

Basslines – „I and I“

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Annotated version with sound and text references

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*„I and I“ is a Jamaican phrase from Rasta and Reggae culture. It originally meant that I, you and all other people are equal before God. In today’s usage, the religious sense hardly comes through at all any more. Outsiders can at best guess that what is meant is ‚we‘, rather than ‚I‘. The characteristic repetition of ‚I‘ brings to mind the self glorification that is often heard when Reggae artists are asked about their personal histories. However, this is not only a shameless expression of male self-regard, but also a formulaic linguistic usage that is typical of the oral tradition. Beth Lesser’s (2012) hugely informative book *Rub-a-Dub Style: The Roots of Modern Dancehall* provides an unintentional illustration of the oral aspects of Reggae culture. It is both an intelligently arranged and questionable collection of quotations, from which „I and I“ has been marginalised for good reasons.*

Essentially, Beth Lesser takes stock of the period around the fire that Lee Perry himself started in his *Black Ark Studio* (1983¹) and the release of Wayne Smith’s *Sleng Teng* (1985²). This was the end of the line for one of the most innovative, seminal Reggae and Dub producers and the beginning of the digital era, which turned all established structures upside down. Unlike Lloyd Bradley, who diagnosed a dramatic decline in

¹ See Katz, 2013, p. 355.

² See Lesser, 2012, p. 287.

quality and final collapse in this time period³, Lesser documents how in this phase, Rub-a-Dub laid the foundations on which Dancehall and all the other descendants of Reggae and Dub music would build. However, it is significant that Lesser never explains exactly what she understands the term „Rub-a-Dub“ to mean.⁴ It is a typical, unresolved, and ambiguous name for the Reggae of that period.

The strength just as much as the weakness of the book is that Lesser depicts the deejays, producers, sound systems, studios and working conditions by letting the artists speak in their own words.⁵ Indeed, their extensive verbatim conversations are neither substantiated nor subjected to critical evaluation. It is also apparent that the quotations have been edited, since the Patois appears to be uniform in spelling and has been rendered so that it is easy to understand. That is probably why the difficult expression „I and I“ only appears once in this book, namely in lyrics.⁶ In spite of the authenticity suggested by her *content*, Lesser does not necessarily present us with facts, but rather everyday stories, which primarily document how knowledge is conveyed and spoken in this culture. For example, it is striking that the appearance of songs on the so-called „charts“ is frequently mentioned in the book. But no information is provided on the sources or validity of these best sellers charts.⁷ A number one hit is apparently objective proof of the quality and success of the work itself. The same occurs when the book mentions how long songs remained on the charts. This kind of talk appears in Lesser's book in 64 places, or on average every 5.5 pages. And 26 of these passages refer explicitly to the top position on the charts. One should not take these stereotypical, essentially unverifiable, and rather tiresome statements literally, but rather as characteristic ways of speaking.

The American psycholinguist Walter Ong (2012) characterizes the oral tradition in contrast to writing as being both formulaic, redundant, sequential, repetitive, rhythmic, illustrative, situational, and also empathic, pugnacious, and tending towards conservatism. The first of these descriptors apply quite well to the example of the best seller charts. The last mentioned qualities also apply to the content and structure of Roots Reggae with its affinity for traditionalism, if not fundamentalism. During the socially and politically precarious phase of Jamaica's transition to independence, Reggae music was an identity-building phenomenon. The population of the ghettos is descended from ancestors who were carried off as slaves and exploited, and who were forbidden to learn how to read. These people were denied access to cultural knowledge that was stored in writing. The culture of the spoken word had to make up for the traumatic effects of deportation, the loss of roots, and of course for slavery itself. Oral storytelling, and songs and rhythms that go back to African roots thus gradually took on existential meaning, if not godly power. In oral cultures⁸, music can take on extraordinary meaning because the auditory sense often takes precedence over the visual.

³ See the [Basslines column in zweikommasieben #15](#).

⁴ However, see the vague and sudden derivation on page 51 (Lesser, 2012).

⁵ Katz (2012) on the other hand, indicates the oral narration („An Oral History“) already in his book title. Although, he also doesn't elaborate on the implications, he states that because of the variety of opinions and spontaneous statements, certain inconsistencies couldn't be avoided (ibid., pp. 7f.).

⁶ See Lesser, 2012, p. 308.

⁷ Lesser explicitly mentions national (Jamaican), British, singles, and also weekly charts of radio stations: It is a very heterogeneous charts group.

⁸ Reggae's orality belongs to the so-called „residual orality“, that is to say, a culture that knows literacy but uses it in a limited way (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orality>).

Several times in the formulation about the bestseller charts, the phrase that is used is that the songs ‚hit‘ the charts. The effect of dubplates on sound system parties is described in similar terms: They ‚mash up the dance‘. Both formulations refer to force and discontinuity based on the history of the artists, ancestors, and the reality of the ghettos; at the same time, these words stage a triumphal resurrection. While the messages in Roots Reggae are often heartening, identity building, and intended to enlighten⁹, the Dub versions take the path of detachment, fragmentation and disintegration.¹⁰ The music thus comments on the experience of poverty and offers a way out. In terms of artistic practice, there is sometimes little distance between original, innovative structures and flat, uninspired reproductions, and consequently between original work and plagiarism. But under the conditions of orality such distinctions are inadequate, anyway. So it is not surprising that such competent authors as Lesser and Bradley arrive at completely contrasting judgments of Dancehall.

The master narrative of Beth Lesser’s book, that is, the narrative that takes priority over all its variations, can be formulated as follows: „No one wanted to release my song. But then the dubplate mashed the parties up, the single hit the charts, and it stayed at number one for months.“ That is exactly how *Sleng Teng’s* success story made the rounds.¹¹ One can take this to mean: Every person may be equal before God, but this is certainly not true of songs – and maybe therefore their authors. Condensed into a catchy formula, the reggae artists, habitual self-presentations, the often seemingly confused Rasta religiosity, and the tragic, unfair, yet still today effective and endlessly to be repeated history is: „I and I is number one!“

Literature

Katz, David (2012). *Solid Foundation: An Oral History of Reggae (revised and expanded edition)*. London: Jawbone Press.

Katz, David (2006). *People Funny Boy: The Genius of Lee “Scratch” Perry*. London: Omnibus Press.

Lesser, Beth (2012). *Rub-a-Dub Style: The Roots of Modern Dancehall*. Toronto: Beth Kingston.

Ong, Walter (2012). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (30th anniversary edition)*. New York City: Routledge.

In this column, Marius ‚Comfortnoise‘ Neukom introduces book publications that relate in various ways to dub culture. He contextualizes each publication, describes its guiding principles, and expands on its author’s thoughts. An annotated version of this column with supplemental sound and text references can be found [here](#).

⁹ See the [Basslines column in zweikommasieben #15](#).

¹⁰ See the [Basslines column in zweikommasieben #11](#).

¹¹ See e.g. Lesser, 2012, pp. 287ff. or Katz, 2012, pp. 347f..

