

At the Crossroads

Tom Jennings

The concept of “the crossroads” has been a staple of US blues traditions. It refers to an oscillating state of paralysis when faced with equally unifying moral choices concerning the personal directions to be taken in life – with the emotional resonance of “feeling the blues” lying in its poignant acknowledgement that pain inevitably accompanies any chosen action. The quintessential concept of the blues crossroads contrasts selling one’s soul to the devil in exchange for earthly gain, with the deferred satisfaction of piety promising heavenly reward. Beyond the religious overtones, of course, far more prosaic existential and ethical dilemmas fit the model thanks to its metaphorical economy of memory and biography, social imbrication, fantasy and individual agency, and the sense that the profound complexity and intransigence of the world never permits simple or perfect solutions. So, now that the cutting edge of globalising capitalism concentrates on squeezing profit from its colonisation of culture, even the most belligerently oppositional genres and forms of production find themselves indentured in its dream factory. Short of abject submission, those in the mesmerising matrix of this most secular of crossroads must thus also distinguish lines of flight from dead end postures in avoiding the sacrifice of autonomy.

During the past decade hip-hop musicians, performers and entrepreneurs have transformed the profile of the contemporary popular music industry in an unprecedented invasion of commodified cultural space on the part of largely lower class Black people (with considerable multiracial involvement at all levels and stages). Starting from organic community responses to the social and economic circumstances of mid-1970s New York, hip-hop’s immensely innovative compositional, discursive and productive formations spread like wildfire across the US, then worldwide. Mobilising and infecting other media and musical genres on the way, as well as the sports and fashion fields, so-called ‘urban’ style is now accepted to be the most profitable framework for cultural production. But success brought not only continual hostility from external gatekeepers, policers and arbiters of taste, and repeated backlashes against its vulgar profanity, but also dissent from within – so that all commentators now foresee no solution to the grave crisis of authenticity arising from the music’s dislocation from its grass-roots origins and the apparently inexorable primacy of commercial agendas. Through a survey of trends in last year’s urban recording releases, this review of the state of hip-hop asks whether the cultural and political movement pursued for three decades really is finally at a standstill in the cul-de-sac of the spectacle.

Roads to Nowhere New



In a series of articles in *Pop Matters* magazine entitled ‘Rhythm & Bullshit?’,¹ Mark Anthony Neal details the market consolidation of US recording and radio sectors in the 1990s, and its severely constricting effects on the range of music coming from blues and soul traditions reaching

the public. Crucially, the cultural neo-colonialist recuperation of independent local production systems under monopoly control coincided with the clout of hip-hop’s younger Black audiences who rejected the yuppie 1980s MOR and disco R&B styles. Ironically, the subsequent overdue return of soul to the maturing hip-hop spectrum reflected both the business success of entrepreneurs like Sean ‘Puff Daddy’ Combs whose upward mobility masterminded the move, and major label rap’s rapid tumble into rapid bling. The outcome now, according to Neal, is that the promotion of R&B only through affiliation with superficial hip-hop has effectively evacuated the human heart of the genre.

This analysis accounts for the present preponderance of teenage R&B karaoke acts visibly lacking genuine feeling. However, R&B’s traditional opposition of big money and individual essence is as problematic as any simple model of alienation. Both musically and performatively, hip-hop aesthetics specifically counterpose grass-roots collective experience and personal biography, thriving on the contradictions and ambivalences thrown up which the transcendent emotionality of a single isolated voice could never resolve. The contemporary challenge, then, is to find renewed expressive potential within a landscape of broken beats and fractured subjectivities without sticking with the busted flushes of spiritual uplift, liberal civil rights and bootstrap economics promising fortunes for tiny fractions. Hence thug soul² thematics grapple forcefully with the fallout of class struggle in a neoliberal age, while exploratory R&B musical innovation is only intermittently apparent,³ as it has serious trouble resisting corporate sanitisation due to its dialogue with hip-hop.

The paucity of significant major 2005 releases largely bears out the story of the suffocation of soul. Flashily fashionable new pop tarts with varying degrees of talent but utterly unoriginal material abound, whereas commercially-proven stars trot out more (or less) of their same. The respective vocal strengths of Mary J. Blige (*The Breakthrough*) and Faith Evans (*The First Lady*) retain considerable evocative power, but the excessively smoothed-out retro ‘80s production and minor tinkering with signature styles contain only flickers of their key contributions to hip-hop soul – an affiliation whose receding substance justifies the album titles in the narcissistic sense of resting on laurels.⁴ In contrast, Jon-B’s fifth album, *Stronger Everyday*, marks a minor advance due to the greater freedom given by a smaller independent label to combine songwriting, vocal, instrumentalist and production prowess with a wider range of subjects than hitherto allowed, with much darker and edgier material accompanying accomplished romantic balladeering.⁵

Rising stars signal little forward movement either. John Legend’s earnest soulman anthems in *Get Lifted* sparked mendacious marketing well beyond self-important moniker and pretentious title.⁶ Meanwhile the great black hope of neo-soul also risks premature greyness. So there’s no doubting the sincerity and sweet soulfulness of Dwele, but second album *Some Kinda ...* virtually recapitulates his debut.⁷ And although scarcely musically adventurous, Jaguar Wright’s *Divorcing Neo 2 Marry Soul* is far grittier and more energising in plumbing depths of frustrated desire.⁸ Anthony Hamilton’s still longer journey from North Carolina saw his debut *Soulife*⁹ followed this year by *Ain’t Nobody Worryin’* – both classic documents of empathic soul detailing the manifold hurts and hopes in life spoiled by economic, emotional and social dysfunction. Hamilton’s voice conveys such generosity of spirit despite repeated heartbreak that questions of sentimentality seem superfluous – especially when his breakthrough required hired hook singing for tired radio rap, mirroring the payoff for perseverance of recuperation familiar in

hip-hop.

Paths of Least Reminiscence



If R&B authenticity appears possible only in nostalgic reference, hip-hop’s disputed golden ages are too recent to mythologise so effortlessly. From a rich field of hip-hop realism and representation, the only transcendence of pain and struggle yet yielded is a handful of moguls marching into mansions and boardrooms remixing the American dream. The celebration of such unlikely riches without any disavowal of origins may be an instructive demystification of continuing race and class aristocracy, but no political phoenix has yet risen (as anticipated by rap’s cultural visionaries) from the ashes of civil rights and Black power’s encounters with the late-capitalist state. Instead commercial ascendancy has attenuated the potential down to cartoon caricatures of toxic ghetto freaks and monsters, as exemplified by Eminem and 50 Cent¹⁰ and sundry similarly tawdry seductions into the wild goose paper chase. Nevertheless many refuse to resign themselves to a social death of enslavement to repressive commodification – preferring a tactical retreat into harnessing the strengths of early 1990s styles but retrospectively questioning the logics of assimilation and accumulation leading to the present impasse.¹¹

North Carolina’s Little Brother have no doubts about the status of mainstream rap. *The Minstrel Show* mimics the format of a television talk show, simulating comic interludes, cabaret and comment interspersed among tracks which excoriate the guns, sex and cash obsessions of radio rappers as no more than contemporary stereotyping and justifying racial subordination.¹² But the equal appeal of progressive rap to both white and Black youth as well as the class affiliations of gangsta rap paint a more complex picture, which is probably why Little Brother offer no analysis or prognosis to back up the bald mantras. More nuanced is *Black Dialogue* by the Perceptionists, drawing on more hardcore conscious antecedents to experiment with a wider range of personal and political orientations in confronting present circumstances.¹³ Heavier still are *The Black Market Militia*, recalling the awesomely dark ghetto-centric mysticism of the Wu-Tang Clan collective combined with the programmatic ambitions of Public Enemy, Paris and Dead Prez in calling the disenfranchised to arms on their own behalf.¹⁴

Unlike many rap luminaries critiquing the degraded state of the music who need distance from commercial imperatives to speak out, Common continues his sophisticated co-articulation of blues, soul and rap in the consistently excellent *Be*. The occasional preachy superciliousness of this wordsmith is here more than compensated for by his imaginative identification with the ordinary guy on ‘The Corner’ (the first single) mulling over constraints on agency and community and striving to make

honourable sense of a dishonourable world. Whereas on *Version 7.0: The Street Scriptures*, Guru swaps the hip-hop royalty status he shared with DJ Premier in Gang Starr for the hands-on difficulty of a small label. This gives further authority to his insistent stress on how the double binds of inner-city hardship threaten to overwhelm integrity – where maintaining a capacity for ethical reflection is even more hard-won and essential than in the music business. And Kazé's *Spirit of '94: Version 9.0* renders explicit rap's inherent intergenerational conflict with 9th Wonder's evocative beats enclosing perceptive lyrics intimately connecting family history to individual and communal futures.¹⁵

Steadfast on the independent underground New York scene, talented lyricist J-Live is a real original in his use of the elements of hip-hop. Preferring live shows with real bands and unusually capable of rhyming whilst scratching, he's also an excellent producer. If that wasn't enough, *The Hear After* oozes with intelligence and insight into the contradictions of the music and its social environment. Mobilising the banality of religious themes and concepts, their meanings are translated into everyday secular contexts of personal meaning and collective ramification with tentative conclusions woven back into a questioning of the purposes of cultural practice. On a similar level of artistry and commitment, Talib Kweli has made steady inroads into the mainstream, but, it seems, enough is enough – and *Right About Now* revels in the refreshing lack of constraints a small label imposes. This "mixtape" is "sucka free" in that no pretence of conceptual singularity inveigles the audience into passive consumption. Instead this exuberant collection of raw hip-hop expertise, energy and lust for life shines precisely due to the absence of overweening promotional hyperbole corrupting strategic bragging into the tactics of the brand.¹⁶

Trade Routes and Branches



Despite the seeming stasis of soul, and the stultifying pressures towards conformity required by major labels packaging rappers as brands rather than artists, as always in hip-hop seeds of renewal are being sown, responding to and mobilising technical developments in other genres and emerging from the fertile dynamics of competition and imagination in hip-hop itself. All sorts of musical and lyrical innovation are bubbling under mainstream radar, even if the most obvious examples achieve prominence not from grass-roots pressure but a commercially-driven need to appear fresh – widening audiences without threatening the existing corporate status quo. So production team the Neptunes (Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo) started in hip-hop but thanks to their unparalleled range and mastery of digital composition can deliver compelling arrangements in any genre. However, without the vision or project of, say, a Dr Dre, all they've aimed for is the celebrity and wealth that gangsta rap ended up with once a depoliticised Black nationalist agenda

of business development obliterated, in practice, other political or cultural tactics.¹⁷ Here, selling (out) seems the only agenda.

A more interesting template is Outkast's incorporation of big beat and disco rhythms to appeal to the pop sensibilities of younger mainstream white audiences¹⁸ – bringing Atlanta's southern soul to new listeners without compromising its status as rap music. André 3000 and Big Boi employ innovations in sound to stretch to the limits some of the oldest African-American cultural themes (the trickster's boasting and posing, plays on words and appearances, etc) that energised hip-hop from the beginning. Other new US production collectives similarly blur boundaries, such as the Sa-Ra Creative Partners' soul, funk and ambient-tinged extensions of orthodox hip-hop beats – and Kanye West is attempting something similar without venturing so far from accepted formulae. *Late Registration* chronicles the distractions and affectations of the black lower middle classes at the bottom of the greasy meritocratic ladder, nervously (or longingly, depending on the mood) looking over their shoulders at what they're leaving behind. The similarly schizophrenic musical accompaniments mix wistful melodic arrangements from indie-rock producer Jon Brion with West's powerful beats laced with killer vocal hooks and unexpected sampled concoctions. Many of the lyrics deal with the psychological and social consequences of daily practices of consumerism among those with at least some disposable income, rather than extremes of utter poverty or ghetto fabulous fantasies favoured elsewhere. This is especially pertinent given that a significant minority of hardcore rap icons have more comfortable backgrounds than their performance personas suggest, and also signifies the socio-economic status of increasing numbers employed in the industry itself.

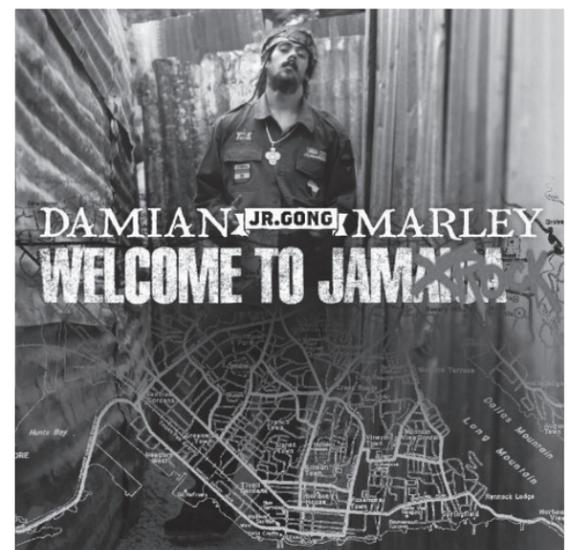


Kanye West's balancing of compositional artistry with a contemporary thematic spin allows him to maintain subcultural hip-hop credentials, as in his production for Common's *Be*. Missy Elliott's strategy is bolder still. *The Cookbook* moves further away than before from Timbaland's lush multi-layered polyrhythmic production paradigm towards stripped down digital beats – simulating a bygone party aesthetic for a CD-buying MTV audience. Gone too is her video portrayal¹⁹ of a monstrous gothic-futuristic female trickster flouting the rules of pop femininity. Now conforming to acceptable conventions of beauty, her early career in routine R&B harmonising also echoes through several tracks which are otherwise entirely out of place. The overall effect is to reference her previous incarnations and questioning of gender stereotypes, but with the associated ambivalence, irony and depth no longer integrated into the music.

Missy is certainly unusual in sidestepping the past 20 years of hip-hop and in jettisoning the styles that made her name. Nevertheless

anchoring her new image in the mythic history of rap parallels the trend noted above among today's maturing MCs and DJs for retrenching within hip-hop's cultural and political strengths as a defence against the theft, trivialisation and symbolic murder they observe in the corporate takeover (i.e. of both the music and society generally). But of course the appropriation has always been a two-way process, where hip-hop's key compositional breakthroughs stemmed from cultural guerilla raids – on the commodified history of Black music and electro's manipulation of found material for dance beats, which in the 1990s extended to digging in the crates of all regions of contemporary popular music. And whereas the most commercial producers go straight for the pop payoff in incorporating the most abject teenybop chart-topping material, smaller hip-hop labels and their rosters of independent artists specialise in venturing beyond easily available musical resources, giving other media and genres of youth subculture an urban twist.

Esoteric experimentation may be conceived as art among independent hip-hop aficionados as well as in electronic and dance genres. This elevation sometimes manifests itself in apparently elitist ambitions to stake a claim in modern classical music, where Stockhausen *et al* can be cited as inspirations alongside more recent digital wizards. Short of such pomposity, the 'concept album' is a common phenomenon, often drenched in futuristic cod-mysticism. A good example is Princess Superstar's intriguing sci-fi themed *My Machine*, hybridising fashionably explicit cyborg erotica to ironically critique and/or celebrate virtual desire. In addition to the obvious allure of science fiction narratives for generations reared on computer games and virtual reality hyperbole, many other artists plunder cult horror and comic book back catalogues. A superior and thoroughly conceived example of hip-hop superhero animation is Dangerdoom's *The Mouse and The Mask*, with characteristically clever and subtle lyrics supported by equally skilful and original beats.²⁰ In contrast, those associated with the Def Jux label often combine rock music samples and references with the orchestral pretensions of 1970s prog-rock, or trade in the individualist indie currency of art-school existentialism and fashionable depressive angst rather than the collectively-oriented passions of other hip-hop subgenres.

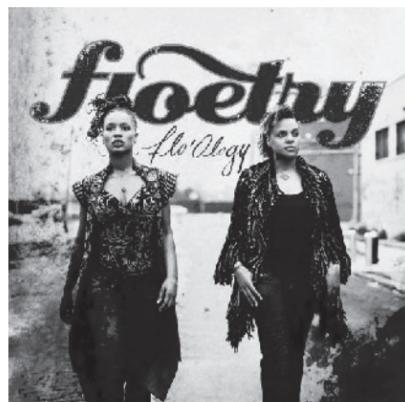


Meanwhile – refracting the other end of the guitar music spectrum – all those dreary white metal bands trading on urban cool with desultorily clueless pseudo-rapping are counterpointed by pre-eminent performance poet Saul Williams pissing away his blistering political spoken word with 1980s NY thrash-style backing.²¹ Utilising a rather different conception of Black punk rock, the Ying Yang Twins' exuberant *The United States of Atlanta* celebrates the rowdy, lower-class crunk aesthetic of the southern state's party scene, digitally synthesised using elements of Miami bass and reggae dancehall, with its relentless slackness watered down (though not much) to

widen the appeal. But whereas Lil' Jon and other "dirty south" heavyweights are quite clear about their indebtedness to Jamaican vocal, musical and performative traditions, well-established hip-hop superstars struggle to do more than blatantly rip them off. So Lil' Kim's latest release *The Naked Truth* milks the most unimaginative and tediously commercial contemporary chart rap, tacking on generic roots reggae beats to avoid looking so utterly stagnant.²²

Further south, hip-hop and reggae styles are proliferating and mixing with local traditions.²³ Younger Jamaican performers blend different dance rhythms into basic dancehall beats to present themselves as more radio-friendly and commercially viable,²⁴ while international rock stars makeover anodyne muzak with pale ragga imitations.²⁵ In a rude awakening to this sanitised travesty, Damian Marley (Bob's youngest son) offers an invigorating blend of styles prevalent in actual Jamaican clubs (including R&B, hip-hop, roots and dancehall). Though designated as crossover material, he characterises *Welcome To Jamrock* as "the whole mix" from Kingston – where jamrock encapsulates a grass-roots version of reggae's history. Then, in a simple but highly effective rhetorical move, the magnificent title song²⁶ reinterprets jamrock as the "real" Jamaica spiralling into escalating poverty, violence and social division disguised as the superficial hedonistic paradise pimped in tourist brochures – implying that the island's most profitable cultural export colludes in this tragic dishonesty. In a parallel manoeuvre, the album's random changes of tempo²⁷ refuse the structural conventions inherited from Western rock music's pretensions to high art, since the privatised consumption of this commodity could never accurately convey the experience which makes its creation possible – the dancehall party where the selector's sensitivity to audience reactions determines content and sequencing. Unlike other bland attempts at populist contemporary reggae,²⁸ *Jamrock's* multidimensional double vision and breadth of themes, sounds and attitudes (conservative, raging, patronising, caring, self-critical and/or radical) simultaneously looks backward, sideways and forwards. This fully realised and unflinching statement of the present forecloses on none of the possible futures – for culture or society; for better or worse – and that's a rare achievement.²⁹

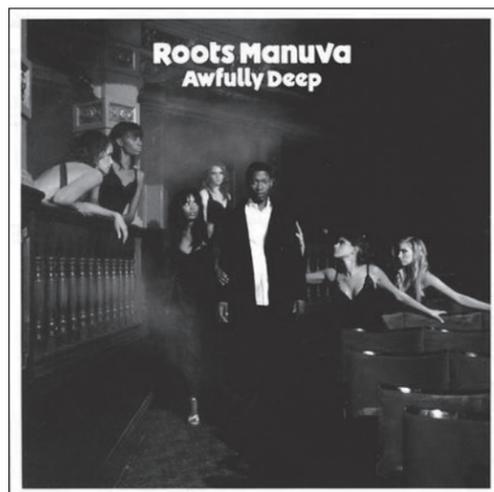
Following Beaten Tracks



This side of the Atlantic the familiar MTV/radio-friendly patterns are also readily apparent. Big record companies oscillate between their traditional indifference to indigenous output inspired by Black traditions and packaging new acts as little more than pop idols with street-cred peddled as short-term novelties. In 2005 the usual sorry litany of incompetently marketed bands most obviously lacked soul. So Lemar's R&B-lite, Joss Stone's fake funk and half-baked singer-songwriting from Kevin Mark Trail, for example, squeezed out attention for the new album from Lynden David Hall—easily the most significant British soulman since Lewis Taylor refused to toe the blue-eyed line.³⁰ *In Between Jobs* summarises Hall's vocal strength and musical

dexterity, alternating mature funk and blues themes and riffs to rival any nu-soul don. And if his album contained nothing particularly new, that was not true of Terri Walker, whose quirkily sassy attitude and powerfully sultry voice had already demonstrated a knack for conveying pop songs with real depth. But, in addition to framing her—completely inappropriately—as a British answer to the new American R&B teen pseudo-divas, Mercury also managed to suicidally botch the content, promotion and launch of her second effort, *L.O.V.E.*

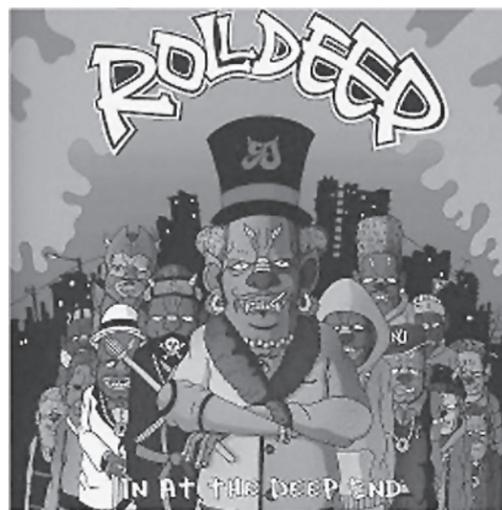
Moving from farce to tragedy, another second album to promise far more than it delivered is *Judgement Days* by Ms Dynamite—a textbook case of an MC fooled by her own bragging; a biblical arrogance no doubt encouraged by media adoration and industry sycophancy. The slickly superfluous pop-R&B production here might sell CDs in suburbia, but exchanging wicked rapping for weak whingeing singing two-fingers her underground origins in UK garage and hip-hop. Worse, the unforgiving tenor of her arguments snootily equates the moral inadequacies of rich and poor – as if ghetto pressures are comparable to the preoccupations of her new pals in the celebrity charity world.³¹ Fortunately, redemption songs were at hand from South London duo Floetry, in *Flo'ology's* gorgeous blend of Natalie Stewart's skilfully ironic spoken word and songstress Marsha Ambrosius' searing gospel-tinged voice floating over the best Philly velvet jazz alchemy. True, only the Roots' Black Lily performance poetry venue rescued Floetry's intelligent womanist sensuality from a lack of UK recognition for the real deal.³² Conversely, their surprisingly unusual synergy testifies to the rarity of Lauryn Hill's or Est'elle's dual melodic and rapping expertise – and embarrasses those who flop like damp squibs between stools.



Maintaining its cool distance from corporate nonsense, straight-up homegrown hip-hop received even more pitiful mainstream profiling than R&B. A perfunctory boost was reserved for south Wales underclass comics Goldie Lookin' Chain, whose *Safe As Fuck* affectionately and shamelessly sends themselves up without a trace of Pitman's bile or Ali G's contempt.³³ Elsewhere, horizontal distribution self-organised by small labels insulates the old-school clarity of MCs-plus-DJs from 21st century sullying.³⁴ Nevertheless, even in grass-roots production a wider range of sonic options is now being explored by those who appreciate Timbaland, Dre and the Neptunes but are confident enough to follow their own courses. So Derby's Baby J expertly combines judicious sampling, compositional simulation and meticulously crafted percussive structure to synthesise downhome and decidedly British moods and atmospheres – showcased in the subtly effective nuances for various artists in his mixtape demo, *F.T.P.*³⁵ Also taking a cue from American R&B/hip-hop crossovers is Doc Brown's impressive *The Document*, managing to echo lyrically and musically the ambivalence of streetwise love and pain from 1990s US blueprints, but without sounding old, tired, naff – or remotely American.³⁶

For really exciting advances in British urban culture, though, the many-faceted Jamaican connections are finally coming to fruition in a compelling pincer movement of vocal flows and bassline rhythms.³⁷ Least unconventionally, *The Rotton Club* – the fourth album from Blak Twang (aka Tony Rotton) – combines a skewering cockney rudeboy swagger with sharply conscious blue-collar decency in deeply personal lyrics. The reggae influence surfaces in the musical tempos too, but this is first and foremost prime UK hip-hop from one of its pre-eminent and most consistent exponents. Considerably more idiosyncratic is *Mixed Blessings* by Lotek Hi-Fi, which has a refreshingly ragged DIY feel thanks to its unpolished hip-hop magpie aesthetic chopping pure Caribbean ingredients. Roots and dub collide with soca bounce and dancehall minimalism, with English patois running through benevolent gruffness, decisive intonation and sweet harmonising. These folks clearly enjoy their music – and it's infectious.³⁸ Nonetheless, the most accomplished, self-assured and satisfying UK reggae/rap crossover vibe belongs to Roots Manuva, whose third album *Awfully Deep* goes further towards syncopating British dub's bastard offspring into a seamlessly sensual complement to his easygoing, humorously intellectual lyrical mischief.³⁹

New Directions Underground



Apart from the direct lineage audible in the sounds produced by those of recent Jamaican descent, reggae's beat structures and performance conventions have had a more circuitous influence on contemporary British music ever since prominent Kingston producers relocated to London in the 1970s, supplying the sonic impetus for trip-hop, bhangra and various UK electronic innovations. The prime movers of the rave revolution may cite Detroit techno and Chicago house precursors, but subsequent developments regularly counterposed vacuously inclusive artistic or philosophical elitism with dangerous grass-roots populism. However, despite the empty escapism of acid house ecstasy, student partying in a global Ibiza or the yuppie new jazz of drum'n'bass, there has always already been an abject ruffneck antithesis blaring out from the nearest sink estate down the road. Originally dubbed "jungle", chopping and screwing dubplate 45s at 78rpm, the ambivalent clarion calls of its MCs hype up the assembled massive into a mobile frenzy while urging communal coherence in the face of the dog-eat-dog misery the rave offers refuge from.⁴⁰

Using new computer tools for sophisticated digital invention, pioneers of the drum'n'bass paradigm quickly superseded crude sampling, while mainstream acclaim and huge sales for Goldie, Roni Size and LTJ Bukem made it clear that CDs could be sold by stripping away the ghetto dancehall appeal. Successive generations of UK garage producers and promoters have oscillated between nourishing the hardcore underground where MCs cut their teeth, and commercial soft-peddling to middle class

consumers. Until recently mainstream airplay necessitated revision to mirror R&B and rap genres reluctantly tolerated thanks to US global dominance, but now all of these boundaries are beginning to blur in the catch-all category of 'grime'. After the fits-and-starts of garage's So Solid Crew, the pop crossover of The Streets and prompt defections of stars like Craig David and Ms Dynamite, two successful albums from Dizzee Rascal and excellent debuts from Shystie and Wiley have definitively signalled the arrival of a new urban broom sweeping away the snobbery.⁴¹

Grime vocalists pace themselves to match rapid-fire multiple beats, but lyrically emphasise neighbourhood social networks and collective expression. Naturally this includes all the tiresome petty beefs and macho melodramas of youth gangs in poverty-stricken environments, translated into battle rhymes and party anthems just as in early hip-hop. Staying closest to junglist rabble-rousing mode, Lethal Bizzle of More Fire Crew/Fire Camp acknowledges debts to rap braggadacio but makes no attempt to copy any hip-hop style. After several underground smashes and even Top 20 hits, his ferocious *Against All Odds* peppers crowd-pleasing chorus catchphrases with nascent narratives of desperate hope. Rival East London collective Roll Deep's eclectic *In At The Deep End* strays much further musically from the trademark sparsely synthesised bleeps and squelches of the 'eski' production style by mobilising all their pop reference points from the 80s onwards – from Asian, Latin, Caribbean, American, and, most of all, UK sources – held together with a dozen MCs in tight-knit breakneck freestyle formation.⁴²

If the lyrical content so far leaves something to be desired for those of a poetic streak, and frantic articulation in the heat of the rave satisfies only speed freaks elsewhere, Bristol's K.Ners flexes expert delivery from a hip-hop apprenticeship around cutting edge digital percussion in *K In Da Flesh*. Meanwhile Manchester sextet Raw-T (with 4 MCs and 2 DJs) blend prodigious rap technique and posse sensibility with grimy ease in *Realise And Witness*, with a naturally uninhibited outlaw flow any studio gangsta would covet. Backed by a startling and brooding bricolage of up to the minute UK garage and US hip-hop sonic inflections, this has a much fuller, more multilayered sound than anything coming out of London, incorporating judicious samples in synthesised breaks plus some mind-boggling scratching and juggling. Together with lyrical depth and quality unexpected from 15 to 20-year-olds, Raw-T fully deserve wide recognition and appreciation irrespective of subcultural pigeonholes.

Back in London, Lady Sovereign rules the east end underclass party roost like a miniature pearly queen. The deceptive simplicity of the *Vertically Challenged* EP and singles like 'Hoodie' mix lazy ease, wicked humour and pointed everyday relevance into basic but rousing beats – and a possible US album release next might catapult her freewheeling chutzpah to global attention. Content with parochial belonging, Mike Skinner's first signing with The Streets' profits are the Mitchell Brothers, ducking and diving to some effect in *A Breath of Fresh Attire's* alternately affectionate and fractious multicultural makeover of Cockney geezers. More ambitious and introspective in referring to rites of passage from underground rave (via football trials) to kosher music career, Kano's emotive *Home Sweet Home* nobly fails to bind together the schizoid strands of grime with the lyrical cohesion of hip-hop. Sway, on the other hand, threatens to do just that – not just through sheer lyrical brilliance, but from a facility to project episodic fragments of personality and experience to chime with compelling beat structures at any frequency. As with Skinnyman, Sway's flow maintains an unerring balance in never overriding a rhythm – and, like the best hip-hop originators, any underground genre may be embraced as grist for his mill, provided mutual respect accompanies the ability to rock a grass-

roots party. Finally, and most spectacularly, Sri-Lankan born and London raised M.I.A. explodes the precious small-mindedness of national and generic divides—whether in music, culture or politics—suggesting an incipient consciousness in dancehall. Her sensuous MC cadence confuses insurrectionary zeal and street aesthetics with an ironic wayward vulnerability appropriate to the awkward contradictions in multiple-rooted postmodern identity, reinforced sonically by the eclecticism of Diplo's towering, swirling and discomfiting electronic production.⁴³

Streets Ahead



So, as in other sectors, new cultural enclosures across the globe imprison previously autonomous forms and practices under multinational control. Media conglomerates build on production and distribution patterns formed in the corporate co-optations of jazz, blues and soul and honed in the homogenisation of disco and contemporary R&B/hip-hop. Here, individual artists can realistically only play with permutations of existing elements, with room to manoeuvre depending on the degree of contractual independence negotiated on the promise of safe profitability. In mainstream R&B, market share consolidation shuts out practitioners who reject the hip-hop glossover styles perfected in the mid-1990s – in the process ignoring innovative work which offers renewal. Likewise, stateside rap flouts its fanciful irrelevance or retreats to the prideful consolations of the past. Occasionally, genuine grass-roots developments – accompanied by changes in local patterns of involvement – still provide leverage for established stars to simulate growth while opening doors a crack for new talent. If the latter already organise on the basis of the social nature of the scene that nurtured them, rather than offering themselves up in vulnerable isolation, the more of a challenge they are to commercial predictability—with the strength of their home environment providing an edge, a base and a safety net.

Major labels then filter in a few representatives of emerging trends, pressurise flagship artists to copycat, offer branded pop acts the surface stylistics (to contaminate them with credibility), and/or flood the market with manufactured clones. However, with little understanding of the source they may also be powerless to prevent relatively unadulterated expressions of vernacular lower-class culture gaining exposure. This probability is enhanced by the UK majors' abiding obsessions: combating US commercial threats with legions of middle class guitar bands, and endless permutations of the bubblegum pop formula optimising a combined appeal to younger children and indiscriminating adult markets. Contemptuous of this packaged froth, urban youth nevertheless increasingly refuse the superiority complexes of their predecessors so that the desires to develop their art and engage wider audiences while earning some kind of living are not felt as remotely contradictory. Aspirations to purity make no sense for those growing up with the complex social reality of a multiracial Britain, in a media

environment saturated with commodified Black culture, where the stark subsistence alternatives for the young poor are crime or slave-labour McJobs as the welfare safety net subsides into the historical sunset.

Amid the usual adolescent bluff and bluster and the heightened agonies of self-destructive negativity in many of the lyrics, a genuinely fresh social consciousness is manifesting in the manic cross-pollinating grime of reggae, jungle and hip-hop. The call of shared influences and a common plight yields collective responses in a music widely but unofficially performed and enjoyed in raves and on pirate radio. Grime's practices face the full panoply of repression, occasioning a chorus of condemnation from outside of the milieu – running the gamut of class-based hatred and moral panic to New Labour's fascistic fantasies of social order. The aesthetics of grime also occasion a cacophony of sneers – particularly ironic when its primary poetic and compositional textures are unapologetically half-inched from hip-hop and drum'n'bass. These may be the most sophisticated new musical movements to emerge for decades, but the respective complacencies of subcultural hubris and mystifying technobabble among many proponents tend to render the blood and guts of ordinary audiences irrelevant.

Instead, grime celebrates the dirty commonness of degraded humanity, anchoring hopes and fears in an exhilarating self-organisation of its elements, shrugging off predictable self-serving opprobrium from elders and betters. An organic and pragmatic promiscuity of form and content, grime wrenches the new technology of sound from computer nerds to fit the needs of the urban wasteland—reflecting its dark and conflictual lived reality while bucking the apparent inevitability of despair endemic there. Enlisting the everyday enthusiasm for R&B, hip-hop, and reggae—rather than flogging the frantic pace of the rave—is thus a natural cultural advance as well as a strategic career move. It facilitates grass-roots networking among open-minded practitioners of established forms who are sick of incestuous backbiting among those protecting their imaginary status as big fish in small ponds. Most significantly, grime's expansiveness hints at a sense that the sublimeness of soul, the social survivalism of reggae and the political potential of rap promise most in passionate interaction – rather than in the false consciousness of pure essence, whether based on the cult folklore of chemicals, electronics, individual genius or divine purpose. Living at the crossroads is a problem only for those clinging onto the wish-fulfilment of such magically cleansing solutions – and the fellow-travellers of grime peer through the fog of such devilish auras, emphatically mobilising from the bottom up the profound and profane advantages of the mundane mongrel, impure in signposting ways forward.



Notes

1. Mark Anthony Neal, 'Rhythm and Bullshit? The Slow Decline of R&B', *Pop Matters*, June-July 2005 (www.popmatters.com).
2. Such as by Dave Hollister, Mary J. Blige, Jaheim or Angie Stone.
3. For example in the work of Me'shell Ndegeocello, D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, Bilal and Lina.
4. In command of their own recording destinies; but with apparently little idea of what to do with the freedom.
5. In an album of consistent quality throughout, including collaborations with 2-Pac and Dirt McGirt (aka Ol' Dirty Bastard) (both now deceased) and Scarface (ex-Geto Boys).
6. Even extending to ridiculous comparisons with Marvin, Donny and Stevie. No wonder little is expected of R&B, even if this particular Legend should last well past lunchtime – not least if 'get lifted' is uncharitably interpreted to refer to endorsement from Kanye West. Comparably inflated claims for greatness are now routinely applied to competent but scarcely original songwriters – another recent example being Alicia Keys.
7. With new words and melodies, even more exquisite sonic crafting ... but nothing to rouse listeners from its hypnotically complacent cul-de-sac.
8. Paralleling the personal travails of ordinary women and the professional pitfalls facing extraordinary female artists – convincingly galvanising anger into strength and solidarity.
9. Shelved by Atlantic in 2001 but now released after the eventual acclaim for 2004's *Comin' From Where I'm From*.
10. See my 'Br(oth)er Rabbit's Tale', *Variant*, No. 17, 2003, for further discussion.
11. For a pungent and condensed statement of this awareness, see the interview with M-1 from Dead Prez in Josephine Basch, 'New Year Revolution', *Hip-Hop DX* magazine, January 2, 2006 (www.hiphopdx.com). A detailed and thought-provoking analysis of the relationship between hip-hop artistry and cultural politics can be found in Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Duke University Press, 2004).
12. Little Brother are MCs Phonte and Big Pooh and producer 9th Wonder, and the name refers to 'older brother' Afrocentric precursors like De La Soul and Tribe Called Quest. *The Minstrel Show's* thesis is also echoed by one of the most forthright hip-hop writers tackling these issues – former *Source* editor Bakari Kitwana. Ironically, his *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggas, Wannabes and the New Reality of Race in America* (Basic Civitas, 2005) effectively undercuts its own oversimplifications, for example conceding that Black and white hip-hop interaction outside of the corporate context – but encouraged by the latter's youth subcultural hegemony – has the capacity to generate fruitfully progressive social and cultural exploration.
13. And layer Mr Lif's and Akrobatik's emphatically sharp vocal delivery with a slew of interesting production styles. These variously recall a spectrum from past Bomb Squad glories to Pete Rock's smooth soul, but are always forward-looking and as intricately interwoven with the lyrics as the two MCs themselves aim for in their sparring.
14. The Black Market Militia comprises Tragedy Khadafi (aka Intelligent Hoodlum), William Cooper and Wu-Tang affiliates Killah Priest, Timbo King (of Royal Fam) and Hell Razah (of Sunz of Man).
15. With the 'soul dojo' hip-hop space metaphorically unifying body and spirit for battles to come.
16. See my 'Beautiful Struggles and Gangsta Blues' (*Variant*, No. 22, 2005) for more on Kweli. The new album shies away from outright political messages in favour of playful lyrical brilliance underscored with suggestive implication – supported by the subtly conscious force of guests like Mos Def, Jean Grae and MF Doom – reaching a crescendo in 'Ms Hill's barbed love letter to Lauryn operating on half a dozen levels at once.
17. Dre is the Neptunes' most obvious precursor musically, in marrying the 'hard' thematics of inner city violence and desperation with the 'soft' melodies and rich textures of California soul and funk – see Eithne Quinn's intelligently illuminating account of the development and significance of gangsta in *Nuthin' But a "G" Thang The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (Columbia University Press, 2005).
18. Most recently in *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, 2003.
19. As fashioned by renowned director Hype Williams.
20. From the collaboration between legendary MC/producer MF Doom and producer Dangermouse – the latter also responsible for remixing the Beatles in *The Grey Album*.
21. On his self-titled album – see my review in *Freedom* magazine (Vol. 66, No 13, July 2005).
22. Trumping rival Foxy Brown's longer-term project – stymied for the past three years by record company wrangles – of working with prominent dancehall vocalists and producers. Astonishingly for women MCs trading on their 'bad girl' hypersexuality – and

- presumably symptomatic of the disrespectful nature of their appropriations – neither Kim nor Foxy seem to have picked up on the specific challenges to traditional male supremacy inherent in contemporary ragga (see Carolyn Cooper's fascinating *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
23. In some cases taken up by major labels – for example, reggaeton (a Spanish-Caribbean blend of hip-hop/dancehall/neo-soca) and the worldwide success of Daddy Yankee's *Barrio Fino*. Brazil also has particularly fertile scenes and a widespread love of reggae – see Patrick Neate, *Where You're At: Notes from the Front Line of a Hip-Hop Planet* (Bloomsbury, 2003).
 24. E.g. singing duo Brick & Lace, who recently toured the UK with 'Queen of Roots' Marcia Griffiths and dancehall's Lady G.
 25. Such as No Doubt's Gwen Stefani in her solo rebranding.
 26. Easily the best single release of 2005.
 27. Which most critics saw as a major flaw. *Jamrock's* guestlist also summarises the male vocalist's multiple roles in reggae, such as revolutionary prophet (e.g. Nas in 'Road To Zion'), condescending patriarch (The Roots' Black Thought in 'Pimpa's Paradise'), or loverman (Bobby Brown in 'Beautiful') – as well as the pivotal historical inspiration of US Black music.
 28. And despite claims by those like Sean Paul to be speaking on behalf of the ghetto poor, but whose heavily-promoted material displays only a fraction of the energy and imagination the latter routinely demonstrate (given half a chance).
 29. Also true of my choice as 2004 'album of the year' – *Gangsta Blues* by Tanya Stephens (again from Jamaica; see 'Beautiful Struggles and Gangsta Blues', note 16).
 30. See Mark Anthony Neal, 'Rhythm & Bullshit', note 1.
 31. See my review in *Freedom*, Vol. 66, No. 23, November 2005.
 32. Reflected in multiple Grammy nominations for their 2002 debut and writing for big hitters like Michael Jackson and Styles P.
 33. Nor, sadly, either of the latter's political nous; but certainly with periodic novelty single appeal, given the precedent of Mike Skinner's lovable lad schtick for The Streets.
 34. Notable releases emphasising original skills include UK Hustlerz' *The Return*, with a sizeable posse of the finest underground rappers flexing their vocabs to Disorda's capable soundtrack. Also, a significant 2005 milestone was the breathtaking display of visceral instrumentation in Killa Kela's *Elocution* – human beat-boxing being a live art notoriously resistant to studio recapture. Finally, Jehst's *Nuke Proof Suit* (Altered Ego) displays both prodigious lyrical skills and engaging self-produced beats.
 35. Standing for 'fuck the police' or 'for the people', etc. Baby J enhanced his rep no end last year with the soundtrack for Skinnyman's social realism on *Council Estate Of Mind* (see 'Beautiful Struggles and Gangsta Blues', note 13).
 36. Despite evoking humbler London parallels to Biggie's storytelling, 2-Pac's passion, and the observation of Nas – the 2004 mixtape *Citizen Smith* having already proved Doc's penchant for convincing local personae. *The Document* also benefits from excellent production and first-rate guest verses from the other Poisonous Poets as well as the scintillating Yungun.
 37. Thankfully not via humdrum Bob Marley covers, such as those trotted out by Ms Dynamite and Floetry (among others) ... or even interesting adaptations like Damian's.
 38. The group comprise Wayne Lotek (producer/MC), Aurelius (aka Dazzla, MC) and Wayne Paul (MC/singer). Guests adding to the chemistry include ex-member Earl J, long-time collaborator Roots Manuva, and rising star Sandra Melody.
 39. For an enjoyable review of *Awfully Deep* celebrating Roots Manuva's unique style, see Stefan Braidwood, 'He got mad style, he strictly Roots', *Pop Matters* magazine, February 2005 (www.popmatters.com). Also look out for *The Blacknificent Seven* – Seanie T's posse album with producer Skeme and fellow MCs Rodney P, Roots Manuva, Karl Hinds, Estelle and Jeff3, which may well be the most exciting UK hip-hop set to date.
 40. Exactly the same ambivalent role of the DJ in reggae dancehall: see my 'Dancehall Dreams', *Variant*, No. 20, 2004.
 41. The persistence and popularity of pirate radio stations have undoubtedly been as important as local rave scenes for grime's emergence, as documented in BBC3's *Tower Block Dreams* (2004) and Channel 4's so-called interactive fiction *Dubplate Drama* (Luke Hyams, 2005). The latter stars Shystie and also features cameo appearances by umpteen grime stalwarts as well as hip-hop and garage heavyweights like Skinnyman (also featured in the former) on fine form and Ms Dynamite's superb spitting schizophrenically split off from her official output. See 'Beautiful Struggles and Gangsta Blues' (note 13) for more on Shystie.
 42. See Derek Walmsley's excellent blow-by-blow account at www.playlouder.com. Former Roll Deep members include Dizzee Rascal and producer/MC Wiley – both

abandoning safety in numbers to follow up personal peccadilloes.

43. Most keenly felt in the mixtape *Piracy Funds Terrorism*, Volume 1 before sample clearance problems bedevilled the more austere *Arular*. Their tour with Roots Manuva early last year was followed by supporting Gwen Stefani stateside, and M.I.A.'s next album will be recorded in Jamaica and produced by Timbaland.

Discography (released 2005 unless stated)

- Baby J, *F.T.P.* (Hall or Nothing/All City)
 Black Market Militia, *Black Market Militia* (Nature Sounds/Performance)
 Blacknificent Seven, *The Blacknificent Seven* (Dark Horizon, 2006 [forthcoming])
 Blak Twang, *The Rotton Club* (Bad Magic/Wall of Sound)
 Mary J. Blige, *The Breakthrough* (Geffen)
 Common, *Be* (Geffen)
 Daddy Yankee, *Barrio Fino* (Mercury)
 Dangerdoom, *The Mouse & The Mask* (Lex)
 Dangermouse, *The Grey Album* (self-released, 2004)
 Doc Brown, *Citizen Smith* (2004), *The Document* (Janomi)
 Dwele, *Subject* (2003), *Some Kinda ...* (Virgin)
 Missy Elliott, *The Cookbook* (Atlantic)
 Faith Evans, *The First Lady* (Capitol)
 Floetry, *Flo'ology* (Geffen)
 Goldie Lookin' Chain, *Safe As Fuck* (679)
 Guru, *Version 7.0 The Street Scriptures* (7 Grand)
 Lynden David Hall, *In Between Jobs* (Random)
 Anthony Hamilton, *Comin' From Where I'm From* (Arista, 2004), *Soulife* (Rhino/Anti), *Ain't Nobody Worryin'* (So So Def/Zomba)
 Jehst, *Nuke Proof Suit* (Altered Ego)
 J-Live, *The Hear After* (Penalty/Ryko)
 Jon-B, *Stronger Everyday* (Sanctuary)
 Kano, *Home Sweet Home* (679)
 Kazé & 9th Wonder, *Spirit of '94: Version 9.0* (Brick)
 Killa Kela, *Elocution* (BMG)
 K.Ners, *K In Da Flesh* (Cristal City)
 Talib Kweli, *The Beautiful Struggle* (Rawkus / Island, 2004), *Right About Now: the Official Sucka Free Mixtape* (Blacksmith / Koch)
 Lady Sovereign, 'Get Random', 'Hoodie', *Vertically Challenged* [EP] (Chocolate Industries)
 John Legend, *Get Lifted* (Columbia)
 Lethal Bizzle, *Against All Odds* (V2, orig. 2004)
 Lil' Kim, *The Naked Truth* (Queen Bee/Anti)
 Little Brother, *The Minstrel Show* (Atlantic)
 Lotek Hi-Fi, *Mixed Blessings* (Big Dada)
 Damian Marley, *Welcome to Jamrock* (Island)
 M.I.A., *Piracy Funds Terrorism, Volume 1* (mixtape with Diplo, Hollertronix, 2004), *Arular* (XL)
 Mitchell Brothers, *A Breath of Fresh Attire* (The Beats)
 Ms Dynamite, *Judgement Days* (Polydor)
 Outkast, *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* (Arista, 2003)
 Perceptionists, *Black Dialogue* (Def Jux)
 Princess Superstar, *My Machine* (K7)
 Raw-T, *Realise & Witness* (F4)
 Roll Deep, *In At The Deep End* (Relentless)
 Roots Manuva, *Awfully Deep* (Big Dada/Banana Klan)
 Skinnyman, *Council Estate Of Mind* (Low Life, 2004).
 Sway, *This Is My Promo Volumes 1 and 2, This Is My Demo* [forthcoming, 2006] (DCypha/All City)
 UK Hustlerz, *The Return* (Suspect Packages)
 Terri Walker, *L.O.V.E.* (Mercury)
 Jaguar Wright, *Divorcing Neo 2 Marry Soul* (Artemis/Ryko)
 Kanye West, *Late Registration* (Roc-A-Fella)
 Ying Yang Twins, *United States of Atlanta* (TVT)