Sound System Performances and the Localisation of Dancehall in Finland.

Abstract

This study examines how the particular performance practices associated with reggae music have contributed to the localisation of dancehall culture in Finland. At the core of this culture lies the concept of the sound system, which, in addition to a DJ, includes a master of ceremonies, or MC, who during a performance, in various ways, will interact with the audience. This article is especially concerned with how Finnish sound systems localise through their performances a particular understanding of reggae as a genre in Finland, and promote reggae through what I define as the dancehall continuum. Theoretically, this study draws on the study of folklore as performance and sociological genre theory. The empirical material consists of interviews with sound system operators and discussions on an Internet message board. Additionally a close reading of the written history of reggae is conducted. The study shows that Finnish sound systems do not only act as intermediaries of Jamaican music, but engage the local audience in the creation of a particular adaptation of dancehall culture in Finland.

**Keywords:** dancehall, Finland, Jamaica, localisation, performance, reggae

Introduction

To understand the dance hall system is to understand many of the mysteries of reggae […] If you have once stood in the middle of a sound system when the speakers are blasting the latest dub plate, you understand reggae much more profoundly than listening to it from your home hi fi for years and years. (Kaski and Vuorinen 1984: 5)

As Finnish reggae enthusiasts Kaski and Vuorinen (1984) suggest in one of the first written depictions of Jamaican dancehall culture, understanding the logics of the sound system performance tells us a lot about reggae music. This article examines the localisation of reggae in Finland through the particular performance practices associated with dancehall culture. At the core of this culture, is the concept of the sound system, which, in its essence comprises of a DJ or selector choosing the recordings to play, and an MC (master of ceremonies), who in various ways will seek to interact with the audience during a performance. Traditionally in Jamaica and its diaspora, the customised sound equipment and speaker systems of each sound system have been material in their appeal to the audience. Today, however, at least in Finland, sound systems are mostly associated with the selectors and MCs as performers, their cultural capital and repertoire of music.

The significance of the Jamaican sound systems in the formation and progress of reggae is acknowledged in most histories about the music (Barrow & Dalton 2001; Bradley 2001; Katz 2003; Stolzoff 2000). The sound system and its particular performance style is considered an institution within popular music and its influence on musical forms in the Jamaican diaspora of North America and the UK, and on club culture in general, is widely recognised (Henriques 2011; Manuel and Marshall 2006; Veal 2007). Although reggae music and the sound system practice have received a substantial amount of scholarly attention, most studies have focused on the culture in Jamaica and its diaspora. With the exception of Marvin D. Sterling’s (2010) thorough ethnography on African-Jamaican popular culture in Japan, the expanding attraction of reggae and dancehall culture in other parts of the world has largely been overlooked. By studying the performances of local sound systems in Finland, I aspire with this article to fill some of this gap.

This research explores the impact local sound systems have on the localisation of reggae music in Finland. Two aspects of the sound system performance are specifically in focus; the role of the MC as a narrator of the performance, and the selector’s choice of Jamaican repertoire and use of exclusively commissioned recordings called dubplates. By looking at these aspects of the sound system performance, the study seeks to identify what kind of narrative about reggae as a genre is localised in Finland through the sound system practice. This is done in the last part of this paper in comparison with how reggae initially reached Finland through the global music industry. Theoretically the study draws foremost on the study of folklore as performance (Bauman 1975; 1986), and sociological genre theory (Fabbri 1982, Frith 1998). The empirical material in this study include interviews with sound system operators and promoters in the cities of Helsinki and Turku conducted between 2008 and 2010, and discussions on an Finnish reggae internet forum from the same period. Additionally, a close reading is conduct of previous research on reggae and the genre’s global dissemination.

Although I will throughout this paper discuss the concepts of reggae and dancehall, and how the definition of these terms are negotiated among the local audience, a few general points should be made clear here, which also define the ethnographic field I am concerned with. Dancehall is an ambiguous term, which, depending on the context, can mean different things, signifying either a particular style of reggae music or its performance context. I use dancehall foremost to refer to music performed by sound systems, which can include a number of different musical styles, normally placed under the umbrella term reggae. This includes different styles of Afro-Jamaican origin, such as ska, rock steady, roots reggae, dub, and dancehall. Thus, the difference between reggae and dancehall is here primarily defined ontologically, where the primary centre of attention is the sound system performance and the live performance or recording respectively. Dancehall denotes reggae performed by sound systems, whereas reggae refers to different musical styles developed in the context of the Jamaican sound system performances, but is not concerned with their mediation.

This research is consequently limited to reggae as it is performed by sound systems, and is, despite certain genre specific parallels, not concerned with live reggae performances in Finland. Nevertheless, the focus on sound system activities is not as limiting as it may seem in describing the localisation of reggae music in Finland, as most of the reggae events with live acts are also organised by local sound system crews.

It should also be noted that audiences frequently talk about the dichotomy between dancehall and roots reggae, where the previous refers to the faster and more dance driven contemporary form of digital reggae, and the latter to the slower traditional reggae, characterised by its typical off-beat ostinato. Roots reggae is more associated with the live reggae circuit, and sound systems with digital dancehall and club culture. However, most sound systems in Finland perform many different styles of Jamaican dancehall derived music – some identifying more closely with a particular style, others aiming for a more all around interpretation of Afro-Jamaican music. Concerning the different ways of interpreting the notions of reggae and dancehall, it should, in this paper, be clear from the context if I am referring to the music as a particular sound or the music’s ontological character and mediation.

I will begin by discussing the MC’s role in the performance, after which I will briefly look at sound systems’ choice of musical repertoire. In the last part of this article, I will study audience comments online and look at what kind of narrative of reggae as a genre is localised in Finland through the sound system performance. This is contrasted with how reggae initially reached audiences in Finland through the sound recordings industry, and what kind of idea about the music this process entailed.

The MC and the performance form

As this study is concerned with how a particular musical culture is localised through performances, I have found it fitting to employ Richard Bauman’s (1975; 1986) theory of folklore as performance. According to Bauman, folklore should be studied as performance, highlighting the ways in which, or how, a content is communicated, rather than analysing the mediated text as a fixed object. Bauman highlights the usefulness of the notion of a frame, as a way of organising social experiences. In a performance, framing is a form of metacommunication, informing the audience about the occurring performance, enabling them to place it in its proper context. Fundamental in the framing of a performance, according to Bauman (1975: 293) is the “assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence”. For a performance to work, it is important that the audience expectations and understanding of the performance form meet the performers intentions.

As Simon Frith (1998: 209) notes, performance in this sense is "a way of standing back from content and considering form". I will here approach the MC’s role in the performance primarily as a way of framing the content of the sound recordings to the performance setting. Henriques (2011: 175-186) suggests that in a Jamaican sound system performance the task of the MC is to guide, excite and control the crowd[[1]](#endnote-1). I want to look at how a local Finnish MC can accomplish these tasks when the performance form of the sound system is not part of the local tradition and not innately familiar to local audiences.

Two aspects in Bauman's notion of framing are useful in understanding the MC’s role in this regard. First of all, Bauman (1975: 295) maintains that framing is about employing "culturally conventionalized metacommunication" informing the audience how to interpret the text being communicated. Relevant here is how a "culturally conventionalised" form is transferrable to a different context or culture. The other important point that Bauman (ibid. 297) identifies in verbal art in terms of an interpretative frame, is that it can vary in intensity: “Art is commonly conceived as an all-or-nothing phenomenon – something either is or is not art – but conceived as performance, in terms of an interpretive frame, verbal art may be culturally defined as varying in intensity as well as range.” How does the MC's performance relate to conventions of everyday conversation in the culture where it is performed?

In order to answer this, we need to recognise that the sound system performance is connected to the particular orality of Jamaican culture. As Henriques (2011: 8) maintains, storytelling and the sound of the spoken word have been key elements in the “richly expressive dramatic performance of everyday Jamaican culture”. Henriques contrasts this tradition with other Caribbean islands were newspapers, poems, literature, other written forms, and painting have had a more prominent role in popular culture. The particular orality of Jamaican culture can also be found in the MC.

At a sound system performance in Finland, normally you will hear an MC use these Jamaican speech forms. Speaking in Patwa, or Jamaican English the MC will in a performance use expressions from dancehall culture – "bigging up" artist and places, "blessing" their performance with a "lord ‘ave mercy" and asking the audience "wha gwan". Coming from a native white Finn, these expressions can seem superimposed, yet they are widely used. Frith (1998: 209) has rightly identified the speaking behaviour of African-American and African-Caribbean communities as the most "significant linguistic source of performing conventions" for contemporary popular music. The ubiquity of these linguistic forms in urban popular culture has made them familiar to audiences in Finland. However, the absence of these forms in the everyday speech behaviour of most Finns, emphasise the performative side in the intensity spectrum that Bauman has discerned between conversational speech and performance.

In its original African-Jamaican context, the use of seemingly performative expressions of this sort are more innate. As Jones (1986: 41)notes, Jamaican English has also been important in reaffirming a Caribbean identity in its diaspora. In Finland, with a relatively low immigrant rate, and almost no Caribbean diaspora, this practice is not culturally conventionalised, and, thus, not straightforward understood as a natural part of the performance. Consequeently, rather than making the performance through its conversational nature easy to approach, applying expressions and forms from another culture can make the performance overacted. These speech forms’ detachment from the performance of the everyday in Finnish culture, can make them seem out of place in sound system performances in Finland.

One way the MC can avoid the misplacement of the Jamaican “dramatic performance of everyday” (Henriques 2011) in Finland, is to perform in the local Finnish language. This requires, however, as MC Chappa, from the Helsinki based Forward Squad sound system suggests, a greater degree of innovation from the MC (interview Näppä 2010). As the content does not directly translate to Finnish, the MC has to work his way around the concepts and come up with novel expressions in Finnish.The songs that sound systems perform are almost exclusively in Jamaican English or Patwa, which makes it easier for the MC to pick up lyrics from a song in English and connect them to the performance setting. Chappa normally uses English when he is performing in the larger cities of southern Finland, but he has noticed how rural audiences do not respond as well to an English performance. Consequently, he has chosen to perform in Finnish in the smaller cities of rural Finland. According to Chappa, these performances tend to be more lively: “The crowd is in a way more honest, they are into the thing in a special way” (interview Näppä 2010).

As Chappa asserts in our interview, this can be due to the fact that there are fewer reggae events in rural Finland, and fans there get more excited when something is happening. However, building on the theoretical framework here, it could also be suggested that by using Finnish, the MC can more naturally connect with the local audience. As the conversational nature of the performance is highlighted the crowd can more easily be guided and excited. The here and now, the atmosphere and local presence at the performance event is emphasised, at the expense of particularities in the Jamaican dancehall culture that the performance seeks to convey.

Regarding the choice of language, in broader terms, a native Finnish MC, has to balance between a seemingly superimposed expression in Jamaican, Standard English, or Patwa with a more local conversational delivery in the Finnish language. The crucial question is, as Frith (1998: 210) notes, does the performer mean it? Does the performer and the performance seem authentic and is it believable to the audience? Drawing on Bauman (1975), this is to a large extent dependent on the audience understanding of the performance form. What is the basis on which they evaluate the performance? Whereas a Finnish performance is easier to approach for an audience who is not as familiar with sound systems – an English performance filled with expressions from dancehall culture requires an audience who appreciates the performance more as part of the Jamaican performance context. As the audience has progressively become more familiar with the performance form, English has become the preferred language for the MCs. Riina Asamoa (interview 2009), concert promoter and former chairperson for the Finnish reggae association, maintains that as MCs have started performing in English the scene in Finland is to an increasing extent resembling its Jamaican counterpart, which clearly is the ideal.

However, it has taken some time for the audience in Finland to become accustomed with the particular performance culture of the sound systems. Members in the Cool Runnings sound system (interview Kurkela and Loikala 2010) active mostly in Helsinki and Tampere in the end of the 1990s, describe the difficulty of trying to present a Jamaican style sound system performance at that time. According to selector Scandal Bag, the audience could not understand what the performance was about, as the DJs were, apart from playing records, commenting the turn of events on the microphone. Scandal Bag remembers that the audience’s reaction at that time was often confused, as they expected a DJ just to play records.

Although reggae clubs were popular in Helsinki already in the 1990s, the sound system performance form did not become established in Finland until the turn of the millennium when a few sound systems introduced the culture to the audience in Finnish. Asamoa (interview 2009) acknowledges especially the efforts of Komposti sound system, whose events and music productions have been significant in introducing reggae to native Finns. In addition to revitalising the live reggae circuit, Komposti has since the turn of the century been one of the most actively performing sound systems and concert promoters in Finland. At the time I was conducting my interviews, their weekly club Reggae Sundays was the main venue and meeting place for dancehall and reggae fans in Helsinki.

Henriques (2011: 180) maintains that: “In order to have any influence on the crowd, the MC has to earn their respect”. This respect – which essentially determines if an audience believes in the act – can be understood as “cultural capital”, as it has been defined by Bourdieu (1986) or “subcultural capital” as the concept has been further developed by Thornton (1995) in the context of club cultures. The audience has to believe that the performer has the right knowledge about the culture and that he or she knows what their doing. Sterling (2010: 67) notes regarding African-Jamaican culture in Japan, that an important way performers acquire cultural capital is by travelling to Jamaica. By spending time in Jamaica, sound system selectors and MC can witness the culture on location and acquire an understanding of it in broader terms. For Sterling (ibid.), in the Japanese context, an important trait that an MC acquires from a trip to Jamaica, is the ability to speak in a Jamaican vernacular. Although Finnish sound system operators do travel to Jamaica, learning the language does not seem to be as important in Finland, where most people to a certain degree already speak English. The cultural capital gained from travelling to Jamaica, is more about having been there, as an act that brings authority. Moreover, as discussions on the Fi-reggaeInternet forum indicate, this feature is not always appreciated among the fans. A tension clearly exists between an audience who follow more closely what is happening in the Jamaican dancehalls, and an audience that emphasise the local interpretation of the music. The latter reacts against the idea that there is a group of people who supposedly knows better how reggae should be experienced, because they have encountered the culture in Jamaica. As one writer on the Finnish reggae forum expresses himself about a popular Jamaican recording which he was not enjoying: “[...] yes, I know my OWN OPINION [original capitals], better than any Jamaican” (Fi-reggae 2009a). It should be recognised that the cultural capital gained through travelling that Sterling (2010) emphasises, also has another side to it, as the conditions for the musical culture is negotiated among the local audience.

Nevertheless, travelling to Jamaica has positive affects on how a performer is perceived among the local audience. Chappa (interview Näppä 2010) notes how visiting Jamaica also simply inspires him as a performer – giving him energy and enthusiasm to spread the culture in Finland. This energy is also recognised by the audience and a fresh return from Jamaica can be used to promote an event. Chappa refers to a performance he had a few weeks before our interview when he had just returned from Jamaica. He recollects how he was excited about the show and how the audience reacted to his excitement. A feedback loop was established where the performer fed off the audience reactions, who in turn were inspired by the performers energy. The excitement was also built up before the show on the Fi-reggae forum, which is used to promote reggae events in Finland. Youtube videos of songs that the selectors were planning on playing were linked on the forum and Chappa posted a video he had filmed some weeks earlier in Kingston (Fi-reggae 2010a). Thus suggesting, not only that he had experienced it and knew what a proper dancehall event should be like, but also that the upcoming party in Helsinki would be as exciting and, most of all, as authentic as the street after party in Kingston, Jamaica that the video portrayed. Several users continued the discussion online the following day after the event (Fi-reggae 2010b), thanking the performers for a successful event and noting how Chappa’s return from Jamaica had brought new energy to the local context.

The example above illustrates how the MC can excite the crowd also outside the performance venue, and how sound systems work as intermediaries of the culture off stage. Sound systems recognise the importance of the local audience and, according to Chappa (interview Näppä 2010), one of the most important tasks of the MC during a performance is to “big up” audience members. Chappa tells me that he will often call out the names of dancers in the crowd and maintains that they get more excited about the performance if they are recognised. As the performer acknowledges members in the audience, telling them that they know who they are performing for, the audience becomes aware of the fact that the performer is as dependant of the audience as the audience is of the performer. Sound systems realise the importance of the audience in the creation of a successful event, and seek to maintain that connection. One might even say, as Thornton (1995: 29) argues about club cultures, that the audience and performer “share the spotlight”, as they both participate in the creation of the atmosphere, which becomes the actual performance.

Naming the names of, not only audience members but of the artists who are heard on record at the performance, is also important. As Hebdige (1987: 8) suggests, naming in reggae music is in itself an act of invocation, where the performer pays tribute to the community from which he has sprung and draws power from the names. Calling the names of specific artists is, thus, an act of transferring the credibility of the reproduced artist on to the performer. The sound system MC is a concrete link between the Jamaican performers and the local audience members in Finland.

MC and selector Resupekka (interview Lintusaari 2009) from the Turku based Black Bear sound system, also explains how it is important for him as a performer, not just to play records but to communicate with the audience:

“Absolutely, I try to connect with the audience. And you can really tell, if you’re early in the evening just playing records and then later grab the mic, it really creates a kind of bond between the audience and the performer... That somebody is really there. Especially if you just let yourself go and get into the game, then it’s not just a mummy selecting the records in the DJ booth. You are interacting with the audience.”

It could be argued that when the performer is not self-conscious about standing on stage and he lets himself go, he also takes the role of the audience and performs the event as a representative of the prevailing ambience at the venue. Henriques (2011: 175) describes the MC in the Jamaican tradition as a disembodied voice in the darkness of the dancehall, but in the Finnish context the MC, like the selector, is often very visible on stage or in the DJ booth, making it easy for the audience to relate with them as embodiments of the prevailing atmosphere. As the MC is guiding the audience through the procession of the event, letting them know about the music played, the task of the MC is not just to *inform* the audience about what is happening, but to *perform* the performance situation, which includes the frame that he builds around the recorded music as content in the performance, and the overall ambience as part of the event, which is established in an interaction with the audience. Resupekka’s mummy analogy is descriptive of the position the performer needs to assume ­– as a representative of the audience, it is important for the spectators to see the performer also partying and enjoying himself with them. The framing of the performance is also tied to the notion of the audience’s competence that Bauman (1975) emphasises, in the sense that the listeners realise sound systems are not just presenting an isolated performance on stage, but seek to perform the overall ambience of the event. The audience’s competence lies in the realisation that they are a part of the performance.

Recordings and the performance content

Let us now proceed to discuss the content in the sound system performance, and the most evident such an element, namely the sound recordings. In accordance with the research questions I have outlined, I will not discuss individual recordings or their formal musical particularities. Rather, I will concentrate on the performers’ strategies regarding the musical repertoire and how their choices affect the localisation of reggae.

Naturally, the records that sound systems perform almost exclusively fall under the broad category of reggae, as defined earlier, and are essentially mostly by Jamaican artists. As Resupekka states (interview Lintusaari 2009), compared to average audience members, sound system operators are more attuned to what is happening in Jamaica and know where and how to get a hold of the latest tunes. Before a reggae record is officially released and more widely distributed via a compilation album or a compiled artist album by a larger record company and available on Itunes for example, recordings are disseminated electronically via promotional lists, blogs, content hosting services and other websites that promote reggae. Staying informed about the latest reggae music, requires knowledge and understanding about labels, promoters, artists, producers, and the relevant connections to acquire the music. Thus, as Resupekka maintains, in terms of getting hold of new music, sound systems function as a "bridge" between the Jamaican music industry and the local audience in Finland. Sound system performances or mixtapes are often the first source of new Jamaican music to local audiences.

However, sound systems do not only perform the most recent music from the Jamaican dance halls. Selector Andor (interview Korhonen 2008), from MPV sound system, explains how he as a performer has to balance between presenting the audience with new material – keeping the scene alive and interesting – and at the same time perform familiar, more widely recognised songs. Andor maintains that a performance is, in fact, normally more successful if the balance is more on the familiar material. The most recent hits are recognised and appreciated by and insider group, and performing material for them is important in maintaining and proving ones position within the peer community, but getting the general crowd moving requires music that is recognisable.

It is also important to play the most popular tunes in at the right time. As a sound system gradually builds up the performance, the audience will also at some point more actively participate in the creation of the event. According to Andor (Interview Korhonen 2008), the selector aims, through his choice of records, gently to build up the mood in an attempt to activate the audience‘s participation:

 “Usually you start the evening with easier, warm up tunes, for when people are arriving, and just slowly try to get them into the vibe. Then you start thinking about when it would be appropriate to change into something more upbeat. Because, if I have tune that I know will get people on the dance floor, I don’t want to play it too early, otherwise people will dance to that tune and then leave the dance floor when it’s over. You have to build up the mood slowly to the point when you know people are ready to party, and you learn that from experience. Otherwise you might waste good tunes on an empty dance floor.”

Today, when audiences have an easier access to Jamaican music online via services like YouTube, the sound systems' role as intermediaries in terms of where new music is heard has become less important. However, sound systems can substantially influence what becomes popular within the local scene. They can in different ways introduce their musical repertoire to audiences prior to the performances, and create a local demand for songs outside their performances. Resupekka (interview Lintusaari 2009) describes how sound systems are able to both advertise performances and make audiences familiar with their repertoire through mixtapes. According to Resupekka, audience members can during a performance come up to him and request songs that they have heard on his mixtape. A few sound systems in Finland also host reggae shows on local radio stations, where they can introduce the music they perform and place it in a broader context. Through these kind of activities, sound systems can influence a local taste and demand for the music.

These processes illustrate how not all music that is popular in Jamaica has the same resonance for audiences in Finland. The music is filtered through sound systems who perform songs that they notice work best in the Finnish context. As Chappa (interview Näppä 2010) explains, new dancehall songs coming out that are directly commenting social and political injustice in the Jamaican society, or overall have a more serious message, tend to be less appreciated in Finland, where dancehall is mostly seen as party oriented music. Chappa goes on to speculate that people in Finland perhaps tend to focus less on the lyrics, and that songs about serious issues are often also slower and a bit darker. The repertoire that audiences respond to differs also in different cities in Finland, as already established regarding the performance form. If a sound system has managed to make a song popular among their regular crowd, it will not necessarily get the same response in another city with a different crowd.

The locality of individual recordings can further be emphasised through in the exclusive dubplates that sound systems commission from reggae artists. In these recordings, typically, a reggae or dancehall singer will sing part of a known song of his or hers, to the same instrumental track but with new lyrics which praise, or “big up” the sound system who has commissioned the dubplate (Manuel & Marshall 2006: 454). The song “Recession” by New York based dancehall artist Beniton the Menace, which became an anthem for the local dancehall scene in Helsinki in 2008 illustrates this example. The song, which was not particularly popular in reggae communities in other parts of the world, became popular in Finland largely because Komposti sound system was promoting it. Apart from playing the record in their sets in various clubs, it was also frequently featured on their weekly radio show. Eventually, Komposti cut a dubplate of the record, which emphasised the song’s connection to Helsinki. In the dubplate version of the song, Beniton the Menace makes several references to Helsinki in the lyrics (Komposti Myspace):

“Komposti sound, it’s all about Helsinki. Reggae Sundays, Redrum, Dance pon the corner. What them say? Big up bad girl corner, Dancehall Terrorists [laugher]. Yeah yeah, Komposti Sound what’s going on? Finland, do you know what’s going on? But it doesn’t matter to me, Bommitommi, VG, Enrico, aye…”

Apart from naming Komposti sound system and its members (Bommitommi, VG and Enrico), the dubplate also references several local reggae events, such as Dance pon the Corner, Reggae Sundays, and the venue Redrum where the latter event takes place. Moreover, Beniton the Menace mentions Finnish dancehall dance crew Dancehall Terrorist. The lyrics above are taken from the introduction to the song before the actual verse starts, but similar references continue throughout the song. The dubplate is, thus, not only highlighting Komposti sound system as performers, but also drawing attention to important places and people within the reggae scene in Helsinki and therefore resonates well with the local fans. At the same time, as Asamoa (interview 2009) maintains, Beniton the Menace was not well-known outside the USA. The song became, through the active promotion of a sound system, an anthem of the local scene in Finland and especially in the city of Helsinki. This not only demonstrates that sound systems influence the musical tastes among listeners in Finland, it is at the same time an indication of a particular local character of the scene and its ability to create local hits.

Localising the dancehall continuum

Whereas the first parts in this paper have focused on *how* sound system performances contribute to the localisation reggae music in Finland, I will conclude this study by looking at *what* is localised through these practices. Here, I am not referring to the actual musical material that sound systems include in their performances, but ideas and values regarding reggae music that these performances endorse. Theoretically I draw here on Franco Fabbri’s (1982) genre theory, which I use to identify the formal musical, semiotic, behavioural and ideological genre rules that reggae music as dancehall culture imply. This is done in comparison to how reggae initially reached Finland through the global music industry and the genre discourse of rock in the 1970s.

When reggae first reached a broader audience outside Jamaica and its diaspora, it was through the success of Bob Marley and the Wailers in the mid 1970s. Before this, reggae music had spread with the Jamaican diaspora to North America and the UK, where the African Caribbean community embraced the Jamaican tradition of sound systems as an important cultural institution and entertainment form. When Jamaican records pierced the charts in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were considered novelty attractions, not taken seriously by the rock press and the mass audiences. As Jones acknowledges (1988: 60–61), Jamaican music faced “deep prejudices” by the rock press in the UK, where it was judged to be “boring” and “repetitive”. With its base in the sound system culture, as a singles music revolving around individual singers or vocal groups voicing backing tracks assembled by producers and their studio musicians, it did not fit the dominating rock form of the time. As Manuel and Marshall note (2006: 449) records were “produced less for mass public purchase than for use by sound systems”.

The music did not meet the genre rules of the global music industry, which Island Records and its manager Chris Blackwell realised as they set out to repackage reggae and promote the Wailers as a performing and album recording entity. The process was significant in the popularisation of reggae to a broader audience. The Wailers’ debut for Island Records, *Catch a Fire* (1973), became, as Davis (1983: 95) notes, “the first reggae album”, in the sense that it was produced and promoted in terms that were more familiar to a rock audience. This considerable shift from the Jamaican tradition, both in terms of style and sound, and the packaging and marketing of the music, lead eventually, as Stolzoff (2000: 97) notes to a split between the “local dancehall style, associated with DJs and sound system events, and the international style, associated with the Rastafarian-inspired reggae of artists like Bob Marley”.

This is also how reggae first reached a larger listener group in Finland (Hilamaa and Varjus (2002: 202). Eric Clapton’s cover version of Bob Marley and the Wailer’s “I Shot the Sheriff” in 1974, became an introduction to many Finns into the music and that same year a Finnish version of the tune, was released by the established Finnish recording artist Kirka. This song, *Taas Nousen Junaan,* has been listed as the first reggae recording made in Finland (Bruun et al. 1998: 291).

At the same time, as reggae reached a larger public outside Jamaica, the experience of reggae on the island did not change. On the contrary, sound systems became even more central to the creative processes within reggae and emphasis in the music was on rhythm and bass, which the international sound had downplayed. The DJ as a performing artist had become central to the culture, and the stylised form of toasting over records become central. As Veal (2007: 5) asserts, one of the main differences between the local Jamaican reggae and its international version was in how the audience consumed the music: “As opposed to attending the concerts staged abroad by musicians like Marley and Tosh, most Jamaicans enjoyed music in dancehalls and at outdoor dances at which recorded music was provided by [...] sound systems."

Different ways of engaging with the music provides different entries into the musical culture. As Frith (1998: 89) notes, liking a genre is about engaging in a taste community. The appeal of a music cannot be detached from an appeal of an ideology, and a set of meanings attached to the genre. Music offers people “access to a social world, a part in some sort of social narrative” (ibid. 90). Discussions on the Fi-reggae discussion forum indicate that the narrative through which listeners experience reggae varies. For part of the audience, contemporary styles of Jamaican dancehall reggae are not always well received, or even recognised as part of the reggae tradition. As Will Straw (1991: 373), declares in his influential essay on musical scenes, they often exist in a pressure between “contemporary musical practices, on the one hand, and the musical heritage which is seen to render this contemporary activity appropriate to a given context, on the other”. Let us consider the pressure between the popular conception of reggae and the dancehall reggae of sound systems in terms of genre rules, and examine what kind of values regarding reggae are localised through sound system performances in Finland.

One most apparent tensions between contemporary dancehall reggae and the internationally popularised reggae is that the former lacks the typical off-beat ostinato that has characterised reggae since its popularisation. A large part of the contemporary dancehall performed by sound systems, does not, in Fabbri’s (1982: 55) terms, meet the formal or technical genre rule of popular reggae. One user on the Fi-reggae (2009a) forum expresses this concern in his comment: “new dancehall doesn’t even sound like dancehall”. For the commentator, the dancehall genre has changed too much for it to even be considered dancehall anymore. As Fabbri (1982: 59) notes, the relative significance of different rules vary from genre to genre. For the reggae fan who enjoys the laid back off-beat reggae groove, the formal structure of the music has a priority over other genre rules, although the ideological value (ibid. 70) associated with reggae from the roots period is also of importance.

Regarding semiotic rules, there are clearly identifiable differences, and what could even be defined as misunderstandings, in the two genre categorisations I have identified. As Fabbri (ibid. 56) defines semiotic genre rules, they relate to how truth and sincerity are indicated musically – or as Frith (1998: 91) suggests, how different genres read singers as protagonists of their songs. Reggae as dancehall culture has different conventions regarding lyrical realism compared to the roots era of reggae. Sexually explicit lyrics, which dancehall fans celebrate and roots fans condemn (Fi-reggae 2009a), can be explained by a different perception of lyrical realism. One reason to why many reggae fans are not receptive towards many contemporary dancehall lyrics is because they are approached with the same sincerety as that of a rastafarian singer talking about the oppression of Babylon. Listener who perceives the “slackness” (Stolzoff 2000: 12) lyrics in the context of the dancehall session, identify “playfulness and humor” in the text as one writer expresses it online (Fi-reggae 2009a)[[2]](#endnote-2).

The most important distinction between these genre categories can however be found in what I would define as the ontological character of the music. This can be understood as a combination of Fabbri’s (1982) behavioral and social genre rules, and relates to what is perceived as the main object of critical attention. In a discussion thread on the Fi-reggae website, a writer under the pseudonym Valtterideclares to have lost hope in reggae and maintains that he has not heard any “good reggae” lately (Fi-reggae 2009b). Consequently, he appeals to the online community to give him suggestions for tunes or artists that might reignite his passion for the music. His peers online are quick to react and several voices express the same concern, while others maintain a more positive position towards new currents within reggae. One user recommends him to visit sound system sessions. While the reply may simply imply that one can hear a selection of good songs at a sound system session, it also articulates the position that sound system sessions should be regarded as the main forum for reggae music. Valtteri, however dismisses this response (Fi-reggae 2009c):

“I rather enjoy my recorded music in an environment where you can hear what kind of soundscape the engineer has created on the record, preferably also without drunkards and other disturbances you might have in a bar.”

By maintaining that he prefers to enjoy the music in an isolated environment, associating records to a domestic, private listening, indicates a clear distinction to the ontology of music in sound system culture. Here, the sound system perfomance, as discussed earlier in this paper, is considered the primary locus for the genre, often regardless of the formal genre rules of the music being performed. At the time I was conducting my interviews, most sound systems in Finland performed several different forms of Jamaican dance hall derived music. According to selector Andor (Interview 2008), a typical event would start off with roots reggae, changing towards the end of the night to more contemporary electronic dancehall, and often also including a selection of fast tempo ska or other early forms of reggae. To Andor, this type of performance seemed natural and the way sound systems should perform, as the listener can experience the “whole package” – referring to dance hall derived styles.

It could thus be argued, that sound systems localise reggae as what I would define as the dancehall continuum. With a musical continuum, I am here referring to how it has been used by Simon Reynolds (2009) in his description of the evolution of Brittish dance music from the end of the 1980s, identifying the same sociocultural context of different musical styles. In Fabbri’s terms this would suggest that the different styles of music that sound systems perform share social and behavioral rules, but the formal and technical form of the music evolves throughout time. This approach would further suggest that the popular roots reggae would in fact be a “sub-genre” (Fabbri: 1982: 53) of the dancehall continuum, whereas dancehall normally is understood as a sub-genre of reggae. For the dancehall fan, the constantly changing sound of the Jamaican dance halls, the evolution of the music, is part of the charm of the music. In Fabbri’s (ibid. 61) terms the constant transgression keeps to music interesting to the listener who never manages to completely comprehend the codification of the genre.

The narrative that the reggae sound system audience participates in, is also created locally. Returning to storytelling theory, as Walter Benjamin (1968: 87) suggests, a “storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale”. The task for sound systems is, thus, not only to convey a story, but also to create a context for it. As we have seen, sound systems do not simply inform audiences about the Jamaican music being reproduced, but perform the music as part of the prevailing atmosphere which they create together with the audience. Similarly, Bauman (1986: 5) suggests that narratives are not to be viewed as icons of occurred experiences. On the contrary, a narrative can be seen to create the proceedings it refers to – whether they have occurred or not. According to Bauman “events are not the external raw materials out of which narratives are constructed, but rather the reverse: Events are abstractions from narrative”.

In other words, sound systems themselves create a narrative, a local understanding about the dancehall culture they seek to convey. The performance is not about representing a replication of Jamaican dancehall culture as such or providing the listeners an entry into that culture, but about presenting the audience with an abstraction or an idea about the intermediated culture and creating a unique narrative about it on location.

Conclusion

This study has discussed how certain aspects in the performance practices associated with sound systems contribute to the localisation of reggae music in Finland. I have studied the activities of local Finnish sound systems and especially acknowledged the role of the MC and theorised the performance as an act of storytelling where the performers convey the folklore of Jamaican dancehall culture in Finland. The study shows how the performance depends on the audience understanding of the performance form and, I have shown how a local understanding of reggae music is negotiated between the performers and their audience. Another important link between the local setting and the artists heard on the records, are the special dubplate recordings. These recordings create conceptual and concrete links between the locality of the performance and the culture in Jamaica.

This study has shown how through these processes particular values regarding reggae as a genre are localised. I have defined this understanding of reggae as the dancehall continuum, which views the culture of the Jamaican dance halls as an evolving musical culture, linking different musical styles together through their relation to the sound system performance. Compared to how reggae was initially popularised outside Jamaica and its diaspora, through the global music industry, the grass roots localisation of reggae through sound system performances can be considered to have a more profound and holistic impact on the local scene. It engages the local audience to participate in the creation of a local narrative about dancehall culture. These processes also illustrates how not all music that is popular in Jamaica has the same resonance for audiences in Finland. The music is filtered through sound systems who create their own interpretation and together with local audience negotiate the sound of the local scene.

This study has focused on how the localisation process foremost from the performers perspective, and leaves several threads in the adaptation of dancehall culture in Finland still to be explored. Since the time of my interviews, reggae has continued to grow as a genre in Finland, as the first number one selling reggae artist has emerged as a popular performer. Reggae has increasingly spread outside the sound system circuit and dancehall can be heard in a number of not directly reggae oriented clubs. Moreover, dancing has become an important part of the dancehall scene in Finland, where several dance crews have emerged and dancehall can now be found as part of the curriculum of several dance schools in Helsinki. This study provides an entry into understanding the localisation process, and signals their importance in the localisation and globalisation of reggae music.

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1. Henriques also identifies championing as one of the MC’s tasks, but he relates this feature specifically to soundclashes, which I am not concerned with in this study. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The sexual explicity in dancehall lyrics and culture overall requires a whole discussion on its own, which I within the limits of this paper will not get into. For a debate around this issue see Stolzoff (2000) and Cooper (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)