

The Hardcore Continuum?

A Report on the “The Hardcore Continuum?” symposium held at the University of East London, April 29th 2009

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floor

The “The Hardcore Continuum?” seminar at UEL came about through an appropriately accelerated and unauthored process of contagion, given the nature of the phenomenon it set out to debate. A month or so after Simon Reynolds had given his widely-publicised talk on the subject in Liverpool, organised by the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (February 25th 2009),¹ a series of posts on blogs regularly linked to Reynolds’ had created a feverish sense of controversy and possible inter-generational conflict amongst a small but impressively articulate coterie of music bloggers, journalists and critics. The controversy turned both on Reynolds’ concept of a “hardcore continuum” (or “the nuum” as it is sometimes known), and on the validity of the critical judgements that he has tended to make on its later manifestations. Put simply, Reynolds has argued for the existence of an identifiable continuity between the producers of and audiences for a sequence of dance music forms to have emerged from urban London since the early 1990s, and has argued for the extraordinary vitality of the creative matrix which has produced “hardcore” techno, jungle, drum & bass, UK garage, grime, dubstep and “funky”. The increasing attenuation of the communicative links between crowds, producers and critics within this context has, Reynolds generally seems to feel, led to a progressive decrease in its capacity to produce exciting, urgent, innovative yet popular dance sounds: an opinion which is hotly contested by younger advocates of these more recent sonic experiments.

Having become aware of just a little of this controversy, I suggested to my colleague Steve Goodman (who happens to be one of the doyens of the London dubstep scene, producing and DJing as Kode 9 while running the influential *Hyperdub* label) that we organise a small, low-key event at which some of these issues could be thrashed out face to face. I didn’t imagine that it would attract the interest of more than a dozen or so participants, but then I hadn’t realised the extent or density of the networks which sustained this cultural micro-climate. My own musical priorities and activities had parted company with “the nuum” very early in its history, although I had retained a fond interest in it, having been a fan of the music in its earliest moment, having danced at clubs that I only now realise have apparently become legendary, and having consistently argued for the formal radicalism and importance of its legacy, even when it didn’t inspire much subjective enthusiasm in me as a listener. Steve, however, is a critical node in the networks that have emerged from that context, and within a few hours, his texting-messaging, e-mailing and mobile phone calls had assembled a brilliant team of enthusiastic commentators all keen for the chance to make public their views on Reynolds’ concept of a “hardcore continuum”, and had secured the support of *The Wire: Adventures in Modern Music*, the UK’s leading monthly magazine of ex-

perimental music. *The Wire's* Lisa Blanning joined a panel comprising Steve and Kodwo Eshun (who gave a joint presentation), journalists Joe Muggs and Dan Hancox, producer and blogger Martin Clark,² blogger Alex Williams,³ critic, writer, journalist and über-blogger Mark Fisher (who also contributed to this edition of *Dancecult*),⁴ and me. Simon himself, only having been invited once the dust had settled and the arrangements firmed-up, sadly wasn't able to join us; although all concerned (Simon included) felt that his Liverpool talk – freely available online in video form at the *FACT* link above – was a sufficiently lucid and comprehensive account of his views to stand as his major contribution to the discussion.

Coming to the debate somewhat from the outside, I was surprised both at the size of the turn-out (over 60 attendees, mostly white men in their 20s, and so too young to remember the golden age of “Hardcore” which had had East London as its epicentre when I was an undergraduate myself) and at the hostility expressed by most of the speakers to Reynolds' position. The contributions varied greatly in tone and approach, but all were, one way or another, responding not only to Reynolds' general hypothesis of a social and musical continuity linking early 90s “hardcore techno” (or just “hardcore” as it would soon be known, any association with Detroit or Frankfurt having been quickly forgotten), jungle, drum & bass, UK garage, grime, dubstep and “funky”; but also to his increasing scepticism about the later elements in this series.

Most strikingly, the debate over “wonky” – the name sometimes given to the experimental beat music associated with British producers such as Joker and Zomby, but also with California's Flying Lotus – brought out some of the key fault-lines. Where Reynolds and Fisher, members of the original hardcore generation, don't hear the vitality of an organic urban music culture in this Myspace-era music, those producers and commentators who have come to maturity or prominence under the dispersed and digitised conditions of the current millennium understandably resent their apparent condescension, and hear wonky as a vital contribution to the self-renewal of dance-derived forms. Eshun and Goodman – the same age as Fisher and Reynolds, but inspired by different commitments – offered a presentation which, through some very close listening and highly tentative theorising, seemed to locate wonky in a different, less historically or geographically-bounded continuum: the (anti-)tradition of Afrofuturism. Apart from Fisher, the other contributors all took the opportunity to take issue with Reynolds for the critical positions which his particular deployment of the “nuum” concept tends to lead him to: increasingly dismissive of those developments such as dubstep and funky which, while seeming to come from the continuum, appear to Reynolds to retain none of its characteristic energy, its unique capacity to combine breathtaking sonic avant-gardism with a genuinely dancefloor-driven party culture. Most of the session was recorded and although we chose not to make it publicly available, most of the contributions found their ways onto the blogs of their respective authors, and I supplied a copy to Simon who wrote several very long posts on the *Energy Flash* section of his blog in reply.⁵

Having lived in East London throughout the history of the “nuum”, and having some distance from the debates, there seemed to me to be a fairly obvious way of accommodating these different perspectives within a singular account. On the one hand, the remarkable ecology of dance parties, clubs, pirate radio stations and record shops which sustained the hardcore, jungle and garage scenes in the 1990s clearly did produce not just a music but a culture characterised by incredible creative intensity and breathtaking levels of sonic innovation on an almost daily basis. The deterritorialisation of that ecology under exactly the same pressures which have seen so

much of everyday culture digitised, globalised, fragmented and specialised in recent years inevitably disrupted it, intensifying some elements, creating new connections and new opportunities, while inevitably rendering impossible the organic and immediate sense of community which had characterised some of its regions and nodes at their most successful.

The London dubstep scene, for example, is accessible and welcoming to participants from a wide range of social backgrounds in a way that the “underground” jungle scene never was, but it is also characterised by a certain self-consciousness which is inevitably somewhat embarrassing to those who can remember what the jungle scene felt like “back in the day”. Dubstep is an internationally-successful genre whose devotees desperately *want* to belong to a “scene” and to listen to avant-garde music with its roots in reggae, jungle and grime. Jungle, on the other hand, was essentially a local music – a seemingly spontaneous *bricolage* of reggae, hip-hop, dancehall, house and techno which nonetheless sounded entirely new and entirely unique – made for local dance crowds. It took most intellectuals, critics, audiences and producers from outside of that milieu several years to stop dismissing it as meaningless proletarian noise and to realise its musical importance, despite the efforts of early advocates such as Reynolds himself. The crucial historical pivot between these two phases was probably the early grime scene, which was a truly strange phenomenon: a weird point of convergence between a handful of teenage producers coming from some of the poorest parts of London and an international network of online intellectuals who were amazed and inspired by the energetic inventiveness of their music, even while it proved too abrasive for most of their peers. Inevitably, the different sets of relationships characterising these different contexts generate very different musics, affects and experiences. Naturally enough, those who missed the urgency of the 1990s scenes feel some resentment towards critics who had the luxury of that experience, and who now seem to be dismissing the different forms of musical creativity which the world of web 2.0 enables.

I’m trying to be impartial here, but perhaps this is disingenuous. In my view, Fisher’s argument that none of the music emerging from this contemporary context has the capacity to shock and amaze listeners as did the sequence of new genres which emerged from London and Bristol in the 1990s is surely valid, with little coming out of the dubstep or wonky matrices which would have much surprised any aficionado of *Warp* records’ “Intelligent Dance Music” in 1995. Anybody who disputes this just isn’t familiar enough with the kind of experimental electronica which was being produced by groups like Black Dog and Plaid at the time. It’s not as if these musics sound *exactly* the same as today’s. The point here is rather that all of the ingredients for wonky and dubstep were easily available and could easily have been imagined in their present configurations by the middle of the last decade. At the same time, I have to confess that the apparent desperation of dubstep’s self-conscious will-to-scenehood is often rather painful to observe, despite the evident quality of the best music that it has produced. What this tells us about the relationships between “authentic” community, sonic creativity and the social dynamics of artistic innovation I’m not entirely sure: but Reynolds and Fisher are both clearly right in their suspicion that it problematises a number of classically “postmodern” hypotheses about the simple unimportance of these issues. Like it or not, the flattened-out relationships of the digital universe just *don’t* produce musics which carry the same affective charge as those emerging from dense locales of shared lived experience. Rather than disputing this observation, it might be more important to consider what it means and what it might tell us about our own possible futures...

My own contribution to the seminar took a slightly different tack to the others. Trying to take a deliberately provocative position, I asked what would happen if we were to acknowledge the case for the extraordinary creativity of the “hardcore continuum”, especially in its “high” moment in the 1990s, but were to question its overall historical significance nonetheless. Despite the formal radicalism of these musics, the scenes associated with them were notorious for the aggression, sexism and homophobia which characterised them, and at a time when black radicalism was in apparent crisis, these largely black-derived musics seemed to be entirely divorced from the political legacies of soul, reggae and hip-hop. Indeed, given the social and political radicalism characterising most of their immediate antecedents (acid house, with its origins in the black gay clubs of Chicago; hip-hop, only recently having left its “golden age” of political consciousness; reggae, with its history of anti-capitalism and anti-racism), as well as the traditional radicalism of their core constituency – the multiracial poor of urban London – the music scenes of the “nuum” were *notable* for their detachment from any kind of politics, their embrace of competitive entrepreneurial values, and their defence of masculinist and heterosexist norms which other dance cultures were busily and visibly deconstructing at just that moment.

Of course, it is important to note that the much-vaunted cosmopolitanism of everyday culture in London surely has been one of the reasons that the far right has found it so difficult to find a foothold there over the past 20 years, unlike in many European cities that have witnessed similar social changes and a similar decline of the traditional left. The hardcore continuum has clearly played a positive role in helping to inoculate London and the wider UK against the fascist virus, by creating shared modes of corporeal intensity which transfigure elements previously felt to be “black” or “white” into musical and dance forms which move beyond these categories altogether. However, this role has been enacted only at a very subtle level. Compared to other musical forms which have been characterised by *either* an obvious exchange between different ethnic cultures *or* the extraordinary formal avant-gardism which typified jungle, garage and grime, the most notable thing about those forms has been their inability to connect with any wider social forces. Might this not be one of the reasons why they have seemed to be so difficult to sustain? Although producers have carried on making all of these musics, the general critical consensus has been that the innovative energy went out of each of these scenes after just a few years and a handful of really classic records. Compare this to the longer histories of jazz, rock, funk, reggae, disco or soul, and one has to ask if the story of the hardcore continuum is not a story of fantastic creativity being repeatedly forestalled, trapped in the cultural ghettos of “underground” raves and amateur radio stations, and thereby neutralised before it could connect with any wider social forces, or even construct a culture for itself which could enable it properly to grow. The white-hot intensity of those sonic innovations may well stand as a legacy to the extraordinary creative potential immanent to groups outside the ordinary networks of capital circulation and “official” culture; but it might also stand as a legacy to the fragility and impotence of such creativity – its inability to avoid capture and reterritorialisation by capital and reactive patriarchy – when it is divorced from any wider struggle for autonomy or democracy.



Author Biography

Jeremy Gilbert teaches Cultural Studies at the University of East London, and has written widely on music, politics and cultural theory. His publications include *Discographies: Dance Music Culture and the Politics of Sound* (Routledge 1999) and *Anticapitalism and Culture: Radical Theory and Popular Politics* (Berg 2008).

Notes

- 1 <http://www.factmagazine.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2028&Itemid=101> (accessed 30 August 2009).
- 2 <<http://blackdownsoundboy.blogspot.com/>> (accessed 30 August 2009).
- 3 <<http://splinteringboneashes.blogspot.com/>> (accessed 30 August 2009).
- 4 <<http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/>> (accessed 30 August 2009).
- 5 <<http://energyflashbysimonreynolds.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2009-06-17T17%3A55%3A00-07%3A00&max-results=7>> (accessed 30 August 2009).