentering, then, is an essential part of dub's defining background. The echoed syllable at 0:32 in "Dub the Right Way" could be read as the movement of an alternative rhythm from the receding background into the defining background, coming dangerously close to overtaking the foreground of King Tubby's composition. A similar example occurs in Scientist's "Below the Belt" (from *Heavyweight Dub Champion*, 1980). 45 seconds into the dub, Scientist has established the song's regular, foreground rhythm, a typical reggae groove loping along at a moderate tempo. At 0:49, however, a horn snippet echoes rapidly against the rhythm, transporting the horn part from the receding background into the song's defining background. Suddenly, the listener's attention is pulled toward the echoic saxophone rhythm. It disappears within 5 seconds, however, seemingly withdrawing its challenge to the foreground rhythm.

I've already used the phrase "bubbling under" to describe Lee Perry's use of reverb on the *Super Ape* album, but "bubbling under" is also an accurate description of dub's use of arrhythmic echo, exemplified by Scientist's rapid saxophone rhythm. The jarring alternate rhythm escapes from the song's regular beat, striking against the established pulse before receding into the background. Such violent clashes hint at unlimited rhythmic possibilities existing *just below the surface*, just as dub's natural audiotopias imply the possibility of a better world away from the crowded ghetto. In the following chapter, I will extend my phenomenological analysis of dub by applying a similar methodology to early hip hop. Although dub is often cited as an influence on the creation of hip hop in the 1970s, the notion of rhythmic decentering (and its relationship

to the audiotopia) forms an interesting basis for examining hip hop's musical organization.

Chapter 4

With its immense and really quite obvious influence on rap and hip hop, it's odd that so few scholars have chosen to examine dub as an essential ingredient in the musical stew that would eventually produce hip hop in the late Seventies. Without the large Jamaican immigrant population of New York City, for instance, it's doubtful that hip hop would even exist. In particular, hip hop innovators like Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa relied on their Jamaican heritage to introduce the South Bronx to the concept of the sound system. While Jamaica has been given credit for inspiring the "block parties" that fostered the creation of hip hop, few scholars have delved deeply into hip hop's musical and technological indebtedness to dub. Dub and early hip hop are related specifically in three areas. Historically, both rely on the public use of space as an essential part of the dissemination of their music (Jamaicans had sound systems, New Yorkers had block parties). As genres associated with remix culture, both genres depend on nontraditional uses--or misuses--of technology in order to create songs. Thirdly, they both utilize rhythmic decentering, with hip hop utilizing "scratching" instead of dub's arrhythmic echo.

In the first chapter, I discussed the importance of the sound system to the Jamaican recording industry. These sound systems were held in public places, so the intense rivalries between competing "sounds" (often spurred on by exclusive dub plates) could become dangerous if they devolved into violence. Over time, a far more peaceful mode of settling disputes began: the sound clash. A sound clash was essentially a sonic

competition between two rival sound systems. The systems would set up facing each other on opposite sides of a public place (Campbell 202). One system would play its best material, allowing the competitor to respond afterwards (Campbell 202-203). Crowd response typically determined the winner of the sound clash. The job of choosing the best records was up to the “selector,” but another equally important figure became essential to victory in the sound clash: the “mike chatter,” “toaster,” or “deejay.” Whatever the title, it is here that the Jamaican groundwork for hip hop is laid.

According to Andrew C. Campbell’s “Reggae Sound Systems,” the mike chatter was “responsible for verbally ridiculing his opponent—the other sound—by taunting them” (199). These “toasters” spoke over dub plates, rhyming as they mocked the rival sound system. One of the earliest and most famous deejays was U-Roy, who toasted for King Tubby’s Hometown Hi-Fi in the late Sixties and early Seventies (Veal 55). He, along with fellow deejays Scotty, Dennis Alcapone, and Dillinger, toasted their way onto the Jamaican charts in the late 1960s. Dennis Alcapone’s hit “Teach the Children,” for instance is one of the earliest recorded examples of toasting. During the song, Alcapone raps his way through a variety of nursery-rhymeish lines over a rhythm ripped from Jean Knight’s “Mr. Big Stuff.”

“Toasting” is rather obviously a forerunner of rapping, another art form that relies heavily on streetwise competition. John Connell and Chris Gibson note in *Sound Tracks* that sound clashes were essentially “turf wars through noise” (174), wisely comparing their competitions directly to the South Bronx block parties of the 1970s, where the “success of the music turned on the skill and dexterity of the DJs, their use of original and obscure record sources, [and] the ability to provide breakbeats and mix several different

records using twin turntables and volume faders” (182). Tricia Rose also discusses the “competitive and confrontational” nature of hip hop in her article “A Style Nobody Can Deal With” (79). She refers to hip hop as “a never-ending battle for status, prestige and group adoration” (Rose 79). The block parties were just as competitive as the Jamaican sound systems, with selectors (DJs) and toasters (MCs) only as respected as the last “break” they sampled or the last line they rhymed.

One individual who knew this well was Clive Campbell, better known as DJ Kool Herc, a Jamaican immigrant who came to New York City at age 12 (Connell 182). Kool Herc created a massive sound system, determined to bring the Jamaican “sounds” to the streets of the South Bronx (Leland 187). Herc would use his (initially primitive) PA system to “toast” over records, shouting out to the crowd like a mike chatter at a sound clash (Connell 182). Some of the Bronx audience would have been familiar with the transplanted custom: many residents were recent Jamaican immigrants (Connell 182). Even today, only Kingston has a larger Jamaican population than New York City (Veal 246). Herc soon discovered, however, that New Yorkers preferred funk and soul over reggae. Not content to merely play the records, however, Kool Herc devised a way to isolate and prolong the “breaks,” instrumental (often percussive) sections enjoyed by dancers (Connell 182). Herc’s contemporaries, like Grandmaster Flash, soon followed suit. Hip hop was born.

In chapter two, I discussed dub’s reliance on mixing equipment instead of traditional instrumentation. Immigrants like Kool Herc arguably transferred dub’s unique technological perspective to the South Bronx, establishing the mixing board (and eventually, the turntable) as an essential musical element of hip hop. “Playing” a

turntable or a cross-fader was a laughably absurd concept until Grandmaster Flash and Kool Herc started blowing minds during block parties in the South Bronx. It was, perhaps, no surprise that Flash (like King Tubby) had a background in repairing electronic equipment (Rose 79), while Kool Herc attended a vocational high school for aspiring auto mechanics (Leland 187). Likewise, many hip hop innovators “used the tools of obsolete industrial technology” to establish a new art form: one that was born out of poverty, but soon became a ticket out of the ghetto (Rose 79). As Tricia Rose notes, a lack of funding for public music education made traditional instruments inaccessible, so South Bronx residents were forced to use what they had (turntables, mixing boards, etc.) to make music (78). Like dub, hip hop utilizes audio technology to create a wholly new art form, one that relies on the manipulation of recorded sound. This manipulation is accomplished through a “mechanical remix” comparable to the use and misuse of technology by dub artists. Just as dub artists pushed their reverb units and echo boxes beyond the boundary of standard studio usage, hip hop’s innovators redefined the term “instrument” to include such audio technology like the turntable.

In chapter three, I outlined precisely how dub utilizes rhythmic decentering to imply the existence of alternate worlds. As I stated, the term “decentering” comes from Michael E. Veal’s *Dub: Soundscapes & Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*. In this book-length analysis of dub reggae, Veal argues that the “two central strategies of dub mixing” are “fragmentation and incompleteness” (57). Dub’s rhythmic decentering, then, can be read as simply another example of the genre’s emphasis on fragmentation. Dub’s echoic alternate rhythms are never fully established, after all. They do not overtake the rhythmic foreground but instead remain within the song’s defining background,

influencing the listener's awareness of sonic space. They are incomplete, offering only a hint at the possibilities offered by the audiotopia.

Veal's discussion of "fragmentation and incompleteness" is remarkably similar to Tricia Rose's theory that hip hop is largely built around "flow, layering and ruptures in line" (81). She writes that the "flow and motion of the initial bass or drum line in rap music is abruptly ruptured by scratching" (Rose 81). For example, Grandmaster Flash's "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" (1981) features the bass and drum section from Chic's "Good Times," but the flowing record is constantly being interrupted by Flash's scratching and cutting, creating a fragmented rhythm effect. We can compare Flash's track with Augustus Pablo's "King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown," where the bass and drum tracks are interrupted ("ruptured," to use Rose's phrase) by echoed guitar at seemingly random intervals. Michael E. Veal sums up dub "as a style marked by the composition of vertical events against a relatively static background" (77). These "vertical events," like the "ruptured" scratching of a hip hop song, add an element of surprise and interruption to the basic nature ("flow") of the rhythm track (Veal 77). Although hip hop and dub are supposedly two completely different genres, their musical aesthetic seems nearly identical. Both are based around a rhythmic decentering that emphasizes rupture and fragmentation.

Not surprisingly, then, my application of Peter Berger's theories about figure-ground relations in music (discussed in chapter three) apply quite readily to hip hop. The "flow" discussed by Tricia Rose is effectively hip hop's foreground, while the scratching that "ruptures" (or decenters) the regular rhythm exists mainly within the song's background, moving from the track's receding background into the defining background

depending upon the violence of the rupture. Again, “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel” serves as an excellent example for an application of Berger’s theories. The “Good Times” rhythm functions as the song’s foreground, while Flash’s scratching ruptures the rhythm’s regularity, decentering the track and moving alternate rhythms into the defining background (and dangerously close to overtaking the established rhythm).

Unlike dub’s “organization of attention,” Flash’s scratching eventually does result in a dramatic rhythmic shift (Berger 123). Utilizing multiple records, Grandmaster Flash constructs what is essentially a medley, finally allowing other songs to overtake the “Good Times” rhythm and become, effectively, the track’s foreground. In dub, alternate rhythms remain squarely within the defining background. In hip hop works like Grandmaster Flash’s “Adventures,” alternate rhythms actually succeed in *overtaking the foreground*, a musical conquest that seems like a logical outgrowth of dub’s radical musical aesthetic.

Rhythmic decentering is an integral part of both genres. Dub’s decentering is tied specifically to its creation of natural audiotopias. In dub, rhythmic decentering offers listeners blurry visions of alternate worlds free from the poverty and cramped ghettos so common to Jamaica. Dub’s major themes (earthly connection and cultural renewal through nature) are less prevalent in its descendants, however, leaving the details about hip hop’s audiotopias somewhat in question. The similarity in techniques utilized by their practitioners, however, demonstrates the importance of sonic space to both dub and hip hop, a cultural connection beyond their obvious historical relationship.

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