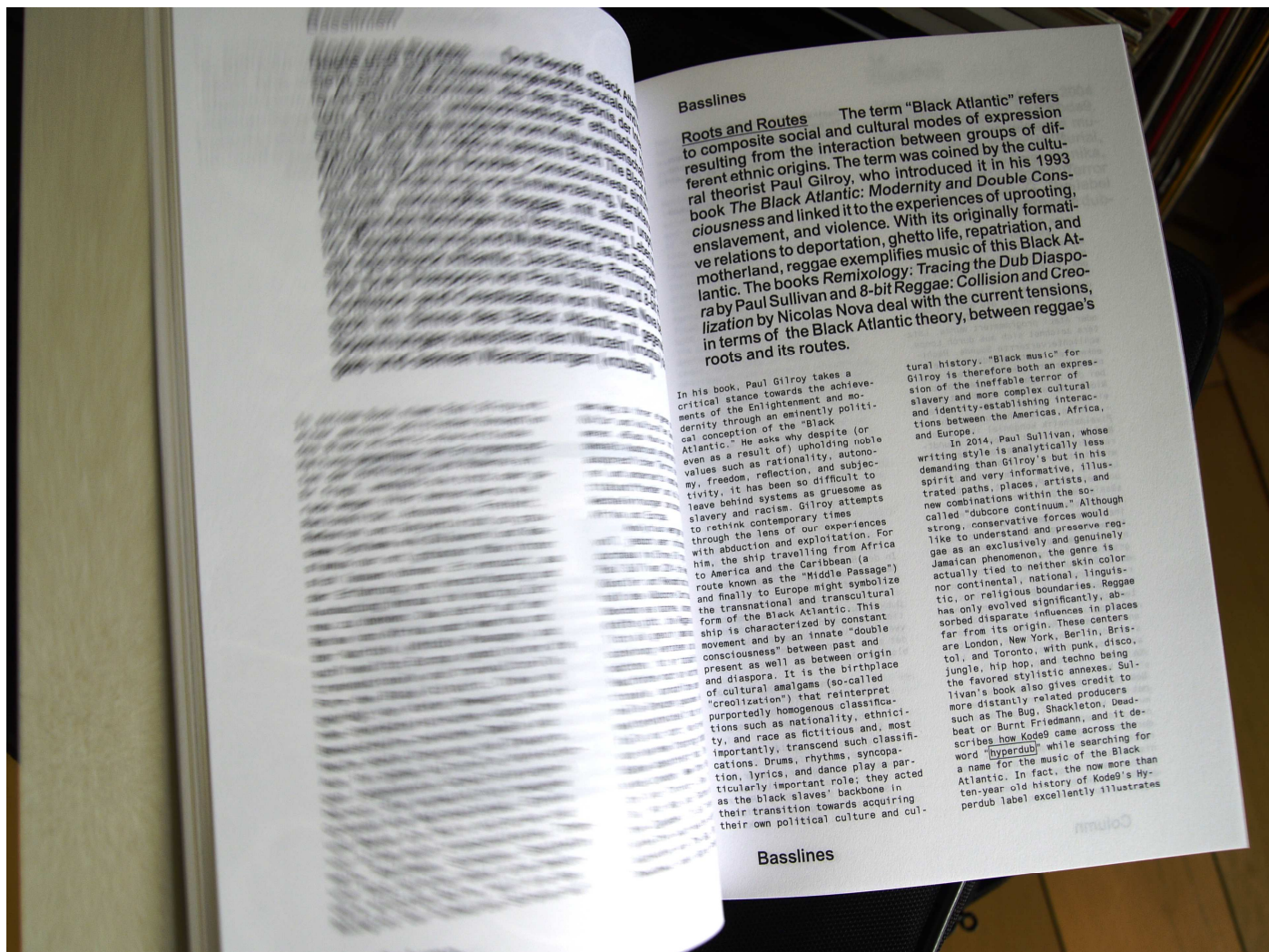


Basslines 4: Roots and Routes

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Annotated version with sound and text references

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*The term “Black Atlantic” refers to composite social and cultural modes of expression resulting from the interaction between groups of different ethnic origins. The term was coined by the cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, who introduced it in his 1993 book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* and linked it to the experiences of uprooting, enslavement, and violence. With its originally formative relations to deportation, ghetto life, repatriation, and motherland, reggae exemplifies music of the Black Atlantic.¹ The books *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora* by Paul Sullivan and *8-bit Reggae: Collision and Creolization* by Nicolas Nova deal with the current tensions, in terms of the Black Atlantic theory, between reggae’s roots and its routes.²*

In his book, Paul Gilroy takes a critical stance towards the achievements of the Enlightenment and modernity through an eminently political conception of the “Black Atlantic”.³ He asks why despite (or even as a result) of upholding noble values such as rationality, autonomy, freedom, reflection,

¹ See Basslines 2: www.comfortnoise.com/blog/2015/06/zweikommasieben-magazin-11-basslines-2.html

² Gilroy, p. 133

³ Gilroy, chapter 1: *The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity*.

and subjectivity, it has been so difficult to leave behind systems as gruesome as slavery and racism. Gilroy attempts to rethink contemporary times through the lens of our experiences with abduction and exploitation. For him, the ship travelling from Africa to America and the Caribbean (a route known as the „Middle Passage“) and finally to Europe might symbolize the transnational and transcultural form of the Black Atlantic. This ship is characterized by constant movement and a by an innate „double consciousness“⁴ between past and present as well as between origin and diaspora.⁵ It is the birthplace of cultural amalgams (so-called „creolization“⁶) that reinterpret purportedly homogenous classifications such as nationality, ethnicity, and race as fictitious and, most importantly, transcend such classifications. Drums, rhythms, syncopation, lyrics and dance play a particularly important role; they acted as the black slaves' backbone in their transition towards acquiring their own political culture and cultural history. „Black music“ for Gilroy is therefore both an expression of the ineffable terror of slavery and more complex cultural and identity-establishing interactions between the Americas, Africa and Europe.⁷

In 2014, Paul Sullivan, whose writing style is analytically less demanding than Gilroy's but in his spirit and very informative, illustrated paths, places, artists, and new combinations within the so-called „dubcore continuum“.⁸ Although strong, conservative forces would like to understand and preserve reggae as an exclusively and genuinely Jamaican phenomenon, the genre is actually tied to neither skin color nor continental, national, linguistic or religious boundaries. Reggae has only evolved significantly absorbed disparate influences in places far from its origin. These centers are London, New York, Berlin, Bristol and Toronto, with punk, disco, jungle, hip hop and techno being the favored stylistic annexes. Sullivan's book also gives credit to more distantly related producers such as The Bug, Shackleton, Deadbeat or Burnt Friedmann, and it describes how Kode9 came across the word „Hyperdub“ while searching for a name for the music of the Black Atlantic.⁹ In fact, the now more-than-ten-year old history of Kode9's Hyperdub label excellently illustrates how specific cultural fragments are borrowed, opposed, and regrouped *without* the necessity of fixed rules, pure forms, or, finally, defined places.¹⁰

One of the most remarkable manifestations of the dubcore continuum today is 8-bit reggae.¹¹ This scion combines the aesthetic of dub and sound system culture with that of the 1980s chip music programmed into the game consoles of Nintendo, Commodore, and Atari.¹² The latter is characterized by loops, lo-fi/distorted sounds, square waves, chirped arpeggios, and characteristic motifs such the one attached to Super Mario's jumps, for example.¹³ 8-bit reggae is the focal point of Nicolas Nova's 2014 book, whose layout is like-minded in its use of basic colors and pixel aesthetics. Through the use of QR codes, each page of the book also provides an according soundtrack. Probably the most important center of 8-bit reggae is Leipzig, home of the Jahtari label¹⁴ and its chief-producer Disrupt. What innovatively began as a free internet label in 2004, now accordingly boasts an impressive catalogue of excellent vinyl releases. Despite resorting to past forms (Jam-

⁴ This concept goes back to W. E. B. Du Bois. See Gilroy, chapter 4: „Cheer The Weary Traveller“: W. E. B. Du Bois, Germany, and the Politics of (Dis)placement.

⁵ Gilroy dedicates the entire chapter 6 to the culture of diaspora: „Not a Story to Pass On“: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime.

⁶ This term has been coined by Edouard Glissant in his book „Poetics of Relation“ (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁷ Gilroy illustrates his view with numerous examples in chapter 2: „Jewels Brought from Bondage“: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity.

⁸ This term leans on Simon Reynolds' „Hardcore Continuum“ (The Wire, 1992-99): www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/the-wire-300-simon-reynolds-on-the-hardcore-continuum-introduction

⁹ Sullivan, p. 144

¹⁰ www.hyperdub.net – Hyperdub on Discogs: www.discogs.com/label/25386-Hyperdub

¹¹ Alternative designations in relevant forums are: „happiness bass“, 8-bit dancehall“, „digital laptop reggae“, „chip dancehall“, „C64 reggae“, „casio riddim“, „bleep steppa“ (Nova, p. 73)

¹² A single representative example for an original 8-bit reggae tune is „Sunset Dub“ by Quarta 330 on Hyperdub (HDB007): <https://youtu.be/tjBOqPDXEog>

¹³ Nova, p. 60

¹⁴ www.jahtari.org – Jahtari on Discogs: www.discogs.com/label/65564-Jahtari

my's first digidub and ragga tunes¹⁵, rudimentary video game sounds, analog production techniques, and vinyl publication¹⁶), 8-bit reggae is anything but a retro genre.¹⁷ Its amazing suitability to clubs is based on a sound design that would never before have been thinkable or feasible.

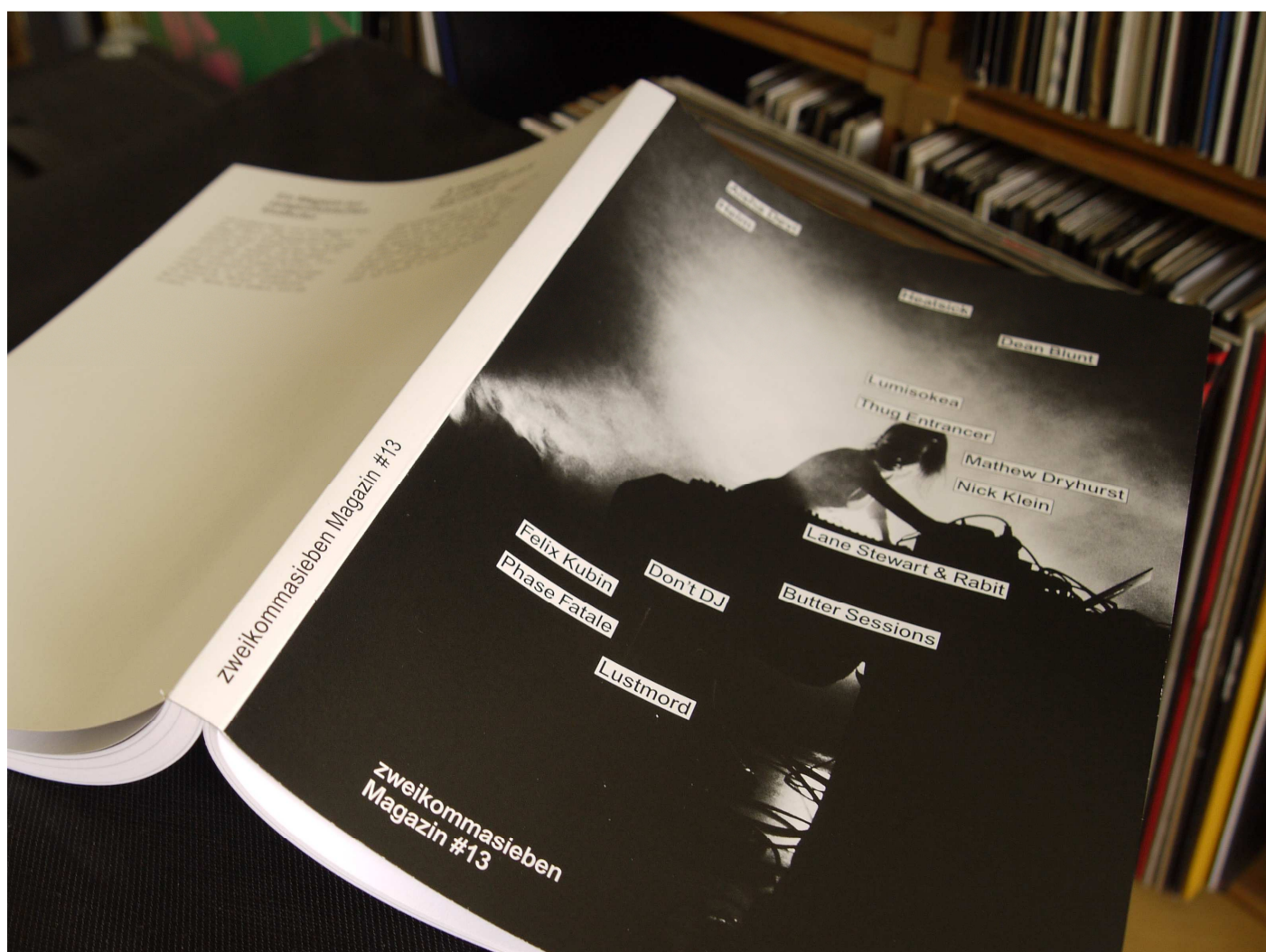
What Gilroy had conceived of in the early nineties, before the age of the internet and low-cost airlines, has now, via 8-bit reggae, manifested itself in fresh and improbable dimensions of interconnectedness and amalgamation. German, French, Polish, Australian, Japanese and Jamaican producers, singers and MCs all develop in parallel a reggae-indebted hybrid of musical firepower and wit.¹⁸ Although hardly any longer „black” and politically rather harmless 8-bit reggae is culturally, musically and socially nothing less than a prodigy of the Black Atlantic.

Literature

Gilroy, Paul (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Nova, Nicolas (2014). *8-bit Reggae: Collision and Creolization*. Geneva/Paris: Near Future Laboratory + Volumique.

Sullivan, Paul (2014). *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora*. London: Reaktion Books.



¹⁵ Following compilation with the great „Synchro Start“ at the beginning is representative for this sound: www.youtube.com/watch?v=WU2kiMMU0Sk – as well of course „Under Mi Sleng Teng“ by Wayne Smith: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRhM4aljCDM

¹⁶ See Basslines 3: www.comfortnoise.com/blog/2016/01/zweikommasieben-magazin-12-basslines-3.html

¹⁷ See Basslines 1: www.comfortnoise.com/blog/2014/12/zweikommasieben-magazin-10-basslines-1.html

¹⁸ See for example „I Am A Robot“ by Pupajim on Jahtari (JTR7-06): www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IKsfQdWP2M – The mix „Level UP“ by Jahtari X Uprooted Sunshine with Blaise Deville on the controls puts these aesthetics developed in Leipzig in a nutshell: <https://soundcloud.com/blaise-deville/jahtari-x-uprooted-sunshine>

