BASS CULTURE

In a collaborative research project, the University's Black Music Research Unit is mapping the undocumented musical experiences of marginalised communities in the UK, and illuminating the impact of Jamaican music on British culture.


Musical Youth

Ska, reggae, drum'n'bass, ragga, trip hop, dubstep, grime. None of these musical genres would exist in Britain without Jamaican music. Not to mention its influence on the most unlikely musical acts, such as Eric Clapton and The Clash. Names like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Pauline Black and Janet Kay, may mean little to many modern-day British music fans, but without their influence, today's UK Top 40 would be unrecognisable.

"It's not that we're unaware of Black music in Britain, but we tend to approach it moment by moment – whatever's popular – we'll talk about that," says Mykaell Riley, former musician and musical producer, and founder of Westminster's Black Music Research Unit (BMRU). "We don't see it as a long narrative – a constant, important catalyst of British popular music."

It is this central misconception and the injustices it creates, that lies at heart of the BMRU's first research project, Bass Culture. Named after Johnson's 1980 album, Bass Culture is the first major study of the history and impact of Jamaican-influenced music in the UK. Spanning over six decades, it redresses not only the way Black British music has been pigeonholed but also what this reductive treatment has come to symbolise within the broader marginalisation of Black British culture and communities.

"People overseas broadly think there are about five Black people living in this country," says Jacqueline Springer, a researcher on the Bass Culture project. "That we all know each other, that we may all be related. And some of the worst people in this country feel that we've only been here for a couple of years. And so, it's important that you have research projects that are pursued with passion but have academic rigour, because they disprove the racist connotations that people who are smaller in number have no bearing and no rights here."

An acclaimed music journalist, Jacqueline also co-founded the events curation duo Union Black, which focuses on the intersection between music, fashion and cultural and racial identity (she currently curates the V&A's Africa & Diaspora: Performance). Jacqueline and Mykaell have always converged in their dual creative and academic interests. He had talked about the Bass Culture project for years, Jacqueline recalls, and when it finally came to fruition and he asked for her help, she jumped at the chance.

"It's a privilege, you know."

In a past life, Mykaell was a founding member of Grammy Award-winning reggae band Steel Pulse; he would later make his name as a music producer,

“WHETHER YOU CONSIDER DRUM ‘N’ BASS OR TRIP HOP OR GRIME – IT’S A RESISTANCE TO THE INDUSTRY AND YOUR ABILITY TO EXIST AS A BLACK BRITISH MUSICIAN.

Benjamin Zephaniah meets Nelson Mandela at the South African Embassy, London 1990

representing the likes of Soul II Soul, Jamiroquai and Björk. As a musician-turned-producer-turned-academic, Mykaell understood, from the outset, the importance of speaking to both audiences, in the Bass Culture project.

“I’ve got an academic audience and I’ve got the industry and I’ve got the public,” he says. “Three quite disparate communities – and I’m trying to tell a story that is similar to all of those communities but distinct to the individual communities.”

Bass Culture has crafted an incredible mass of archive material – including video interviews, photography and physical artefacts – communicated through outputs including a documentary film, an exhibition and even a podcast.

Initially, many artists he approached were reluctant to take part, Mykaell tells me, following years of racism and exploitation by record companies. Even issues like signing contracts were rife with difficulties, because in the past, “this might be translated in lost royalties – or contracts they were signing they thought they meant one thing but turned out to be another.”

This brand of exploitation is a common problem within the music industry. But there are also recurring themes which are distinct to Black British musicians.

“The treatment of Black artists is complex, because, depending on how you look at it, it appears the same, but actually it’s not,” Mykaell says. “There’s a history where they haven’t had the same level of support, promotion, or investment to have developed and sustained a meaningful career, and so that has resulted in a certain level of marginalisation – historical marginalisation – that has fostered a resentment – for good reason.”

Many musicians and former musicians who took part in Bass Culture had never even read their own press cuttings – articles featured in “magazines they were not interested in”, accompanied by “a postage-stamp-sized image”. On the flipside to this, Mykaell identified a “need to be seen” in many of these individuals, following years of marginalisation by both record labels and the press. This was one of the factors fuelling Bass Culture’s strong focus on photography and videography. Mykaell partnered with the iconic music photographer Adrian Boot, who “has the largest collection of images representing reggae in Britain”.

“We looked at how we would select the images that told a particular story,” Mykaell says. “This included the relationship to reggae, Jamaican communities and sound system culture over that period, and we agreed that we should approach bringing to life these individuals through life-size or larger images. So, the majority of the exhibition was exactly that.”

Replacing the “postage-stamp” images of the past with giant super-sized images carries deep symbolism.

“One person said to me – ‘I’ve never seen this image,’” Mykaell recalls. “Then they corrected themselves and said ‘I’ve never seen an image of myself this size. This means I have been successful.’”

These images were accompanied by extensive film interviews, which, in turn, formed the raw material for a Bass Culture podcast. All of this was essential, in Mykaell’s view, to empower people to tell their own stories – essentially reclaiming the narrative from predominantly white salons of journalists and academics who have traditionally controlled it.

Taking this one step further, Mykaell and his research team arranged workshops, encouraging people to write their own stories, and with it, “upskilling” the community.

“I think at least one of those individuals is now completing their PhD this year at Goldsmiths.”

Another part of putting this project back into the community’s hands was

Notting Hill Carnival, 1980


The Specials in Montreux

enabling them to curate their own weekly events – a memorable one being the Rude Boy fashion show.

"The Rude Boy catwalk show – hilarious!" Mykaell says. "Where people were asked to come dressed as they were when they were 18. And people turned up in clothes they really should not have! But it was just a fun way of exploring fashion and the story of music."

With the support of the then-Culture Secretary Matt Hancock and Ticket Master, Mykaell took this research to the Mayor of London, and the Form 696 was repealed as a direct result.

"It was the use of Big Data to challenge the idea that young Black males are essentially criminals and that the gathering of these individuals would incite some kind of civil unrest," Mykaell says.

As well as hitting artists' careers and earnings, the invasive treatment connected with Form 696 – such as confiscating phones and rifling through contact lists – echoed a dark history faced by Black British reggae artists decades earlier. With Black communities and their music excluded from pubs and working men's clubs, sound men would construct their own custom-made sound systems at illegal house parties.

"These were dangerous times and people were breaking the law – the law had been fashioned in a way so that listening to Black music publicly felt dangerous," Jacqueline says. "That is absolutely wrong. It's absolutely wrong, you know. This wasn't even the 1920s where you could associate it – like jazz – with prohibition. It was engineered as a result of racism."

For Mykaell, grime is just the latest incarnation of young Black musicians fighting a system that tries to suppress them. He points to the "multiskilled and entrepreneurial" nature of many grime artists – creating their own video content and even championing online gaming.

"I think Black youth music has always been born out of a resistance to the challenge of being a Black musician in Britain," Mykaell says. "Always. Whether it's East London, Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester. Whether you consider drum 'n' bass or trip hop or grime – it's a resistance to the industry and your ability to exist as a Black British musician – so that's why I don't separate it. I think jump forward to 2016 – 17 – 18, grime's suddenly ascendent because they've recognised it's down to them to challenge the system. And they circumvent the industry."

So, is this a kind of antidote to the marginalisation of Black British music?

"Yeah, it's an antidote – or a vaccine, I would say, a bit like the COVID vaccine. It only lasts 12 weeks, right? And then you might assume you're OK, only to be reminded, look, it only lasts 12 weeks! You're now vulnerable again."

Though the Bass Culture project was originally planned to last three years, six years in, it has taken on a life of its own – with a British Library exhibition scheduled for 2024.

"I think the most important thing of all is that it exists," Jacqueline says. "What you have is something that exists for everybody, and you can build on what exists – and what better legacy is there. It existed in Mykaell's mind. And it exists now as an academic resource. We're lucky to have people who make music and we're lucky to have people who respect music and want it chronicled."

Linton Kwesi Johnson (LKJ) on Railton Road, Brixton, 1979