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# Jamaican Sound Systems and Knowledge Systems: Practice-Based Research (PBR) in Popular Culture

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Résumé de l'article

Working with popular street cultures in the Global South offers scope for practice-based research (PBR) to go beyond its application with creative practitioners in the galleries and theatres of the Global North. We start from an account of a “reasoning session” with reggae sound system owners, selectors, and engineers staged as a PBR event in Kingston, Jamaica. Such popular music cultures across the Global South have their own specialist apparatus for playing recorded music and—most important for a PBR investigation—their own embodied, situated, and tacit knowledge systems. These include the sophisticated arts of selecting music, tuning up a sound system, and the value of the culture for the communities from which they originate, as well as strategies for current challenges, such as police harassment and lack of government recognition or support. Accessing such grassroots knowledge systems requires not only a good rapport with local practitioners but also close cooperation with their own organizations and with local university researchers. Such PBR also demands sharing research findings—for example, by screening the documentary film we made of the reasoning session for its participant. It is concluded that practitioners’ ways of knowing as revealed by PBR can help challenge conventional ideas about the nature of knowledge itself.

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## **Jamaican Sound Systems and Knowledge Systems: Practice-Based Research (PBR) in Popular Culture**

Julian Henriques and Brian D'Aquino

A clear bright tropical morning in Kingston, Jamaica, the air not yet hot. Through the corrugated zinc gated entrance people start to arrive in the sound system workshop yard; they are mostly elders, but some young people too. All have to sanitize, sign in, and have their temperature taken. The mood is relaxed and friendly as people chat, already knowing each other. This yard is an open space dominated by stacks of speaker boxes. A film crew is setting up in front of a semi-circle of chairs in front of a literal wall of scoops (bass speakers). This is the HQ for Jam One sound system, whose owner, Anthony Myers, is the chair of the Jamaican Sound System Federation (JSSF) and host for today's event.<sup>1</sup>

Billed as a “reasoning session,” the event is an opportunity for invited reggae sound system owners, engineers, and selectors to sit down together and discuss common issues and challenges of today's Jamaican dancehall scene. It is also a research event facilitated by the University of the West Indies' Institute of Caribbean Studies and Reggae Studies Unit for the Sonic Street Technologies (SST) research project. Today's discussion is to be filmed and transcribed as research material. What these practitioners say to each other gives access to the actual workings of a popular culture. It is within and between these participants that the knowledge, expertise, and experience on which the Jamaican sound system scene was built—and on which its future might also depend—resides.<sup>2</sup>

The session was remarkable at the very least for bringing together some of the island's leading sound system professionals for the first time. For those that know the scene, the attendee list was extremely impressive. Speakers included Anthony Meyers (Jam One Sound and JSSF board member); Clarence Cain (Kozmik Sound); Errol Campbell and DJ Tatiana (High Grade Sound); Hugh James (Jam Rock, formerly Redman Intl, and JSSF board member); Maurice Johnson, aka Jack Scorpio (Black Scorpio); James Howard, aka Jimmy Solo (Shang Hi Solo Phonics); Joshua Chamberlain (JSSF board member); Luke Davis Elliot (selector, son of Digitech Sound); Monty Blake (Merritone); O'Brien Rowe (OB Sound); Ronnie Jarrett and Norman Williams (8 Mile sound); Winston “Wee Pow” Powell (Stone Love, also representing Bass Odyssey).

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**UWI**

**Sonic Street Technologies**

**ICS**  
INSTITUTE OF CARIBBEAN STUDIES

**erc** | European Research Council

**JAMAICA SOUND SYSTEM FEDERATION**

# Sounds of the Future

**SOUND SYSTEM INDUSTRY REASONING SESSION**

**THE JAMAICA SOUND SYSTEM FEDERATION**  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE  
**SONIC STREET TECHNOLOGIES**  
**RESEARCH PROJECT**  
AND THE  
**REGGAE STUDIES UNIT**  
INVITE YOU TO  
**SHARE IDEAS AND DISCUSS**  
**PRESSING ISSUES**

**SUNDAY**  
**FEB. 20, 2022**  
REASONING SESSION  
**10:30 AM - 5 PM**  
NETWORKING SESSION  
**5 PM - 9 PM**  
VENUE: **JAMAICA SOUND SYSTEM FEDERATION HQ.**

If you are an engineer, owner, promoter, selector, MC, dancer and videographer or other practitioner from the sound system industry, then this event is for you.

*All COVID-19 Protocols Observed • Entry By Invitation Only*

*Sounds of the Future: Sound System Industry Reasoning Session poster/flyer, February 20, 2022.*

This article frames the day's event as an exercise in practice-based research (PBR), where the practice is that of sound system operations and the research is into the practitioners' ways of knowing. We discuss the theoretical as well as practical and political implications of a PBR methodology having as its subject the popular culture of the Jamaican dancehall sound system scene as an example of the kind of apparatus for playing recorded music—called in our research “sonic street technologies”—to be found across the Global South. PBR cannot tell other than an “inside story” of a particular scene or event, in marked contrast to the typical corporate consultants' report.<sup>3</sup> We argue that this is particularly important with marginalized, that is, subaltern, popular cultures whose knowledge systems are situated and largely embodied and oral.

These music scenes also generate a substantial informal archive of sessions, both in physical format such as tape cassette and digitally, online on *YouTube*, *Mixcloud*, and elsewhere (Stanley Niaah, Cork, and Howard 2022).

Describing and reflecting on one particular event, our research questions indicate the ground covered in what follows.

- How can PBR facilitate access to embodied knowledge systems in the Global South?
- What PBR conditions and relationships are required for working with marginalized communities in the Global South? And what particular responsibilities does this entail?
- What can PBR reveal about practitioners' knowledge systems, and how might these challenge conventional ideas of epistemology?

In Jamaica, the sound system dancehall session has traditionally been the very heart of the island's popular culture. Every night of the week, there are several dances on the streets of Kingston's downtown communities, in shopping malls, car parking lots, backyards, and sound system HQs. Perhaps surprisingly, on the island, the popular culture of the sound system remains quite marginal—literally a subculture—from the point of view of the authorities or any official recognition or support. This is notwithstanding their cultural and economic value for a majority of the citizenry of the country as well as those in the diaspora, not to mention its potential contribution to the Jamaican tourist industry.

The authorities often blame sound system sessions for causing violence and social unrest rather than seeing them as grassroots strategies to overcome or at least ameliorate existing social challenges (Rivera 2022). The substantial value of sound system culture was certainly one of the points raised in the reasoning discussion. Jamaican sound systems are in fact only an example of one type of street culture and technology. Colombian *picós*, Mexican *sonideros*, or Brazilian *radiolas* and *aparelhagens* make equally fertile ground for PBR investigations. Such research aims to question knowledge as it is usually understood in academic research; that is, excluding situated, embodied, collective knowledge systems and their subaltern locations.



*Sounds of the Future* event: preparing the venue to meet health and safety standards. JSSF HQ, Kingston, Jamaica, February 20, 2022.



Working with practitioners in the Global South as PBR gives researchers particular responsibilities. As researchers from the Global North, our institutional positioning is undergirded by a highly asymmetrical power dynamic that is given further emphasis by the little trust that practitioners often have for institutions that are local to them. We aim to exploit and invert this dynamic positively to give recognition, respect, and international status to practitioners' creative work. Also, researching their processes and techniques with practitioners can encourage them to articulate their understanding of what they are doing to each other and to outsiders, and contribute to their confidence in the wider cultural value of their own practice. Shared research discussions also provide a rare opportunity to help build solidarity among sound system owners.

In addition, PBR also gives researchers the responsibility to help build local strengths, as with the Jamaica Sound System Federation, for instance. Although the initial idea of organizing a reasoning session came from us as researchers, this was put to the federation as a suggestion for them to frame and organize it in a way that could benefit the local scene, as well as strengthen the federation's role, brand, and reach. As far as researchers are concerned, the performative force of PBR with practitioners situated among subaltern communities rather than an avant-garde elite fuels theoretical and methodological questions not otherwise available.

### **What We Did: Subaltern PBR**

As a result of this comparative social and economic isolation outside Jamaican mainstream society, the sound system community has had to develop its own ways and means of economic survival and technological innovation, not to mention forms of creative expression. This makes it a rich reservoir of alternative knowledge systems, or rather what we describe as *ways-of-knowing*, emphasizing the practices and processes of knowledge production, as this “knowledge” is not reified as such, not even oral, but almost entirely situated, tacit “know-how” (Henriques 2022). Embodied in sound system builders', audio engineers', and selectors' techniques and practices, it is in respect to these *ways-of-knowing* that PBR can also play a role in revealing practitioners to themselves. Remarks like “I've never thought of it like that before” provide some of the most affirming moments in PBR. The particular value for popular cultures is that the knowledge systems embodied in these creative practices express *different* ways of thinking and being in the world than those unearthed from “high culture” creative practices of the Global North. In this respect, PBR faces all the challenges that avant-garde artmakers and performers do with practice as research (PAR), with the additional hurdle of operating in a marginalized section of society.

PBR is particularly useful where creative practices are performative, as they tend to be in popular cultures, often with music and dance, not least because they invite participation.<sup>4</sup> Also, the transient nature of the auditory medium makes it highly suitable for the temporary takeover of public spaces, as mentioned above. This is especially the case when the “performance” is that of the archive, that is, recorded music, rather than a “live” artist or band. Hence the importance of the selector, MC, or DJ enlivening the recording with their chat and special sound effects. Moreover, being a phonographic medium, there is a considerable amount of audio and electronic engineering work to be done to maximize the impact, appeal, and distinctiveness of the sounding of the set of equipment. Numerous practices, techniques, and knowledges are involved in repurposing an essentially domestic device such as the record player into one capable of impacting hundreds of people in the open-air setting of a street dance.

### **Reasoning**

It is an important feature of this study that the SST team are investigating the practices of others—the sound system practitioners. This differs from the practice as research (PAR)

approach, in which artists or creative practitioners rationalize *their own* non-rational creative processes (Vear 2021). The authors are both, however, practitioners in their own right, either as sound system and record label owner, sound artist, or filmmaker. This leads to an even more crucial point. The sound system scene can be said to have its own ways of “overstanding” (the Rastafarian inflection of understanding) what it is doing as accessible only to those on the inside of the scene, even in Jamaica. The event we describe in this essay is thus valuable as an opportunity for a wider sharing than perhaps has been previously the case. For this, we have to thank the good will and trust of the practitioners themselves and our Jamaican researcher collaborators.

The *Sounds of the Future* event was dubbed as a “reasoning” session to align itself with the local Rastafarian culture. In this powerfully imaginative language (also known as “dread talk”), the term “reasoning” indicates a gathering of like-minded individuals, normally to be held in a herb yard or in a community hub (Pollard 2000). In a Jamaican reasoning session, the discussion is held in a noncompetitive fashion, and gatherings may include not only conversations but also chanting, drumming, and smoking herb (cannabis). The purpose of reasoning is to deepen each other’s spiritual awareness as well as to discuss pressing issues for the community. “Reasoning” thus stands not only as an event but also as a specific practice aimed at knowledge production and sharing. Such knowledges are marginalized, or in Jamaican lingo, “downpressed,” largely because they are from the ghetto street, that is, these knowledges are bottom-up rather than top-down knowledge.

The idea of “reasoning” is part of a wider range of linguistic strategies to align the “inner meaning” with the “outer form” of language that Jamaican Rastafarians have championed. Among these “I’n’I” as a pronoun singular and plural at once is a powerful example particularly apposite for the present discussion of collective thinking. While the noun “reason” indicates an object—a feature or quality that is possessed or achieved — “to reason” as a verb conveys the idea of a process, something that is collectively produced. It starts from the participants’ acknowledgement of the relation between each other and with the rest of the *cosmos*, as captured in the song “Reason Now” by Jamaican vocal trio The Abyssinians.<sup>5</sup> Reasoning reflects the existence of alternative *ways-of-knowing* and reveals ways of thinking otherwise, that is, *contra* the Western episteme. By evoking an ongoing kinetic activity, something that is occurring “out there” in the practices, movements, and gestures of a community rather than in an individual’s mind alone, the concept also challenges Descartes’s notion of reason as innate and preceding knowledge. It takes at least two people to reason; it is precisely in the lived space between them that the reasoning takes place. By using the term, we intend to acknowledge the genuine opportunity for researchers to learn from these alternative knowledge systems. The nonextractive SST project’s approach to research is certainly consistent with the “reasoning” spirit.

The purpose of the event was to support the local scene by helping to consolidate the work of its representative bodies and to facilitate discussion among practitioners. SST envisioned and sponsored the event, along with the trust and longstanding support of Tony Meyers and thereby the JSSF. Our collaborative approach makes our research process itself a form of practice—research *as* practice, a form of PBR as distinct from the standard PAR. This is to say, the research process aims to make a contribution to a creative scene, not only document it. In this case, the desired positive impact was to back up practitioners’ own efforts to have their culture and industry recognized in an institutionally hostile environment. In this respect, our work shares some features of the action research paradigm, though it approaches the issue by resourcing practitioners rather than as a joint problem-solving exercise (Heron and Reason [2001] 2008). This adds a further layer to the practitioners’ practices and *ways-of-knowing* that our project is

researching. Thus, practitioners should enjoy a two-fold recognition: from us as researchers and hopefully from the government authorities.

### Researcher Collaborations

Besides collaborating with practitioners, we were also collaborating with local researchers. The Jamaican sound system scene is not easily accessible to outsiders, and the successful outcome of the day was due to the solidity of pre-existing relations of mutual respect built over many years before this project began (Henriques 2011). The day benefited hugely from our SST research associates from the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of the West Indies, Mona. Sonjah Stanley Niaah and Dennis Howard chaired the discussions and together with Ashly Cork curated the staging of the event. It must be pointed out that without these parties' efforts, and especially the trust they were granted by the local practitioners' community, the event would not have been possible.



*Sounds of the Future* event: filming the reasoning session. JSSF HQ, Kingston, Jamaica, February 20, 2022.

### PBR Methodology

The reasoning session can be considered the second step in a three-step development process of our methodology. It builds on the first step, which was bringing sound system practitioners and researchers together in the same space to share ideas and challenges. In 2016, this research interest gained momentum as Sound System Outernational (SSO), an informal research group “dedicated to recognizing, stimulating and supporting reggae sound system culture worldwide” and responsible for a series of successful events at its base at Goldsmiths University in London, in Naples, Italy, and online in Brazil (D'Aquino, Henriques, and Vidigal 2017).<sup>6</sup> SSO events provided a necessary stage for formulating the SST research funding proposal and allowed us to reflect on the implications of operating in different social and cultural environments. Each SSO

event focused on the lived experience of selectors, engineers, and box builders as the repository of a specific and situated form of knowledge (D'Aquino and Pârvan 2021).

The second step was tested out with the present reasoning session, where practitioners discuss their work among themselves with researchers only chairing the session. Such sharing among peers, with each corroborating or disagreeing with others, yields socially shared knowledge. Ideally, this process generates a different kind of research material than that “extracted” from an informant in a conventional one-on-one interview. Such non-extractive methods are central to the present PBR approach (Christie 2013).

The third step requires re-presenting or articulating (as distinct from simply representing or documenting) back to the practitioners their own understanding of what they do. The documentary film of the session is an example of this re-presenting, where the practitioners speak “in their own words” without editorial comment. To gain wider recognition for their *ways-of-knowing* such re-presentation also has to make sense to others outside the particular scene, as with the term “reasoning.” This article is an example of that ambition. Such PBR aims to provide a model for further reasoning sessions with professionals from other types of sonic street technologies elsewhere in the world. Our project aims not only to contribute to decolonizing the relation between technology and culture but also to make good use of our international academic status and financial resources to both document and contribute to the well-being and development of the local sub-cultural scenes.

## What We Learned

The day was divided into two sessions, one focusing on the sound system’s specific technology and techniques and the other on the current state of the culture and industry in Jamaica. The convivial spirit of the discussion reflected a community of “colleagues” and masters of their craft, but it also indicated a pre-existing reservoir of reasoning or *ways-of-knowing* as the result of the participants’ longstanding contributions to the scene. This reservoir includes particular skills and techniques, such as those required to fine-tune a set of equipment or to entertain the crowd, as well as a shared understanding of their own activity, including aims and challenges. It must also be pointed out that this shared knowledge did not prevent them from having different views or disagreeing on a particular topic. Such “productive dissensus” (Robinson 2020) made the conversation even more rich and lively.

### Session I: Technologies and Techniques

The *Technologies and Techniques* session, chaired by Dennis Howard, focused on the ongoing shifts in equipment, music, and aesthetics in the dancehall session as a way to unpack the ever-changing relation between technology and culture. It included a passionate debate around the definition of a “real” sound system, where participants highlighted the convergence of distinct factors, such as the need for a certain type of equipment and the skills to operate it, as well as the knowledge of the music and the ability to present it. This discussion reflected the complexity of the sound system as a distinctive techno-cultural apparatus traditionally emerging from the socio-economic environment of Kingston’s most marginalized urban areas (aka ghettos). As represented in the reasoning session, we should add that there are also middle class “uptown” sound systems.

Overall, what came up was an “ongoing clash” between “the aesthetic and the heritage of sound system versus the practicality of nowadays technology,” as Howard put it. It was interesting to notice how the dispute was cutting across generations, with elders taking different sides. The “tradition vs. innovation” debate was also framed in the wider context of the global supply chain.



Historically, sound system components were custom-built, from speaker boxes to the hand-wiring of valve (tube) amplifier transformer coils. But an increasingly globalized electronics market has all but destroyed the local manufacturing base, pushing some sound system owners to have their set built abroad and shipped in—something that others criticized as “not true to sound system culture.”

The discussion on sound quality was also revealing. Participants agreed on the need for clarity for the sounding of the music, rather than sheer amplifying power, with elders such as Jack Scorpio suggesting that old school equipment sounds “warmer and better.” Nonetheless, different points of view emerged on the best techniques to employ for achieving the quality of sound for which every operator strives. Some participants such as Tony Meyers stressed the importance of a proper tuning procedure (adjusting sound levels and frequencies) as part of the soundcheck. Others insisted that tuning was nothing more than “acting,” part of the dancehall scene as “Jamaica’s premier street theatre” (Stanley Niaah 2019). Master builder Ronnie Jarrett went as far as to claim that tuning has in fact only to do with the building of speaker boxes. In his own words, “Tuning is done when I put my tape measure on that piece of plyboard!” They agreed to disagree on this.

Another critical set of skills emerging from the conversation was that related to the selector (in other scenes called the DJ). The selector is the person who chooses the music to be played, which is, of course, crucial for the success of any sound system. As Norman Williams from 8 Mile Sound noted, “Sometimes him bigger than the sound.” Participants were able to unpack the ability to entertain the crowd into a set of complementary skills such as “reading” and “building” the crowd, “feeling” the music played, and being able to deliver “the right presentation.” Overall, the selector’s activity was widely acknowledged as “an art.” Still, different views emerged about how to master this art, with some preferring to “reach out” to the crowd’s own taste, and some preferring to play “for themselves” but enlisting the crowd for their journey.

## Session 2: Politricks and Pushbacks

The challenges facing the industry was another shared concern that emerged in the session chaired by Sonjah Stanley Niaah, entitled *Politricks and Pushbacks*.<sup>7</sup> This session focused on the current state of the scene, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing relationship with the government and the police, and considerations on the status of sound systems as a legitimate productive force within the entertainment sector in Jamaica. As Stanley Niaah acknowledged in her introductory remarks, “Jamaica is the only country that has given the world seven or eight distinct genres of music in the latter half of twentieth century in a fifty-year span.” As the source of this musical abundance, she advocated for the sound system to be regarded as “Jamaica’s national instrument,” just as the steel pan drum is celebrated in Trinidad.

Unfortunately, the reality has proved to be rather different. Participants lamented how sound systems in Jamaica suffer from a lack of institutional recognition and increasingly restrictive legislation. Scarcity of licensed venues, noise regulations, police harassment, tight curfew times, and cost of permits were listed as some of the factors threatening the health of the industry, especially during the last decade. The pandemic exacerbated existing issues, with a long lockdown imposed on the entertainment sector,<sup>8</sup> which also fuelled corruption among police officers who could add COVID-related fines and charges to the highly arbitrary application of the controversial Noise Abatement Act, 1997.<sup>9</sup> As Jimmy Solo of Shang Hi Solo Phonics put it: “As you talk about police, right now police a make money out of this dance thing more than we.” As a result, several sound system owners had to scale down by selling equipment for smaller and more discrete off-the-shelf powered boxes, rather than full-scale sound systems.

It was also interesting to witness how “industry” and “culture” were conceived as inseparably linked. Sound system is an expensive business, requiring considerable investment from those living in some of the most marginalized communities in Jamaica. Without a flourishing and self-sufficient local scene, the culture has no means to sustain itself. This is indeed the reality in the Global South, where maintaining a pricey hobby is not an option, nor is receiving institutional funding. But commerce does not necessarily compromise creativity as is often thought in the Global North. From versioning to specials and dub mixes, financial pressure has always triggered innovation in Jamaican music, in a way specifically aimed at serving the local market (Howard 2016; Hitchins 2014).

Historically, sound systems have played a critical role in the development of Jamaican music, both for young artists to hone their performance skills and for safeguarding musical quality and lyrical content. More recently, the dominant global business model centred on digital platforms and streaming revenues has had a huge impact on Jamaica’s unique local music industry—a bubbling but indeed fragile ecosystem. This paradigm shift has also undermined sound system’s authority within the local scene. As Tony Meyers expressed it: “They have put sound system on the backbench,” as now the music goes straight from bedroom laptop to *YouTube* and streaming platforms. Long gone are the days when the sound system was “the voice of people” as Prince Buster’s 1960s set was named.

From a research point of view, hearing how their industry and culture is declining from some of Jamaica’s most respected professionals was one of the most unexpected findings of the event. (While this is true for Kingston, we were later able to establish it is less so in other parishes of the island.) Meanwhile, sound system culture is by contrast thriving in many other parts the world, populating commercially successful festivals such as the sound system dedicated Dub Camp in France, and even entering museums and art galleries, as with Black Obsidian sound system nominated in 2021 for the UK’s prestigious Turner Prize, or Channel One’s sound system speakers stack being displayed at the Museum of London in 2021.<sup>10</sup> While testifying to the commercial potential and cultural value of these Global South expressive cultures, sadly this discrepancy also shows how this is more likely to be appreciated—and exploited—by the established cultural industry of the Global North than in the local context, where their subaltern origin remains a stigma.

### Next Generation

Participants identified the lack of intergenerational transmission as the most dangerous threat to the future of the culture. Intergenerational dialogue was seen as a good way to generate interest in possible newcomers. Disappointingly, the reasoning session had only two young participants (one of whom was the only woman). Interestingly, they were both expressions of a family lineage, with Luke Davis-Elliot being the son of Digi Tech Sound and DJ Tatiana selecting for High Grade, owned by her father. This awareness reflected the participants’ own understanding of a way-of-knowing that is fully embodied, tacit, and mostly non-verbal. This understanding is certain to die with them if not passed on. Such generational knowledge transmission was another aspect in which the event seemed to be successful, as noted by Luke Davis-Elliot, who stated: “My father owned a sound. . . . I always looked on that sound, I was like, I don’t know if I’m going back there because of how digital I am personally. Coming here, I realize that this is what I want to do. This is the real stuff.” Luke got a round of applause from other participants when he said that.

### Sound Knowledge

Underlying the content of the conversation described above, the key point to emphasize for PBR is the broad range of *ways-of-knowing* and knowledge systems that lie within the sound system

practitioners' ken (range of understanding). As an alternative to traditional epistemic knowledge systems, this can be counted as evidence for the third step in our methodology (re-presenting the practitioners' own understanding of what they do). The practitioners' *ways-of-knowing* or what we can call a sound system (anti) epistemology can be broken down into three component parts. Very important are (a) the *evaluative judgments* that the engineer makes about sounding when tuning the set, or the selector makes about the vibes of the crowd when deciding which tune to play next. This can be described as connoisseurship, that is, the kind of refined sensibility and expertise that can only be derived from lived experience (Henriques 2011, 63–87). While the term “connoisseur” is readily applied to sommelier or perfumier, to describe sound engineers as working with this kind of knowing aims at elevating the appreciation of their skills—as is consistent with a PBR approach.

Then there are (b) the *ways-of-knowing* closely linked to *ways-of-making* such as the workshop craft skills required for electrical engineering or for speaker box design and building, as Ronnie Jarret described in the session. Traditionally in Jamaica, such tacit knowing is picked up by way of an apprenticeship in a “prento” system under the supervision of a master builder in the workshop yard. This is what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) describe as “situated learning.” Or, as sound system Ronnie Jarrett tells us, such learning can be based on trial and error. Either way, reference is seldom made to textbook electronics or even to available speaker plans. This approach is not exclusive to Jamaica, but rather the standard way through which reggae sound systems achieve success and endurance across the different countries and settings where the culture has spread. For example, Mikey Dread of London-based Channel One sound system also reported this approach.<sup>11</sup> Such practices are frequently referred to as *know-how*, but that term underestimates the creative and imaginative dimensions of the engineers' techniques and practices.

Finally, it is important not to forget the knowing that can be called (c) *operational knowledge*, which is an absolute necessity for any sound system to function in Kingston's ubiquitous informal street economy—off books, off grid, and generally outside officialdom. Trust is the lubricant that enables this informal system to run smoothly, based on longevity of friendships, business and family relationships, and the comparatively modest size of the Jamaican sound system community. In short, everyone knows everyone else, so there is what might be described as an unwritten log of favours between parties that tend to balance out over the medium to long term. This is part and parcel of what is called in Jamaica the “livity” (lifestyle or way of living) of the ghetto, akin to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as a learned repertoire of social and cultural dispositions. Another example of operations within this milieu would be the market traders, known as “higglers” (or informal commercial importers as they are officially called) that Gina Ulysse (2008) describes in *Downtown Ladies*. Overall, the livity of marginalized communities is invariably one of “making something” out of very little.

What these three systems of knowing have in common is that they are unwritten and often shared across the community of knowers and collectively owned in much the same way that a dancehall session belongs to the crowd (audience). The audience is always the ultimate arbiter of success or otherwise of a session, just as it is judge and jury on whether a new style of music or dance deserves to go out from the street dance to the wider market.

In addition, there is one key ingredient that motivates and makes possible all the above; that is, the practitioners' sheer love for the music—and the sound of the music. JSSF chair Tony Myers characterized himself as one of the “real players in the business, [because] we love sound,” in contrast with many of the younger generation who see DJing more in commercial terms. “We love sound, we don't love money,” said Myers. Talking about the street sessions, Jack Scorpio

added: “It’s a community love. It’s something where people just look forward to.” From this, it can be said that as far as practitioners are concerned, knowledge, far from being an “objective” thing, is rather infused with values and passions. In short, *ways-of-knowing* are embodied and situated as they invariably concern ontology (being) as much as epistemology (knowledge). In the practices the present research describes, the two are inseparable—despite traditional philosophy’s insistence on such a disciplinary divide.<sup>12</sup> The lived experience combining knowing and being is especially in evidence with reggae and dub music that sound systems have been designed to play. Inspired by the spiritual values of Rastafarianism as well as its Nyabinghi drumming, the scene puts great store by what it calls “conscious” attitudes and “Ital” (natural) ways of living—especially in reggae scenes outside Jamaica.

## Sharing Results

The spirit of sharing between equals embodied in the ideals of the reasoning session has very much been taken on board with the SST project’s strategies for disseminating our PBR findings. One is the conventional path of academic publication in edited volumes and journal articles. In parallel, the project has put considerable effort into sharing our findings with the practitioners involved, the Jamaican scene, and with wider sound system communities worldwide. Since the start of the SST project in January 2021, this has been done via the SST blog, which has disseminated updates on our research process on a weekly basis, as well as contributions from guest authors, reviews of events, interviews, and photo essays by the practitioners themselves.<sup>13</sup> Also central is our research practice of filming all interviews and discussions. Highlighting sections of the interview transcripts is the first stage of the film editing process, during which we also select clips for our *YouTube* and social media channels. This same interview material can equally well be used for written publications.

The *Sounds of the Future* premiere of the forty-five-minute research documentary based on the reasoning session described above took place on July 24, 2022 at the 10A West Kings House Road, in New Kingston, a well-established venue owned and run by Justine Henzil.<sup>14</sup> Coincidentally, the venue was staging an art exhibition for the fiftieth anniversary of her father Perry Henzil’s foundational *The Harder They Come*, Jamaica’s first feature film. Our screening of the documentary from the reasoning session was followed by a discussion and some music entertainment provided by Jack Scorpio and High Grade Sound with DJ Tatiana.

The screening was well received and the discussion lively. Participants shared their own memories related to the dancehall scene and were generally not aware of the declining state of the industry. This gave a sense of the potential of such documentaries for raising self-awareness in the scene and providing some unique insights for outsiders. But we must acknowledge that it did diverge somewhat from our expectations. Though there were a good number of the sound system professionals who contributed to the film, many of the audience were Kingston middle-class colleagues and friends. It was in fact a comment from one of the participants following the reasoning, who said, “I wish government people were there to hear all of that!” to suggest that, given its production values and foreign university support, the film could have backed the JSSF’s effort to establish an official dialogue with the authorities. Despite our best efforts, the invitation was not picked up by any government representatives, even though it was staged at the more uptown venue than the Jam One HQ yard where it had originally been planned.





*Sounds of the Future* documentary, premier screening. West Kings House Road, New Kingston, Jamaica, July 24, 2022.

The main weakness of the event was the lack of a JSSF spokesperson, with the federation's chair Tony Meyers only being able to join with an online message from abroad and no other JSSF board member attending. The consequent lack of clarity on the federation's activities limited the discussion and especially the chance for the JSSF to build its own status. This circumstance showed that the federation was not yet quite ready to lobby the government.<sup>15</sup> The learning point for the SST project was that—whatever our ambitions—any contribution that the research process might have can only move at the pace of our local collaborators, who alone have to carry the responsibility for any intervention in the local scene.

Overall, it was very encouraging to see how practitioners were prepared to talk to each other and to voice their own demands, both in the reasoning session and the discussion following the screening. This was anything but self-serving, nor was it inhibited by the secrecy and competition that are sometimes a defining feature of these grassroots music scenes. The timing of the session immediately after the pandemic and the perceived decline of sound system culture on the island no doubt stimulated the need for an open discussion. As Stone Love founder Winston “Wee Pow” Powell argued during the reasoning, “what an industry needs is two things to be named as such: aim and objective, and ethics.” The whole PBR process made it clear that the Jamaican sound system scene does not lack either of these attributes. Instead, they are the most important shared legacy that has sustained the culture and that can secure a thriving future. What could be beneficial to ensure that the culture continues is to deepen the level of discussion and widen participation: something to which we hope the reasoning and the screening contributed.

## A Planetary Network of Sound Technologies

Performing the musical archive on the streets by means of appropriately repurposed mobile sound reproduction technologies is an established practice in the Global South and—increasingly—also in sections of the Global North. The precipitating factors behind these subaltern forms of entertainment are rather trivial in the first instance: warm temperatures, lack or inaccessibility of facilities, the need for cost-effective entertainment, and the urge to generate informal revenues are the key drivers to ignite these unique—but recurrent—formations we describe as sonic street technologies. Each scene, around the *sonideros* or *radiolas*, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, defines itself by the genre of music it plays—cumbia/salsa and reggae respectively—rather than its equipment. So, they usually function as enclosed and quite self-sufficient systems, though sometimes linked across continents with those playing the same music.<sup>16</sup> Uniquely, the SST research perspective is able to consider all the varieties of sonic street technologies as a whole, as is being represented on our online global sonic map.<sup>17</sup> The know-how, or embodied knowledge related to sound technologies thus provides the common ground to reflect on these mobile music apparatuses as a research field encompassing numerous street music scenes.







Sonic Street Technologies: postcard invitation to fill in the Sonic Map questionnaire.

In describing these formations collectively as sonic street technologies, the aim is therefore to consider these mobile audio apparatuses as both a site and a tool for experimenting with new ways of sharing a community's being in the world. The diffusion and concentration of sonic street technologies unfolds a planetary network of subaltern sonic practices that challenges the top-down understanding of consumer technologies enforced by corporations and rooted in the military-entertainment complex (Goodman 2012, 31–34). The political implications of such a bottom-up approach should not be underrated. As Jonathan Sterne (2012) has pointed out, the application of international standards and protocols to consumer technology designs not only objects but also final users. By “sounding otherwise”—other than the industry standard, but also outside the designated space-time of official entertainment—these street technologies materialize alternative *ways-of-knowing* as “thinking otherwise.” This takes the form of actual sound waves, custom-built machines, gatherings of dancers, and communities of knowers. Through the steady refinement of their technological features and the increasing sophistication of their performative techniques, they gradually cross what Matt Fuller (2005, 19) describes as “the threshold into self-organization” to evolve into self-sufficient sonic media ecologies. The strategies deployed to cope with site-specific challenges slowly consolidate into style, while the continuous iteration of practices allows a specific body of knowledge to sediment and grow.

The contribution that the study of sonic street technologies such as the Jamaican reggae sound systems can make to PBR is to widen the research field to include not only types of knowledge other than normative epistemic systems, but crucially also the power relations in which the scenes operate. Their *ways-of-knowing* are distributed rather than localized, collective rather than personal, and open source rather than proprietary. Within each scene, knowledge is elaborated, preserved, and transmitted through an informal network of practices that is rhizomic rather than hierarchical. While “primary” and “secondary” epicentres or “nodes” may still exist by virtue of

geographical clustering or the kudos associated to a particular crew, the overall structure remains horizontal and open to contribution, with each node performing a threefold job of knowledge accumulation, amplification, and release.

Secrecy and exclusivity are usually cherished by individual practitioners. One example of the value of exclusive knowledge is the selectors' practice of scratching out the labels of their best vinyl records in order to prevent rivals from identifying them and therefore acquiring their own copy. This is not unique to the Jamaican scene, but a consistent feature of scenes as distinct as *sonideros* in Puebla (in Mexico) and even more with *picós* in Cartagena and Barranquilla (in Columbia), where a *picotero's* reputation has literally been built around *exclusivos* for more than five decades (Carbonell 2022, 21–25). Nonetheless, the evolution of a scene is based on the continuous borrowing of beats, styles, and tropes from others and subsequently re-elaborating them in a way that challenges the romantic image of a “lone genius” as the main agent of creative production. An individual or crew can certainly be recognized as particularly influential or creative, as with Stone Love sound system in Jamaica, or *picó* El Rey de Rocha in Colombia. But this higher status makes true sense only in relation to the multitude of those by whom they were inspired, as well as those they have inspired in turn. In addition, any node's status in a scene can swiftly change according to the intensity of the practices for which it accounts.

The reggae sound system scene has been notoriously fast moving and volatile. As the reasoning session showed, the position that Kingston has retained for over five decades as a trendsetter and primary source of knowledge is currently fading. In the meantime, other nodes—even in the Jamaican countryside, or abroad—have emerged, sometimes preserving, nourishing, and innovating a know-how that would have otherwise been lost. As one example, Kingston Dub Club founder Gabre Selassie has recounted how he had to travel from Jamaica to London in the early 2000s to purchase a specific piece of custom-built equipment that at the time was no longer in use in Jamaica, even though it was local engineers who had pioneered that design. In his own words: “The London man them kept up that tradition there when Jamaican sounds started to fade more into a phase of ready-made equipment instead of custom-built.<sup>18</sup> Based on an idea of collective and distributed creativity, sonic street technologies and the associated scenes function in a way that resembles oral cultures. In fact, both are performative and based on the ephemeral medium of sound rather than written word. PBR work can help us recognize the value of considering such knowledge systems in a global context.

### **Conclusion: Sound Systems and Knowledge Systems**

With popular street cultures, especially in the Global South, the value and force of PBR is even more profound than when the practices and performances are located in the galleries and theatres of the Global North.<sup>19</sup> This is because often the popular cultures in the Global South do not benefit from the respect and recognition that their uptown “high culture” counterparts take for granted in their comparatively well-funded spaces. Notwithstanding the immense creativity and potential earning power of sonic street technologies, across the Global South it is invariably their subaltern origins that disqualifies their knowledge from contributing to the society at large.

With PBR, popular culture can reveal ways of “thinking otherwise” as a basis for what de Sousa Santos (2014) calls “epistemologies of the South” or de Castro (2014) “cannibal metaphysics,” or what Foucault (1980) calls “subjugated knowledges.” Any power that the sound system scene can exercise in Jamaica is power from below—*puissance* (power-with) shared among members of a community. This, rather than *pouvoir* (power-over) concentrated in the hands of an elite, to make use of an important distinction unavailable in English. It is also in most cases a potential power or a power-*in-potentia*, as it might go unrecognized not only by governments, elites and



scholars, but sometimes even by those who have it “in their own hands.” Rather than acquiescing to this ancient but still relevant distinction between the *theoria* (θεωρία, sight, contemplation) of epistemic knowledge and the *poiesis* of bringing something new into the world, PBR is in a position to challenge the privileging of any one idea of knowledge to the disparagement of others.

With sonic street technologies, both in the Global South and in the Global North, “sounding otherwise” is perhaps even more of an immediate challenge to the establishment than “thinking otherwise.” The likelihood is for it to be labelled as noise, the terrible “other” of sound—and thus policed or silenced. From Kingston to Barranquilla, from Mexico City’s Tepito Market to London’s Notting Hill Carnival, sonic street technologies’ temporary sonic takeover of public space is often met by hostility from the authorities. State repression can include not only stringent sound level regulations, tight security protocols, and costly fines but also use of police and military force.<sup>20</sup> This reflects how power differentials shape the way sound is conceived, produced, and consumed, from the city soundscape to the global music industry. Along lines of race and class, the sound of sonic street technologies should be considered as *Black* noise (D’Aquino 2021). So, the knowledge systems that produce it are then to be described as *Black* (Henriques 2021). This disenfranchisement parallels that of the denizens of the marginalized communities from which it emerges. Hence the JSSF’s challenges in getting their voice heard.

As is to be expected, knowledge comes down to questions of power, which is inevitably about ownership rather than origins. To whom does knowledge belong? When knowledge is reduced to data—as is so often the case—then the answer is very clear—the aggregators, and certainly not the users, whose clicks generate it in the first place (Srnicek 2016). In respect to subcultures, issues of ownership are most often framed around ideas of authenticity and cultural appropriation (Jackson 2019). Such questions are quite acute at a time when traditional big box sound systems struggle to survive in Jamaica while sound systems and reggae and dub festivals are flourishing across Europe. In this context, PBR can undoubtedly play an important role not only in fostering recognition from the outside but also in stimulating self-acknowledgement from participants within the scene. But this has to be done in concert with the local communities, seeking the best way to support practitioners by developing non-extractive methodologies as well as shareable research outputs, such as films and videos capable of recognizing, amplifying, and redistributing existing knowledge. Also, it should be remembered that proprietary ideas of knowledge can be useful, for example where music copyright is used to help ensure that the originators receive financial reward for their work (Mann 2022). But this should not be seen as the only functioning model.

As against any monopoly of knowledge, it makes sense to reverse the Foucauldian paradigm to say *power is knowledge*. It is not the case that *know-what* is disembodied, abstract, and objective, whereas *know-how* is embodied, situated, and subjective. No, both kinds of knowledge are situated: it’s just that the situatedness of power vanquishes other kinds of knowledge. The most important contribution that PBR can make, then, is to mount a critique of epistemic knowledge itself. PBR as practised in the Global South has a particularly important role to play because these alternative *ways-of-knowing* are solely responsible for inventing and sustaining cultural and technological apparatuses such as sound systems in the absence of any of the kind of support such creativity might expect in the Global North. This gives PBR in the Global South additional strength to challenge the “tyranny of the universal,” as Angela Davis describes it.<sup>21</sup> That is the ideological belief that there is only one true knowledge system, as owned and promulgated by the white male of the Global North. Our research aims to think otherwise.

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## Notes

1. A description of the event that provided an initial draft of this article can be found on the *SST Blog*. See D'Aquino (2021).
2. The event was part of an ongoing ERC-funded research project, Sonic Street Technologies (SST), which in part, conducts research on Jamaican audio engineers and their contributions to the lived experience of the audience in the sound system dancehall session. See the SST website, accessed September 20, 2022, <http://sonic-street-technologies.com/>.
3. See, for example, Nordicity (2021).
4. The concept of “musicking” can be very useful here. See Small (1998).
5. The Abyssinians, *Reason Time*, single, Clinch Records, Jamaica, circa 1975.
6. See also the SSO website, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://sites.gold.ac.uk/sound-system-outernational/>.
7. “Politricks” (“politics” + “tricks”) is another word originally from the Rastafarian lingo and commonly used on the island to express the shared distrust toward institutional politics.
8. When the event took place, in February 2022, Jamaica was still awaiting restrictions to be fully lifted. Apart from a short break in the summer of 2021, the entertainment sector was in total or partial lockdown for twenty-five months, from March 2020 to April 2022.
9. The full text of the Noise Abatement Act is available at <https://www.ecolex.org/details/legislation/noise-abatement-act-1997-lex-faoc053280/> (accessed September 20, 2022).
10. On Dub Camp festival, see Sevin (2023); on Black Obsidian see Arts Foundation (2021); on the Dub London Exhibition at the Museum of London, see Museum of London (n.d.).
11. Interviewed by Brian D'Aquino for the SST project in London in November 2022, Mikey Dread noted: “You have to have an apprenticeship, any job you’re doing. Sound system is like a job. When you have apprenticeship you’re going to the pitfalls, but then you don’t go into the pitfalls and just give up. You go into the pitfalls and drag your way off again and then you get going again. That’s the importance of having an apprenticeship in sound system.”
12. See, for example, Santos (2018).
13. See the *SST Blog*, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://sonic-street-technologies.com/category/blog/>.
14. Sounds of the Future will be made available in late 2023 on the SST *YouTube* channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@sonicstreettechnologies>) as part of the project’s video archive.
15. The date chosen was also not the best to serve the cause, as it immediately followed the Sum Fest festival that gathered authorities, the media, and thousands of dancehall professionals and fans on the opposite side of the island.
16. One example, the music of the Maranhão state in north Brazil is reggae. The first author of this piece was told that the most popular current reggae they play is from artists in the Solomon Islands.
17. See Sonic Map, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://sonic-street-technologies.com/sonic-map/>.
18. This is quoted from another SST research documentary entitled *Rockers Sound Station: Tales of the Kingston Dub Club* which will be available on the SST *YouTube* channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@sonicstreettechnologies>) later this year.

19. See for example Barrett and Bolt (2017) and Nelson (2022). Also, to note, the PEER Lab at UCLA have produced a very useful Database for Practice-Based Research, <https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/about/community-engagement/peer-lab/> (accessed September 20, 2022).
20. For example, on Kingston, Jamaica, see Lewis (2017), and on Barranquilla, Colombia, see Avendaño (2019).
21. See the report on Davis's speech to a gathering of Ferguson protesters in St. Louis in 2015 in Murawski (2017).

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