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Reggae culture as local knowledge: Mapping the beats on southeast London streets

William 'Lez' Henry & Les Back

Photographs by Olivia Thompson

Where can reggae knowledge be found? Where is the extraordinary contribution made to British culture by dub lyricism and bass culture to be found? After half a century of reggae music it remains true that its story is not adequately documented in books or on the university curriculum. With some honourable exceptions the story of reggae in Britain remains hidden or at best only partially appreciated.[1] Yet the form can be used to explain the significance of the stories told by a group of citizens that have been, in many cases, othered in the land of their birth. This means considering the city spaces and alternative public arenas, within which these stories that were direct counters to the dominant, mainstream, white representations of black life in Britain could be heard. Consequently, the voices of the British born/based performers that ensured the perpetuation of this socially, culturally and politically driven genre right up to the present moment will be given the prominence they deserve here.

Our argument in this chapter is that in order to tell and show the story of 'bass culture'[2] we need to find new ways to bridge the gap between the social worlds in which the music is made, its collective memory sustained, and the spheres of official academic knowledge. We focus on an experiment with showing, telling, recording and

[1] See Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Jamaican rebel music'. *Race & Class*, *17*,4, (1976) 397–412, Paul Gilroy, (1987) *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: the cultural politics of race and nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), Les Back, "'Coughing Up Fire': Sound systems in South-East London," *New Formations*, 5,Summer, (1988): 141-152. Anna Arnone, *Sound Reasoning* (Brighton: Arandora Press, 2017), Lloyd Bradley, *Bass Culture: when reggae was king* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

[2] The term Bass Culture (1980) was first used as the title of an album by the dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, released on the Island Records label.

mapping local histories of reggae culture in South East London, to access these very public ongoing intergenerational discussions about what it means to be black, African, Caribbean etc. in the UK. It is crucial we do so here because such discussions represent the types of historical and contemporary cultural concerns that question the role of aesthetics in the process of any racialised form of identification. This also forms part of the internal registers by which an 'Africentric'[3] 'consciousness' is understood through discussions about the reality of the racist exclusionary practices, that need consideration in any meaningful account of black subjectivities as represented in the reggae performance.

The basic premise of this approach is that we need to look and listen for reggae knowledge in the places where it circulates; in street corner conversations and in public places like barber shops, Caribbean food takeaway restaurants, personal record collections, reggae record shops and where its traces are embedded in local city worlds. In order to access this local knowledge, we argue you need to get out, walk, encounter and participate in the unfolding life of the city and the mute traces of the past in an endeavour to make them speak. Therefore, we focus on an experiment with recording and telling the culture and history of reggae through walking and mapping local streets in South East London. We begin our journey in New Cross where Goldsmiths, University of London is based within the Lewisham borough, where both of us have studied and lived for much of our lives. It is a part of London that played a very significant role in the development of reggae in Britain and is home to important sound systems like Jah Shaka and Saxon Studio who played reggae extensively in the

[3] See Gilroy, P. (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso & Henry, W, A. (2006) *What the Deejay Said: A Critique from the Street!* London: Learning By Choice, for an explanation of the usage of this term as opposed to 'Afrocentric'.

network of youth clubs, house parties and churches that offered alternative public spheres for black Londoners.

Lewisham borough is also the home of the historic 'Eve Recording Studio' where Lover's Rock as a genre was created and, in the first instance, female performers from London and beyond, sung an 'ethic of loving blackness' into being in politically harsh and hateful times.[4] Thus, according to Palmer:[5]

> I am suggesting that Caribbean communities in Britain have used the erotic and political intersection of lovers' rock[6] and conscious roots reggae to reconfigure the stereotypical, loveless and nihilistic representations of their identities found within popular British media discourses on 'race' and 'immigration'.

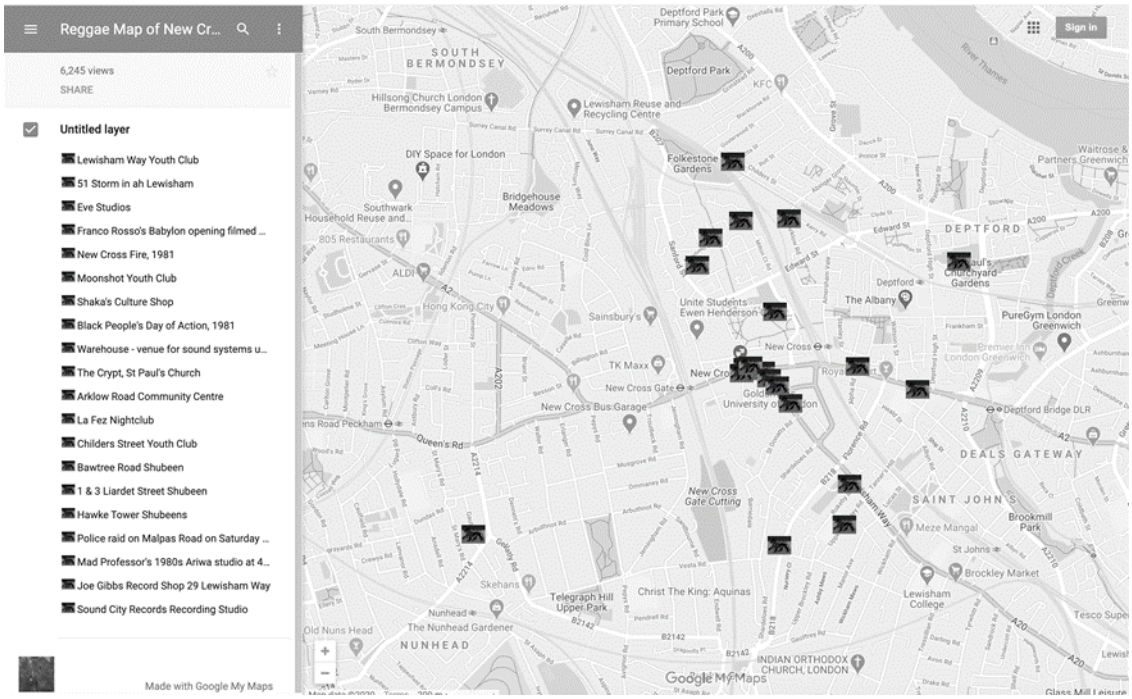
The above, makes known the complexity involved in the rendering of the form in a palatable way because lovers' rock unapologetically promoted a powerful black aesthetic that not only challenged but, as suggested by Palmer, 'reconfigured' what it meant to belong to post Windrush[7] Britain. Black people were/are not supposed to embrace their blackness much less be proud of it, which is why lovers' rock offered a profound challenge to the dominant white aesthetic encapsulated in the song 'Black Pride' (which we will return to below), written by John Kpiaye and sung by the group

[4] Lisa Amanda Palmer, 'LADIES A YOUR TIME NOW!' Erotic politics, lovers' rock and resistance in the UK, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, 4,2 (2011), 177-192.
[5] Palmer. L, A. (2010: 266) The Politics of Loving Blackness in the UK. PhD Thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham.
[6] Unless otherwise stated, taking a lead from Palmer (2016), 'lovers' rock' will be used to speak to 'an integral component of the reggae music landscape of that period'. See Palmer (2016) 'Men Cry Too': Black Masculinities and the Feminisation of Lovers Rock in the UK', for a detailed analysis of the genre and its historical, social, cultural and political worth to contemporary studies of the black presence in post Windrush British scholarship.
[7] June 22nd, 1948, the passengers aboard the ship HMT *Empire Windrush* who had made the 8000-mile journey from Jamaica, Trinidad and other ports of call, disembarked at Tilbury Docks in Essex. This is where the name of the current political scandal involving *'The Windrush Generation'* is derived from, which is an aspect of the UK Government's 'Hostile Environment'. For an insightful account on the experiences of Caribbean migrants in Britain see Webb, J. Westmaas, R. Kaladeen, M. & Tantam, W. (eds), (2020) *Memory, Migration and (De)colonisation in the Caribbean and Beyond.* London: University of London Press. Downloadable Pdf: https://humanities-digital-library.org/index.php/hdl/catalog/book/memory-and-migration

'Brown Sugar. These songs were representative of 'music as politics', demonstrating how during the 1970s and 1980s there was a unique development in the cultural landscape, that would promote loving blackness, espousing black pride in novel and interesting ways.

A Reggae Map of New Cross

For more than a decade we have been taking groups of people for walking tours through this postcolonial landscape and telling reggae's story in the places where it was made. In 2018 we attempted to collate what we have learned through creating an on-line open access map called the *Reggae Map of New Cross*.[8]

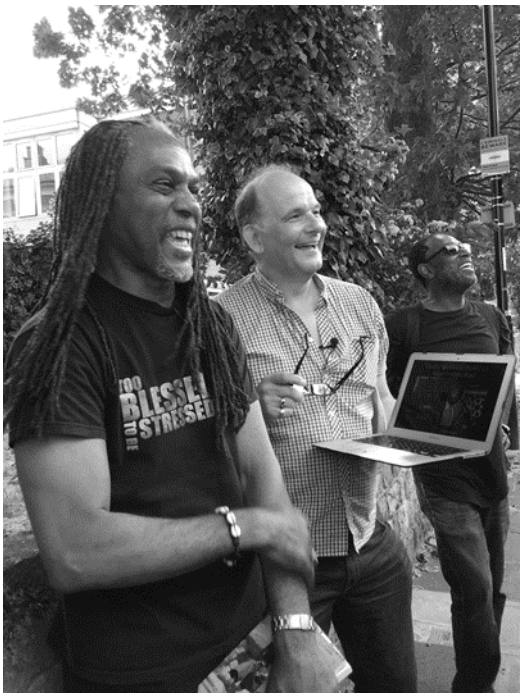


[8] To access the map online type into a search engine: 'Reggae Map New Cross, Les Back and Lez Henry'.

This was part of a larger project called '*Bass Culture*'[9] which is an oral history of reggae in Britain directed by Mykaell Riley and funded by the AHRC to make public various hidden dimensions of reggae music's seminal role in British popular music:

> It's a very important part of the history of pop and I make that reference because often we tend to separate things. Pop simply stands for popular music. Lovers rock is an important step on the way to where we are with regards to British popular music. it's a part of the subconscious memory of those who have grown up in the UK…So Lovers rock that kind of came about late 1970s was a natural evolution of first-generation Caribbean's to take ownership. Mykael Riley[10]

The point is that reggae music has since its inception sustained black communities through direct communal action, experienced within and through the songs and stories that were presented across the airwaves through various mediums. Therefore, whilst the odd reggae tune will occasionally gate-crash the mainstream pop market, the underlying messages of the form per se, purposefully counter and transcend a dominant white culture in myriad ways; thereby giving a potent voice to the voiceless that is premised upon loving blackness.



In what follows we want to take you on a walk through this cultural landscape, using words and images to explain how this project is an example of how reggae knowledge might be made and communicated in the present. Walking is not just a technique for uncovering the mysteries of city life. Rather, it is also a form of pedagogy or a way to learn not just

[9] See: https://www.westminster.ac.uk/current-students/events/bass-culture-70-50
[10] Mykael Riley featured in 'The Story of Lovers Rock' (2011) Film by Menelik Shabazz.

individually but also collectively,[11] because it involves thinking on the move as we encounter the damage to the city; its exclusions and paradoxes; its gendered, racialised and classed rights of way and the invisible, yet tangible, barriers that denote the rights to freely wander. So, reggae walking is more than a matter of applying the lens of a library to magnify and interpret city life. To walk then is to be surprised, to be challenged by the world unfolding with the limits of what we know and also to confront the tricks that memory can play.

A favourite moment in drawing the map was our search to find Childers Street Youth Club in Deptford, which was a popular sound system venue in the 1980s. It is where Ghetto-tone sound system played Saxon regularly and it is mentioned in Lez Henry's important history entitled *What the Deejay Said*.[12] It was here in the summer of 1982 during one of these sessions Lez was given, in a spontaneous naming ceremony, his deejay name and dubbed Lezlee Lyrix by three of his friends Loosh, Basher and Jackson. This happened whilst he was 'chatting' one of his lyrics when they got the selector to 'pull up' the track and then loudly proclaimed "dem bwoy deh can't test! You have di most lyrics. Ah Lezlee Lyrix yuh name!" We returned one summer afternoon to try and find the site in 2018.

After both being led by our failing memories to the wrong place on a couple of occasions, a local elder helped us out. She pointed out the place where the club had been located. She said: 'The young boys used to play music in there on a Saturday night.' Lez replied 'Yes, I was one of those young boys.' We all three laughed and then

[11] Maggie O'Neill & John Perivolaris 'A Sense of Belonging: Walking with Thaer through migration, memories and space' Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture, 5,2&3, (2014) pp. 327-338.
[12] William Henry *What the Deejay Said: A Critique from the Street* (London: Nu-Beyond Ltd 2006).

she replied, 'well you are not a young boy no more'. The prefabricated building that the youth club was housed in has been knocked down and replaced with a new development, but we managed to find the right place on the map for its historic location.

This fable is a reminder of how easily memory fails, how quickly even familiar streets play uncanny tricks on us and how it is important to try and ensure that the detail – in this case – of how reggae music created an alternative public world in politically harsh and racist times is not lost. For Michel de Certeau the experience of city life at ground level is mysterious, both immediate and often illegible.[13] In order to see beyond the familiarity of the streets we need to transform them into an understood landscape or what de Certeau calls this 'space', i.e. where knowledge of a specific place is assembled, historicised and situated. "Every story is a travel story," de Certeau writes, highlighting this process of making space through telling stories.[14] Through walking and mapping historic sites we aimed to render reggae spaces as forms of local knowledge.

On the surface this is very different from the walking-tour guide that have proliferated in London's tourist economy and yet, as Adam Reed points out in his brilliant study of self-employed tour guides in London, both require what he calls personification.[15] Urban knowledge is personified and made the individual property of the guide, and this, Reed warns, risks closing down understandings of the city. As we continue this journey on the page with you, we want to warn against

[13] Michel de Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, University of California Press, 1988) p. 93.
[14] Ibid. p. 115
[15] Adam Reed 'City of Details: Interpreting the Personality of London,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 8 (2002) pp. 127-141.

personification. We are not making an exclusive claim to know the meaning and history of reggae, nor that Lewisham borough was the only important site in its genesis as a form in the UK, although we do not deny our own lives are woven intimately into this story but from very different positions.

As a deejay Lez Henry understood the culture of reggae sound systems from the inside and 'on the mic', thereby appreciating the vital therapeutic power of the music, as a means to live and survive the experience of coming of age in a time where racism in London was at its most vicious and violent. For Les Back his entry into the world of reggae culture was as a white friend who was invited into the alternative public world hosted by black young people. Whites who gained access to the dances where sound systems played had to 'prove' themselves within a face to face negotiated form of everyday ethics. It meant acting with respect and affiliations and humility. As Gail Lewis has commented, London in the 1970s and 1980s was really a chequerboard of racialized spaces.[16] The great hypocrisy of this racialised coding of space meant that as a white Londoner Les Back could gain access to black hosted spaces, while black Londoners like Lez Henry would be excluded from the racist white spaces. To introduce these nuances within the cityscape, our walks/talks take many different routes through the reggae map of New Cross, but we always start at the same place outside the gates of Goldsmiths College, University of London.

[16] Gail Lewis 'From deepest Kilburn' in L. Heron (ed.) *Truth, Dare, Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties*. (London, UK: Virago, 1985) pp. 213-236

First Steps… 51 Storm Inna Lewisham

Goldsmiths was founded 1891 as Goldsmiths' Technical and Recreative Institute by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in New Cross, London. It was intended from its inception to provide practical education for this poor district of London that was both an industrial centre and part of its dockland economy. Acquired by the University of London in 1904, it retained a commitment to community education offering evening classes that were available to the local people. By the 1970s and 1980s it was a thriving centre for the Caribbean community that had settled in this part of London largely through the availability of affordable property and private renting. In the 1970s legendary Jamaican artist/producer Joe Gibbs had a record shop opposite the college at 29 Lewisham Way.

While the mission of Goldsmiths was to be connected to its locality it remained through the 1980s a 'white Island' in an increasingly postcolonial sea, with regard to the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes taught during the day. While there

were some exceptions like poet Linton Kwesi Johnson who started his sociology degree in 1973, the intellectual and political life of black London was sustained and defined off campus. In many ways the staff teaching sociology and anthropology classes during the day were oblivious to the vitality of the black expressive cultures that were being created, sometimes literally next door. It is always different when we do the reggae walk together. There is never a single coherent definition of place and no definitive version of its history, unlike the story told by the Caribbean elder who put us on the right track on Childers Street. We are not suggesting that reggae walking is simply a matter of 'being there' or getting close to places where this history unfolded. Rather, we want to suggest that part of the value of this form of reggae knowledge is not just of proximity but the value of returning and staying with the unfolding story of the culture and the people who have made it.

This house at 51 Lewisham Way was the place of regular dances in the 1980s and many local sound systems played there, and deejays innovated their own unique style of cultural and political expression on the mic. It was literally a few doors away from where the Sociology Department was located during the 1980s and 1990s and on the opposite side of the street is where the offices of the Anthropology Department are to this day. It is a simple fact that students and staff studying culture during

the day were, perhaps, completely unaware of the fact that the bass culture of reggae music shook the foundations of the buildings by night.

Me never start MC till the end ah 81,
the first Sound me chat pon was Saxon,
in ah 51 Storm down inna Lewisham,
is I daddy Rankin an ah next bredder-man,
ah Mello an Levi at the microphone stand,
Rankin ask D Rowe fi mek me ride the version,
pon 'Shank I Shek' me put the mic in ah me hand,
me start chat lyrics in ah different fashion,
me look pon Levi face ah bare confusion,
is like him couldn't understand what's going on,
seh when me mash it up ah bear congratulation,
an Levi ask me one question,
Lezlee which Yard-tape you get them lyrics from,
me seh move pirate that's origination,
happy an you love it say murdee.[17]

It was December 31st, 1981 to January 1st, 1982 that Lez first performed on Saxon, a reggae sound system owned by 'Musclehead' and 'D Rowe' at the time. Yet it is the naming of the venue that is of interest here because '51 Storm' was in fact number 51 Lewisham Way, that the above lyric alludes to. Interestingly enough, understanding

[17] Lezlee Lyrix, Ghettotone Sound System 1983, cited in Henry (2006: 15)

the history behind the naming of the venue is a good example of why we chose to 'map the beats of the south London streets' in this way. The name '51 Storm' was coined from 'Hurricane Charlie' which devastated parts of the Caribbean including the Island of Jamaica in August in 1951, killing 152 people and causing millions of pounds worth of damage. Consequently, the very naming of this site linked those in London across time and space with this aspect of Caribbean history and Jamaica, demonstrating how reggae music acts as a conduit for cultural continuity.

During our walk we point out, as mentioned above, that the staff and faculty at Goldsmiths College were perhaps unaware of what transpired on a Saturday night in this alternative public arena, where the seminary was more organic in its orientation to a collective learning process. A form of learning premised upon countering much that was taught in formal institutions like Goldsmiths College, where black people learn little or nothing positive about themselves. Moreover, this standpoint partially explains why students occupied the old Deptford Town Hall, which is now a teaching space at Goldsmiths, University of London from March – July 2019 (137 days in total).

Goldsmiths students occupied this building in protest at the historical and ongoing racist treatment of the 40-45% BAME student population. Ironically then, the occupation of this building makes known that there is a physical and an intellectual closeness between these valuable sites of learning that once commandeered, which is what took place on Saturday nights, can speak to different truths using their own frames of reference. Therefore, as Pete[18] suggests, there is 'two-eyed seeing when you can observe the colonial constructions around you and you can see the decolonial possibilities offered by indigenous ways of knowing'; that which is captured in the usage of the 'A-Side and B-Side metaphor'[19] based on the 45-inch single.

It is fair to say that without the 45-inch singles produced in Jamaica and played on sound systems, which then criss-crossed the 'Black Atlantic' spreading the reggae message in the form of singing vocals on the A~Side and toasters/deejays on the B~Side, there would arguably be no content for this book. This is not an exaggeration as every form of musical expression discussed in this collection can be rooted back to this primary source; Jamaican reggae and sound system culture.

The A-SIDE was the recorded tale that would be played across the airways or in dancehalls and as such represented the thoughts and feelings of the performer, captured on plastic that were immutable in the sense that once recorded and produced they could not be altered. This in many ways represents the stories that were told about the black presence in the UK from an outsider perspective that far too often misrepresented that lived reality. But the B~Side, other than when it

[18] Pete, S. (2018: 177) 'Meschachakanis, A coyote narrative: Decolonising Higher Education' (in) Bhambra, K, G. Gebrial, D. and Nişancioğlu, K. *Decolonising The University*, (London: Pluto Press)

[19] See William Henry (2006) What the Deejay Said: A Critique from the Street! London: Learning By Choice for an in depth explanation of this

contained a deejay version, was the blank canvas upon which any performer could paint their own picture beyond the confines and constraints of the recording studio. This meant that performers could speak, 'live and direct' to audiences of their peers, enabling them to use the amplified public platforms that are reggae sound systems to, amongst other things, chant down Babylon without apology. To make this point clearer we will continue our journey and take in some of the other sites that are featured in the reggae walk.

Stand firm! Jah Shaka the cultural Warrior

Walking back along Lewisham Way towards New Cross we often take the group to 324 New Cross Road, where Jah Shaka had his Culture Shop in the 1980s selling records and dread paraphernalia (it is now Locks Unique). Record and culture shops like this offered places of learning and historical memory. Jah Shaka (Neville Powell) was also known as 'Nocky' within the sound system world. He took on the name Shaka for his sound after the warrior Shaka Zulu. Born in Clarendon, Jamaica he travelled to London with his family in 1956 where he went to Samuel Pepys Secondary School in Brockley, which is the school that Lez attended as well and is where he knows Shaka from. Since the

mid-1970s the name Jah Shaka has become synonymous with Rastafarian roots music, dub wise and Marcus Garvey's black consciousness. He cut his teeth with a south East London sound system called 'Freddie Cloudburst' but by the late seventies Shaka's sound system was a vital part of black London life.[20]

As a young white teenager Les would often go to Shaka's shop to buy records from him. While Shaka himself did not pay him much attention the environment of the shop was furnished with its owner's dread philosophy, and an alternative curriculum was on offer here to students like Les who was open and receptive to it. Lez henry had been part of Jah Shaka's sound system in the early days and recalls:

> I know this world well and in the early days our local 'Big Sound' from Lewisham was Jah Shaka; a sound system I was affiliated with from its creation in the early 1970s as a 'box bwoy'. A 'Box Bwoy' is like an apprentice on a sound system that, as I have argued extensively elsewhere has a structured and highly efficient 'division off labour' where everyone knows what their role is. The 'box bwoy's role was to travel to the venue in 'di van back' with the equipment and then help unload the equipment from the 'Sound Van' and help set out the speaker boxes. We would then run the wires to them from the amp, which often meant finding yourself in some precarious positions when 'stringing up'. We could not touch the amps or deck or mixer etc. as that was the sacred rite of Shaka or one of the 'bigger man dem' who had a more senior role in the sound system.
>
> Likewise, we were not allowed to connect the wires to the speakers or to the amp, but we did get the kudos of being associated with one of the best British Sound Systems ever, that is still going strong to this day. Our 'payment' of course was free entry to the sessions and the chance to meet people from all over London and other parts of the UK. Interestingly enough, I was reasoning with Paul Gilroy years ago about some of the best dances back then and we realised we were both in the Metro Club in Westbourne Park when the resident sound system, Dennis Bovell's Sufferer, clashed with Jah Shaka and Quaker City from Birmingham.

The houses and parties where the sound systems would string up would be made into places of refuge and reasoning and joy when they were filled by the bass frequencies

[20] See William Henry, W. 'Jah Shaka', in A. Donnell ed. *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 155.

of reggae. It for this reason they were targeted by the institutionalised State racism of the police and the freelance racists within the wider community. Just a mile away on Saturday 26th April, 1975 there was an infamous police raid on a Shaka dance on Malpas Road, Brockley. *Race Today* covered the story:

> 'More than 200 young blacks danced to the sound of the popular Jah Shaka at Malpas Road on Saturday/Sunday 26th-27th'. After visiting to demand the sound be turned down, the police 'reinforced in numbers and violent in attitude... ordered everyone to leave the building. One of the organisers who stood at the door was dragged out and thrown into the van. The police proceeded to kick, punch and truncheon people indiscriminately. Not content, they went on to wreck £400 of equipment with their truncheons. Sixteen people were charged with crimes ranging from assault to drunk and disorderly behaviour... one police officer exuding arrogance warned Jah Shaka that the sound was banned from playing in South London'.21

The buildings in the area no longer carry visible traces of that violent history of racism from the police and the wider community in the form of fascist organisations like the National Front and Combat 18. Yet, anything that is buried within social memories can

[21] See for more details see http://transpont.blogspot.co.uk/2015/10/mek-it-blow-police-raid-new-cross-jah.html

be excavated, revealed and reasoned through and in a way our walks are an attempt to develop an archaeology of everyday life. They are also attempts to make an inventory of not just the pain, but also the joy and playful association that was created through the music that black youngsters raved to in their endeavours to deal with racialised disaffection and disenfranchisement.

Across the street from Shaka's shop was 'Warehouse', a venue run by the aforementioned Loosh where sound system dances were held beneath what is now 'The Venue'. Dance goers would have to enter from the back of the building, which was formerly 'The New Cross Super Kinema' that opened in 1925. Originally there was a cinema on the ground floor and a dance hall above and it retained its Kinema title until 1950 when it became part of the Gaumont chain of venues, but it closed its doors in 1960. The building was brought back to life and during the late 1980s to 1990s the underground part of the building was a popular venue for reggae dances. These sessions would sometimes start around midnight on a Saturday and finish on a Sunday afternoon.

There is a good reason why the culture of reggae is often referenced as part of an underground movement, because much of its life was sustained literally *under*ground. A short walk away along Deptford High Street we find 'The Crypt' in St Paul's Church. Literally beneath the church was one of the most important sound system venues in London during the 1970s and 1980s. The Crypt, was undoubtedly one of the most popular venues in Lewisham during its heyday and many big sound systems from all over played there such as: 'Frontline, Sir Coxone, Jah Shaka, Neville The Enchanter, Dnunes Sound, Soprano B, Saxon, King Tubby, Fatman, Lord Koos, Count Shelly, Prophecy, Sledgehammer, Trojan Sound System and even Ghettotone',

which was part owned by Lez Henry. Lez suggested elsewhere that during that moment we were ‘tomb ravers’ and the famous sound system clash scene in Franco Rosso's film Bablylon (1980), which featured Jah Shaka’s sound system was filmed there. The Crypt was also a venue for other musical events including psychedelic rock 'all nighters' featuring live bands.

We often bring the walkers back to 439 New Cross Road where the mood becomes more solemn. In the early hours of Sunday 18th January 1981 a fire broke out here, killing 13 young black Londoners as they were celebrating the 16th birthday of Yvonne Ruddock, one of the victims. The party goers were listening to reggae that night and tragically, nearly two years later, the fire took another victim, bringing the official death count to 14. Concerns about racism had been running high in the area due to the active presence of the National Front and more importantly, several racially motivated arson attacks had already taken place in the London Borough of Lewisham. Les Back often tells that:

> As a teenager I regularly passed the ruined house at 439 New Cross on my way to college at Goldsmiths. In the doorway was a makeshift memorial stating, “thirteen of our children murdered” and beneath these words was a list of their names. The burnt out three-storey house was a reminder of the nature of the offence like an open wound scorched in the body of the city. Today that trace has been replaced by a marker on the house remembering those lost young lives and the futures that were stolen from them that night.

Eye-witness accounts pointed to arson and the suspicious behaviour that night of a man who drove off in a white Austin van. Fire had been a staple weapon of racist violence and there had been other arson attacks on black community centres, youth clubs and private homes, including the petrol bombing of a house party in Sunderland Road, Forest Hill, SE23. Some 35 years later the origins of the New Cross Fire are still unknown. When we take people there, we stress it is important to remember the shameful indifference to these deaths at the time within the media and the political establishment.

In the days that followed there was little coverage of the terrible loss of young lives in the newspapers, with the exception of *The Sun* reporting it on their front cover, and no statement of condolence from then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.[22] The cold silence of the white establishment is one of the undeniable facts of this tragedy and this conveyed a brutally simple message that the loss of young black lives was simply unimportant. As Johnny Osbourne sang pointedly in the tune that was released in the wake of these events '13 Dead (and Nothing Said)'.

Out of the ashes of this terrible tragedy came an unprecedented political mobilisation led by the families, the New Cross Massacre Action Committee and the wider black community. It resulted in the historic 'Black People's Day of Action' on Monday 2 March, 1981, where 15,000 people from all over the country filed by 439 New Cross Road bound for the Houses of Parliament and Fleet Street. The photographs of the young people who lost their lives were carried as a demonstration that their humanity mattered and Lez Henry was one of the marchers on that day. The

[22] See New Beacon Books *The New Cross Massacre Story: interviews with John La Rose* (London: New Beacon Books Limited, 2011).

march was documented by photographer and writer Vron Ware who was working for the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* at the time. In May 2017 a free exhibition of Vron Ware's photographs took place at Goldsmiths, University of London.[23] The images bear witness to an historic moment of community organising and resistance in post-war Britain.

During our walks we take these images into the street and using the screen of our laptop trace the vantage point from which they were taken. The results are often uncanny summoning ghosts and traces of that past that can so easily remain mute or invisible. At this point of our walk we often play Linton Kwesi Johnson's tune 'New Crass Massahkah.'[24] The tune conveyed in dub poetry both the musical joy of the party and the terror of the fire, offering in word and bass perhaps the most enduring and powerful form of historical witness. Our point here is that what is offered on the reggae walk is an alternative to the theorisation of black life, premised on the voices

[23] See '13 Dead Nothin Said Exhibition', 2017 https://www.gold.ac.uk/calendar/?id=10585
[24] Released on Linton Kwesi Johnson's album *Making History* released in 1983 on the Island Records label (ILPS 9770).

and perspectives of the livers and doers of the culture during the so-called 'crisis' periods of the 1970s and 1980s. The emphasis is thus located in notions of black culture and identity, which are understood as knowable and observable ways of being because they speak to the importance of recognising the consciousness that births counter cultural forms. These are crucial aspects of rethinking the self, autonomously into being and this alternative 'hidden' voice makes known a perspective that counters the myriad racist distortions that othered blacks in the white imagination.

Lewisham Way Youth & Community Centre

Heading east from Goldsmiths we congregate outside Lewisham Way Youth & Community Centre. We pause here often to talk about why youth clubs were so significant at the time and this youth club was a regular venue for dances and various other activities including a football team, a netball team and a very successful martial arts dojo. Run by Harry Powell it was a place of refuge and joy for young Black people during the 1970s, 1980s and beyond. On Friday evenings there was the occasional

dance where huge sound systems were brought in and the photographer John Goto remembers the physical impact of the baselines vibrating through the floor. 'Most of the attendees were regular members of the youth centre, though not all.'

On the steps of Lewisham Way Youth and Community Centre, we often show the portraits that he took at another venue, less than a mile away, and they are like the ghosts of young lives and shadows of this once vibrant world. Goto, photographed portraits of local dance goers in March 1977 and these portraits were recently published in his photographic book *Lovers Rock*.[25] Joan Douglas,[26] who attended the sessions and is featured on the cover of Goto's collection, informed us:

> The portraits were taken on two occasions. The first occasion was on a Tuesday evening at Crofton Park School, Youth Club, which is where John Goto was working with the youth who were interested in learning photography on a weekly basis. The second was at the same venue on a Thursday but the difference is there was a dance that evening, featuring 'Small Axe' Sound System with 'Bad Breed Jesse' and 'Donald C' at the control. So, as part of the process of developing the portraits we regularly posed for him not knowing that one day they would be published in a book. That explains why some people are dressed up in the images, whilst others are casual, and it was quite a shock for me to see myself on the front cover. What people need to recognise is that for all the pressure we were under with the 'suss laws' from the police and the racist treatment we got at school, at work and in the streets, we were proud of who we were as black people and the lovers' rock music was our release; our time to escape from the harshness and celebrate and love each other.

Joan's insight is telling as it adds the necessary detail to the portraits he took, conveying that experience so eloquently with so much of the feeling of the time represented in the clothes, both dressy and casual, black youth wore during that moment. Joan also speaks to that resilience black youth had during this historical moment where an indomitable spirit was on display in spaces that were safe, cathartic and necessary to the black communities in Britain. Consequently, in the images that were taken by John Goto, you can see representations of this black pride and more

[25] John Goto *Lovers' Rock* (London: Autograph, 2013)
[26] Joan Douglas personal communication, March 2020

importantly how it was celebrated within alternative public spaces; free from the sanction, judgement and gaze from an overly hostile racist society at its peak in parts of Lewisham in 1977, when the photographs were taken.

This is important to grasp here because these spaces were, as Joan suggested, safe spaces for black youth and were crucial to maintaining a sense of self-worth, regardless of what type of black youth you represented, because you had 'Criss Girls' meeting with 'Sweet Boys'; 'Soul Heads' meeting with 'Ska Shufflers'; 'Roots Man' meeting with 'Ital Steppers and Skankers' meeting with 'Heartical Rastas' and no one felt out of place; because all belonged. This sense of belongingness did not exclude white youth who wished to venture into that world, because they knew they would not be attacked or harassed, which was absolutely not the case in white dominated spaces at the time.

Reggae has always been inclusive in this sense because the music was played in very local places that were linked to much wider cultural and musical networks, where people from all walks of life could mix and mingle in peace and safety. It is interesting now to reflect on the power the music possessed to protect young black people from the psychic damage of racism during that moment. For the music and the places where it was played, provided a physical and psychological refuge in an otherwise hostile city. John Goto's enduring achievement is that he enabled these young people to be themselves in those moments in front of the camera, perhaps not recognising that one day they would be used as exemplars of loving blackness; a theme we will develop further below.

Lovers' Rock & Eve Studios and loving blackness

Lovers' Rock, a noticeably different style of reggae music from that produced in Jamaica, was made in the UK and in a large part was sponsored by music lovers and supermarket owners Dennis and Eve Harris. From their 'Eve' recording studio, which housed their 'Dip Records' label in Upper Brockley Road, London Borough of Lewisham, they worked in tandem with musicians like John Kpiyae and Matuumbi's Dennis Bovell. From this collaboration a sound was produced that mirrored their relationship with Jamaican roots and US soul music, while being influenced by coping with, and speaking to, all aspects of everyday life in 1970s racist Britain:

> Dennis Harris the managing director of Dip Records called me up and said he was building a studio would I be interested in being the Sound Engineer and kind of session musician and Producer as well. Now Dennis was looking for a name to represent what we were doing in that studio and Augustus Pablo had a tune called "Lovers Rock." And it was at that point that that tune was doing big things in the dance, right. And that was like one of the names just brandished around a little bit, like all the other old names. And then he said yeah that's it and then he took his thing and drew a heart with an arrow going through and that's gonna be the label. Dennis Bovell[27]

Bovell's insight enables us to get a feel of this seminal moment in British history, taken from an interview in the excellent documentary "The Story of Lovers Rock" (2011) by Menelik Shabazz. What is telling here is how Bovell explains why the name was chosen and what it became representative of and who the music would speak to; not just locally but also outernationally.[28] They went on to have a string of hits that further defined the genre as something uniquely British in flavour as further stated:

> We knew we were creating something distinctively British, Right! It was a kind of local scene…where we were hoping one day to be as big as any other genre. Something that

27 'The Story of Lovers Rock' (2011) Film by Menelik Shabazz.

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> was home grown in Britain. Local musicians but melodies that could stand up alongside any of the great melodies. Dennis Bovell[29]

By suggesting that 'we knew we were creating something distinctively British', Bovell recognised from the outset this unique, melodic, style would become more popular than many of the Jamaican reggae imports. Crucially this partially explains how lovers' rock played a significant role in overcoming the bias against British reggae music, which was largely deemed inauthentic when compared to Jamaican music. This is important for us to deal with here because during this historical moment reggae, 'real reggae', could only be produced in Jamaica and thus could only be performed by born Jamaicans. Many producers and performers would press their records on a white label and pass them off as pre-release imports from Jamaica to claim this 'authenticity' and Dennis Bovell has commented that his band Matumbi used this ploy for their early releases[30].

Despite this pressure lovers' rock producers and performers were even more determined to accentuate (literally) the differences between them and their Jamaican counterparts, stylistically and lyrically, by stressing that which made them so noticeably different. Thus opportunities arose for British performers to take centre stage in the promotion of lovers' rock, which obviously culminated in the meteoric rise of Janet Kay and the immense popularity of the form. According to Kofi:[31]

> We were asked to come in and do an interview with a record company called Dip to do some backing vocals for TT Ross. She was releasing a track called 'Jealousy' and we did some backing vocals for her and were very excited about

[29] 'The Story of Lovers Rock' (2011) Film by Menelik Shabazz.
[30] 'Tru Reggae Story', interview with Dennis Bovell, Summer School project (2006: Nu-Beyond Learning By Choice)
[31] 'The Story of Lovers Rock' (2011) Film by Menelik Shabazz.

> that and really enjoyed it. And I think that the interest grew once they heard the backing vocals.

The 'we' that Kofi speaks of were the members of the group 'Brown Sugar', Pauline Catlin, Caron Wheeler of 'Soul to Soul' fame, and Carol Simms as she was known then. However, after becoming disillusioned with the treatment [32] they received they moved on from working with Dip Records and recorded as a group and then branched off into their solo careers. Lovers' rock was soon to influence the Jamaican music scene, as exemplified by Sugar Minnott's cover version of Michael Jackson's Good Thing Going and his tribute song, 'This is Lovers' Rock' (1980), the title track of an album of the same name, which began with the iconic and heavily sampled 'Okay people! This is Lovers Rock'. Indeed, many of the biggest names in Jamaican reggae – Dennis Brown, Beres Hammond, Gregory Issacs, Freddie McGregor and Sanchez D – are often regarded as lovers' rock artistes, as is the UK's Maxi Priest.

The passion for lovers' rock soon spread throughout Britain, producing artistes and groups like 15, 16 & 17, Brown Sugar, Sylvia Tella, Louisa Mark, Carroll Thompson, Sandra Cross, 'Jean Adebambo', Kofi, Caren Wheeler, 'Junior English', Lloyd Brown, Marie Pierre, Winston Reedy, Paul Dawkins, Trevor Hartley, Trevor Walters, Victor Romero Evans , Peter Hunnigale, Peter Spence and groups like Tradition, The Investigators, The Instigators, Cool Notes, Natural Mystic, The In Crowd et al. However, it was Janet Kay's 'Silly Games' (1979), a song written by Dennis Bovell which really put Lovers Rock as a genre on the map, firstly in the UK pop charts where it

[32] The poor treatment of artistes in reggae is a highly contentious point and space does not allow for an in depth analysis of it here, but some insight can be gleaned from the film 'The Story of Lovers Rock' (2011).

reached number 2 and then became a hit throughout Europe and other parts of the world. It was the first Lovers Rock song featured on mainstream British TV, with Janet Kay performing on the BBC's flagship music programme 'Top of The Pops'.

The title lovers' rock can be a touch misleading as the music was spawned in a time of overt and hostile racism, where police harassment of, and violent attacks on, black people from far-right groups like the National Front were daily occurrences. That is why, although the genre focused on black love and harmony and was dominated by female performers, it also had a conscious edge to it where songs spoke of 'Black Pride' and being 'In Love with a Dreadlocks'.

Dennis Bovell suggests that 'to say I am in love with a Dreadlocks was a radical thing to say at the time inside the black community and outside it'.[33] A point endorsed by Lisa Palmer who states that the powerful sensuality of tunes like 'I'm In Love with a Dreadlocks' enabled musically the 'formation and transformation of loving

[33] Dennis Bovell personal communication, November 2018.

countercultural identities'.[34] This is important to note here because the form was often reduced to 'romantic reggae', due to the predominance of the female voice. Yet the songs of love were no less politically significant than the explicit political message being communicated by the deejays on reggae sound systems.

The song 'Black Pride' offered a direct challenge to the dominant white aesthetic, using 'music as politics' to state, 'I'm so proud to be, the colour that God made me'. Whereas, 'I'm in Love with a Dreadlocks' dealt with many of the internal and intergenerational concerns, thereby challenging the idea that collective black identities can be reduced to where you were born, how you dress and how you wear our hair. This aesthetic argument is as important now as it was then, and we only need to consider the affliction of skin bleaching[35] and other forms of black 'racial suicide' to appreciate its relevance from within the culture. But too often these discussions are muted in the wider public arena, for various reasons, which explains why the counter-cultures that deal with these issues in plain and simple terms are critically important to maintaining this form of dialogue. 'Brown Sugar' demonstrate how artistes were and are regarded as a mouthpiece for particular sections of the black community, who otherwise would remain absent of a potent counter cultural mode of expression. To this end they generally echo, very publicly, the overall sentiments and sensibilities on the most important issues at any given time. This is a crucial point we make on our walk as lovers' rock music, in line with the ethos behind the reggae message, has since its inception sustained black communities through direct communal action,

[34] Lisa Palmer p. 183
[35] For an in depth analysis of this cultural phenomena see Henry, W, A. (2012) 'Shades of consciousness: from Jamaica to the UK' (in) Hall, R. (ed) *The Melanin Millennium: Skin Color as the 21st Century International Discourse*, Michigan, USA: Springer.

experienced within and through the songs and stories that were presented across the airwaves through various mediums.

Conclusions

Returning to the question we posed at the beginning of this chapter reggae knowledge is embedded in the places where this music was made and listened to. Learning reggae's history requires a kind of archaeology of local city life and the musical threads that link London to the reggae diaspora, to the Caribbean, and to the world. Every time we conduct these walks something new is revealed about the richness of reggae music in this historic corner of London. In order to learn this history, we suggest, sociable methods of knowledge creation need to be found which create communities of thinking and understanding that place the makers of this musical world at its centre. All of this is necessary for the kind of reggae pedagogy shared by many of the contributors to this volume; a form of slow release understanding achieved through *staying there*, taking another attentive stroll and thinking again on our feet. What experiments like our reggae walking and mapping project point towards are more open and inclusive forms of knowledge that truly have a social impact. Telling reggae's story with the people who made it in more sociable and connected ways, is simultaneously a form of 'local knowledge' and an 'outernational perspective' that is both embedding in a place but never confined to, or only or rooted to within it.

This contribution to the lifeblood of London life and British culture more broadly is ignored or simply looked past, but as the iconic Jamaican singer Bob Marley reminds us, 'in the abundance of water on the fool is thirsty'. One of the lessons learned time and time again from our walks is the persistent, localised, presence of

the people who have made this history and culture, which always results in passers-by tagging along to take in the experience. One reggae loving resident put it this way: 'we haven't gone anywhere… we are still here… we are still here', because the walks bring the history of London into a conversation with present realities. Today the alternative public sphere of black life like the youth clubs and record shops, which were animated by reggae music, are largely gone and little more than the ruins of a once vibrant world remain.

The reggae walks make us confront the fact that the institutions of black community life are being erased, dismantled and are in danger of being forgotten. The fact that these stories have been ignored and disparaged for so long is a shameful indictment of the failure of our educational institutions to tap into the empirical richness of their local communities. Yet, the enduring power of reggae is an undeniable fact of London life and to tap into the pulse of the city, by 'walking' its streets, is a way and means to honour and record that important UK legacy. What we have argued throughout is this might be embraced in open sociable forms of knowledge exchange, where no one claims to know the whole story but where 'each one' really does 'teach one' by taking one step beyond the UK reggae baseline.