

## Basslines 2: Everything Can Be Dub Has No End?

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Annotated version with sound and text references

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„Everything can be dub” says Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry in the documentary Dub Echoes.<sup>1</sup> He is not too far off with that comment because dub is actually more of a production technology that can apply to all styles than it is a genre of music. However, it is certainly worth looking at dub more intimately. In his professorial dissertation *Dub. Soundscapes & Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*, Michael E. Veal (2007) focuses on musical developments in Kingston, Jamaica between 1968 and 1985 and presents impressive analyses that involve musicological, psychoacoustic and cultural theory aspects.<sup>2</sup>

For Veal, dub is a sub-style of roots reggae which has been dismantled by predominantly electronic sound processing and converted into new, often unfinished sound

<sup>1</sup> Natal, 2009, 25:32.

<sup>2</sup> See the blog entry „The Essential, Annotated Dub Library” for further recommendable literature and movies in the context of Dub and Reggae: [www.comfortnoise.com/blog/2015/06/essential-dub-library.html](http://www.comfortnoise.com/blog/2015/06/essential-dub-library.html)

structures. Its musical effect and technical aspects have transformed pop music and enabled genres such as hip-hop and techno to be born.

Veal provides detailed analyses that document the difference between the original pieces and their „dub versions” as well as indicate the individual touches of leading engineers like King Tubby, Lee Perry and Scientist.<sup>3</sup> He identifies the specific manipulations that build the characteristic aesthetics of surprise, suspense, collapse, incompleteness, repetition and improvisation: processing of the vocal track by erasure, fragmentation, collaging and multilayering; generating spatial effects with devices that create echo, reverb and delays; the change in timbre (in particular, intensifying the bassline) through the processing of frequency curves via filters; the use of secondary signals from remotely placed microphones; the application of foreign and nonmusical sounds; the use of backward-running, slowed or accelerated tape tracks or the targeted misuse of equipment; assembling recordings and turning them into new pieces of music.<sup>4</sup> Dub versions are not simply instrumental versions, edits, or remixes although nowadays the hackneyed word „dub” is eagerly applied to them.

According to Veal, dub is an essential expression of the living conditions in the Jamaican diaspora, which is characterized by a 400 year history of displacement, deportation, slavery, colonialism and a civil war-like transition to independence.<sup>5</sup> The shattered and both newly and openly composed pieces reflect the experience of absence, incompleteness, discontinuity, sadness, and nostalgia in exile and in the ghetto. In particular, reverb, echo and bass evoke the lost memory of African ancestors, the motherland and the destroyed culture – as well as the state of being isolated in the void of space and the desire for a future in which the injuries that have been suffered are healed. The idealized perceptions of Africa that originated during this period, with the often strange-seeming connection to Ethiopia and the dictator Haile Selassie, as well as the oft-used „otherworldly”<sup>6</sup> adjective to characterize the sound are to be seen in this context.

Veal wonders to what extent marijuana consumption is responsible for the formation of dub.<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that THC and dub influence the perception of space, movement, details, surfaces and time in a comparable manner, but concluding that the dub phenomenon is the result of such causation would be too trivial. Economic aspects and the sound system culture are of paramount importance; so too was the onset of digitization around 1985, which brought with it an abrupt end point.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, dub reflects temporally defined social, political and cultural changes to Jamaica, and on the other, it has had a vast reach in profoundly changing our listening habits and production of music as well as perspectives on Africa, the outer space and modern machines.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Veal presents the techniques of von Sylvan Morris (S. 95ff.), Osbourne ‚King Tubbys’ Ruddock (pp. 108ff.), Philip ‚Prince Philip’ Smart (pp. 104ff.), Lloyd ‚King Jammy’ James (pp. 126ff.), Overton ‚Scientist’ Brown (pp. 123ff.), Lee ‚Scratch’ Perry (pp. 140ff.), Errol Thompson (pp. 163ff.) and Joe Gibbs (pp. 169ff.).

<sup>4</sup> pp. 64ff. – Studio Technology and Compositional Strategies of the Dub Mix.

<sup>5</sup> pp. 196ff. – Starship Africa. The Acoustics of Diaspora and of the Postcolony.

<sup>6</sup> p. 202

<sup>7</sup> pp. 80ff. – The Ganja Factor: A Caribbean Psychedelica?

<sup>8</sup> pp. 185ff. – ‚City Too Hot’. The End of the Roots Era and the Significance of Dub to the Digital Era of Jamaican Music.

<sup>9</sup> pp. 208ff. – Science and Space: Dub and Afro-futurism.

One may wonder about what of all this it is that moves us today when we listen to the historical and contemporary productions. Dub counts for a lot, but certainly not everything.<sup>10</sup> The word could stand to use a bit more of a profile because Lee Perry is of course quite right in his other famous yet rather empty-worded quote from that film: „Well, as far as I see it, dub has no end.”<sup>11</sup>

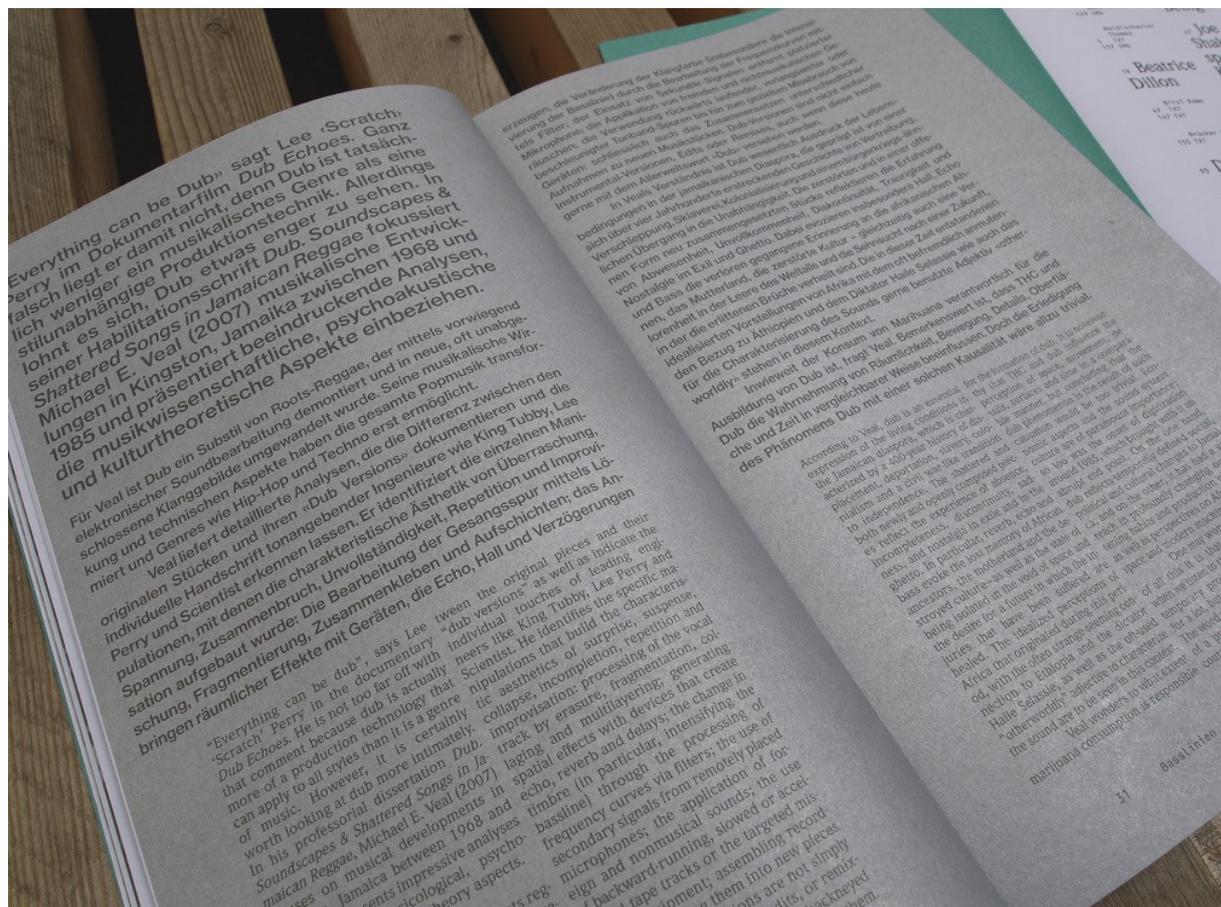
## Literature

Natal, Bruno (2009). *Dub echoes*. Videograma/Soul Jazz Records (dvd200). Available:

[www.youtube.com/watch?t=2782&v=g1SabmCZcbY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?t=2782&v=g1SabmCZcbY)

Sullivan, Paul (2014). *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora*. London: Reaktion Books.

Veal, Michael E. (2007). *Dub. Soundscapes & Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.



<sup>10</sup> Veal's last chapter (Coda. *Electronica, Remix Culture, and Jamaica as a Source of Transformative Strategies in Global Popular Music*; pp. 220ff.) is informative in this context: He discusses the enhancements of Dub by pointing concisely to England (Punk, Neo-Dub, Jungle, Drum & Bass, Trip-Hop; Adrian Sherwood, Neil 'Mad Professor' Fraser, Dennis Bovell), Germany (Pole/Stefan Betke, Rhythm & Sound/Moritz von Oswald & Mark Ernestus) and the USA (Lloyd 'Bullwackies' Barnes, Bill Laswell). – See also Sullivan (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Natal, 2009, 1:16:58.



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