

## Dancehall

Dancehall represents the commercial end of the reggae spectrum and takes its name from the arena in which the music is popularly played as with disco, club and rave music. Finding a mainstream club to play reggae music was, and still is difficult, even in Jamaica. Establishments (black and white) are mainly interested in the more Europeanised forms of black music such as soul and r&b. Reggae promoters provided their own spaces by hiring a venue (hall) and promoting individual events (dances).

Credited with giving birth to hip hop and jungle (drum & bass) and a major influence on the rave and wider club scene dancehall has been around since the birth of reggae music in 1968.

The dancehall scene is generally popularised by folk-hero type characters. In the late 1960s we had the rudies. Represented by Jimmy Cliff in the film The Harder They Come, the rudies were a rebellious character who used crime to struggle against poverty and discrimination. Rudies were a strong influence on the skinhead/suedehead movements in Britain.

From the mid-1970s we had the rocker, a more conscious character inspired by Rastafari and Africanism. 1970s dancehall produced heavy dance styles (steppers) and dub (music produced by dubbing tracks and sound effects together after they had been recorded). Dub dancehall coined the phrase 'Drum & Bass'. The Rockers inspired another definitive reggae film. Titled Rockers it was a virtual who's who of reggae artists. It was expatriate dancehall selectors (DJ's) of this era who gave rise to hip hop in N. America (DJ Cool Herc).

From the mid-1980s came the raggamuffin. Influenced by Thatcherism and Reaganism, raggamuffins represented a move back towards the materialism of the rudies but with the lust for dancehall and the cultural confidence of the rocker. It was during this era that the dancehall scene gained recognition as a distinct area within reggae. Its association with hip hop also threw dancehall into mainstream consciousness and everyone became aware of the raggamuffin and their ragga music. In Britain dancehall is still referred to as ragga.

Dancehall has since developed its own sub-categories. The most popular is the bashment, represented by faster commercial music played in a style termed 45 juggling i.e. playing singles (45's) in quick succession. In England 1970s dancehall did not disappear but went underground, resurfacing around the early 1990s as the dub scene. Popularised by Jah Shaka, one of this country's longest running and most respected Sound Systems, the Dub scene has been used by others as the foundation for jungle and much of the rave scene.

### Dance

Crews in the dancehall vie with one another to produce the latest dances. Most dances still originate in Jamaica. However each year at least one style goes international and is seen anywhere dancehall is played. Some dancers have made international names and a lot of money by creating new dance moves (Mr. Bogle of the Black Roses Crew). More popular dances include the Bogle, the Butterfly and the Pregg. Dancehall dances and dancers have been used in other areas of music and by artists such as Michael Jackson and MC Hammer. Through jungle, which was essentially built around dub and ragga, dancehall moves have infiltrated the broader club scene.

### Fashion

Male and female dancehall turfites (hard-core patrons) take hours to prepare for an evening out. Dapper Dons rule menswear but the Dancehall Queen rules the dancehall. Popularised through Don Letts' film of the same name she is a true diva, epitomising dancehall style, glamour and performance. Although European designer names are popular, the notion of sophistication in dancehall style is driven by African culture i.e. strong colours, decorative fabrics and inventive accessories. Here anyone under size 12 is generally considered mauger (skinny). As with African decoration imagination is important pit helmets, three pairs of sunglasses, diving gear and garments worn inside-out and back-to-front are all normal. Britain is generally more reserved than Jamaica or the USA, but even in this country theatrical display has no meaning in the dancehall. Essentially glamour or evening/club-wear, most dancehall fashions are either made to order or fabricated by the wearer. However, in Britain and the USA there are some of retailers of dancehall fashion.

## Performers

Sound Systems form the backbone of dancehall. Consisting of singers, selectors (DJ's) operators (engineers) DJ's (rappers) and box bwoy (boys) or gyal (girls) (roadies). Sounds are powerful travelling road-shows. British Sounds include Luv Injection and Asher World Movement. Originally singers and DJ's worked as part of Sound Systems but due to their increased popularity many now work solo or as part of a crew (group of artists working together) British DJ's have always had difficulties gaining international recognition for a number of reasons but individuals such as Baby Cham carry a great deal of international respect as well as commercial success. The selector now holds centre stage in the dancehall with Chris Goldfinger of Asher World Movement, one of this country's leading selectors, also presenting a regular dancehall programme on BBC Radio 1.

The final player here is the producer, the creator of the rhythms. True to its African roots reggae is built around rhythm. European musicologists have often referred to reggae as back to front music because the rhythm is placed in front of any melodies. Other forms of music such as soul, jungle etc. have reduced their rhythms to a simplified back beat, whilst rhythm remains sacred in the dancehall. Different artists make recordings on the same rhythm and each recording carries a separate title for the rhythm. A selector will generally play records in order of their rhythms. For example they will run the records on the Badda Badda rhythm, then the records on the Backyard rhythm and so on. Recording artists want to record for the producers with the hottest new rhythms. Britain has some strong producers such as Mafia and Fluxy and Jazwad who have produced internationally acclaimed rhythms.

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