
MAN VIBES: MASCULINITIES IN THE JAMAICAN DANCEHALL

DONNA P. HOPE

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Given the predominance of men as DJs, sound system crew, promoters and industry executives in Jamaican dancehall, many social observers have noted the ways in which this subculture reflects a strong privileging of male sensibilities, anxieties and desires. This acknowledgement, however, often gives way to more generalized discussions of the subculture or, where gender does indeed become the focus, to commentary on its manifestations in the erotic dress and dance of female dancers. While these are certainly crucial to an understanding of dancehall subculture, the more complex sociohistorical, political and economic nuances of Jamaican masculinity as expressed in this space have remained largely unexplored. This has been the case at least until the publication of Donna P. Hope's *Man Vibes: Masculinities in the Jamaican Dancehall*, a critical contribution to the growing corpus of scholarship on this subculture.

Hope employs a range of methodologies in her research. These include interviews with inner-city dancehall practitioners and lyrical analysis of the many songs, past and present, that speak to the multivalent construction of masculinity in contemporary dancehall. Hope, a Lecturer in Reggae Studies at the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of the West Indies, begins by articulating her principal concern with how dancehall culture, viewed by many Jamaican social critics as variously hostile to the values of the Jamaican middle class, is in fact engaged in a deep conversation with it. In the first chapter, Hope mobilizes the Gramscian concept of hegemony to define that particular manifestation of masculinity—strong, straight, financially secure, and sexually promiscuous—which is considered normative in much of Jamaican society. She explores the literature on the colonial

and capitalist terms in which black masculinities have historically been circumscribed throughout Jamaica and the Caribbean. Hope is interested in a tension whereby poor Afro-Jamaican men engage in extreme performances of a subcultural masculinity that is at the peripheries of the Jamaican middle class experience, even as these performances in many ways reinscribe the hegemonic masculinity of that middle class.

“a scholar with an extraordinarily close ear to the ground of Jamaican dancehall culture”

In each of the next five chapters, Hope focuses on a key term in which this process manifests itself. In Chapter Two, she focuses on promiscuity as one such term. Male dancehall practitioners' emphatic declarations of their sexual prowess and conquests would appear distasteful by monogamous, Christian, middle-class standards. However, Hope notes that many middle-class men, too, secretly engage in this behavior; the ability to father and financially provide for many children in and out of wedlock is a measure of manhood for many Jamaican men across classes. In the third chapter, Hope focuses on gun violence as another aspect of hardcore dancehall masculinity; as is true in many other societies plagued by such violence, those who bear the guns are often only the desperate proxies of more powerful individuals higher up in the social order.

The fourth chapter focuses on an intense homophobia as one of the more notorious expressions of masculinity in dancehall culture. Hope notes that here again, such expressions are not confined to the dancehall but rather reflect a sentiment more generally felt throughout much of Jamaican society. Hope frames dancehall homophobia in relation to the mainstream in a range of ways: as “arguably a radical and extreme variant to Jamaican masculine paranoia of the feminine where in many instances, male homosexuals are deemed gender traitors who violate the accepted rules of gender identity and/or gender performance” (69-70); as legally normative; as partly a product of religious fundamentalism; and as an attitude whose effects are socioeconomically inflected, whereby gay men who happen to be relatively privileged bear a degree of insulation that comes with class-based respectability.

The fifth chapter focuses on conspicuous consumption as another prominent aspect of dancehall masculinity. Hope chronicles the range of brand name commodities—from luxury cars to cell phones to alcoholic beverages—that have been in vogue throughout the history of contemporary Jamaican dancehall. In her discussion of the British Link-Up Crew, an especially extravagant group of men who have promoted dancehall events in Jamaica, Britain and the United States, Hope notes that dancehall as an expression of desire to escape poverty is significantly situated not only in local terms, but also vis-à-vis Jamaican migration to the colonial mother country and the geographically proximal superpower of the United States.

In light of the strident homophobia of the dancehall, the sixth chapter of *Man Vibes* is perhaps the most intriguing. Here, Hope identifies what she sees as a recent shift in expressions of dancehall masculinity towards a “feminized aesthetic”, one which includes “regular visits even by the most hardened ghetto youth to cosmetologists for facials, manicures and pedicures . . . regular visits to salons for hair care . . . conspicuous and intricate hair styles (e.g. intricate cornrows), and plucked, trimmed and fashioned eyebrows” (125). Skin bleaching, conventionally associated with women but also now evidenced among men (allegedly including the superstar DJ, Vybz Kartel), is a further manifestation of this trend. The recent popularity of dance—again, conventionally the province of women or heterosexual dance partners—among individual as well as groups of men is for Hope another indication of the emergence of this “softened” variant of dancehall masculinity” (ibid.), one whose homosociality verges ambiguously on the homosexual.

Hope astutely notes that homosexuality—despite this trend toward a softened masculinity—remains marginalized in the Jamaican dancehall, and discusses a subsequent backlash in which several dancehall artists have criticized this development in their songs. Still, she views the trend as potentially transgressive. She writes that “this radically transgressive variant to dancehall masculinity . . . raises questions about the current constitution of hegemonic masculinity from which dancehall culture ultimately draws its strength” (142), and suggests that this development might be seen as an extension of a narcissistically embodied commodity aesthetic drawn from such transnational sources as Western high fashion. While there may quite possibly be latent homosexuality in the feverish homophobia of the Jamaican dancehall, Hope’s suggestion above leads one to wonder how much this development is really about the feminization or homosexualization of dancehall masculinity. This is as opposed, or relative to what may more immediately be a local and transnational commodity aesthetic whose aspects of gender and sexual orientation are secondary (which is not to say unimportant).

Hope rightly abstains from facile social psychological observations about the meanings of this trend toward the feminization of dancehall masculinity, but concerning the quote above, on which this chapter ends, it would have been interesting if she had more extensively addressed the “questions” she believes this development raises about hegemonic masculinity in Jamaica. Indeed, I would have liked to have heard a bit more about what precisely Hope believes are the challenges dancehall masculinities pose to hegemonic Jamaican masculinity, beyond its status as something apart from the middle-class.

The book contains some editorial infelicities which, smoothed over, would have given greater force to Hope’s otherwise lucid writing. But this aside, what one garners from this book is the sense of Hope as a scholar with an extraordinarily close ear to the ground of Jamaican dancehall culture, and a sense of gratitude that she has taken on the fraught but important topic of masculinity in the dancehall in the systematic, sustained and sensitive way she has. *Man Vibes* is a welcome work that will advance the national, and international, conversation on this topic, hopefully, as its author writes in closing, in ways that will disclose more direct and socially beneficial “routes to empowerment for Jamaica’s future men and women” (168).

**HOLD ON TO YOUR DREAMS:
ARTHUR RUSSELL AND THE DOWNTOWN MUSIC SCENE, 1973–92**
TIM LAWRENCE

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**A MUSICAL PIONEER FROM NEW YORK'S GOLDEN DOWNTOWN PERIOD:
ARTHUR RUSSELL AND THE INFINITE MIX**

Hold on to Your Dreams, on deceased New York musician Arthur Russell, is Tim Lawrence's second book and follows 2003's *Love Saves the Day* (LSTD). Whereas the social and musical backgrounds of both are broadly similar authorial purpose and the resulting tone are markedly different. Whereas the earlier book tells a straightforward history of disco, though varying from other accounts as Lawrence argues that Loft party supremo David Mancuso's role remained pivotal from first to last, *Hold on to Your Dreams* is primarily an unswervingly intimate portrait of an unclassifiable, restless musician who "skipped between sounds and scenes with the nonchalant ease of a kid playing hopscotch" (2).

In the Preface, Lawrence is clear about his endeavour: "Along with the topography of Russell's choices, the testimonies of Russell's family, friends and collaborators have heavily shaped this book" (xix). He explains that, if alive, Russell might have hindered the biography as the cellist, singer, songwriter and quixotic producer was "often cryptic and cagey when interviewed" (ibid.). Intrigued when a leading light in the 70s disco scene told him that Russell's "mutant disco" tracks like "Go Bang!" and "It's All Over My Face" are quite simply sublime, and that the quietly-spoken, obstinate man from the US Mid-West was an unsung era from the golden days of downtown, Lawrence set out to "combine the burrowing mentality of the archaeologist with the presentational outlook of the museum curator and the emotional sensitivity of a diarist" (xx).

The word *definitive* is not strong enough for Lawrence's deep excavation of Russell's life. With clearly no stone unturned, the text might have been plodding and over-worthy. But Lawrence repeats the trick of LSTD: whenever he senses that a gossipy tale, music description or cultural analysis may start to tire, he shifts the beam to something else, confident enough to begin a new section sometimes unconnected from the one before.

The chapters in *Hold on to Your Dreams* tend to start with a contextualising section such as Chapter Four's "Intensities", on how the experimental music scene took shape in downtown spaces like The Kitchen. Chapter Five's "Variations" explores the time when disco had passed its creative and progressive peak. Lawrence suggests that performance spaces integrated "all kinds of avant manifestations" (179) while generic distinctions blurred. This was Russell's time, a period when pop, new wave, experimental, jazz, funk and mutant disco rubbed shoulders, if not always easily or amicably.

Russell epitomised downtown's wildly creative aesthetic in the way he always worked across genres and was quintessentially community-minded. But, for Lawrence, Russell's gift reached beyond this time period too. He pre-figured the post modern, multi-mix where music would be re-invented in an infinite number of ways. However, early on Lawrence identifies this Renaissance man's Achilles heel (5).

(He) spread himself across too many scenes and worked with too many musicians to build up a major reputation in a single genre, yet his lack of commercial success cannot be attributed solely to the music industry's distrust of eclecticism. Russell's perfectionism was peppered with obstinacy—on one occasion he spent the whole day fine-tuning a kick drum while his co-musicians waited to begin.

However, Lawrence goes on to argue consistently and persuasively that "there was something beautiful about Russell's reluctance to decide on a final mix of many of his works" (ibid.). In a moving passage, Lawrence explains how, towards the end, and to the immense sadness of his many friends, Russell was just too sick to comment on how his multitude of mixes could be better dissected and reconstructed.

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There are many light hearted and frankly amusing stories on Russellian disapproval. He complained loudly to all about heavyweight dance music producers Larry Levan and Francois Kevorkian's remixes—which garnered significant scene-approval. Russell had fulminated that the versions of "Go Bang!", played to thousands of ecstatic gay dancers in clubs The Saint and Paradise Garage, were too obvious and under-subtle, preferring his own complex, loopy takes, which strung a dizzying array of sonic ideas together as if out to confuse the dance floor. And when remix genius Walter Gibbons worked with Russell in re-designing the beautiful "Let's Go Swimming", an observer later offered Lawrence an insight into the all-night studio sessions (262).

There were incredible scenes of screaming and fights... Arthur was shrieking and tearing his hair out, raging around the studio like a psychotic bat, while Walter was calmly snipping and pasting the tape as if it was macramé. Arthur would say, 'You're ruining my fucking vision!' And Walter would reply, 'Arthur, Arthur, calm down!' (ibid.)

If Russell comes across as an obstinate perfectionist—and just a little “queeny”—then the reader is adroitly pulled into agreeing that moves to commercialise his, and downtown’s, singularly creative flow of music were (sort of) unethical although clearly successful and worthwhile in cases like Talking Heads and Laurie Anderson. As Lawrence reminds, Russell’s view was that “music’s will to freedom was hard to contain, and each recording was capable of being re-born—played differently and experienced differently—in a unquantifiable range of settings” (190).

Lawrence remains an unashamed fan and a sensitive portrayer throughout but *Hold on to Your Dreams* exemplifies the same kind of minor weaknesses apparent in *LSTD*. Sometimes his urgency at getting inside Russell’s head, to better understand motivation, psychology, or just to aid a smoother chronological flow, comes over as a little strained. After Lawrence declares that Russell “embodied radical change” (189), he feels the need to add, “it’s possible that Arthur struggled to grasp the full range of his activity” (ibid.). And throughout, Lawrence feels irresistibly drawn to lists, the longer the better, where many authors consider such blocks of text prettier when shunted to a footnote, or endnote.

Small misgivings aside, *Hold on to Your Dreams* is an exquisitely moving, comprehensive and impressive work of human forensics which helps unlock the numerous edges, seams, schisms and passions of the 1970s and 1980s downtown eras. Rarely for works on non-art music—rather, popular music—cultures, it exalts in a uniquely detailed, satisfying and unswerving portrait of someone who, Lawrence convinces, was a great yet largely unsung musician, composer and arranger. In addition, and with a keen eye on cultural milieu interchanges, Lawrence identifies a profound effect of the Russell aesthetic.

Whenever he could, Russell... established the framework for an egalitarian, cooperative practice. He created music within a range of collaborative networks, and emphasized the group over his own individual presence (345).

In what must have been a trying test, Lawrence doesn’t shirk the final, tragic moment in April 1992 when Russell died from AIDS-related complications, obscure, angry and frustrated, although surrounded by loved ones. He ends with a reflection from Russell’s long term partner, Tom Lee, who tells Lawrence that “he should have realized the end was coming when Arthur stopped listening to his (Sony) Walkman, comparing Side A and Side B of the same recording” (333).

In a postscript, Lawrence tells how, since 2004, much of Russell’s best work has been released, some even re-mixed, and a little of the many hours of dusty studio tape given the light of day for the first time. Lawrence leaves us with the firm impression that his subject’s “ethic of pluralistic openness . . . has been embraced” (354).