

# Culture In The Dance - The Roots and Dub Sound System Movement

by Peter Lionheart



Aba Shanti I in Caen, France w/ Dub Livity Sound - (JB of Dub Livity Sound System)

## *Channel One in Southall, UK March 2010*



Channel One at Southall Community Center, March 2010 - (Peter Lionheart - Lionheart Sounds)

As I step into the legendary Southall Community Center on the west side of London, the first thing I feel is the bass. Pouring out of the scoop bins on the far side of the room, it hits me in the chest, enveloping me with a warm and deep feeling. As the driving drums, the skanking guitar, the victorious horns, and the heartfelt vocals all come into perspective, I feel a powerful vibe in myself, and I know I am experiencing something new. I continue into the hall, finding a sweet spot in front of the 10 by 10 ft speaker stack, and to the side of where the selector is playing records, and controlling the amps, eq, and sound effects. Contrary to a stage show, this “control tower” is on the wall in the middle of the audience, where the sound is best. I look around at a diverse crowd of people; Indians, Africans, and Europeans; baldheads, dread locks, and turbans; all enjoying the music.

As the first tune ends and the selector, Mikey Dread, pulls the needle off the record, the void of sound after the full immersion is striking. Immediately voices call out, “Gwaan Mikey,” “Yes Channel One”, encouraging him to continue. The anticipation grows when the needle hits the wax of the next selection, and the warm and distinctive hiss of a well-played record fills the space. And then a drum roll rings out and the riddim comes alive in the air and bodies of all present. As the sweet voice of Rod Taylor cries out, “Jah Jah see, and knowing, every little thing, Oh they don’t know that his eyes is watching them...” the omniscient presence of the Most High is brought into conscious focus.

When the tune ends, the selector quickly reaches up, fluidly lifting and setting down the needle, as he flips the 45 on the eye level turntable. And now it is time for the “Dub”, the stripped down instrumental version.



When the riddim drops for the second time we immediately feel the driving kick of the steppers beat. After a few bars the bass line again surges into my body, complimented by a driving binghi drum echoing from the tops of the speaker stack. Where the vocal version gave focus to the lyrics, in the dub, each instrument in the riddim is given time to shine. The guitar skank comes in again only for a second, echoing into the layers of the sound, easing me deeper into a meditative state. Adding to the intense ambiance, a siren cries out, texturing the sound with a dread seriousness. And before long a quick reminder of the vocal sings out, “Sees and knows, knows, knows...” echoing its message deep into our consciousness.

As the night progresses, tune after tune of heavyweight Roots and culture music comes to life through Channel One’s mighty speaker stack. The energy continues to flow and buildup, with the packed room jumping and skanking to the music. Before I know it, it is 3:30 AM, and much to the botheration of the crowd, the management is calling for an end to the music. After a few more signature tunes, the session is done. I am exhausted, yet energized, with the vibrations still very alive in me. I have finally experienced reggae music the way it is meant to be experienced; through a custom heavyweight roots Reggae Sound System...



Ceska Sankare, Humble Tafari, I Warriyah, and bredren (from L to R) in Baltimore (Ital Productions)

## The Music – The Message

As a seeker of Truth and Right in a world dominated by illusion, distraction, and immorality, I am yet to find anything that gets as close to the essence of reality like the message of Rastafari as carried by Roots Reggae music. The spiritual depth, the historical clarification, and the deeply rooted consciousness that is carried by this music is humbling and inspiring. Through the ancient African drums and mystic melodies of the music, and the stimulating and life affirming lyrics, Reggae reminds us of our divine upright nature, our history of glorious heights, and the staggering depths to which humanity has sunken; and it does all of this with an upfullness that impels us to better ourselves, seek truth, and act for justice.

As has been said many a time in and about reggae music “Word and Sound have Power.” Words or lyrics can be a power for upliftment, but we cannot forget the importance of sound in that power. In this light, Reggae Sound Systems project the living musical spirit and message to the people. Personally, the more deeply I engage with reggae, the more strongly I feel that the music is meant to be both heard and felt. The message and musical intricacy is to be listened to, but likewise the music should be moved to and absorbed, letting it work its magic subconsciously as a full body experience. Of course, Reggae music can be enjoyed through an i-pod, a car stereo, or club PA, but when played through a Roots Sound System, the power of that word and sound takes on its full potential...



Blackheart Warriors and bredren stringing up the Sound - (Empress Abi - Livity Productions)

## Sound System Equipment

So what is it about a Reggae Sound System, Sound, or “set”, that is so special and particular? Basically it is the sheer force of the sound, the ability to precisely control that sound, and the use of effects to expand the sonic experience. As said by Humble Tafari of Wildfiyah Rootical Sound, “Reggae music (Roots music) is the derivative of African music. Where the focus is on the drumbeat. And the melody is in the bass line... It is the bass that drives the soul and the spirit.” With the bass having the lead role in the music, naturally the speakers and amps must be able to carry that force. Most Sounds have at least four 18-inch subwoofers, often of the classic scoop design, with curved chambers inside. Whatever the speaker design, the sub bass boxes, often powered by heavy duty amplifiers with up to 10,000 watts, carry a heavy force that one can feel as movement in the air.

Most “sets” are built to play 3-way, or 4-way, with bass, low mids, mids, and highs separately amped and controlled. All 3 or 4 groups of speakers work together to play the music in its full audio spectrum. With



amps and speakers producing the sound, the operator works with a Reggae “preamp”, a specialized mixer, to control it. In the preamp, the frequencies are split from the beginning, making the sound cleaner, and giving the operator more direct control. Other classic feature are kill switches, that allow the operator to play the bass, mids, or highs alone, and controls and eq’s for microphones and effects units like echo’s, delay’s, and sirens; used to add to the ambiance, expand, and dub the music to new levels. Traditionally Sounds played vinyl on a single turntable, although nowadays many Sounds play CD’s or directly from a computer.



King Alpha Sound Control Tower - Ras Joseph on preamp, Ras Peter on Mic  
- Dub School March 2010 - (Peter Lionheart - Lionheart Sounds)

Even with the best equipment, a Sound comes down to the people controlling it. The operator (engineer) is essential to finesse a warm rounded sound out of the equipment, the selector to collect and choose powerful tunes, the mic man to introduce music and communicate with the crowd, and the dedicated souls who arrive early and stay late to string up and take down the heavy speakers and equipment. These people, their hard work, message, and selections, define the Sound’s character.

## History of Reggae Sound Systems

While most people know Reggae from live band performances, it was initially studio-produced music, created to play on Sound Systems. There were many Sounds in Jamaica playing R & B in outdoor neighborhood venues before the local recording industry developed. However, in the 1960’s, Coxsone Dodd’s Downbeat Sound System and Duke Reid began to produce ska and rocksteady music, which they tested on their Sound’s local crowds, cultivating unique styles. (This practice that continues today, with Sounds like King Alpha who only play their own productions.) When Reggae was born, the Sound Systems played a crucial role in exposing the new music, which was not accepted by radio or general society. As noted by I Warriyah, recording artist and mic man from King Alpha Sound and Fasimbass Afrikan Blood Sound, “Sound systems give local up and coming recording artists the opportunity and a medium to be heard loud and clear by the masses.”

# Notting Hill Carnival

Beginning in 1964 as a cultural celebration of London's Afro-Caribbean communities, the Notting Hill Carnival is now the largest street festival in Europe, taking place the last weekend in August. While it still includes traditional carnival elements such as masquerade and a parade, the thirty Sound Systems that string up every year have become the main attraction. While many musical styles are represented including Soca, RnB, Hip Hop, Ska, Jungle, Soul etc, Reggae continues to be one of the key genres. Many of the UK's premier Sounds have played there over the years including Sir Coxsone, Jah Shaka, Java, and Small Axe. Nowadays the three roots and dub Sounds that have been maintaining a strong presence and crowd are Jah Observer (with a strong vintage roots selection), Channel One (playing roots and heavy UK steppers), and Aba Shanti- I (presenting a distinct spiritual style with many of their own productions). Naturally it has become one of the most anticipated Roots and Culture Sound System events in the world, with dub pilgrims traveling from far and wide to feel the vibes. <http://www.thenottinghillcarnival.com>



Stryda & Digistep of Duskasm & Crowd @ Aba Shanti I, Notting Hill Carnival 2010  
- ('The Humble Lion' & Falasha Recordings)

This showcasing opportunity was crucial for the message-based Roots music that became dominant in the 70's. Recently independent, with slavery's legacy of gross inequality, poverty, and social oppression, Jamaica's population was ready for change. Fueled by the teachings of Leonard Howell and Marcus Garvey, who ignited Pan-African consciousness and efforts towards sovereignty, as well as the Rastafari people's looking to Haile Selassie and their African roots for redemption and guidance, Reggae music came to be a powerful social force.

Soon Roots music was booming out of Sound Systems all over the island, creating a place to celebrate the joys of life despite ghetto tribulations, and cultivating a spiritually and politically minded generation. While there were many big Roots Sounds including, U Roy's King Sturgav, Augustus Pablo's Rockers, and The Twelve Tribe's Jah Love Muzik, one of the most well known was run by producer and technical wiz Osbourne "King Tubby" Ruddock. Tubby basically invented Dub music, soon to be a Sound System staple, creating wild instrumental mixes of the era's Rasta music, much of which he recorded. Similarly his Sound stood out with custom-built amps, speakers, reverbs and delays, as well as extensive "dubplates" (exclusive mixes of songs.)



Meanwhile Sound Systems were gaining momentum and playing a similar role in Britain, where many disenfranchised Jamaican immigrants were trying to make their way in the heart of “Babylon.” Speaking on his adolescence growing up in the UK, Humble Tafari noted, “The sound was used during a time when black youths were unemployed, and had nowhere to go to... The sound played a story of black awareness and black pride... It was like a church, and a political rally gathering all rolled into one. For one would leave the dance feeling blessed, and also inspired and motivated to better themselves.” In the 70’s and 80’s there were many big and popular Sounds in the UK including Sir Coxsone, Fatman, & Jah Tubby’s, but none would have as big of an impact on the modern day scene as Jah Shaka...

## **Jah Shaka – “The Mighty Zulu Warrior”**



Jah Shaka & Crowd at Rototom Dub Station 2010 - (JB of Dub Livity Sound System)

The role of Jah Shaka in defining the Roots style of Sound System cannot be underplayed. Jah Shaka made cultural music and Dub his primary focus. According to Shaka, “The sound came out of the struggle in the 70’s which black people were going through in this country - we got together and decided that the sound should play a main part in black people’s rights and we would work hard at it and promote some better mental purpose...” Ceska Sankare, selector and operator for Fasimbass Afrikan Blood Sound, reflected on his first experience of Jah Shaka in session, “....That Jah Shaka experience left me speechless and culturally, ideologically, musically a changed young man... I was around 23... Jah Shaka was actually projecting the Afrikan banner of liberation with precise science... When I left that morning, I was aware of my musical and cultural position within myself and my community.”

But Shaka's message was not only a consolation to the African community, as it resonated with all people facing inequity and striving for better. Jags of APS US Sound, recalled, "a lot of Indian youths go to the dances... because them and their parents went through the racial struggles of the UK, victimization, police brutality, racism... there was always something about listening to Jah Shaka play; everything just seemed to be better when you came out of the dance."

Well known for his heavy Sound, Shaka also produced a lot of music, and had a plethora of exclusive dubplate mixes from the premier studios of the day. He was known for playing music with an intense and driving feel, selecting countless experimental takes of one riddim, fully exploring Dub's potential. As the dancehall style with its sexual and materialistic focus became the dominant force in the music, most Sounds stopped playing Roots music. Shaka, however, "almost single handedly carried the Roots Sound System torch through a period of very low popularity in the 80's & provided a model/blueprint/inspiration for many who became active in the 90's, 00's and beyond..." (Ryan Moore - Twilight Circus)

## Dub Station

Beginning in Paris in 2007, Dub Station has become the premier brand of Dub Sound System events in mainland Europe. Consistently drawing large and enthusiastic crowds, Dub Station has been a truly inspiring testament to the popularity and potential of Reggae Sound System events. Put on by the Musical Riot crew, the success has led it to expand to continuing events in Marseille, Nantes, Toulouse, Rennes and the Garance Reggae Festival in France, and to Barcelona and the Rototom Sunsplash in Spain. Through their events, Dub Station has been able to book many of the UK and Europe's well known, as well as up and coming, roots and dub artists including Sound Systems Jah Shaka, Channel One, Aba Shanti I, King Shiloh, Jah Tubby's, King Earthquake, Jah Voice, King Alpha, Word Sound & Power, Mighty Tabot, Iration Steppas, Stand High Patrol, Ma Kaya, Dawa Hi Fi, OBF; Dub producers including The Disciples, Twilight Circus, Jonah Dan, Black Redemption (US), Jacin, Vibronics, Keety Roots, Dubkasm, Bush Chemists, Slimmah Sound, Dub Creator, Gussie P, and Alpha & Omega; and Singers including Tena Stelin, Afrikan Simba, Christine Miller, Kenny Knotts, Sister Rasheda, and more....

<http://www.musicalriot.org>



Jah Observer selecting tunes at Dub Station Garance 2010 - (JB of Dub Livity Sound System)



Inspired by Jah Shaka, in the late 80's a new generation of Reggae producers started making music in a distinctly UK style. While sticking to the Roots formula, they incorporated modern production techniques, creating a heavy digital sound, emphasizing the four-on-the-floor steppers beat. Ras Muffet, Nomadix, Blakamix, and Keety Roots all contributed new styles, independently releasing Sound System geared Dub productions. Producers of European background, like Disciples, Manasseh, and Jah Warrior, who also ran their own Sounds, further developed the diversity of the scene. "In the seventies and eighties it was predominantly black people that would go to these sort of gatherings still. But now the message is bigger... you find that who wants to hear the message will come... It's open to all people that are conscious and are seeking truth and right in this time..." (Aba Shanti I)

## The Global Sound System Scene in 2011

Arguably, the global Roots and Dub Sound System scene is bigger now than ever before. Many Sound Systems are being built and played, producers are releasing quality tunes, and dances are popping up in unlikely places. While the UK still has many of the top Sounds and producers, the biggest dances are now in Europe, with healthy scenes in Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, Holland, Germany, and especially France. While this scene is less rooted in Rasta and struggle, it is still positive, embracing Reggae music, and contributing some heavy digital Dub music.

The movement continues to spread globally with Sounds like Kebra Ethiopia in South Africa, Dig-Ital-Dubs in Brazil, and Tribe Works in Japan. The internet has helped by making information accessible and connections easier. Whereas before, one would hear echo's of experiences or cassette recordings, nowadays one can link people on facebook, learn about rare tunes on youtube, and check talawa.fr, an online community sharing Sound System recordings, studio productions, and radio programs.



Sati, Zee, & Jags of APS US w/ Stack - (Empress Abi - Livity Productions)

# Reggae Sound Systems in the United States



Ras Kush, Ras Zahir, and Humble Tafari at the control tower, USA RRDE San Diego 2010

- (Empress Abi - Livity Productions)

In the US there were Sound System dances in the late 70's and early 80's, but they were largely limited to pockets on the East Coast. More recently a scene dedicated to Roots and Dub Sound System has been developing. Probably most well known is Ras Kush of Black Redemption Sound and label. Since the late 90's he has put on many dances in New York, released well-received productions, and toured extensively in Japan and Europe. Other well established US sounds include; Aba Shaka's Musical Ark Of Jah Covenant, sharing deep musical vaults in Atlanta, Humble Tafari's Wildfiyah Rootical, playing uncompromising roots and steppers dub in Washington DC; and Ceska Sankare's Fasimbias Afrikan Blood Sound, educating the Baltimore community to stay in tune with the Afrikan reality. In the past few years there have been some newcomers on the West Coast, including San Diego's Foreign Love Hi Power and Blackheart Warriors Hi Fi, (with Orthodox Reuben & Ras Zahir), Sonoma County's Comanche High Power (with Daddy Stevo), and APS US based in LA. Also, Dub producers BriZion based in San Diego, McPullish in Texas, and Kris Naphtali in Connecticut, have been building highly sought after dubplates, and New York based Taitu records has been releasing many powerful tunes. Where the scene in Europe has moved away from message towards emphasis on hardcore dub, the US scene is more rooted in a cultural foundation. In the words of Ras Zahir, "A Rastafari Sound Systems role is to be a positive voice for the people who don't have the means or way to speak out against injustices, poverty, brutality, etc. Its role also includes doing works... speaking out is only one step, there must also be action."



## The 2011 USA Roots Reggae Dub Expo

The USA Roots Reggae Dub Expo is a showcase of Rastafari Roots and Dub Sound System culture for the United States. At each event, US based Sounds string up, and play tunes from evening until morning. They share Roots music in a unified fashion, each bringing their unique style and selection. Participating sounds include Blackheart Warriors, Wildfyah Rootikal, Fasimbass, APS US, Mystic, Black Redemption, Mike B, and producers Brizion and Kris Naphtali. Through their works they hold firm to traditional Sound System culture, building their own custom sets, and remaining livicated to Roots music, old and new.

In 2010, the first annual events in Baltimore, MD and San Diego, CA were a striking success. For Mike B an expo organizer, "The USA RRDE 2010 - San Diego was a life changing experience... the strong feeling of unity in the dance, the oneness of purpose, and the uplifting vibes in the place showed me what is really possible with sound systems." This year the expo will consist of one event held on the West Coast in San Diego, CA on September 17th. For folks in the US who make the trip, they will be able to experience properly tuned and amplified Roots music through heavy Sound Systems; but without having to travel all the way to Europe...

<http://usarootsreggaedubexpo.com>

<http://usarootsreggaedubexpo.blogspot.com>



Mike B on the Mic and Kris Naphtali at the Control Tower, USA RRDE Baltimore 2010  
- (Empress Abi - Livivity Productions)



## Experience Reggae Sound System Yourself!!!



Bredren Skanking in front of King Alpha's Stack at Dub School March 2010 - (Peter Lionheart - Lionheart Sounds)

For some, the state of Reggae music in 2011 can seem somewhat shocking and depressing. Declining sales, low attendance at shows, and lowered musical quality and consciousness, all contribute to doubt about Reggae's future. Yet as a lover, collector, and promoter of Roots music and its deep spirituality, when I observe the current Roots and Dub Sound System scene, I see Reggae music truly thriving with a bright future ahead. Although in the US the scene is small and just starting to build, the potential here is great. With time it can only get bigger. Ultimately it is about awareness of the distinct power and vibe that Sound Systems bring to the music. I hope that more people will take the time to look into it, take a trip over to Europe, and make it to one of the USA Roots Reggae Dub Expo events, where they can feel the power of the sound and embrace the dread consciousness of the vibrations. In the words of Andy G, Oakland based selector, "It really has to be experienced, and once it has, there is no going back."

*Peter Lionheart of Lionheart Sounds has been deeply engaged with Reggae music and its message of upliftment and redemption since the late 90's. Beginning on the radio at KZSC in 2001, over the past ten years Lionheart Sounds has played and promoted numerous shows, and put out 20 sought after modern Roots mixtapes with distinct selections, musical flow, and message. Look out in the future for a series of vintage Roots mixtapes, some heavy productions, and a custom Sound System being built to share the sonic and spiritual power of roots music with the Bay Area and Northern California...*

<http://www.lionheartsounds.com>