

dancecult

JOURNAL OF ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURE



ECHOES FROM THE DUB DIASPORA

GUEST EDITORS TOBIAS C. VAN VEEN AND HILLEGONDA C. RIETVELD

VOLUME 7 NUMBER 2 2015

DANCECULT

JOURNAL OF ELECTRONIC
DANCE MUSIC CULTURE

Issue 7(2) 2015

ISSN 1947-5403

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Published twice yearly at
<<http://dj.dancecult.net>>

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INTRODUCTION: ECHOES FROM THE DUB DIASPORA

— EDITORS' INTRODUCTION —

HILLEGONDA C. RIETVELD AND TOBIAS C. VAN VEEN
LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY (UK) / UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL (CANADA)

Dub is a term that resonates in multiple aspects of electronic dance music culture. In the crates of DJs, the search terms of online record shops, and echoing throughout scholarly and cultural genealogies, dub signifies a signature style of spatialized rhythm and sound that derives from the studio practices pioneered by Jamaican dance sound systems since the late 1960s, in which versions—“dubs”—were crafted from instrumentals of reggae recordings. Eventually, the techniques of this type of remix, both disruptive and echoic, became an end in itself. The resulting dub aesthetic, as Veal (2007) puts it, shatters not only song form and narrative conventions, but ruptures and fragments the cultural politics of dominance.

Pressed on vinyl and spun by DJ selectors, the skeletal forms of reggae allowed vocalists, emcees and the dancing crowd to superimpose lyrics during sound system events. Using the studio as instrument, by the 1970s the practice of versioning developed into a remix aesthetic. As an evolving and experimental art, dub foregrounds the texture of sound as a landscape of low frequency vibrations, haunted absences and instrumental snippets punctuated by rhythmic events and otherworldly toasting. Crucially then, dub is not only a musical style but also an artistic discourse, in the aesthetic act of making dub—a type of remixing that emphasizes the phatic affects of sonic space and haunted time.

This special issue began with a question posed to the *Dancecult* listserv in April of 2014: what research had been conducted around the cultural dissemination of dub, particularly its cross-genre, and transcultural, influence upon dub techno? How might we, as scholars that attend to dub as a sonic, cultural, and black Atlantic formation, coordinate various perspectives on what might be called the “dub diaspora”?

Our interest in thinking the complexity of dub arose through its valences: the multiple inflections of dub as it encompasses a production practice and a remix aesthetic as well as the embodied experience of dub’s haunted spaces and echoes on the dance floor. The study of dub calls for its critical as well as speculative thinking as a mode and materialist practice of

belonging, a space of encounter and exchange, and a shared imaginary of cultural allegiance. Before encountering Sullivan's book *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora* (2014; reviewed this issue), the phrase "dub diaspora" arose in our conversations as a conceptual alliteration for what we imagined as but one vector, one could say, of Paul Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic (1993)—those "routes not roots" of music, recordings and performance that are forged from the trauma of the Middle Passage, particularly as dub's routes arise from the Carribean Afrodiaspora. From the discussion that circulated on-list and off (with initial ideas and support from Jonathan S. Taylor), we further developed our interest in addressing the dub diaspora as a musical discourse, thinking it by way of affective "acoustemology" (Feld 2012) and as a sonic "way of knowing" (Henriques 2011), both of which proffer a metaphor and theoretical framework for an approach to contemporary cultural politics that fuses sounding with embodied epistemology and ontology. As our conversation opened onto questions to which we had no ready answers, it became evident that a special issue was in need, one in which multiple avenues of research would echo and version the nascent concept of *dub diaspora*.

This special issue of *Dancecult* responds to the need to better understand the multiple practices that can be said to articulate the dub diaspora. Likewise, this issue's scholars represent a diverse set of research practices that reveal different questions as to what the dub diaspora means as a conceptual and critical research concept. In "Versions, Dubs and Riddims", Thomas Vendryes explores the history of Jamaican dub production and consumption, offering a critical overview as to how dub transited from a popular music genre that epitomised the musical and political terrain of Jamaica during the 1970s, to its "decline in popularity" as dancehall overtook dub during the 1980s. As Vendryes argues, dub emerged as an influential global style, capable of mutating any number of other genres, at the same time that it departed Jamaica, routing itself through what we have come to call the dub diaspora.

Kim Ramstedt addresses the media format and cultural resonance of the dub plate, particularly as it is deployed within the context of a reggae sound system in Finland. Ramstedt develops a production studies approach to the manufacturing of such unique instrumental recordings, addressing how the shift in media format from acetate vinyl to digital has complicated the concept of a singular recording. Ramstedt proffers a critical reading of Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" by addressing how dub plates connote cultural authenticity—and the significance of "Jamaica" as the locus of such authenticity—in their customisation for a specific sound system.

John Harries explores the speculative realms of dub mythology by developing the diasporic connections between Afrofuturist tendencies in dub and African-American music culture, turning to a crucial re-reading of Kodwo Eshun that reexamines the futurist tendencies of the dub diaspora. By delving into the differences and similarities between the speculative imaginaries of Sun Ra, the Arkestra bandleader, jazz composer and philosopher poet from Saturn, and Lee "Scratch" Perry, whose mystical production techniques defined the output of his Black Ark studio, Harries complicates attempts to collapse cultural differences while,

at the same time, exploring how Afrofuturism has become integral to the dub diaspora's mythos.

Alessio Kolioulis stakes out the "Borderlands" of dub by tracing the "hauntological politics" of dub techno that span productions in Kingston, London, Detroit and Berlin. By exploring the multiplicity of aesthetic, social, and economic relationships that arise between dub techno and urban space, Kolioulis develops an "acoustic ecology" of dub production that draws attention to the myriad ways in which urban geographies both simultaneously reflect and produce the haunted spaces and echoes of dub music.

Our closing article, by special issue guest editor tobias c. van Veen, is written in memoriam to UK dubstep emcee and dub poet Space Ape, a.k.a. Stephen Samuel Gordon. Space Ape's imaginative approach to dub as "bass fiction", suggests van Veen, combines both speculative theory and embodied practice. By developing the many allusions in Space Ape's "sensory language" to process philosophy, ritual possession and horror fiction, van Veen argues for the crucial role of radical black performance in Afrofuturist ontology, explicating how Space Ape undertakes a creative becoming through the material convergence of what he calls the *sign / sine* of the dub.

Our From the Floor discussion demonstrates the wide reach of dub's reverberations. Nabeel Zuberi turns to "War Dubs", undertaking an exemplary exploration of the many ways in which dub's production techniques have arisen in electronic dance music culture—particularly its "musical practices, forms, technologies and institutions"—during "recent wartime". In a similar vein of analysing dub for its political messaging, Chris Christodoulou carefully unpicks the racialised and post-industrial connotations of "dark" and "darkness" in UK bass culture, tracking how "dark" discourses in grime, dubstep and jungle/drum 'n' bass constitute a critical reply to the "ethnocentric demonisation of blackness". Meanwhile, two scholars conduct gonzo reportage from dub events a world apart—and yet intimately connected. Chris Partridge reports on his experience of the "sacred" in the "affective space" of Jah Shaka's sound system, reminding us again how discussing dub on a conference panel supremely differs from the bone-shaking rattle of its performance, where, "that evening, dub mattered". Erin MacLeod, who is "from foreign", provides an update on Kingston's Dub Club, suggesting that the success of this seminal sound space of dub appreciation has led to a "dub riddim revival" that traverses Jamaica's capital "from Hope Road to Crossroads to lower First Street in Trench Town". And last, but not least, tobias c. van Veen switches his signature to tobias.dj, providing a live turntablist performance of dub versions that traverses new and classic cuts of dub techno, dubstep and dub proper, drawing from vinyl and digital files alike, in a mix that echoes through the haze of delay and reverb thanks to the Roland RE-201 Space Echo.

We hope you will enjoy this diversity of dub's reverberations as much as we have enjoyed assembling this eclectic and inspired issue. May the dub discussions—regarding dub as musical form, as cultural practice and as concept—echo on through the dreadsphere of Babylon.

TOBIAS C. VAN VEEN & HILLEGONDA RIETVELD
HALLOWE'EN 2015, WHISTLER/LONDON

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