Organised Sound (2025), 1–9
doi:10.1017/S1355771825000032

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Article

Bridging Gaps in Black Music Research: A conversation on experimental sound by the BMRU

Hussein Boon, Chris Christodoulou, Julia Toppin and Mykaell Riley
Westminster School of Arts, University of Westminster, UK

Abstract

This article is a discussion with supporting commentary, exploring the complex interplay and role of experimentation in various British Black music genres. We consider these as rich sources of cultural production, what we term the 'Black Box'. As part of this Black Box discussion, we consider the researcher's role in studying cultural production at global, national, regional and community levels. We critique the tendency of Western markets to both commodify and homogenise as well as raise concerns about perpetuating forms of neo-colonialism, especially with the increased importance of Africa, particularly styles such as afrobeats. Our discussion highlights the paradox of late corporate capitalism's short-term focus, and we consider whether there is potential for a technological infrastructure to create genuine cultural and economic growth, that also challenges Eurocentric and Anglo-American dominance of the music industry. Within this flux, the importance of experimentation and the emergence of micro-genres facilitated by the internet advances a global dispersal of new sounds. However, this diversity is shadowed by the continued relevance of major label structures and the role of streaming platforms in controlling and mediating artist–fan relationships.

(Received 28 May 2024; revised 16 January 2025; accepted 16 January 2025)

1. Introduction

The following text is based on a conversation between four academics, Dr Mykaell Riley, Julia Toppin, Dr Chris Christodoulou and Hussein Boon, who are all based at the University of Westminster and members of the Black Music Research Unit (BMRU; BMRU, n.d.). Our decision to write a paper through dialogue for this issue can be thought of as an experimental approach. In doing so, it enabled us to tackle themes of historically underrepresented groups as a means to address the significant knowledge gap within the field of music, including experimental sound.

Instigated by Julia's discussion on multiple landings, we explore potential research crossovers through Stuart Hall's concept of jouissance, which highlights the often underestimated joy in theory (Hall 2021: 342). Our focus is on the interplay of experimental innovation and audience engagement, particularly in clubs, highlighting the joy and playfulness inherent in Black British music genres that enrich the British and global music scene. This approach emphasises the need for more inclusive and nuanced understandings of diverse identities in experimental music and academic research.

2. Preliminary

Four themes from our broad-ranging discussion will be touched on in this article. The first is the notion of experimental, experimentalism and sonic practices. A key point is the distinction between an artist's direct use of terms such as 'experimental' and those ascribed by others such as critics, academics and listeners. To illustrate this, we draw from Dennis Bovell's interview for the AHRC research project Bass Culture (Bovell 2017).

The second theme is one Mykaell Riley refers to as the 'Black Box'. The Black Box is a metaphor for systems or processes that are not fully understood or transparent. In Black music, it signifies the hidden aspects of its creation, distribution and consumption, where the cultural contributions of Black artists often go unrecognised due to systemic biases. In the context of Black British music history, it highlights the underexplored and undervalued elements caused by a lack of resources and documentation. This metaphor counters what is referred to as 'deficit-informed research' (Solórzano and Yosso 2002: 26).

The theme explores Africa's role in revitalising Western markets and technologies, which Julia terms the African Turn (aka colonialism 3.0). This topic extends beyond music into areas such as commerce, intellectual property and colonisation by stealth undertaken by major record labels, informed by diversity and Black Lives Matter. We also discuss the potential of using multiple landings as a research method, with participants reflecting on their own practices and experiences throughout.

As part of our preparation for this discussion, our fourth point is drawn from the Bass Culture Archive and concerns Paul Gilroy's observation of the making of an archive. He said, 'I think it's up to us to make a rich archive which is right in all the details so that we can, in a sense, struggle against that' (Gilroy 2017). Gilroy emphasises the importance of creating a collection of musical, cultural and sociological accounts to challenge dominant narratives marginalising the contributions of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-diasporic cultures to Britain. This archive would help

Corresponding author: Hussein Boon; Email: h.boon@westminster.ac.uk
Cite this article: Boon H, Christodoulou C, Toppin J, Riley M. (2025). Bridging Gaps in Black Music Research: A conversation on experimental sound by the BMRU. *Organised Sound*, 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771825000032

reposition Black British music as British history and support research projects focusing on this cultural heritage.

3. On Experimentalism and Experimental Sound Practices

Hussein Boon (HB): The subject is about experimentalism, and, earlier, you were talking about invisibility. So are we addressing a single form of experimentalism or different modes of experimentalism that might be different between different people, not necessarily just based around ethnicity or race or differences around gender, perhaps differences in terms of how one sees what one does. So we're not necessarily looking at a single or mono idea of experimentalism. It's one of the things that we talked about earlier, just to backtrack, that I find it quite difficult to find the use of the word 'experimental' as a deliberate use of the term, therefore difficult to be located in the various interviews in the Bass Culture archives of all these different practitioners. So would you like to go back over that, that little bit of our pre-conversation in terms of your thoughts behind the direct use of experimental as opposed to the assumption of it.

Chris Christodoulou (CC): For me, if we're looking to frame 'experimental' in terms of cultural discourse and notions of ethnicity, we can see how the discourses of European art music and high culture are often placed onto Black artists and music, usually by white and middle-class music journalists and critics for whom those discourses are more natural and immediate. It's also about trying to make something 'different', or directly connected to the body, dance, etc., more 'respectable' through a process of cerebralisation. From an assumption of the binary of blackness equating to the body, affect, sensuality etc., and whiteness correlating with the mind, intelligence, science, etc., the term 'experimental' can sometimes be a way to domesticate musical difference and the sensual, which is about making the coordinates of Black Atlantic music more respectable to white and middle-class music consumers (Christodoulou 2020: 14). So, you then have to ask whether using terminology like 'experimental' is valuable in the first place.

From a jungle drum and bass perspective, the experimentation came from pushing some aspects of studio technology to its extremes – the speed or choppiness of the time-stretched breakbeats, the griminess or heaviness of the bass, for example. You could look at that process being experimental due to its 'hardcore' focus. But it wasn't experimentation for the sake of it. It had a focus based on the priorities of working-class inner-city kids wanting to squeeze as much pleasure as possible out of their increasingly uncertain and precarious lives. I don't get a sense of a Eurocentric, monocultural discourse of experimentation being evident or used within the context of people in the studio, making early rave music, jungle, etc.

So, 'experimental' comes from a cultural space that is not necessarily the space within which the intentionality of the people producing these sounds are fitting into. What you find later on is perhaps some of those artists understanding that taking on the position of being an experimental artist is a kind of way to frame your own activities within that of the 'auteur'. The kind of artist figure working within this tradition of the visual arts and again, fitting into this discourse of high culture because it's viable professionally, commercially, etc.

We were talking earlier about how representations of race and ethnicity were linked to a semiotics of the body. When you're at a club or rave at 3 a.m. and listening to an amazing, funky break and a super heavy bass line, this notion of language and your understanding of language becomes unclear. The whole idea of 'experimental' breaks down in that kind of space.

We'll take your use of the term 'experimental', which we can impart to an artist or a piece of music, but what do we mean by that? And is it valuable to the audience the framework within which that music was originally produced and intended for? And so I don't think the cultural use of that terminology is that useful for musicians. But it may be useful for people wanting to ascribe their own cultural values as a listener to certain kinds of music in the form of 'avant-garde' or 'experimental'.

HB: The question this leads to is whether this is more exploration with an experimental twist rather than necessarily making a declaration that 'I am an experimental artist' or 'this is experimental music'.

CC: It's a really useful point to be starting from. But I think we have to look at the limits of that term as well. The way that 'experimental' within any kind of artistic and creative framework, can be seen as useful, is to really understand intentionality. For whom is it produced? If we're talking about the politics of cultural acceptance, and credibility, as a starting point, I think that can be a useful term. But my feeling is that those who are consciously embracing that term should understand the implications of doing so. Whether that's artistically or culturally, 'experimentation' becomes associated with the idea of innovation, which is problematic in lots of ways. This idea of the perpetually new aligns with problematic notions of the auteur, the individual artistic genius, the idea of hierarchies based on newness for the sake of newness.

HB: But this is also ideas of fashionability, what's in, what's the mode right now. It brings me to Boris Groys point on the new, that fashion becomes the main driver of this desire for the new (Groys 2014: 50), even if this new is retro (Reynolds 2011).

CC: Which also suggests a kind of exhaustion of that sort of discourse and terminology, the self-perpetuating paradox of the new, that it is cyclical. We now have the endless repetition of the past and then imparting that to the idea of experimentation and innovation.

HB: And we face similar things with AI, right?

CC: For me, this is not a problem if we understand the notion of newness not as a sort of perpetual progression or a kind of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771825000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hinterland of endless innovation, but as a discourse that itself can be questioned, can be reframed and reconfigured.

HB: So to me, being a musician, when I experiment, I usually think about getting new sets of sounds or processes together to explore how they can be put together, potentially into ways that can be constructed into finished or semi-finished pieces or performable things (Boon 2021, 2022). But it's not necessarily the outcome of saying, today I'm going to experiment. It is finding lots of different ways of cracking the same kind of nut. Related to this idea of the experimental, or the use of the direct attribution of experimenting, here's something from Dennis Bovell in the Bass Culture archive:

> my intention was to make a rifle of tunes with that drum beat because I discovered that how the tilt of what was famous in reggae happened was by changing the drum beat. If the drum beat changed then it was a whole new thing and when Sly Dunbar had come with this [unclear] and four to the floor [humming a beat] you know as opposed to the one drop thing it was suddenly mad, it was disco kind of hammering it out. I was quite jealous of that. I wanted to invent a drum beat that would steal the limelight. So I worked it out and then I went to find a drummer who could play it because I didn't see myself as being able to play it but once I'd invented it I needed a person who played drums and of all the people that I kind of showed it to, the drummers that I showed it to 'what do you think about this?' Drummie Zeb from Aswad was the person to go 'yes I'll play that'. (Bovell 2017)

HB: This is around the time of Silly Games and they had to work out how to physically perform this sort of new idea in the studio. Would this be classed as experimental? Experimentalism? Is it more invention?

CC: Well, I would frame that in the context of Dennis Bovell's own musical framework – is that experimentation? Is that just about making a statement or just wanting to produce quite complex rhythmic patterns that only a small number of people will be able to play? So that is not necessarily a statement that normalises or fetishises the idea of experimentation. But it does suggest the importance and value of meaning.

Julia Toppin joined our discussion, and we revisited the idea of the experimental, this time within a more under-explored or recognised aspect. The question we sought to explore was the role of clubs, DJs and audiences when considered within the framework of experimentalism.

HB: Something we haven't really discussed yet is the role of clubs. Are clubs places of experimentalism or experimentation?

Julia Toppin (JT): Absolutely.

HB: Rather than necessarily just putting it in terms of an artist and groups of artists, what would you say?

JT: You wouldn't have a dance scene without clubs. So they are essential. That's the thing. Like with electronic dance music, not just jungle and drum and bass, but also house and techno. We have deified these DJs and some MCs, when we should be deifying the ravers. Without the ravers, there is no scene. I can remember the first time I heard 'Mr. Kirk's Nightmare' (4 Hero 1995), you're in the club and wondering what is this? Then you are running around to Red Records (British Record Shop Archive, n.d.); you are running around asking, 'What's that track? I heard it in the club.' You would literally have to wait weeks before you even heard it on pirate radio, let alone find it in the records shops. That whole excitement of always hearing new music, trying to find who the track was by and what it was called. Singing it to the record shop staff. Sounding ridiculous. It is almost the antithesis of what clubbing is now, where many DJs are sent tracks on promo and are not experimenting at all. Just playing the most popular tunes. What one of my research participants called 'playing top ten'.

CC: People are comfortable with what they know, and I think the sense of familiarity gives a level of comfort that wasn't necessarily part of the discourse in the nineties.

JT: Yes, we just wanted to hear good music.

CC: Julia is absolutely right. High culture discourse tends to support a kind of cultural hierarchy of experimentation defined by individuals in studios working in isolation. But one of the key drivers of experimentation, especially in relation to electronic dance music, is the collective need for new sonic experiences that address the body directly, but also the idea of the social body. That is a driver of experimentation within the studio space, the dancers – the producers aren't necessarily thinking about experimentation in that sort of high culture sense. They just want experimentation in the context of, 'how are we going to create impact on the dance floor?' 'What do we need to make this sort of bassline?'

JT: Yes. What will the crowd like? Where do we put the drop? What will it sound like if I push this technology to the limits of what it can do?

CC: Totally. And that's what's often avoided in that discourse around experimentation. The concept of Eurocentric white music culture and the displacement of crowds, as somehow experimentation can't come from collective experiences but comes from these genius individuals, which is also linked to phallocentric masculinity. The romantic modernist idea of the genius individual. So I think what you say about crowds and collective experiences and clubs and spaces are where experimentation is propelled and driven, and it's a really important one.

JT: What was happening in Blue Note was happening in clubs across the country. You know, people were getting their dubplates cut, their temporary acetates, they were making a track from Monday to Thursday, going to the cutting house on Friday, cutting their dubs. Going to multiple clubs on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Playing these tracks, seeing if they worked. Some worked, some didn't. We don't remember all the tracks that didn't erupt on the dance floor.

HB: So that's trial and error in the making process.

CC: And the everydayness of what you describe is really important as well. But I think The Blue Note is an

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771825000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interesting example. The first time I went to The Blue Note, and it probably says a lot about me, I was went expecting to see Gilles Peterson, but I got the night wrong, so I ended up going to Metalheadz Sunday Sessions for the first time. Metalheadz is still going, and that drum and bass discourse, significantly, you can level at Metalheadz. And they were amazing nights at The Blue Note. But what's interesting is The Blue Note was a jazz venue. I think a level of that romanticisation, that fetishisation of Metalheadz comes from the association with jazz as high culture, with luminaries from the jazz scene coming into the genre, like jazz vocalist Cleveland Watkiss.

HB: So the question, still in this area of experimental, is the [role of the] DJ. Is the work of the DJ also experimental?

CC: Brian Eno talked about the DJ as a kind of curator, rather than someone who just plays records. The DJ sits on that boundary between somebody who is a consumer, someone who buys music, producing a sort of self-curated archive, who is also a performer of music and, a quite important cultural figure in some cases (Rietveld 2016: 132). Somebody like Norman Jay, he's never mixed a record in his life, but a whole music culture developed around him, which points to the importance of how he sequenced his tracks and how he fitted them together. This is what was meaningful to people. How you think about the DJ, their significance or where DJing fits within the cultural hierarchy, and the extent to which cultural hierarchies are important or not is are they just consumers playing music for crowds, or are they these important cultural gatekeepers who do interesting creative things? How they segue, how they mix … There are long mixes, while in hip hop, DJs do the cutting and scratching thing. If you're talking about a DJ as a sort of figure of experimentation, if you want to see the DJ within that context, I think absolutely they should be thought of like that.

JT: If we look at the DJ performance in music scenes as an experiment then we could view the sequencing of tracks as the hypothesis, the dance floor in the club as the method and the audience of participants (ravers) as the variable. The challenge comes when DJs commodify their cultural and social capital to exchange their value for economic capital. Capitalism always demands more which is where the goal of generating more capital by appealing to the mainstream market can be prohibitive of experimentation.[1]

4. The Black Box

The Black Box follows an earlier discussion among us about Africa, sparked by the success of artist Tyla. This led to a conversation on challenges faced by certain music styles in the UK, such as RnB, and artists such as Elisha La'Verne,[2] who found success in Japan but not at home. The text includes more background on Mykaell Riley's metaphor of the Black Box, followed by two complementary discussion sections.

4.1. Background to the Black Box metaphor

I [Mykaell Riley] use the concept of the 'Black Box' to refer to the idea of complex systems or processes that are not fully understood or transparent, yet that produce recognisable and influential outcomes. When applied to Black music, this concept can involve examining how Black musical traditions and practices are transmitted, transformed and integrated into broader cultural contexts without always fully comprehending the intricate social, historical and cultural dynamics at play. The metaphor entails three areas for consideration:

- Opaque Processes: the mechanisms through which Black music influences mainstream genres are often not fully acknowledged. Innovations by Black artists are frequently adopted and commercialised without proper credit or compensation.
- Lack of Visibility: the stories, struggles and achievements of Black musicians are not adequately documented or celebrated in mainstream media and cultural institutions.
- Cultural Appropriation: mainstream artists and industries exploit Black music styles, stripping them of their original context and meaning, while profiting disproportionately compared to the original creators.

As examples of how this could be put into action, [music] researchers might look at how Black British music is adopted and adapted by various cultures and communities, sometimes losing its original context or meaning in the process. This could involve studying the ways Black British music has influenced popular music genres, how it has been commercialised, and how it has retained or lost its cultural significance despite these changes. This research would also acknowledge the public arena, where there is an army of professionals and community individuals addressing these issues. Their aim is to open the 'Black Box', to allow the rich history and ongoing contributions of Black British music to be more visible and valued within the broader cultural narrative. The work of the BMRU, therefore, is critical to opening the Black Box. We are exploring how to embed Black British music history secondary school curricula and sharing this information at educational conferences. We have devised three undergraduate modules at each level to impart a body of knowledge to the next generation of music creatives. We have initiated a petition for a permanent exhibition documenting Black British music's contribution to culture and the economy. Overall, our efforts represent effective methods for promoting and preserving this rich musical heritage.

4.2. Complementary discussions

HB: So, the question we get to is what Mykaell calls the 'Black Box'. The idea is that much of the developments in musical styles and innovations and whatever else that drive economies of music interest emerge from some form of Black music-making, Black cultural activities. Everything

[1]Paul Gilroy identifies this challenge as sorting 'out categories of marketing and selling the music as a form of commodity from the categories that we want to use as interpretive devices or critical devices to make sense of the life of music in the world' (Gilroy 2017: n.p.).

[2]Hussein worked with Elisha as a songwriter, guitarist and musical director. Demo tracks and early singles were recorded at Maxi Priest's studio, Dugout, which was in the back garden of a house in Lewisham.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771825000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comes out of this Black Box. Some of the things that we haven't discussed yet are the roles of perennial musical styles like dub or the idea of bass music in general.

JT: The Black Box concept is really interesting.

HB: Well, the thing is, we want to disentangle some of that or at least discuss them, and yeah, pay homage to the fact and recognise that there is a lot of culture and economy that comes out of this.

JT: I understand exactly what Mykaell is talking about. This Black Box concept is fascinating, especially in the British context. As the UK music industry personnel are not interested in the concept due to the repercussions of admitting the extreme level of extraction without due and appropriate compensation. All this amazing, innovative, catchy Black music comes out of this Black Box and is then circulated, appropriated, pastiche, homage. Or is it just commercialised and then extracted?

For example, UK RnB will never be truly as commercially successful as it could be because the UK music industry siphons off the best talent for its industrial popular music complex. Deliberately refusing to support the genre or help build an infrastructure so it can stand independently on its own. There are two reasons for this. One is racism. Britain is an unforgivably racist country where it is hard coded into every institution to attempt to structurally deny Black people the equality of opportunity. The industry likes the music and the culture,[3] but they don't want the people to have any independence, agency, or long-term wealth. The second is that if they allow Black music genres and, by extension, Black artists to thrive independently, who is going to create all the great pop music, and where are they going to get their ideas from?

Mykaell's Black Box concept is very polite. Monique Charles would say, 'take the culture, leave the people dem' (Charles 2016).[4] For example, jungle, drum and bass got commercially white-washed (Toppin 2023: 89–90). They were not successful with garage, so they just starved it out of existence by not supporting it. Jungle and garage were semiotically linked with blackness and criminality. The media would only support this narrative and not the music. Drum and bass is still successful because they discursively extracted all of the blackness out of it. The late 1990s discourse was we're not doing jungle anymore, we've got this drum and bass thing. It's more sophisticated. It's more intelligent. It's more technological. It's better. Whereas in truth it was just different and they built an infrastructure around it that could be more easily controlled. Genres like dub and reggae stay mostly in the Black Box due to their international infrastructures that do not require support or interest from UK major labels.

CC: Mykaell's point about the enacting of opaque processes to neutralise or obfuscate Black musical influence in the development of a mainstream genre seems especially pertinent to the tension that exists between 'jungle' and 'drum and bass' as terms that are sometimes interchangeably used to describe the emergent fast bass and breakbeat-driven electronic dance music popular at UK inner city clubs and raves in the 1990s. First, I think it is important to acknowledge that the impulse to name and categorise formal and stylistic codes and conventions into genres has a social function that can help to identify cultural, geographic, class, racial, or generational groups active in performing, recording and disseminating a discrete set of musical conventions. If Franco Fabbri defines genre as a set of 'musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules' (Fabbri [1981] 2004: 7), then the process of naming a genre by groups with the sufficient musical and cultural capital to formulate these social rules can make visible previously hidden, suppressed, or novel creative practices. However, underlying drives behind this impulse from an industry perspective may come from the profiteering needs of record and music management companies or platforms, and sometimes music critics and journalists, who may use this naming process to wrestle cultural power and economic ownership over an emergent style or subgenre or at least acquire a sense of influence over its formation. To this extent, Simon Frith's point about genres being intrinsic to the mechanisms of the music industry highlights their value as 'a way of defining music in its market, or . . . the market in its music' (Frith 1998: 76).

I substantially agree with Julia when she says that the rebranding of 'jungle' as 'drum and bass' was an ethnocentric attempt to recontextualise the genre along the semiotic lines of 'white' intelligence and learned technique over 'Black' criminality and corporeality. However, I would deviate from any essentialist narrative of the supposedly white middle-class takeover of a Black working-class style. The British post-colonial framework out of which jungle emerges intersects race and class to such an extent that white, working-class DJs and producers like Hype and Dillinja were often those making and playing music that articulated the most Afrocentric and African-Caribbean elements; in other words, white junglists were often playing and producing the 'blackest' music in the genre. Similarly, the discourse of 'intelligence' underpinning the jungle's reframing beyond the physicality of the dancefloor and towards the home-listening album market – and by implication, identified the tracks that engaged the body through the prioritisation of beats and bass as 'unintelligent' – was often promoted by Black artists themselves in an attempt to broaden the creative potentialities of the music, and perhaps achieve a sense of professional stability in an albeit white-dominated wider music industry. A further complication of the Black jungle/white drum and bass binary is that, as Michael Veal identifies, the term 'drum and bass' is rooted in Jamaican sound system culture and was first used in the early 1970s to define the main features of reggae's stripped-down and studio-centred offshoot, dub (Veal 2007: 57). So, rather than seeing the emergence of drum and bass as the neutralisation of jungle's inherent blackness, it could be understood as the conscious attempt to avoid the racial essentialism that had formed around the music's mainstreaming in the mid-1990s, retaining its post-colonial and 'underground' qualities through a considerable process of experimentation and thereby avoiding the stifling commercialisation to which Black music often succumbs.

5. The African Turn

HB: I suppose what we are trying to understand here, in everything that we've been discussing, it's this idea of gaps, and one gap that we've referred to ever so briefly is the influence, in terms of music, coming from Africa in the

[3]Simon Jones highlights this as 'periodic raiding' (Jones 1993: 105)

[4]This is a point that Perry A. Hall raises as a means to avoid 'engaging or embracing the human reality' (Hall 1997: 33), while simultaneously accessing the musical culture.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771825000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

summary that you gave on commercial music at the moment in terms of afrobeats and so on. So this becomes the new focus, where new ideas come from for commercialism and exploitation, but also experimentalism, experimentation and innovation. Africa is a large continent, but how do you see these kinds of innovations? Is it a question of the West being a bit more bankrupt, exhausted of ideas and going somewhere else to pick up some new things and bring them together? Is it a desire on behalf of artists from Africa to actually become more global and achieve a global status? Is it a mix of both, or none of the above?

JT: The African turn. Another thing I find fascinating. I write about Jungle. I teach, lecture and therefore analyse music business. When the UK music industry (Radcliffe 2020) launched the Afrobeats chart, I was like, what? You've got a chart? For Afrobeats? Drum and Bass way is bigger than Afrobeats. Where's the Drum and Bass chart? However again, you have a discourse. You have double digit growth in African music economies set to continue into the medium to long term because the proliferation of broadband communication technology has not fully penetrated all the municipalities. So you have got corporate music and entertainment companies in the West whose profits are collapsing in a super-saturated marketplace. All these big entities like Spotify never making a profit, which is ridiculous. The majors cutting staff due to future AI profitability nightmares. Meanwhile, everybody, all the majors and tech companies, have been investing in Africa for at least the last five years because it's the last chance to make money in this advanced stage of Western capitalism. They can't make any real money in China because the Chinese government will not let anyone in. They've already rinsed out Australia, and they have partnerships there. What is left? They can't have America because America has their own extraction going on. Half of them are American companies anyway. So the only place that is left and ripe for exploitation in terms of almost any resource is Africa because it's been undeveloped for decades due to colonialism.

So the danger for Africa, again, because it's just going to be colonialism 3.0 or neocolonialism, is they [major labels] want to go in and invest, but really put in their infrastructure. Make sure they are getting a slice of whatever's going on there. And that is why there has been this global push of afrobeats, amapiano, afro pop. We know that there is a difference between afrobeat, originated by Fela Kuti, and afrobeats, this new genre. However, we also know that afrobeats takes influence from origins in highlife, Juju and many other African music genres. There is a wealth of untapped talent in the 54 countries in Africa. With many acts already known in their home territories.

So with streaming, you get someone like Tyla, who, with one song, became a global pop sensation. This song banged, right. So naturally, it went viral. That's great. However, Tyla and her team were ready. This is very interesting as a lot of the UK acts that go viral are not ready. You can tell that they have not had much artist development. Tyla has clearly been developed. The album was ready to go. She's gone on tour. She's doing phenomenally well. So I think that that's one part of it. The majors and tech companies need a slice of the African market to keep generating profits for their stakeholders.

You've got these young people on the ground creating the Kenyan Alt New Wave with gengetone, alternative RnB, alternative drill. Drill in Kenya is cheerful. None of the shanks, suits and shovels vernacular of UK Drill. They rap about positive things, and I think that's fascinating. So there's all these different genres and this creative explosion of music for different reasons.

Like you said, Chris, it's not just one narrative. That's why Africa just looks so interesting. And everybody wants a piece of Africa right now.

HB: Yes, in more ways than one.

JT: However, Africa has issues in terms of its copyright infrastructure. Until it gets that sorted out, and, basically, the African countries need to be the ones to sort it out to ensure the ownership stays within their borders.[5] However, until the copyright gets sorted out, there will not be any economic freedom for the musicians there because that is where the money comes from.

CC: I think that's also part of the impulse of the Western record companies going to Africa, also, is because there is the shakiness of IP frameworks.

JT: There's a lot of extraction happening over there.

CC: So what I would look at in terms of you having that longer-term view, is what are the longer-term possibilities for reversing what is currently a kind of neo-colonialism? Africa's yet to be rinsed in that respect. And so, the West, having exhausted its other markets in terms of perceived restrictions, limitations, and subscriptions, is using afrobeat as a way to corporatise very diverse forms of music and ideas. Most new afrobeat has very little to do with that history of highlife, Femi and Fela. There is that interesting tension, that is the thing about corporate late capitalism, that it is incapable of thinking in the longer term. It's incredibly powerful, it's entered into [our] lives in every sort of material way. But what it can't do is the longer term. And that's where the limited hope actually is. With that economic investment, perhaps that allows those industries to emerge from within the African context, 20 or 30 years down the line. Does the late capitalist model allow for this kind of longer-term investment? Does it provide momentum for a dismantling of the sort of Eurocentric Anglo-American infrastructure that still dominates the music industry? I'm not sure.

6. Multiple Landings as Jouissance?

HB: So given this type of business infrastructure, the kind that gets parachuted in and then sort of colonises, what does that mean for ideas of experimental and experimentalism, does it have an impact? Do people just carry on regardless and go, well, whatever's in place, it doesn't really matter because I'm just going to carry on doing?

JT: For me, I see experimentation as outlined by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993).[6] Every generation wants to

[5]One example is milton and Mano's discussion of communication rights within an African context by exploring 'what facilitates and constrains' their introduction rather than their overall feasibility for the continent (milton and Mano 2022: 34).

[6]Julia expanded on this point later, saying, 'For Bourdieu and Johnson (1993) in the restricted field of production that is the culture industries, periodically new modes of creative expression are formed and assert themselves in positions of difference to current

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771825000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have their own sound. So they experiment with what has gone before, and elements of that come from their surroundings, and they make what's theirs. We are in this era where we have subgenres of subgenres of subgenres. Gen Z and microgenres. They are very peculiar, an interesting generation because of the internet, they can hear everything. They're taking influences from everywhere and every era, they are creating new sounds. I see that as experimentation. It's about what lands, isn't it?

Microgenre is a great way of saying it because lots of different things land because you've got this global audience now. You can have lots of things simultaneously landing. And people in that group have no idea that those people over there exist. And I think that's good. But also within this, we have these structures where this ideology, which has been learnt over time, not just by the Black working class but also the white working class, that you can't be independent of these major label structures. But it is great out there if you want to be independent. There are some really successful Black event brands like No Signal, Recess and DLT, who are filling 10,000-capacity venues. They have built their mailing lists over time. The key thing is that it doesn't matter what group it is, whether Black, white, Asian. If people are going to be independent, they just need to have the foresight to build their mailing list and stay independent. It's that lure of thinking that the grass is greener on the major label side.

HB: Most big bands are realising and have woken up to the fact that all of these platforms, whether it's Spotify for example, do not provide [direct] access to the fans. No access to listeners, which means you have to build that old traditional thing of the mailing list, in another place where you have ownership, where it is accessible and that opens up as a portable text document that can never be destroyed by that platform. But the problem is, that as much as the platform discourse is that they are enabling artists and supporting artistic democracy, the listeners are only accessed via the companies. The listeners are the platform's customers, but they are fans of your music. The reality is that platforms are not going to let you directly access those fans. You have to find another way of building.[7] Therefore, off-platform activities become important.

CC: Varoufakis talks about technofeudalism.[8] We're in an age of cloud capitalism, so we're no longer in an age of pure capitalism. Now, the problem with Spotify and other platforms is they own the virtual spaces for music, which are now the main spaces of economic and cultural transmission. But I know that you're [gesturing to Julia] positive about AI and I think that's amazing. I hope you're right.

JT: It's fantastic but it's also very dangerous. It is replicated many of society's inequal power structures.

CC: Yeah. But what I'm saying is you have knowledge that I don't. I hope your version is the one that allows a kind of usurping of the cultural power of platforms like Spotify and Amazon. And that people can still do their own thing.

JT: Spotify have had a deal with WPP for over ten years, they're one of the biggest advertising platforms in the world.

HB: They're all interconnected. That's the problem, right?

CC: But what you said about landing is also important in terms of going back to the question about experimentalism and how that occurs within the musical diaspora, the Black diaspora and the South Asian diaspora. For me, meaningful experimentation comes from friction. And the friction brought about by material frameworks and ethnic and racial frameworks and class-based frameworks that are not necessarily in the minds of the artists and the creatives at that time. They're just trying to make incursions into their own cultural spaces. For me, that's the most meaningful, important form of experimentation, as opposed to this kind of opaque, non-material category of individualist experimentalism as an inherently 'good' form of creativity. I think musicians who are often trying to be consciously experimental, often produce music that is also opaque and directionless.

HB: But doesn't this, from a research perspective, given that you can have multiple things landing through lots of different audiences at a time, from a research perspective there isn't really a question of any single kind of truth or ground truth here. Someone will research that type of music over there and someone else researches that one. They will all be allowed in, as it were, into that research arena, because there's no way that a single form of research can cover multiple landings adequately enough to give a proper account without excluding.

JT: I think part of that archiving work is incredibly difficult now because there are all these microgenres. I would love to do more research on garage and speed garage. And I would love to write about drill because I love UK drill. But jungle and drum and bass is big enough. I had to do a jungle and drum and bass piece for the V&A, and it blew my head open because these genres are 35 years old and massively undocumented and archived.

CC: This goes back to the idea of microgenres. Genres are a good way to highlight the historical, cultural and political significance of music. Genres carry meaning and structures of feeling. But there also are limits to genre and at the micro level, and that significance becomes less visible and less important. I agree with you. I think genre's still important because it allows you to talk about how it starts. But I think, also, there are limitations in that framework.

JT: But what we can do with these microgenres is that Stuart Hall cultural studies framework of analysis (Hall 2019). Where we go okay, Baile Funk is really starting to heat in the club scene and has the multiculturism of 90s jungle. What is going on socially, politically, culturally. Why is this happening? We can ask 'why' and make these mini stories.

HB: Rather than see it as only a small part of the national thing, therefore, ignore it.

JT: Yeah. Yeah. Exactly.

HB: You know where he talks about jouissance. Lots and lots of little things, doing it for the joy of it, for the fun of it. So the theoretical approach becomes instead of looking for a single theory, you enjoy [and encourage] the playfulness and allow for multiple theories.

CC: Pleasure beyond pleasure. That's from Roland Barthes. The idea of ecstasy beyond pleasure (Barthes 1975).

mainstream trends. This position generally emanates from the young who are keen to carve out positions of their own.'

[7]For example, the Black Artist Database (n.d.).

[8]Varoufakis's point is that 'capitalism is now dead, in the sense that its dynamics no longer govern our economies. In that role it has been replaced by something fundamentally different, which I call technofeudalism' (Varoufakis 2023: xiii)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771825000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

HB: Which is another way of saying multiple landings. The multiplicity of landings as another form of jouissance. I think this is a good way to summarise our discussion as well.

7. Conclusion and Future Work

Our contribution to this edition of *Organised Sound* is the challenge to ideas of experimentation, experimentalism and the gaps that can emerge when it is codified as being only in certain artists, locations or styles. In doing so, we identified that very few artists tend to use the term directly and that this may be of more use to critics and listeners. More importantly, our discussion sought to entertain the idea of clubs, DJs and their communities as being potential sites of experimentation.

The Black Box is both a research subject and a research object. Previous researchers such as Perry A. Hall have noted that 'white-dominated wider culture absorbs aesthetic innovation' (Hall 1997: 33), such as where we describe how scenes, movements and musical economies are 'rinsed'. Therefore, the Black Box is a fertile and energetic space, subject to frequent raiding at all times. The Black Box also enabled our discussions to explore some of what is taking place in Africa as a music and economic space, including the resources of the continent, which can be considered as the ultimate Black Box. Not only is Africa the source of many difficult-to-mine raw materials that power telecommunications infrastructure, smart devices and the like, but the growth of global music companies' interest in Africa represents a shift in music industry economics that has, until recently, been largely ignored. Therefore, the African Turn must be viewed in combination with the Black Box as a means to understand why the continent and the African diaspora are of significant interest to Western global interests.

Our tentative consideration of different types of research approaches, such as multiple landings and jouissance, acknowledges that much music is being made and experimented within niches and communities that might not have knowledge of other styles and communities. In this sense, jouissance can be deployed, where pleasure in the making of lots of playful theories might well be a useful position for researchers to adopt as a means of telling lots of microstories. A jouissance lens taps into this life of music. Yet, it also challenges those working in, researching and documenting music activity areas such as experimental or electronic music to contend with a multiplicity of identity and expressive practices. Rather than aiming for what Hall characterised as an 'immediate identity' (Hall 2003: 108). The immediate identity functions as a form of 'convenient' singular truth, an easy explainer that should be resisted.

Returning to the Black Box and future directions, an obvious and practical strategy would be to uncover, document and disseminate the rich history and ongoing contributions of Black [British] musicians intersecting with the local music-making communities. This leads to four particular points. First, revising academic frameworks is necessary. Music curricula that remain ethnically narrow should challenge their canon, which involves questioning which musicians and genres are considered worthy of study. There is scope to adopt more interdisciplinary approaches, thereby expanding the canon to reflect a more diverse range of contributions.

Second, expanding research methodologies is crucial. Oral histories and ethnographic research are taking place, but this is slow, resulting in the loss of opportunities to capture the experiences and perspectives of Black British musicians. This is particularly relevant to Black music content, often missing from traditional archives.

Third, although academics are already collaborating with community organisations, recognition of this work by research departments can be fraught with difficulties.[9] Nonetheless, academics strive to build these bridges between scholarly research and the lived experience of local music groups, cultural organisations and artists to ensure that research is grounded in the community and benefits those whose stories are being told. The point here is this activity requires further support.

Fourth, digitisation and open access are important for making resources widely available. Digitising archives and creating online platforms where the public can access music, interviews and historical documents can democratise knowledge access and increase public engagement with Black British music history. But within this medium, there are additional incoming issues, not least that of AI.

By adopting these strategies, we believe that musicologists can play a critical role in opening the Black Box and ensuring that the contributions of Black British musicians are recognised, documented and celebrated.

References

Barthes, R. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller. New York: Noonday Press.

Black Artist Database. n.d. About. www.blackartistdatabase.co/#/about (accessed 23 May 2024).

BMRU. n.d. Black Music Research Unit. https://bmru.co.uk/ (accessed 23 May 2024).

Boon, H. 2021. Using DAWs as Modelling Tools for Learning Design Sound-Based Applications in Education. *Journal of Music, Technology & Education* *13*(2–3): 305–22.

Bourdieu, P. and Johnson, R. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Bovell, D. 2017. Interviewed by C. Melville, *Bass Culture (AHRC funded project)*. www.mixcloud.com/BassCultureduk/bass-culture-dennis-bovell/ (accessed 23 May 2024).

British Record Shop Archives. n.d. Red Records. www.britishrecordshoparchive.org/shops/red-records/ (accessed 23 May 2024).

Charles, M. 2016. Hallowed be Thy Grime? A Musicological and Sociological Genealogy of Grime Music and Its Relation to Black Atlantic Religious Discourse. PhD thesis, University of Warwick. http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/92164 (accessed 23 May 2024).

Christodoulou, C. 2020. Bring the Break-beat Back! Authenticity and the Politics of Rhythm in Drum & Bass. *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* *12*(1): 3–21. https://doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2020.12.01.08.

Doharty, N., Madriaga, M. and Joseph-Salisbury, R. 2021. The University Went to 'Decolonise' and All They Brought Back Was Lousy Diversity Double-Speak! Critical Race Counter-Stories from Faculty of Colour in 'Decolonial' Times. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* *53*(3): 233–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1769601.

Fabbri, F. [1981] 2004. A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications. In S. Frith (ed.) *Popular Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol. *3*. London: Routledge, 7–34.

Frith, S. (1998) *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gilroy, P. 2017. Interviewed by J. Springer, *Bass Culture (AHRC funded project)*. www.mixcloud.com/BassCultureduk/bass-culture-paul-gilroy-part-one/; and www.mixcloud.com/BassCultureduk/bass-culture-paul-gilroy-part-two/ (accessed 23 May 2024).

Groys, B. 2014. *On the New*, trans. G. M. Goshgarin. London: Verso.

[9]For example, much 'research has shown that those academics of colour who do work in the academy face a range of racialised and racist difficulties, are often made to feel like outsiders who do not belong' (Doharty et al. 2021: 234).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771825000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hall, P. A. 1997. African-American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation. In B. Ziff and P. V. Rao (eds.) *Borrowed Power Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 31–51.

Hall, S. 2019. Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular' (1981). In D. Morley (ed.) *Essential Essays*. Volume 1: *Foundations of Cultural Studies*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 347–61.

Hall, S. 2003. Encoding/Decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis (eds.) *Culture, Media, Language*, Working Papers in Cultural Studies. Oxon: Routledge, 128–38.

Hall, S. 2021. *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. P. Gilroy and R. W. Gilmore. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Jones, S. 1993. Crossover Culture: Popular Music and the Politics of Race. *Stanford Humanities Review 3*(2): 103–18.

milton, v. c. and Mano, W. (2022). Afrokology and the Right to Communicate in Africa. *Javnost – The Public 29*(1): 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1889830.

Radcliffe, M. 2020. UK's First Ever Official Afrobeats Chart to Launch. www.prsformusic.com/m-magazine/news/first-ever-official-uk-afrobeats-chart (accessed 2 January 2025).

Reynolds, S. 2011. *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. London: Faber.

Rietveld, H. C. 2016. Authenticity and Liveness in Digital DJ Performance. In E. Hytönen-Ng and I. Tsioulakis (eds.) *Musicians and Their Audiences: Performance, Speech and Mediation*. New York: Routledge, 123–33.

Solórzano, D. G. and Yosso, T. J. 2002. Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research. *Qualitative Inquiry 8*(1): 23–44. https://doi-org.uow.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/107780040200800103.

Toppin, J. 2023. Jungle: A Critical Intersectional History. In M. Charles and with M. Gani (eds.) *Black Music in Britain in the 21st Century*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 89–104.

Varoufakis, Y. 2023. *Technofeudalism What Killed Capitalism*. London: Bodley Head.

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

Discography

4 Hero. 1995. 'Mr. Kirk's Nightmare'. Vinyl. New York: Sm:)e Communications.

Videography

Boon, H. 2022. Learning and Designing Sound Based Music: Enhancing Music Production Pedagogy in HE [conference presentation]. https://youtu.be/iqBoN7FREnY (accessed 23 May 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771825000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press