Chronicling New York Reggae and Hip Hop's Crossroads, and Community Media as Historical Archives from the Ground Up

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Abstract *In this chapter, I first establish some historical background concerning reggae's arrival and subsequent reception in New York. Thereafter, I illustrate details of the "Hip Hop x Dancehall Takeover" event, which took place at the VP Records Retail store on Jamaica Avenue, Queens, on April 23, 2022, during one of my extended research stays in New York. I use this as a starting point to highlight the activities of two longstanding New York-based archivists, ambassadors and activists of reggae and hip-hop culture in attendance: Ralph McDaniels, founder of landmark hip-hop television show, Video Music Box, established in 1983; and Shaun Walsh, who in the following decade founded Flatbush, Brooklyn-based community media channel Whatz Up NY TV.*

Introduction

My wider doctoral research addresses Jamaican mass migration to New York after 1965, and the subsequent spread of Jamaican culture and reggae music: first across the famed megalopolis, and later elsewhere in the US and internationally. I trace how the establishment of New York as an additional regional and global hub of Jamaica's diaspora, reggae music, sound system and dancehall culture, would lead to a reciprocal dialogue between reggae and hip hop across the following decades in the latter's birthplace. While some scholars have recognized that reggae took some

time to "percolate" into wider African American cultural practice, reggae and hip hop's entanglements are considerably more substantive than their current representation would suggest (Marshall 2006: 215; Patterson 1994).

Across the 1980s, reggae's percolation "through African-/American, urban cultural practice" and in hip-hop culture especially was realized through contributions from pioneering figures primarily, though not exclusively, from the New York reggae and hip-hop scenes, a phenomenon both transnational and translocal in its entanglements. While I focus specifically on the arrival and distillation of Jamaican culture into wider New York popular music culture, I also highlight the fact that spreading reggae to a wider popular audience in the US megalopolis, and laying the foundations for its eventually prolific dialogue with local hip-hop culture, did not come about solely through the contributions of Jamaicans. Reggae's wider reception in New York would establish musical connections that traversed genres, music cultures, and communities.

Aside from Jamaicans and Jamaican Americans, key contributions to reggae's spread and crossover with hip hop in New York came from individuals of other Caribbean ancestries including (in no particular order): Trinidadians, Haitians, Bajans, Bahamians, Antiguans, alongside native New Yorkers born and raised beside their Caribbean neighbors, reflecting a diverse pan-Caribbean, "musical multiculture" of individuals from a cross-section of ethnicities, diasporas, and New York neighborhoods (Peth 2018; Marshall 2006: 215; Patterson 1994: 108; Melville 2020: 3). From the turn of the 1970s onwards, reggae would become increasingly audible in New York City's soundscape, resonating through the sound system sessions in the city's streets, dancehalls and nightclubs, on the mixtapes that blared from home and car stereos, and eventually on New York radio, soundtracked and facilitated by a community of *selectors* (DJs), singers, *deejays* (MCs), producers, sound system owners and operators, studios, record labels, record shops and distributors, and radio DJs (Kenner 2005).

My wider enquiries are principally informed by ethnographic research and personal interviews carried out between 2019 and 2023, in addition to wider literature and other secondary historical accounts and

multimedia materials. Although somewhat suspended in time by the impact of the global pandemic, I spent a total of almost six months in New York City, with two extended visits, the first between October–December 2019, not able to resume my enquiries in person until the first half of 2022. Both stays focused on building up a picture of the key individuals, spaces and sites—primarily, though not exclusively—in the reggae and hip-hop scenes that contributed to reggae's emergence and spread in New York and the proliferation of its dialogue and eventual fusion with hip hop from the 1980s through the 1990s. Taken together, the primary and secondary accounts and materials gathered across the course of the research, serve as an initial attempt at providing a more substantial "mapping" of the emergence of reggae music and culture in New York and its ensuing intersections with a nascent hip-hop culture (Melville 2020: 3–7).

Through initial referrals from my existing contacts in the reggae and hip-hop scenes internationally, in particular the UK and Germany, while in New York I established a network of research participants on a word-of-mouth basis, otherwise known as "clustering" or snowball sampling (Kasinitz 1992: 12). The participants were some of the aforementioned groups of actors who shaped the development of the music and cultures of reggae and hip hop in New York from the 1970s and 1980s onwards, both in parallel and in their intersections, or in other cases local specialists and contemporaries of these individuals. The research also highlights the emergence across the 1980s of a subgenre of New York reggae and hip-hop fusion, sometimes referred to as raggamuffin hip hop,[1] which merged the sounds, styles and practices of the two cultures, particularly in terms of musical production, language and lyricism, and the

1 One of the earliest recordings to use the term was the 1988 album "Raggamuffin Hip-Hop" by London-based artists and proponents of the "fast-chat" deejay style Asher D and Daddy Freddy. When I spoke to several of my research collaborators in New York about the term, however, they were sometimes unfamiliar and even sceptical of the label, suggesting it probably had more to do with the commercialization, marketing, and commodification of 1980s and 1990s reggae and hip-hop fusion by the major labels who sought to market and capitalize on it.

visual style, fashion, and aesthetics of reggae and hip-hop culture (Marshall and Foster 2013).

I conducted both formal and informal semi-structured interviews with some of the central architects of this crossover and fusion in New York, attending reggae and hip-hop stage shows and DJ and sound system events where my research participants or other relevant artists to this historical era were performing. In addition, secondary research materials were gathered in public library archives, attendance at documentary screenings and panel discussions and through further enriching informal conversations on these overlaps in day-to-day settings around the city. Aside from the time spent in New York, despite the challenges of conducting fieldwork during a global pandemic, I remain in touch with many of the artists, producers, DJs, record shop owners, and archivists who I talked with along the way, individuals I seek to forefront in the representation of these historical developments. In early summer 2023, I was even fortunate enough to make a brief research visit to Jamaica, once more bringing the enquiries about reggae's spread to New York, and intersections with hip-hop culture, full circle.

This chapter functions as a selected illustration of some of the key sites and contributors to this popular music history that I spent time and spoke with during my research stays in New York. I walk the reader through a partial overview of reggae's migration to New York and its subsequent spread and eventual intersections and dialogue with hip-hop culture, especially during the latter's Golden Era. The first part of the article focuses on some historical background regarding reggae's arrival in New York and the increasing "visibility" and "audibility" of Jamaican culture and reggae music in the US metropolis (Marshall 2006: 218). The second part of the chapter, the dub version, or B Side, focuses on a significant event that occurred during my second extended research stay in New York in Spring 2022, the "Hip Hop x Dancehall Takeover" taking place at the VP Records Retail store on Jamaica Avenue, Queens.

First drawing on details from the event, including a series of panel discussions, the article highlights a selection of reggae and hip hop's intersections in New York, before focusing on the contributions of two important New York-based archivists, ambassadors, and activists of reg-

gae and hip-hop culture in attendance. The host of the discussion panels for the day, Ralph McDaniels, or "Uncle Ralph," founder of the landmark hip-hop television show, Video Music Box (VMB). Next door in the store's yard where an all-vinyl reggae sound system session completed the event's program, I connected with community media organizer and archivist Shaun Walsh, founder of Whatz Up NY TV (WUNYTV), a Flatbush, Brooklyn-based community media channel.

Locating these two individuals' positions in the relevance of reggae and hip hop's parallel and shared histories in New York, the article illustrates how a chance meeting with these two figures furthered an understanding of the significance of these community media organizers and grass roots archivists in establishing an audiovisual history of the music cultures of reggae and hip hop in New York from the early 1980s up to the present day. Moreover, the article details how the very idea of taking a video camera into New York's underground music cultures began with Ralph's documentation of hip-hop culture, acting as a blueprint for representing hip hop and many other underground Black and marginalized popular music sub- and multi-cultures and scenes in New York. In the final section of the article, several extended conversations with Shaun are drawn upon to highlight his efforts in bearing the torch for reggae and Caribbean culture in the decade following VMB's establishment. Finally, the article reflects on the legacy of these two individuals, who have done so much at a grass roots level in terms of elevating reggae and hip-hop culture and establishing archives that document their historical development in New York, both in parallel and in their perpetual intersections, reciprocal influence, and fusion.

Hip Hop's Semi-Centennial, Godfather Herc, and Jamaica's Second Mass Migration

Across the course of 2023, a wealth of celebrations and commemorations took place in hip hop's birthplace, across the US and globally, for the culture's fiftieth birthday. Already documented within the dominant historical narrative of hip-hop's emergence and evolution are the founding

contributions of its Jamaican-born godfather DJ Kool Herc (Clive Campbell), and the parties he hosted together with his sister Cindy at 1520 Sedgewick Avenue, The Bronx, in the late summer of 1973 (Chang 2007: 67). Having moved to the US from Kingston six years prior, age twelve, Herc has spoken about the impressions made upon him by his early exposure to reggae sound system and dancehall culture in Kingston (ibid.: 68–72). The influence of practices pioneered by the early Jamaican sound system *selector* (DJ) who would chat or *toast*[2] vocal improvisations live over a record in a dancehall session, a form of proto-rapping, and the innovations of Jamaican sound system and recording technologies, are all acknowledged as having shaped the emergence of hip-hop culture in The Bronx (Perry 2004: 13–15; Gilroy 1993: 33; Snapes 2021). Herc and others' recognition of the influence of these central aspects of Jamaican sound system culture on hip hop's emergence is further echoed by a host of other architects of New York's hip hop and reggae scenes, illustrated throughout.

Reggae's reception in New York, and its subsequent growing dialogue with hip-hop culture, was crucially facilitated through the migration and establishment of the Jamaican sound system (technological medium) and dancehall (space) nexus, mobile discotheques and sites of musical creation and innovation (Barber 2024: 129). Sound system scholar Julian Henriques' research highlights the role of the Jamaican sound system engineer in crafting an "exemplary apparatus" of subaltern, "non-epistemic" knowledge production, which, through its central musical and technological "repurposing" practices beginning in the 1950s, have propagated innovations in the dancehall that have in turn had a significant impact on global popular music cultures (Henriques 2021: n.pag.). Anthropologist Normal Stolzoff's historical reading of the dancehall suggests that it has been "a space of cultural creation and performance since the slavery era," noting the ongoing, global significance of Jamaican dancehalls as "cultural counterworlds," spaces that since

2 Toasting would later become known as deejaying and is referred to hereafter as the latter, not to be confused with the disc jockey (DJ), who in Jamaican sound system culture is more commonly known as the selector.

their formation have facilitated "the syncretic blending of African and European cultural forms" among Jamaica's lower classes (Stolzoff 2000: 3–4).

What academic and popular representations of Godfather Herc's founding contributions to the culture often tend to omit is the striking number of other hip-hop pioneers of Jamaican, West Indian, and Caribbean descent. Furthermore, there tends to be a failure of situating the arrival of these foundational figures and their families in New York within the context of the historical significance of the US' 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration Act. The law's passing "opened the proverbial gates" for a subsequent wave of wider mass migration to the US from the Caribbean, which in the Jamaican case signified the advent of the island's "second mass migration" (Greer 2018: 14; Patterson 1994: 107). As hip hop spread across the five boroughs and beyond during its "Golden Age" from the 1980s through to the mid-to-late 1990s, reggae practice, sounds, and stylings could be seen and heard more explicitly in hip-hop productions, language, lyricism, and fashion (Duinker and Martin 2017). This period coincided with the establishment of a "critical mass" of New York's Jamaican, and wider Caribbean population outlined below, in the boroughs of The Bronx, Queens, and perhaps Brooklyn especially, and the neighborhoods of Flatbush, East Flatbush, and Crown Heights (Marshall 2006: 2015). Resultingly, reggae, sound system, and dancehall culture was acutely resonant in these areas (Serwer 2016).

Reggae's Reception and the Increasing Audibility and Visibility of Jamaican Culture in New York

From the early 1970s, reggae music became increasingly "audible" in New York City's soundscape as the influx of Caribbean people, many of whom had moved to the metropolis in search of better economic prospects and greater sociopolitical stability, brought their music with them (Kenner 2005; Marshall 2006). Jamaicans moving to New York from reggae's homeland sought to establish their new home in the Empire State as a hub for reggae music and culture, with a host of both aspiring and

established artists, producers, studio engineers, record shops, record labels, sound system owners, operators, and DJs migrating to New York. Elsewhere in the United States, smaller though nonetheless notable concentrations of Jamaicans would eventually settle in Miami, Atlanta, and urban centers across the Eastern Seaboard (Marshall 2006: 308).

Several figures central to reggae's wider reception in New York were guided by a musical vision and mission to spread their beloved reggae music from the island of Jamaica to the world (Hinrichs 2011: 12). One notable example is Philip Smart, music producer and owner of HC&F Studio, founded in Freeport, Long Island in 1982: "arguably the most significant and longest-running reggae studio in the US," with Smart at the helm until his retirement in 2013, sadly passing the following year (Serwer 2005). Born in Kingston in 1953, Smart had grown up in close company with reggae royalty and several other late masters of Jamaican music. His close teenage friend and collaborator was the producer and mystic melodica virtuoso, Augustus Pablo (Horace Swaby), while in the early 1970s, Smart would graduate as a sound engineer and producer from the studio of Jamaican dub pioneer King Tubby (Osbourne Ruddock), in Kingston's Waterhouse district (Meschino 2014). In 1976, Smart moved to New York to pursue studies in audio engineering. On settling in Brooklyn, he found an already "well-enough established network of Jamaican producers and sound systems," which as well as creating demand for reggae recording studios locally also kept him in work as a freelance engineer alongside his studies (Kenner 2013). Studios such as VP Records in Queens, Wackies in The Bronx, and Jah Life Outernational in Brooklyn. On establishing his studio, Smart set about realizing his ultimate motivation to make "New York known as a reggae town" (ibid.).

The Jamaican in New York: Early Tensions and "Shifting Significations"

Reggae's reception, and that of Caribbean culture more broadly, took some time to establish itself in New York, however. Many accounts from New York Caribbean reggae and hip-hop luminaries and otherwise reit-

erate the idea that being Caribbean in New York City in the 1970s could sometimes be a "liability," with Kool Herc recalling how West Indians arriving in this decade became a "target" for local gangs in The Bronx (Chang 2007: 72; Marshall 2006: 213). In cultural terms, at this point in time Jamaicans specifically were too "outsider" to be fashionable, their patois dialect unintelligible to their neighbors, and reggae too 'foreign' for Herc's early hip-hop DJing, with many new arrivals preferring to "conceal" their cultural heritage (Marshall 2006: 213–215).

As previously indicated, across the 1980s, however, this picture changed dramatically as 213,805 Jamaican citizens alone, 9 percent of the island's total population, moved to the United States, with almost half this number heading to New York (Waters 1999: 36; Manuel 1995: 241). Over the same period, a "critical mass" of the population was achieved, with New York's Caribbean population as a whole surpassing two million residents, making New York "the biggest Caribbean city and the second biggest Jamaican, Haitian and Guyanese city" globally (Marshall 2006: 215; Manuel 1995: 241). In turn, cultural significations also shifted. Reggae's wider reception in New York, and the US at large, was precipitated by a number of key transnational and translocal social, cultural, and political developments across the 1980s.

Musically speaking, back in Jamaica this decade saw the eventual dominance of the reggae 'dancehall' sound, which had reigned supreme in the dancehalls of Kingston since the turn of the decade. In 1985, producer King Jammy (Lloyd James) and artists Noel Davy and the late Wayne Smith, also Waterhouse residents, started a digital reggae revolution when they stumbled across a Casio MT40 keyboard pre-set (Trew 2019). The pre-set was deployed as a bassline on Smith's smash hit "Under Mi Sleng Teng," setting about yet a further revolution in reggae music: in its production techniques, lyrical content, and aesthetics (ibid.). The visibility of Jamaican culture in New York in this era was also heightened, though wider representations of Jamaicans were at equal turns "demonizing and lionizing," the former perpetuated by images in US media of the increasingly notorious Jamaican *posses*, or *yardies*, infamous drug-running gangs "set loose from political patronage by the profits of the drug trade" in Jamaica, who now "cornered the markets

of Brooklyn and the Bronx and the greater Tri-State area" (Marshall 2006: 218). These and other factors taken together set about "shifting significations" of Jamaican culture and reggae music in New York across the 1980s, which became increasingly visible and audible in the city's streets, dancehalls, clubs, and radio network, and elsewhere in wider US popular culture (Marshall 2006: 213–221).

With the digital dancehall explosion in Jamaica quickly spreading to New York, particular practices and tropes of reggae culture began to show up more explicitly and prolifically in hip hop, and also vice versa, including the sampling and remixing of reggae *riddims* (rhythm tracks or instrumentals) in hip-hop productions, the adoption and increasing audibility of Jamaican language in rap music, the fusion of rap with dancehall deejay stylings, and the visibility of dancehall fashion in hip-hop style. Jamaican culture and reggae music resonated with New York hip hop's aesthetics at this moment, with the emergence of dancehall reggae bringing "Jamaican music closer to the production values of American hip-hop" (ibid.; Katz 2005: 85). Bridging the practices and aesthetics of the two cultures, in turn led to the fusion of New York reggae and hip-hop music and style and the emergence of the raggamuffin hip-hop subgenre (Marshall and Foster 2013).

Throughout the rest of this chapter and elsewhere, I forward the idea that reggae and hip hop's eventual fusion crossover in New York in the 1980s and 1990s, can in fact be thought of as the closing of the circle in a continuous "socio-sonic circuitry," or circularity, between Jamaican and African American popular music culture and practice, beginning with transnational cultural flows in and between Jamaica and the United States during the foundation of a national popular music culture in Jamaica in the 1950s (Marshall 2006; Patterson 1994: 108).

Dubbing Reggae and Hip Hop's Shared New York History: VP Records and Video Music Box Present "Hip Hop x Dancehall Takeover"

Figure 1: VP Records Retail Store, 170–19 Jamaica Avenue, Queens

(Author Photo, 2022)

VP Records Reggae Journey from Kingston, Jamaica to Jamaica, Queens

On April 23, 2022, the "Hip Hop x Dancehall Takeover" event took place at the VP Records Retail store, Jamaica Avenue, Queens, as part of international Record Store Day.[3] The event's co-host was Patricia Chin, aka

3 Founded in 2007, Record Store Day is an annual global celebration of independently owned "brick and mortar" record shops and record store culture. Further information can be found at recordstoreday.com.

Miss Pat, co-founder of VP Records and reggae's "matriarch" (Peru 2022). The article "VP Records – A Reggae Journey, Four Decades And Counting," drawn upon throughout this segment, describes how Miss Pat, together with her late husband Vincent 'Randy' Chin made their first entry into the music business when they established Randy's Record Mart, a second-hand record store in downtown Kingston, in the late 1950s (VP Records: n.d.). Since then, musical seeds first planted in Jamaica would go on to become VP Records, as it is known today, the world's biggest reggae record label, retailer and distributor, and largest independent record label outright, with a 25,000-strong catalogue of recordings.

Figure 2: VP Records Co-Founder Patricia Chin aka Miss Pat

(Author Photo, 2022)

Back in Jamaica, the Chin's enterprises had started out during a critical moment in the island's history. Not only did they witness the birth of the island's first indigenous pop music, ska, across the 1950s, but by the following decade, with Jamaica's independence from British colonial

rule imminent, they lived through ska's emergence as the soundtrack to Jamaican independence. The popular craze for ska was eventually so great it precipitated demand for a domestic recording industry, which the Chins would soon become a central part of. Demand for Jamaican recordings was further stimulated by the first mass migration of the island's population to the UK beginning in 1948, which established the first significant global export market and hub for Jamaican music and culture (Patterson 1994: 107). By 1962, the Chins had moved their enterprises to Randy's now legendary site of 17 North Parade, Kingston, where within a few years they had also established their first studio, alongside the many other now-iconic Jamaican recording studios that emerged during this period. From 1968 up to the mid-1970s, Randy's Studio 17 would establish itself as one of the island's finest early studios, recording many of the greats of this musically fertile era including Bob Marley and The Wailers, Dennis Brown, and Gregory Isaacs.

As the initial optimism of independence quickly faded, Jamaica's social environment going into the 1970s presented many challenges, not least for the Chins and their aspirations to reach newly emerging global markets. As a result, the couple set their sights on New York City, "with its growing Jamaican community and access to the world's largest market for recorded music" and in 1977 relocated to Jamaica, Queens, where they established VP Records, retailer, manufacturer, and distributor of reggae music at their first location at 170–03 Jamaica Avenue (VP Records, n.d.).

Instrumental in spreading the early dancehall sound of the 1980s, they would also establish an important connection with arguably the leading Jamaican producer of this era, Henry "Junjo" Lawes, via the New York-based reggae producer Hyman "Jah Life" Wright. This triangle of the Kingston-New York connection helped to elevate the exposure of early dancehall stars such as Yellowman, Johnny Osbourne, and Barrington Levy. VP Records would go on to release seminal titles from dancehall stars of the post-1985 digital era, such as Shabba Ranks, Super Cat, Capleton, Buju Banton, Beenie Man, and Bounty Killer, who had first emerged as deejays and singers in Kingston's dancehalls, before establishing significant in-roads for Jamaican artists and reggae music; first, in New York City and later to wider audiences and markets in the

US and internationally (VP Records 2022: 01:57:59). This was further perpetuated by the crossover of these artists into New York hip-hop culture, with all the above collaborating in classic examples of 1990s reggae and hip-hop fusion, including: Shabba Ranks ft. KRS-One "The Jam" (1991), Bounty Killer ft. Jeru the Damaja "Suicide and Murder" (1995), and Capleton & Method Man "Wings of the Morning" (1995).

"Hip Hop x Dancehall Takeover" Panel Discussion: Four the Hard Way

The four-way panel discussion billed as the day's centerpiece featured several central figures of New York reggae and hip-hop culture and global popular music history, period, primarily addressing reggae and hip hop's New York entanglements in the 1980s and 1990s. In order of appearance were DJ and producer Kenny Dope (Kenny Gonzalez), born to Puerto Rican parents in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, who through his early exposure to music at home and in the streets began his music career in 1985, aged fifteen, working at a local record store (Lawrence 2006). He is perhaps best known as one half of the iconic New York production duo Masters at Work, together with DJ and producer 'Little' Louie Vega, Salsa King Héctor Lavoe's nephew (Louie Vega, n.d.). Their near forty-year partnership as a production team is recognized as "one of the most influential, long-running and prolific relationships in dance music history" (Lawrence 2006).

Alongside Kenny Dope was Kool DJ Red Alert (Frederick Crute), known within the community as "Uncle Red," a founding father of hip-hop culture, born in Antigua before moving with his family to Harlem as a child (Education Through Music 2022). Attending high school in The Bronx, he would witness hip hop's emergence as an attendee at Kool Herc's early 1970s house parties, and by the end of the decade had honed his own skills as a DJ, bringing him to the attention of Afrika Bambaataa (Lance Taylor) and his Universal Zulu Nation (Red Bull Music Academy 2017). From 1983 up to the mid-1990s, Red Alert would cement his legendary status on his weekly Kiss FM "Dance Mix Party" show, one of the

first rap shows on commercial radio. True to the New York DJing style of this moment, his revered sets were famous for the diverse musical tastes they traversed (ibid.).

The third central figure in conversation was Brooklyn-born Sting International (Shaun Pizzonia), another renowned New York club DJ who began e of five. At sixteen years old, his reputation as a DJ led to his invitation to play at the WBLS FM Christmas party held at the iconic Studio 54 nightclub (Meschino 2018). With an extensive cross-genre knowledge of music, by the late 1980s, as well as being one of the most in demand club DJs in New York, he also focused his attentions on music production, with his passion for reggae leading to his mentorship under the late Philip Smart at his HC&F studio. A two-time Grammy award winning producer, he would also launch the careers of numerous notable Jamaican-born reggae artists in New York, including Shaggy (Orville Richard Burrell), "the only diamond-selling dancehall artist in music history," Red Fox (Gareth Shelton), and Screechy Dan (Robert Stephens), all four members of the wider Brooklyn-based reggae collective Ruff Entry Crew, a prominent musical force in New York's dancehalls of the Biltmore Era[4] in the late 1980s and 1990s (Meschino 2018; Wasserman Music, n.d.; Serwer 2013).

At the turn of the 1990s, Kenny Dope would release the first in a series of reggae and hip-hop fusion experiments, beginning with Masters At Work "Blood Vibes," where Dope took the vocal from Jamaican reggae artist Junior Reid's international hit "One Blood" and "mashed it up" with the drums from A Tribe Called Quest's "Bonita Applebum" (VP Records 2022: 00:36:53). These recordings began as "trial and error" experiments, "blends" or "transition records" that enabled New York DJs to "segue" between different musical styles in their sets (ibid.: 00:37:04). Like many up-and-coming producers of this era, Dope would hand over these

4 Named after the legendary reggae sound system sessions and stage shows that took place in and around the Biltmore Ballroom on Church Avenue, Flatbush.

recordings as exclusives on reel-to-reel tapes, not having the resources to press them onto *dubplates*[5] (ibid.: 00:42:30; Stolzoff 2000: 58).

After he handed "Blood Vibes" to Kool DJ Red Alert to play on his Kiss FM show, the reception on the radio and in the clubs for this reggae and hip-hop fusion was so well received, that Dope's experiments would give Red Alert the "ammunition" to "program (reggae) to the massive" (VP Records 2022: 00:42:47). Meanwhile, in 1990, Sting International also secured a DJ residency on Kiss FM, on the Hip-House Reggae show hosted by the prominent Barbados-born radio personality Dahved Levy. In parallel to Red Alert's efforts on the airwaves, Sting International's partnership with Levy would establish a "previously unavailable mainstream platform for reggae, dancehall and soca," as part of his "three-pronged strategy" to broaden reggae's reception beyond its core audience, with many of his productions becoming "important records… embraced by hip-hop and club DJs…," reflecting a unique "New York hybrid dancehall sound" (Meschino 2018).

Chronicling the Sites, Sounds, and Scenes of New York Reggae and Hip-Hop Culture's Evolution

"Uncle Ralph" McDaniels and Video Music Box: An Audiovisual Blueprint

The final member of the discussion was host Ralph McDaniels, "affectionately known" as "Uncle Ralph," born in Bed Stuy, Brooklyn in 1962 to part-Trinidadian parentage, a DJ, VJ, video producer, and founder of the landmark hip-hop television show VMB introduced earlier (Video Music Box, n.d.; Jones 2021: 00:11:46). Since founding the pioneering show in 1983, four decades of interviews, music videos, live footage from club nights, concerts, and events, today make up the Video Music Box Collection (VMBC): "the largest visual history of hip-hop culture" in the world,

5 Recordings pressed onto vinyl acetate as exclusives for a particular DJ or selector.

spanning from hip-hop's "metamorphosis" in its birthplace, up to the present day (Video Music Box Collection, n.d.).

VMB's story began in the early 1980s when McDaniels, completing his college studies, interned as an engineer at WNYC-TV Channel 31. In 1983, he was able to secure airtime for his hour-long show, which was broadcast six days a week. Alongside selected music videos, of equal importance to the show's eventual stature were the live footage and interviews captured on camera at events and nightclubs across the five boroughs (Stelloh 2012). In establishing the first hip-hop TV show, VMB set the blueprint for what the format of a hip-hop TV show would even look like, emphasizing a documentation of the culture at a street level, and providing an early platform for the very visibility of hip hop and Black American culture on US television: "Video Music Box was us showing us" says rapper DMC (Darryl McDaniels) of the pioneering Queens rap group Run DMC (Jones 2021: 00:53:38).

VMB's scope was not confined to hip hop alone, with documentation of the nascent and evolving New York R&B, house, reggae, and salsa scenes today totaling over 20,000 hours of rare footage and music videos (Video Music Box Collection, n.d.). In this regard, VMB has also played an important role in broadcasting an audio-visual introduction of other New York music cultures and scenes to a wider local audience. Regarding McDaniels' connection to reggae culture, the Puerto Rican, Bronx-raised hip-hop luminary Fat Joe highlights, "Ralph used to play the Caribbean stuff, the reggae stuff, before we even knew Jamaicans" (Jones 2021: 00:32:38). Furthermore, in McDaniels' work as a film and music video producer, during the 1990s he produced and directed music videos for Shaggy, Red Fox, Super Cat, and Shabba Ranks, all artists generally acknowledged to have 'opened the gates' for reggae's wider reception in New York and beyond (VP Records 2022: 01:49:35).

Uncle Ralph's role in documenting and representing the history of New York's music cultures highlights the importance of grassroots community media actors in chronicling the evolution of these scenes. When McDaniels began his activities in the early 1980s, both reggae and hip hop remained predominantly underground scenes, receiving little to no visual documentation or representation outside of the musical commu-

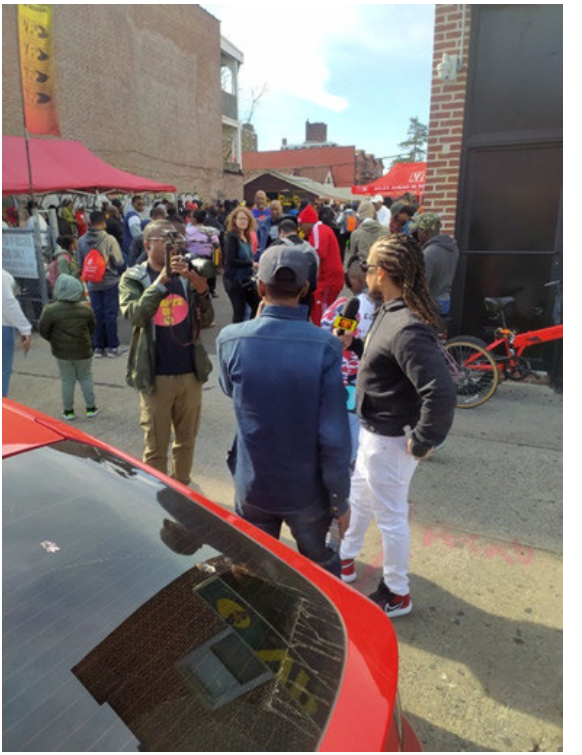
nities themselves. In establishing a visual format for the representation of the nascent New York hip-hop and reggae scenes in particular, Uncle Ralph and Video Music Box played a highly significant role in bringing hip hop and reggae to a wider, eventually international audience in the birthplace of the former, as many of the key figures attending the day's interviews attested.

Archiving Caribbean Culture in New York with The People's Cameraman: Whatz Up New York TV

As the main panel discussion drew to a close inside, Uncle Ralph would host a series of further discussions with a veritable roll call of figures central to reggae's wider New York reception and subsequent hip-hop fusion from the 1980s up to the present day. In no particular order, Ralph was joined by reggae veterans Johnny Osbourne, Mikey 'Mack Daddy' Jarrett, and Nadine Sutherland; Jamaican-born hip-hop pioneer Don Baron of 1980s rap group Masters of Ceremony; dancehall dons Red Fox and Screechy Dan; and contemporary champions of New York reggae culture, DJ Pee Wee of Pretty Posse Sound, DJ Slick of Nexxt Level Sound, selector Empress Breeze, and DJ Max Glazer of Brooklyn's Federation Sound.

With the rest of the panel discussions in full swing in VP's function room next door, guests browsed the store's extensive catalogue of Caribbean music recordings and related merchandise. Outside in the back yard, on a bustling sunny afternoon on Jamaica Avenue, an all-vinyl reggae sound system session was in full swing. In true Jamaican sound system style, high power bass vibrations frequently submerged the interviews inside, not to mention shaking the physical foundations of the neighborhood. Some of the guests would pass through to greet and talk with Uncle Ralph, before stopping by at the sound system session to touch the mic and bestow musical blessings on the occasion. Together with some of the legendary individuals in this all-star cast, I observed and soaked up the sound system atmosphere and situation outside in the yard, "where the real action was happening" (Walsh 2022).

Figure 3: Shaun Walsh interviews the artists Screechy Dan (left) and Red Fox (right)



(Author Photo, 2022)

I was briefly and graciously introduced to a string of central figures in reggae and hip hop's shared and respective New York histories, past and present, before at some point being struck by how many camera crews were in attendance, representing New York community media platforms, social media channels, and music news websites, documenting all aspects of this event and celebration of reggae music and culture,

and reggae and hip hop's historical dialogue. Together, artists and other attendees basked in the spirited occasion of this commemoration.

Figure 4: Sat atop Pretty Posse Sound's speaker stack "the yellow bird"

(Author Photo, 2022)

Red Fox and Screechy Dan joined another interview outside with Shaun Walsh, "the people's cameraman" and WUNYTV founder, and out of my curiosity as to his activities I introduced myself. During my remaining time in New York, Shaun and I would engage in several further

extended conversations, which alongside an ongoing correspondence, form the basis of the discussion outlined in this section (Walsh 2022). In parallel to VMBC's extensive hip hop and multi-genre music and culture archive, by Shaun's own humble estimations the live concert and event footage and interviews with prominent music, community, and political figures he and his team have captured, represent the biggest historical archive of Caribbean culture in New York City: "I archive everything, you know [he laughs]. I got hundreds, man, hundreds of tapes[6] [cassette recordings] for the culture, you know, so I've archived from tapes to flyers, now to the video… all of that stuff I've archived" (Walsh 2022). Further reflecting on Ralph McDaniels and VMB's legacy, Shaun describes how when he first started taking a video camera to community events in 1997, prior to establishing WUNYTV as a Public Access television show in 2001, he was directly inspired by and emulated the format and blueprint pioneered by Uncle Ralph.

Shortly after Shaun and I's first meeting, WUNYTV was gearing up for its twenty-first anniversary event. On June 11, 2022, Shaun was joined by Red Fox and Screechy Dan in receiving honorary proclamations from the State of New York, presented by State Assembly member Brian Cunningham and Senator Kevin S. Parker in recognition for the three's respective and collaborative contributions from the 1980s up to the present day in elevating reggae music and Caribbean culture in New York, and in turn, elsewhere in the US and globally. All three were recognized primarily for their contributions to the community and local culture in Flatbush, heartland of New York's Caribbean community and the epicenter

6 Shaun is referring to predominantly live recordings of reggae sound system sessions, radio shows, and mixtapes made by DJs and producers, that circulated in and between Jamaica and the communities of its global diaspora. With regards to reggae, Kingston, New York, Toronto, and London and other active satellites of Jamaican and Caribbean diasporas were central hubs that propagated these exchanges. The importance of the culture of mixtapes, in a pre-internet age especially, is another central consideration with respect to the global spread and intersections of many underground music cultures in the 1980s and 1990s, not least reggae and hip hop.

of reggae dancehall culture during the Biltmore Era. Pointing to the importance of documenting and archiving this era, Shaun talks about the central Brooklyn sites in which reggae's creative cultivation in the 1980s and 1990s would occur, in venues such as The Tilden Ballroom, The Ark and Club Illusion, prior to its wider New York and US reception. Speaking of the venues of this era, he adds, "what I'm doing (archiving), what you're doing [my research], at least you can say it existed… they're parking lots and malls nowadays."

Born in the UK in 1970 to Jamaican parents, at six-months old Shaun went to live with his maternal grandmother in Albion Mountain, in the Jamaican parish of St. Mary, joining his older brother and sister who had already made the move prior to Shaun's birth. In 1978, the family emigrated again, settling in East Flatbush, by now home to a well-established and prominent Caribbean community. Arriving at the turn of the decade, New York City and the streets of its "outer boroughs—Brooklyn, the BX, Queens, Shaolin, even parts of Strong Island—ran red hot. Between Reaganomics, AIDS and the crack epidemic," the pressures of the city sometimes weighed heavy, and often even more acutely for new arrivals (Kenner 2013: n.pag.). The hostilities that Jamaicans and others faced in New York City, and the "shifting significations" of Jamaican culture across the 1980s, are further reflected in Shaun's experiences. He recalls, "I remember asking my parents, 'When will I be able to speak like the rest of the kids?' Trying to speak like, you know, American style, right? … When we all came here, we all wanted to be American… that's what everyone was doing at that time, like we wanted to kinda assimilate into American culture." A key aspect of 'assimilating' into American culture for Shaun and others on first arriving in New York City was embracing the dominant youth culture of the moment, hip hop: "I was Run DMC's biggest fan, because we were all like hip-hop heads, you know? … So, I was a Run DMC fan, everybody in the hood was a Run DMC fan, everybody… Every single person" (Walsh 2022).

Shaun was "too young" to have been exposed to reggae dancehall culture at this early age. But while many Jamaicans and other new arrivals to New York City attempted to assimilate, in terms of dress, speech, and the music they identified with, Shaun highlights how others, who he

refers to as the "hardcore" dancehall people—in some cases Jamaicans who were more established in New York—had kept reggae culture alive within the community. As I introduced earlier, this was in fact an entire network of reggae activists, who kept reggae culture bubbling away in New York's Caribbean communities, in the streets, in underground clubs, dancehalls, and other community spaces.

Referencing the veteran, Jamaican-born, New York-based reggae singers and deejays, Mikey 'Mack Daddy' Jarrett, who began voicing recordings for Wackies and Jah Life as early as 1979, Reverend Badoo and Ranking Joe, Shaun says, "if it wasn't for the likes of those guys—those guys kept it—so for people like me now, we [had] something to go to" (Walsh 2022). In 1982, a respected member of the Jamaican community in Brooklyn known as Squire Dread (Howard Anthony Small) passed away. After the funeral, a memorial and tribute were hosted on Clarkson Avenue, Brooklyn, by the Jamaican-born, New York-based reggae sound system Third World Hi Fi. On the mic were deejays and singers Mikey Jarrett, Reverend Badoo, Willow Wilson, and Sammy Levi. Cassette recordings from this session soon circulated and, via his sister, one fell into Shaun's hands; something he identifies as one of his first entry points in reconnecting with reggae music and Jamaican culture and further the advent of his passion for archiving all aspects of the culture he came across.

This moment also represented a shifting tide for Shaun musically speaking, the waves of which were spreading throughout New York's Jamaican community across the 1980s. Shaun would begin to reconnect with his Jamaican roots, turning his back entirely on hip-hop and 'American' culture, and embracing the burgeoning reggae dancehall scene, which was quickly spreading from Jamaica to the world, not least through the spread of sound tapes. By now a transcontinental phenomenon, recordings of the latest big reggae dances taking place in Jamaica, and increasingly in the global hubs of the diaspora in the UK, US, and Canada, achieved legendary status through their international circulation. For New York-based Jamaicans, the in-flow of sound tapes and vinyl recordings were "even more important than hip hop… [as] each week's deluge of fresh vinyl served as a kind of broadband connection

to their island homeland, transmitting high bit-rate signals in both directions about… how the yard massive was living in Jamaica and inna Babylon" (Kenner 2005).

In the mid-1980s, as the digital dancehall revolution took hold in Jamaica, Shaun had begun to go deep into reggae culture and would hone his lyrics and delivery in a reggae deejay style together with his peers, experimenting and imitating the leading Jamaican and New York dancehall artists of the day on the sound systems kept at his friends' houses, or at small parties. Several years later, Shaun started studying at New York's Stony Brook University, where over the next two years he began to perform on stages at college parties as the artist Bellymus (his childhood nickname back in Jamaica), alongside his friend Horsehead (David Duncan) aka H-Diggy. With time, he began to perfect his craft, and other emerging artists gave him and his deejay partner segments of their time slot to perform. On one such occasion in 1990, he shared the stage with Red Fox and another prominent Brooklyn-based reggae artist of that era, Naturalee. Headlining was the hip-hop group Leaders of the New School, which featured a young Busta Rhymes (Trevor Tahiem Smith Jr.), another East Flatbush native of Jamaican descent, and an outspoken commentator on the lack of recognition given to reggae music and Jamaican dancehall and sound system culture and the formative influences it has had on hip-hop culture. The rapper has credited dancehall icon Shabba Ranks as a key influence on his own style, having stated that he imitated aspects of Shabba's voice, fashion, and dancing and brought that into his own artistry as a rapper and in turn into hip-hop culture (Gardner 2022). He has also attributed the fast-chat lyrical stylings of prominent 1980s Jamaican dancehall deejays Papa San and Lieutenant Stitchie as a principal influence on his rapping style (ibid.).

Another important milestone in Shaun's life, and the WUNYTV story, was his exposure for the first time to student politics and activism on campus. He recalls, "At the time there was a blood drive by the Red Cross. They said that Haitians couldn't give blood because they are AIDS carriers. So, I said, shit, ok, I took off one of the plaques and started walking around and screaming and all that, and that was the beginning of this politically motivated kind of attitude that I have" (Walsh 2022).

At the turn of the 1990s, Shaun dropped out of his college studies and took on a job as a transporter in a Manhattan hospital, continuing his activities as a music artist and event promoter. He performed at central reggae venues in Brooklyn—Club Rendezvous (formerly Dynasty), The Ark and Club Illusion—alongside other prominent Flatbush-based reggae artists such as Screechy Dan and Red Fox, whose recording careers at this moment were taking off in line with reggae's wider New York and US reception, already well underway. Shaun would also perform as a support act for iconic reggae elders Alton Ellis and John Holt, and the dancehall veteran Tiger.

Thereafter, Shaun focused his attentions on a full-time nursing career, working for the next fifteen years as a licensed practical nurse, with the demands of the job leading him to quit his activities as a reggae artist and stage performer fairly abruptly. With his life-long passion for music and reggae always present, however, just a few years later he resumed his musical activities as a sideline. At the end of the 1990s, gang violence and guns once again plagued New York's streets. Shaun wanted to create a safe space for young people in Brooklyn away from the violence in the streets and founded a music promotion for high school students billed as Sunday Afternoon Jams. He adds, "I have a history [and] I know the struggle in this thing, man," referencing a near-death experience a decade earlier, when the house party he was attending in Brooklyn was shot up by gunmen and Shaun, an innocent bystander, caught a stray bullet that pierced the top of his skull.

Shaun's motivation to document local culture and community life, he reiterates, had always been in him, and now equipped with his own video camera, he documented every single one of these Sunday sessions, mimicking VMB's format and speaking to the attendees queuing up in the line, greeting them New York style with a "whatz up?" before documenting the performances and action inside. The format of this documentation at the parties, sowed the seeds of WUNYTV. As the Sunday jams grew "exponentially," Shaun sought to create a TV commercial to promote them. At first, he paid someone else do this for him, but as he honed his skills on the camera, he began to do his own. All this came prior to having his own show: "We had a lot of parties, and I think VMB was on

at that time also, so we would mimic what they were doing. I have my guy outside with the microphone with the people in the line, talking to them, and then the guy would go inside the club and talk to the people, and I documented *all* the parties—something told me to keep the documentation" (Walsh 2022; original emphasis).

Some years later, Shaun wanted to air a commercial for one of his party promotions and approached an acquaintance who already had a show on the Brooklyn Community Access TV station, a Public Access network available to Brooklyn residents. In 2001 WUNYTV was born, airing as a weekly half-hour show. Shaun's idea was to cover "some party stuff to get the people to think about politics," principally focusing on issues pertaining to the cultural, musical, and political life of New York's Caribbean community.

In the show's "Weh Dem Gone?" segment, a riff on VH1's "Where are They Now?", Shaun foregrounded one of the main niches he wished to push in the show's musical content. The segment focused particularly on interviews with some of the older 'foundation' reggae artists, whom Shaun could see were often going by unnoticed at some of the events he was attending in New York, eclipsed by up-and-coming artists, and sensed that it was imperative to do this before some of reggae's celebrated elders passed. In 2004, the show began to be broadcast in parallel on the New York City-wide cable TV channel, Caribbean International Network, the same year that by absolute chance Shaun captured perhaps one of his greatest scoops with regard to reggae and hip hop's circularity.

In a Manhattan nightclub, Shaun and one of his interviewers known as General, chanced upon the meeting of Kool Herc and "Daddy" U Roy (Ewart Beckford), aka "The Teacher" and "The Originator" of Jamaican sound system deejaying. Though not the first proponent of toasting, he is recognized as the first person to elevate the form from the sound system to the studio, having perfected his art on Jamaican dub pioneer King Tubby's Hometown Hi-Fi sound system in the late 1960s (Snapes 2021). In 2019, at an event in Queens, New York, U Roy was "crowned" the King of Dancehall by "The Emperor" of modern dancehall deejaying, Shabba Ranks (Rexton Rawlston Fernando Gordon), two years prior to The Originator's passing (Lindsey, n.d.).

In the footage that Shaun captured, Herc referred to U Roy as "my king," even getting down on one knee to honor the great reverence that Herc and others have for an artist who would 'set the foundation' from Kingston to New York. From the Jamaican deejay style that U Roy developed on the sound systems of Kingston, Jamaica, and the blueprint this established, a young Herc would absorb U Roy's vocal stylings, and the early ska music of The Skatalites and Prince Buster on the neighborhood sound systems and bring that with him to The Bronx. U Roy's response to this recognition was to highlight the foundational influence that African American music had on Jamaicans prior to the beginnings of the development of local imitations of in-flowing R&B, blues, and jazz styles that would birth ska music, citing the reverence Jamaicans had for artists such as Fats Domino, Louis Prima, and Louis Jordan.

U Roy's sentiments regarding reggae's African American "roots" and "routes" were also echoed in another highlight of Shaun's archiving activities, when in June 1990 he met another foundational figure of Jamaican music, Clement "Sir Coxsone" Dodd, founder and producer of reggae's first record label Studio One, the "Motown of Reggae" (Hall cited in Paul 2005: n.pag.; Stolzoff 2000: 48; The Music Origins Project, n.d.). In the 1980s, Dodd faced a similar fate to that of VP Records and the Chin family mentioned earlier. The monumental Studio One, which had always been located on 13 Brentford Road, Kingston, was attacked by gunmen, and Dodd duly moved his operations to 3135 Fulton Street, Brooklyn (Katz 2004).

Given the respect in the room for Coxsone, who Shaun noticed early on was referred to even by his elders as "Mr Dodd," a sign of utmost respect, Shaun did not feel it was appropriate to record the occasion, though he is able to recollect many of the details through his archival memory. The advantage of this, he adds, was that without the presence of a camera Mr Dodd felt at ease to talk freely, "he was just giving it" (Walsh 2022). Dodd "credited Black American music for everything.… and this is *Coxsone*… so Coxsone got it from here [the US]," a reference to Coxsone's stays in the US in the early 1950s, where he and other early sound system owners would travel to the southern states to work as farm laborers, meanwhile sourcing rare US R&B and jazz recordings to bring

back to Jamaica in order to establish an edge over rival sound systems (Walsh 2002, original emphasis; Katz 2004). Shaun continues, "So, I guess it's like people are saying… you have Coxsone, the original, got his music and influences from America, right, developed this Jamaican art form and then people later on down the line got influenced by a guy that was influenced by Coxsone, Kool Herc, so the thing just kinda like came back to—it's a circle, you know?" (Walsh 2022)

Conclusion

In Shaun's case, and in the case of the blueprint established by Ralph McDaniels and VMB, the documentation and archiving of reggae and hip hop's parallel and shared histories established by these individuals are invaluable resources for our understanding of the people, spaces, places, mediums, and innovations that shaped the evolution of reggae and hip-hop culture in New York, not to mention other marginal, multicultural music scenes of this culturally monumental megalopolis. In his comment earlier, "at least we can say it existed," Shaun also reflects the extent to which the life works of these two individuals were carried out without realizing the historical significance of the moments they were documenting, instead being informed by their participation and love for the two cultures. The result of these efforts as of 2024 are, in Shaun's case, an archive of over twenty-five years of Caribbean culture in New York, with tens of thousands of hours of footage, alongside an extensive collection of sound tapes, flyers, photos, and memorabilia that have captured and chronicled reggae history in New York.

Perhaps Shaun's principal inspiration for the format and approach of his activities when starting out, Ralph McDaniels, has today established the VMBC Inc. as a non-profit organization and archive with more than 20,000 hours of rare, raw footage of New York City's nascent and evolving hip-hop, reggae, and other music scenes, which also archives many of the music videos of this period, including those produced and directed by McDaniels himself. Across his forty-year career, McDaniels has also worked with inner city youth teaching film, radio and TV, and in mak-

ing the archive public has established an extensive historical and educational collection that has seen him work together with the NYC Board of Education, the NYC Department of Corrections, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The Universal Hip Hop Museum in The Bronx, and a range of other educational and arts institutions, with the archive functioning as a medium of cultural preservation, education and research (VMBC, n.d.).

Shaun has similar aspirations for his own archive once he has completed the slow process of single-handedly digitizing his materials. For researchers, especially those such as myself who come from outside of the immediate communities they are documenting and representing, I am hopefully not alone in recognizing the paramount importance of honoring representations of these cultures from the documents and accounts given by those who lived, participated, shaped, and indeed, captured them. Shaun and Ralph's efforts to chronicle reggae and hip hop's parallel and shared histories, as well as actively participating in their creation and evolution, have established invaluable archives that provide extensive, multimedia databases that can help us to understand, commemorate and educate about the evolution of these cultures: their social and musical history, including the development of musical practices and recording discographies, the spaces and technologies that facilitated this, and an (audio)visual representation of these developments as they unfolded. For their role in this, Ralph, Shaun, and other grassroots archivists should undoubtedly be recognized and remembered within these histories.

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