WAKE
THE
TOWN
&
TELL
THE
PEOPLE

Dancehall Culture in Jamaica

* 

Norman C. Stolzoff

constant cheerleading, common sense, and editorial guidance I would be still floundering on chapter 1.

Ultimately, this project is a result of the incredible support and love I have received from my family over the years. Weekly phone calls for moral support, good cheer, and general venting (as well as occasional calls for loans) were the foundation that allowed me to weather the trials and tribulations of graduate school, my illness, and the rigors of completing a work such as this. To Dr. Marsha A. Stolzoff, my mother, goes my deepest love and respect. She nurtured in me a love of learning and a tenacity to reach for my highest goals. To Russell E. Stolzoff, my brother, I owe my love for Jamaican music, for it was he who introduced me to the power of reggae. Russell has walked by my side the whole way through this project, and from him I have gained the strength to keep on pushing. To Steven B. Stolzoff, my brother and friend, I owe my determination to pursue the path with heart and art. Steven, a truly gifted musician, poet, and comedian, has allowed me to see how important it is to trust my intuition in matters of creative expression. To Stephanie B. Stolzoff, my sister-in-law, I owe a heartfelt thanks. Stephanie, a nurse and midwife by profession, has provided expert doctoring in this birthing process they call a book. To Obe Hasson, my stepfather, I offer my gratitude for his guidance and thoughtful advice. Obe, an expert photographer, patiently taught me the photographic skills I used to capture the images of dancehall presented in the book.

Lastly, I would like to thank Ken Wissoker, my editor at Duke University Press, who believed in this project from our first conversation. As an author, I can’t imagine having a better working relationship with an editor.

Financial support at various stages was provided by the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Davis. The field research for this project was funded by a Predoctoral Grant (#5685) from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and a Visiting Research Fellowship from the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica. Follow-up research in 1998 was supported by a Bowdoin College Faculty Research Grant.

1

Dancehall Culture
in
Jamaica:
An Introduction

Dancehall—from the urban ghettos of Kingston to the rural districts of the countryside—is the most potent form of popular culture in Jamaica. For Jamaica’s ghetto youth (the black lower-class masses), from among whom come its most creative artists and avid fans, dancehall is their favorite recreational form. Yet dancehall is not merely a sphere of passive consumerism. It is a field of active cultural production, a means by which black lower-class youth articulate and project a distinct identity in local, national, and global contexts; through dancehall, ghetto youth also attempt to deal with the endemic problems of poverty, racism, and violence.

In this sense, dancehall is a multidimensional force, at once symbolic and material, that permeates and structures everyday life in Jamaica. It is almost impossible to move through Kingston’s urban public spaces without encountering dancehall in some form, whether in its pounding bass rhythms or the signs of its distinctive paraphernalia. By day, one confronts dancehall music while crammed into public buses; while walking down the street coming from record shops and small sound systems used by music vendors; while socializing at bars, restaurants, and beach resorts; and while attending political rallies and civic events. By night—especially on weekends—dancehall music is performed around the island in hundreds of outdoor dancehalls, in dozens of clubs, and at a handful of stage shows. Even if people never leave the comfort of their living rooms in the upper-class neighborhoods in the hills above Kingston to venture out to one of these sessions, they are not likely to go to bed undisturbed by dancehall. Sound systems, the sophisticated, megawatt mobile discos, which are essential to dancehall performance, can be heard from miles away until the wee hours of the morning. And if one were able to avoid this so-called “night noise,”
Dancehall is also a center of prolific linguistic creativity, as evidenced by the publication of several dancehall dictionaries such as Chester Francis-Jackson's *The Official Dancehall Dictionary* (1995). Through the inventiveness of dancehall DJs, new words and expressions are constantly being added to the lexicon of Patois, the creole spoken by a majority of Jamaicans as their first language. And as Carolyn Cooper convincingly argues in *Noises in the Blood: Omality, Gender and the Vulgar Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (1993), no area of Jamaican cultural politics is more disputed than the notion that Patois, rather than simply being bad English spoken by the uneducated masses, is the legitimate language of the nation.

Dancehall, however, is not simply a local cultural form; it is part of the global mediascape from Belize to Japan. In 1994, record sales for Jamaican popular music were more than US $300 million a year in the U.S. market alone. Yet this is not the first time Jamaican musical exports have experienced international success. As Larry Rohter wrote in the *New York Times*, 12 April 1998: “Every musical style to emerge from Jamaica over the last 35 years has eventually achieved international popularity. Reggae is part of the vocabulary of every working pop musician. The disc jockeys known as toaster[s] are now acknowledged as the earliest progenitors of rap, and ska has lately become the favorite of skateboarders and punk bands the world over.” Dancehall continues to influence hip-hop in the United States and several new dance music genres in England, such as “jungle” and “trip-hop.” Dancehall singers and DJs, such as Buju Banton, Luciano, and Capleton, who ushered in a Rastafari renaissance in dancehall culture after 1993, regularly tour the globe carrying on the tradition of legendary reggae performers like Bob Marley, Burning Spear, and Marcia Griffiths. Hence, while dancehall is rooted in local history, the local economy, and local politics, it has both deeply affected and been affected by translocal processes.

While the global dimensions of Jamaican dancehall are generally recognized, the historical ones are not. Many commentators believe that dancehall culture is a new phenomenon because the term dancehall music entered the lexicon less than fifteen years ago at the same time that Jamaican music culture was undergoing a radical creative transition. I contend, however, that the dancehall has been a space of cultural creation and performance since the slavery era, even though the name given to this constellation of oppositional practices has changed over time. This is not to deny the significant disjunctions and radical reformulations in both the form and content of the dancehall performance over time, but it is to recognize that the current set of practices known as dancehall can be traced back to earlier forms from which they derive. As Hedley Jones, former president of the Jamaica Federation of Musicians, told me: “Dancehall has always been with us,
because we have always had our clubs, our market places, our booths...where our dances were kept. And these were known as dancehalls."

Following Jones, I thus argue that the Jamaican masses have been creating cultural counterworlds through secular music and dance performances in the "cultural spaces" known as dancehalls for more than two centuries (Erlmann 1991: 18). For instance, it was in the dancehalls of the slavery era that Jamaica’s first popular music, known as mento, was created. Mento, like other dancehall creations, was a product of the syncretic blending of African and European cultural forms. As such, mento is a model of the dancehall’s potential for generating culture, not only for the black lower class in particular, but for the nation as a whole.

In the late 1940s the dancehall event underwent a decisive transition from the performances of live jazz and mento bands to the performance of sound systems. For the past fifty years, the sound systems have been the driving force behind Jamaica’s popular music culture. For example, it was the sound system operators’ desire for locally produced records that gave rise to the Jamaican recording industry, now one of Jamaica’s most important economic sectors. And it was the sound system dance that was used as a cultural laboratory for the invention of ska, rocksteady, reggae, and dancehall music and dance styles as well as for the popularization of Rastafari, Black Power, and the gangster persona of the rude boys.

Although live-band concerts, radio, and video are now important media for dancehall performances, the more than 300 sound systems in Jamaica remain the primary vehicle for the consumption of locally produced popular music. As in the past, sound systems play Jamaican music in the dancehalls that cannot be heard anywhere else. For this reason the sound systems continue to be a unique medium for communication, social interaction, education, moral leadership, political action, and economic activity, especially for blacks from poor backgrounds, who—as a social bloc—tend to be systematically excluded from positions of power in the nation’s print and electronic media, government bureaucracy, corporate hierarchy, and religious establishment. I am not suggesting that dancehall is completely successful in these capacities, or that it is a wholly liberatory institution, however. As in Jean Comaroff’s analysis of Tshidi Zionism, the dancehall combines a “complex interdependence of domination and resistance, change and perpetuation” (1985: 260). For example, the dancehall performance has the capacity to fundamentally challenge Jamaica’s race-class hierarchy and the colonialist ideologies of white supremacy. Yet it also can reinforce the hegemonic structure when it promotes misogyny, the romanticization of violence, homophobia, and what Gage Averill calls the "habit of divisiveness" in the black lower class (1997: 10). In practice, most dancehall events move back and forth between these poles in a complex manner that makes it difficult, and misleading, to impose a single interpretation on these performances.

Despite its seemingly contradictory elements, the idea that dancehall culture is powerful is widely shared in Jamaican society, even by some of its fiercest critics. In a newspaper article, "Why Dance Hall Is Such Powerful Stuff," Jean Fairweather wrote in The Gleaner, 24 April 1994: "For the first time, Jamaican popular music far outweighs the combination of church, politics, and the educational system in power and influence." Echoing this view, journalist Marjorie Stair wrote in The Gleaner, 30 April 1994: "I came to appreciate the power of political and intellectual leadership in the 1970s and the 1980s. In the 1990s it is the music and the media which now hold that power."

Given this perception of dancehall’s cultural power, it is no wonder that it has become central to discussions of Jamaica’s deepening social problems, such as the debate inaugurated by Prime Minister P. J. Patterson in his “National Consultation on Values and Attitudes” in 1994. For example, one of the Consultation’s twelve panels, “Media, Entertainment, and Violence,” focused on the “negative impact” of dancehall lyrics on the nation’s youth. That Jamaica is undergoing a crisis unparalleled in the post-Independence period is a fact that few outside the ruling People’s National Party (PNP) government would dispute. Even the following statement, written by long-time, high-ranking Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) official Pearnel Charles in the Jamaica Observer, 25–27 February 1994, is widely held by the Jamaican masses:

We need no prophet to tell us that we are in a crisis. Our society is divided into social layers that are largely created by the social structures we have inherited and not by talent. Most of the differences we see today are rooted in the structures we have built and are now showing up as permanent features. It is this which is creating the exploitation and confrontation at all levels in the country today. Thus, the fear and the anger, the crime, the violence and the hate, as well as the indifference and the discouragement seem to be what has been influencing many to migrate to what they see as safer grounds.

In fact, the relationship between the perception that Jamaica is in a period of deepening social breakdown and the view that black lower-class forms like dancehall are the source of this decadence dates back to the slavery period. By emphasizing the historical depth of this linkage between dancehall culture and moral panic on the part of the Jamaican elite, I do not want to minimize the urgency of the present moment. Rather, in pointing...
out this historical continuity, I am arguing that this predicament is part of a longer trajectory that we need to examine when we look at the current struggle for power in Jamaican society that Brian Meeks characterizes as "hegemonic dissolution." In *Radical Caribbean: From Black Power to Abu Bakr* (1996), Meeks argues that unlike other West Indian societies, where independence profoundly altered the hegemonic power structure, Jamaica's oligarchy was able to consolidate its control over the society from 1962 through the 1980s. Not until the 1990s, with the decline in the economy, the increasing autonomy of drug gangs, and the rising level of political apathy, has the Jamaican elite had to deal with the threat of social chaos and its own loss of political control. This elite looks to the dancehall in all of its forms, more than anywhere else, as the source of its problems.

*The Dancehall as a Force of Generation, Mediation, and Reproduction*

Whether from fascination with cultural difference, or fear of its potential to incite rebellion, mobilize political sentiment, or question the moral order that underpins Jamaica's social hierarchy, Jamaica's middle and upper classes have always had to take notice of dancehall. Dancehall, I argue, has functioned as a space where the symbolic distinctions and the social divisions of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and political affiliation in Jamaican society are made, reinforced, and undone. In this sense, it is both an emblem of black identity and solidarity and a marker of social difference. As such, dancehall is not only important to poor blacks, but central to the society as a whole, because Jamaicans of all races and classes define themselves in relation to it. For the lighter-skinned middle and upper classes, glossed as *uptown* people, opposition to dancehall has galvanized their sense of cultural superiority—hence, their right to govern—because they think it demonstrates black lower-class cultural inferiority and lack of morality. For the most part, these *uptown* Jamaicans hear dancehall as obnoxious noise, which they often refer to as "boom-boom music," and they feel threatened because of their inability to control dancehall practitioners. However, for the black lower classes, glossed as *downtown*, dancehall is a symbol of pride in the ghetto, in black identity, and of African culture. For downtown people, especially the youth, the dancehall provides a medium through which the masses are able to ideologically challenge the hegemony of the ruling classes and state apparatuses. Dancehall is thus a marker of a charged cultural border between people of different races and class levels.

Yet even in the black lower class, dancehall is not unanimously supported. Wide differences exist between groups based on religious practice, age, cultural orientation, etc. As a contested space of black lower-class cultural practice, the dancehall is at the crossroads of several overlapping cultural debates, both internal and external to the event itself, concerning Jamaica's ongoing social, economic, political, and moral "crisis." For example, it is not uncommon to hear downtown people complaining about the morality of a particular song, or arguing that a popular singer or DJ is not a proper role model for youth. In this regard, many lower-class blacks agree with uptown critics when they single out dancehall as the primary source of the escalating crime and social disorder overtaking the nation. Despite the opposition of certain Christians, orthodox Rastafarians, feminists, and middle-aged parents, their contrary position has done little to persuade the majority of lower-class blacks that they should avoid dancehall.

*The Dancehall as an Alternative Sphere*

To the tens of thousands of Jamaicans involved as fans, entertainers, producers, and sound system operators, dancehall is a way to deal with the racism, poverty, and exploitation of living in an oppressive postcolonial society. The dancehall remains a key cultural matrix and social institution because it has retained these functions over time. The dancehall is therefore part of what both Brown (1991) and Gilroy (1991) call the "changing same," that is, the propensity for African diasporic cultures to constantly reinvent their traditions through cultural performance to meet the exigencies of the present day while retaining continuity with earlier forms. When Gilroy (1994) states that American hip-hop practitioners conscript history in the service of the present, he could just as easily have been referring to the Jamaican dancehall participant.

As an alternative economy, dancehall is a means of survival, and as an alternative space, it is a refuge. Recognizing the cathartic effect of the dancehall, a policeman at a dance one night told me: "Jamaica would explode, if it were not for dancehall." Yet dancehall is more than just a way to survive. It is also the center of the ghetto youth's lifestyle—a place for enjoyment, cultural expression and creativity, and spiritual renewal. For example, it was in the dancehalls that Rastafari became more than a religion of social outcasts. In the 1960s, through the influence of dancehall culture, Rastafari became widely embraced by the black lower class, even spreading to the brown middle class. Thus, the dancehall is a communication center, a relay station, a site where black lower-class culture attains its deepest expression. Dancehall retains this role wherever Jamaicans have migrated overseas in great numbers—New York, Miami, Toronto, London.

Dancehall business is an important alternative economy, especially for lower-class blacks, who are chronically underemployed or who want to
avoid the rigors of minimum-wage labor. The dancehall industry provides access to jobs, the opportunity to achieve relatively great success, and a means to sell one's labor and products on the foreign market. Looking at the social backgrounds, career trajectories, and working conditions of those who labor in the dancehall recording industry sheds light not only on the commodities that are produced, but it also helps us understand the way that Jamaica's political-economic system shapes everyday practice for this section of the working class. Indeed, thousands of Jamaicans who are virtually trapped at the bottom of a rigid political-economic hierarchy rely on dancehall for their daily bread. For a few lucky ghetto youths it is one of the only means of attaining social mobility. And as one of Jamaica's largest and most diversified economic sectors, dancehall is important to the national economy in terms of record exports, tourism, and foreign investment.

Yet the production of dancehall is important for more than economic reasons; it has performative and political implications as well. For example, choosing to remain in the dancehall field profoundly affects the identity and life experiences of its practitioners. Dancehall artists face the potential not only for great acknowledgment and social reward, but also for fierce competition and brutal attacks, such as armed assaults by rival performers and gangsters. These artists' performances reflect these working conditions, which in turn help to form the values and social imagination of the ghetto youth who are dancehall's primary consumers.

In this sense, the dancehall as an alternative field of production must contend with the larger political-economic system in which it is embedded. That is, the social relations of dancehall productions are to a great extent structured by the same social variables found in Jamaica's national economy: massive exploitation, racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence. Except for a few powerful women, dancehall production is overwhelmingly male-dominated, and women are discouraged from becoming singers and DJs. In addition, many dancehall songs written by male DJs and singers aim violence toward women and homosexuals. Whereas the representation of women has become a matter of some debate in Jamaican society (especially among middle-class activists), gay-bashing has not been politicized because homophobia is widely accepted throughout the society.

The Dancehall as a Site of Clashing

Dancehall events are sites of clashing—zones of conflict—that range from the micro to the macro level and from the symbolic to the "real" in Jamaican society. For example, one of the most popular aspects of dancehall performances are the ritual duels known as sound system clashes. These are fiercely contested musical battles that employ all manner of symbolic violence. To understand the implications of the clash, it is not enough to look to the rising level of violence in the society. The clash first emerged and continues to function as a way for particular sound systems to differentiate themselves and thus clear a space in a crowded field of competitors. In this sense, the clash operates as a dramatic embodiment of the competition within the music business, in particular, and within the lower class, in general. Thus, clashing takes place between gangs who attend dances, between groups of women dancers known as modeling posses or crews, and between the audience as a whole and state security forces.

Hence, dancehall performance and production not only reveal the struggle between Jamaica's haves and have-nots, but they also are a terrain where some of the most inexorable battles take place among the "poorer class of people." According to practitioners, competition in dancehall production has increased over the years along with the growing international success of dancehall and the concomitant decline in Jamaica's other leading economic sectors—agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and banking. As a result, the dancehall field has experienced rising levels of conflict and violence. In fact, violence continues to escalate in all areas of the society, although most deaths occur in the ghetto between gangs locked in what is called tribal war. In recent times, the murder rate has been surpassed in each successive year, even though Jamaica's once notoriously violent elections have been relatively peaceful. According to Larry Rohrer in the New York Times, 12 April 1998: "In 1997 more than 1,000 people were killed, a murder rate more than three times that of New York City." Not surprisingly, personal security in the inner-city ghettos and garrison communities, those ghetto neighborhoods controlled by armed gangs, has forced male residents to join or ally with any number of martial-like groups, such as the local drug gang, political party, or, as a last resort, the police. In a similar fashion, one's success and safety in dancehall is dependent on the backing of a powerful patron (a police officer or gang leader) or the solidarity and protection of a group (known as a crew or posse). Without the backative (support) of a crew, a dancehall entertainer is vulnerable both in terms of economic opportunity and violent attack. Yet the crews, like the gangs they so closely resemble, must each jockey for position with rival crews, an activity that results in varying degrees of conflict.

Thus, the production of dancehall takes place in the midst of these chaotic rivalries. As a result, most dancehall artists see themselves as soldiers deployed in a war zone. Gaining popularity, power, and a group of loyal defenders by any means is one of the few ways to advance through the hierarchy. However, in a field where just earning a living, let alone becom-
ing a star, means intense competition, great pressure always exists to overcome one’s rivals. Usually, however, this need to eliminate one’s rivals is worked out symbolically in song and performance, especially in duels known as clashes. This ritual murtheration is central to dancehall’s sacrificial economy, and it directly relates to Gilroy’s observation that we need to examine “the relationship between self-making and deliberately taking the life of the other” (1994: 71). Thus, the symbolic play of dancehall sometimes exceeds the bounds of its ritual containment, leading to actual violence.

The dancehall as a site of clashing also takes place on the macro level. For example, the clash between uptown and downtown social strata, through the medium of police harassment, is intensified at night — especially in and around dancehall sessions. The result is the police’s ongoing terrorizing of what Jamaicans call the dancehall massive — a term that refers to the crowd’s size and singularity. The police give the excuse that they are looking for gangsters and monitoring excessive night noise. The problem is that gangsters, entertainers, and patrons are, from all outward signs, indistinguishable.

Often, the underpaid police, who are themselves frequently drawn from the ghetto, are looking for a bribe, settling a score, or flexing their muscle by “locking off the dance.” Sometimes, they come to apprehend innocent dancehall patrons and, with no probable cause, put them into police lockups. The Jamaican police force is notorious for such activities; its criminality, brutality, and extrajudicial murders have been documented by international human rights groups. According to America’s Watch (1986 and 1993), police homicides in Jamaica account for one-third of the total murders in the country, whereas the rate in the United States has been estimated at less than 4 percent.

The police see dancehalls not only as giving refuge to gangsters, but as places where victories over the police are celebrated. Jamaicans have a long-standing fascination with outlaws who defy the state, as the film The Harder They Come, directed by Perry Henzell, so brilliantly depicts. Outlaws have long been romanticized as Robin Hoods and defenders of their ghetto communities. Today’s gangsters have inherited this heroic role, even though their criminal associations constitute something of a terrorizing police force within the borders of their own ghetto areas. Unlike the idealized outlaws of old, these gangsters are not above victimizing people within their constituencies. For instance, since the late 1960s, gangs of outlaws have been affiliated with one of two rival political parties, and they control their home turf both for themselves and for their patron political bosses. Although with the advent of the cocaine trade, the tie between these posses and their politician sponsors has weakened since the 1980s, many ghetto communities are still fraught with politically motivated gang warfare. However, now that gangs no longer are completely dependent on local political patronage, the situation has taken on an even more sinister cast. Many gangs are now part of transnational drug cartels. And, it is widely believed that some of the gang-related murders in Jamaica are carried out by gangsters based in North America, who fly into the country for a job and then leave the same day.

Intergang rivalries marked by political affiliation and control of the drug trade, the so-called tribal wars, have also played themselves out in the dancehalls. Some of these gangsters are participants in the dancehall scene, which is the business of things as record producers, sound system owners, and entertainment promoters, or on the performance side as sound system selectors, DJs, or dancers. The gangster lifestyle, based on a conspicuous display of masculine symbols of power (women, cars, money) and willingness to use violence to achieve desired ends, has become a model of the good life for thousands of male youths in the ghettos. The figure of the gangster has thus become a central theme in the dancehall performance. Many social problems give rise to this phenomenon. The poor educational system and high rates of unemployment alone make organized crime seem like a viable alternative. When this situation is added to the escalating level of crime, the fear of violent attack by gangsters or the police, and the systemic political corruption in the society, one begins to understand the attraction for these ghetto youth to the short, intense life of the gangster.

However, the power of the gangster persona in dancehall culture is not a passive reflection of the experience of the gangster in the society at large. To a great extent, dancehall has been an idiom through which entertainers not only have romanticized the gangster’s life in song, but they have elaborated the gangster role in live performance and in their daily lives. Thus, DJs and singers give expression to the gangster lifestyle through performance, while the gangsters in reciprocal fashion enact the scripts performed by these entertainers in their real lives. In fact, these career paths are tied together on a number of levels. Many of these youths move back and forth between a career in entertainment and in the gangs. Few other desirable options exist; they believe, because working as an unskilled manual laborer is considered “undignified,” skilled labor is extremely hard to come by, and emigration requires the right social connections and a sizable bank account.

However, some youths fortified with inspiration from “reality” songs and Rasta-influenced “culture” lyrics resist the lure of the gangs and criticize the use of the gun. These dancehall performances expose the processes that tempt these youngsters to become sacrificial pawns to the suicidal chess matches called “party politics” or “drug trafficking” in Jamaica. Yet, dance-
hall is equated with criminality and violence by many outsiders to that
culture in Jamaica (primarily members of the light-skinned middle and
upper classes, Christians, orthodox Rastafarians, older generations, and
government officials). They imagine the dancehall performance as nothing
other than dangerous and debauched, and they see it as a direct threat to
everything that is positive. Dancehall, for them, has become a symbol of the
nation's decline, social disorder, moral pollution, and cultural decadence. In
the press and in daily conversations, dancehalls are seen as places of uncontrolled
sexuality, known as slackness, as breeding grounds for crime and
violence, and as disseminators of night noise.

I might add that I, and more than a few insiders, also find aspects of
dancehall culture menacing, such as when it promotes homophobia, misogyny,
and the glorification of violence against innocent victims. Yet as an
anthropologist, I am reminded how important it is to recognize the com-
plexity of popular cultural forms like dancehall. After Paul Gilroy, I believe
that as "critically inclined intellectuals," who are engaged with "key ethical
and political questions" pertaining to the "special potency of popular cul-
tural styles," our work, "irrespective of [its] noblest motives, is revealed to
be inadequate where it moves too swiftly and too simplistically to either
condemn or celebrate" (1994: 50).

The Anthropology of Caribbean Popular Culture

Over the past thirty years the study of the Caribbean by anthropologists,
social scientists, and humanists has gradually come to embrace the impor-
tance of popular culture in these societies. Since 1990, a flurry of interesting
work has been done on popular culture in the region, especially by ethno-
musicologists working on such music cultures as calypso in Trinidad
(Rohlehr 1990), zouk in the French Antilles (Guilbault 1993), rumba in
Cuba (Daniel 1995), bachata (Pacini Hernandez 1995) and merengue
(Austerlitz 1997) in the Dominican Republic, popular music in Haiti
(Averill 1997), reggae in Jamaica (Billby 1995), and an edited volume on
various Caribbean musical genres (Manuel 1995).9

Yet, the tendency in American anthropology to neglect the role of popu-
lar culture in the Caribbean is exemplified in a review article, "The Carib-
bean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropology" (1992), by the noted
anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot. This essay makes no reference
to the region's expressive forms despite their local, national, and global
importance. Rather, his discussion continues the work of the political-
economy school, headed by Sidney Mintz, whose theoretical approach has
shaped the anthropology of the region. While it is necessary to acknowl-
edge the importance of the political-economic perspective, these analyses
have tended to overlook the role of cultural expressions as an important
political and economic force. They have made a false dichotomy between
political and economic forces (like the sugar plantation) and cultural forces
(such as dancehall) (Nettleford 1979).

At the same time, the scholarly literature on Caribbean cultural history
has until recent years too easily fallen into the two-sided colonial ideology
which maintains that either "Caribbean history is no more than the History
of Colonization of the Caribbean" or the notion forwarded by middle-
class Caribbean intellectuals, such as Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott:11 "In
time, the slave surrendered to amnesia, [and] that amnesia is the true
history of the New World" (1974b). Hence, the work of the Caribbean
intellectual, according to Walcott, affords no time or energy for the musings
of the historian, because of this "erasure of the past."

For Walcott, history is best understood and made use of through artistic
acts, where history is lived in the present, rather than through scholarly
efforts, in which history is represented in historical texts. In his Ethno-
graphic History, Caribbean Past (1990b), Richard Price quotes from the
volume by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant (1989), three Martiniquan
intellectuals whose views reflect those of Glissant and Walcott: "Only po-
etic knowledge, literary knowledge, in short, artistic knowledge can reveal
us, perceive us, bring us back, evanescence, to a reborn consciousness." Per-
haps this view that values the creative imagination over scientific analysis is
cautions both scholars and Caribbean people away from a fetishistic —
shall we say, morbid — attachment to the details of the past, to that which is
no longer alive and in our midst. This ambivalence toward discovery of the
past is understandable, especially for a people whose history, in the sense of
a written linear narrative, has been hidden "beneath the colonial veneer of
History,"12 and whose history, in the lived sense of people's everyday lives,
to a great extent has been filled with pain, violence, dislocation, slavery, and
persistent downpression.13

And this ambivalence is widely shared. Even Rastafarian reggae singers
such as the legendary Wailer, Peter Tosh, sang: "I'm gonna walk and not
look back." While this attitude provides a psychological benefit in certain
situations, Tosh himself was to advocate and express the importance of a
historical consciousness of the last "four hundred years." Thus, I agree with
Price's conclusion: "collective amnesia was more an invention of bourgeois
intellectuals than a rural reality" in the Caribbean (1990b: 15). Among
common people, collective memory was "preserved, transformed, or oblir-
erated according to the location of particular individuals and collectivities
in relationship to particular events and actors, past and present" (1990b:
Ninjaman before him, is known primarily as a gunman DJ. Yet he also has scored significant hits in every category of dancehall lyricism.

In addition to their ability to be "all-rounders" and to capitalize on the public's penchant for clashing between the top two stars, Beenie Man and Bounty Killer have been in the forefront of the dialogue with hip-hop music since the mid-1990s. Songs by both of these artists have incorporated hip-hop elements of the most popular rap stars like Biggie Smalls and Busta Rhymes, and they have appeared on these rappers' albums and vice versa.

As agriculture and mining, traditionally Jamaica's two most important economic sectors, have declined, attention has shifted to tourism and the entertainment industry, a sector where Jamaica enjoys a unique niche in the international market. To harness the productivity of the entertainment industry, of which dancehall is a major part, the government contracted with a Miami-based consulting firm in 1995 to survey the current condition and economic potential of the music industry, the first time that the government has included the entertainment business in its formal economic strategy. The findings of this report were summarized in the "National Industrial Policy" (Jamaica Government 1996), published under the auspices of the PNP government.

The report gave official recognition to a reality that most Jamaicans take for granted: dancehall culture is big business, both locally and globally. The Recording Industry Association of America estimates "that between 1992 and 1993, 27 million units of reggae albums were sold in the United States, earning revenue of approximately $270 million dollars" (Watson 1995). While no such reliable estimates are available for dancehall in Jamaica, there can be little doubt that it is one of most productive sectors in the overall economy, as evidenced by the PNP's recent efforts to collect data on this "nontraditional product."

The dearth of statistical data on the dancehall economy has two explanations. First, the dancehall economy has always operated primarily as an "informal sector," that is, outside the domain of government record-keeping and tax collection. Second, the business people involved in dancehall production have relished this autonomy and tax-exempt status, even while they have clamored for government assistance and investment from

START
the banking sector. Given the recent tax code, which legislated a 15 percent General Consumption Tax (GCT) on all commercial transactions, these producers are more reluctant than ever to divulge their earnings, fearing the government tax collectors as much as they fear their "bad minded" (envious) brethren from the ghetto who target them for criminal attack.

Despite sparse research on the dancehall economy as a whole and its lack of formal organization by the government and big business, the dancehall's impact is realized in all facets of Jamaica's economy. Literally thousands of Jamaicans are directly employed in dancehall-related occupations, and thousands more are the indirect beneficiaries of dancehall production because its worldwide appeal stimulates tourism and helps promote other Jamaican exports, such as coffee. For example, the locally produced film Dancehall Queen (1997) captures dancehall's centrality to the informal economy. The movie depicts the importance of dancehall, not only for primarily male performers like Beenie Man, but also for female huggers such as the film's protagonist, who becomes the queen of the dancehall.

The production of dancehall culture is a multidimensional network that incorporates a number of productive systems and actors. The field of players and institutions includes huggers, DJs, singers, dancers, models, selectors, instrumentalists, producers, promoters, fashion designers, graphic artists, managers, attorneys, journalists, radio disc jockeys, media houses, recording studios, record shops, record manufacturers and distributors, record companies, video production houses, venture capitalists, and multinational companies that use dancehall for advertising their products (such as Desnoes & Geddes, bottlers owned by the Guinness conglomerate). The composition of each layer differs by race, class, and gender, which partially reflects the hierarchical structure of political-economic power in the society. That is, the dancehall economy largely functions as a microcosm of the greater system of economic inequality in that it both reproduces hegemonic patron-client relations and generates its own relations of inequality.

For instance, while the black lower classes go into dancehall's informal economy as a way of subverting conventional wage labor, and while many of them achieve a level of success unavailable in other pursuits, they are invariably drawn into exploitative relationships with agents who have more political-economic power as the lower-class blacks attempt to improve their own position in the field.¹ For the most part, this means that upper echelons of dancehall production are controlled by white, Asian, and racially mixed middle-class and upper-class men, the middle rungs by brown and black middle-class men (with a few powerful women as well), and the lower strata by black lower-class men (with women filling well-defined positions subordinate to men).²

Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the relative autonomy that dancehall production provides to the black lower classes. As agents with little economic and cultural capital, members of the black lower class have used dancehall as a means of creating economic opportunity where none existed before. For example, the success of dancehall in the North American market has allowed Jamaican artists to obtain visas and work permits to perform and earn U.S. dollars. To discount this reality is to fail to understand the threat that the middle class feels toward bunna and bongi-yaga³ (lower-class blacks), who are able to drive "Benzes" and buy fancy houses in posh neighborhoods.

---

**The Political-Economic Structure of Dancehall**

The outline presented in this section represents a heuristic model of dancehall's political economy. I present the various layers from the bottom to the top of the hierarchy, even though the actual power relations between each of the actors are more complicated and unpredictable.

**VENDORS, HUGGERS, AND HUSTLERS**

At the lowest level of production are thousands of vendors, huggers, and hustlers, who buy and sell dancehall-related goods, provide refreshments at dancehall sessions, and work at odd jobs, such as posting dancehall posters and moving sound system equipment. This stratum is filled almost exclusively by persons from the black lower class. Both men and women go into vending, haggling, and hustling, but vending and haggling are thought of as women's work, while hustling, which consists of things like working deals between artists and sound systems, is an occupation filled primarily by men. Most of these workers are able to earn only survival wages; however, a few huggers with large market stalls and hustlers with established connections are able to purchase cars and sometimes even to buy houses in middle-class districts.

**DANCEHALL ARTISTS**

At the next level of production are the creators and performers of dancehall culture and music: graphic artists, fashion designers,⁴ photographers, songwriters, singers, DJs, selectors, MCs, dancers, and dancehall models. The entertainers, those who record and perform the music directly, which number well into the thousands, are also predominantly from the black lower class. A few performers, however, are from the brown middle class. Here, the sexual division of labor is highly differentiated. The central role of performers who use their voices—DJs, singers, and selectors—is almost