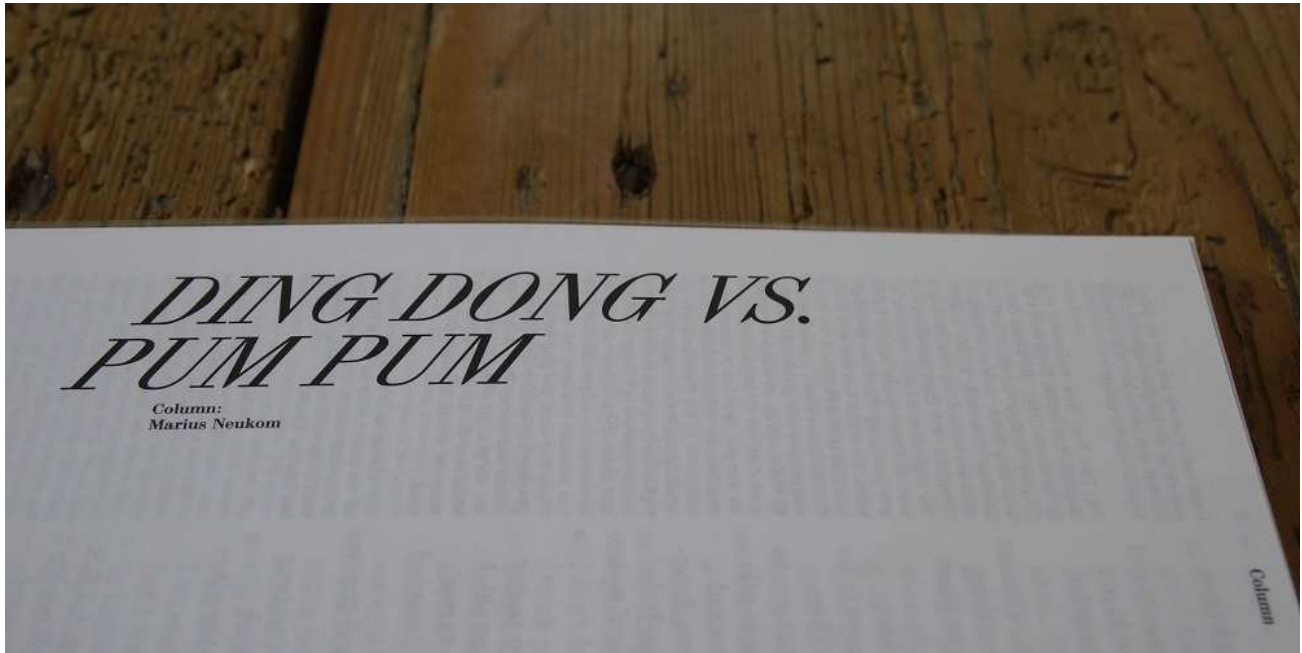


Basslines – Ding Dong vs. Pum Pum

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Annotated version with sound and text references

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Within the European West, discussions on the representation of sexuality and gender in today's dancehall culture often result in head-shaking. The observation of forced masculinity, contempt for women, homophobia, and violence have led to a complete lack of understanding, strong condemnation, and sometimes even concert bans. Although such reactions are comprehensible, it is surprising how often they are characterized by an unreflected self-righteousness. In her book, Inna di Dancehall. Popular Culture and the Politics of Identity in Jamaica, Donna P. Hope presented a revealing description of dancehall culture already back in 2006.

Much has been written on dancehall culture before and after Hope's book¹ but Inna di Dancehall stands out because the author is personally involved with and close to the subject. Her book is the preliminary arrival after a journey not only through the dancefloor but also through Jamaican society: from the dancehall fan to the dancehall researcher, and from the rural working class to the social hotbeds of the big city. She observes keenly, writes vividly, theorizes with restraint, and refrains from politicizing and judging. Such qualities are, unfortunately, often lost in other, more academically-oriented publications on this topic, especially when they raise allegations of sexism and racism and try to substantiate their claims with far-reaching theoretical discussions.

¹ In the meantime Hope has published further books (Hope, 2010, 2013 & 2015) as an author and editor.

In the chapter on gender and sexuality of Inna di Dancehall, Hope refers to a hierarchy of the skin² in the context of race, class, and gender: At the top is the white man, followed by the white woman. Next comes the colored man and then the colored woman, after which is the black man and finally, at the very bottom, the black woman. This ranking has historical roots in colonialism and slavery, originating from distinct European patriarchal structures. With this hierarchy in mind, Hope concludes that the gender order within dancehall culture is not accidentally prone to sexism and heteronormativity in which biological gender, gender identity, and gender roles are consistently drawn as either superior male or inferior female, and in which the 'natural' and solely acceptable and healthy form of sexual intercourse must be heterosexual. In particular, she shows that the female ideals of beauty are closely related to European ideals; for instance, improving one's appearance by straightening one's hair or by the harmful practice of bleaching one's skin.³ She also notes opposites such as the ideal of female obesity, which is sometimes aided through the use of hormone pills.⁴

Such themes are reflected in many song lyrics and music videos, and often appear in more-or-less encrypted forms. For example, in "Love Punaany Bad" (1998)⁵, Shabba Ranks sings: "... love punaany bad, / mi a punaany guineagog⁶" (I love vaginas⁷ very much / I am a vagina master). The genital organ represents the entire female person, who, while highly esteemed, must of course be taken possession of. This male perspective is complemented by equivalent phrases of female artists, showing how both sides support stereotypes and fantasies through such reductive, binary thinking.⁸ In "Boom Wuk" (2004)⁹, for example, Tanya Stephens sings: "It's all about the sex / Mi jus love off you boom wuk / Love the way you have mi pum pum stuck / ... / "Love the long ding dong" (It's all about the sex / I just love how you fuck / I love the way you're stuck in my vagina / ... / I love the long penis). The quality of sexual intercourse is determined not only by penis length but also by how violent the sexual intercourse is. In the duet, "Ramping Shop" (2009)¹⁰, Spice sings the following with Vybz Kartel: "Well you haffi ram it hard (...) kill mi wid di cocky" (Well you have to push hard (...) kill me with your penis). In Addicted (2017)¹¹, Popcaan almost entirely eliminates the female subject when he sings: "Gyal, me nuh waah fight everyday a di week / Me know you waah me / And you tight fat pum pum a fight fi me see it» (Girl, I don't want to fight every day of the week / I know you want me / And your tight fat vagina will fight so that I get to see it)."

² Hope, 2006, p. 39

³ Hope, 2006, pp. 40f.

⁴ These pills are used in the broiler industry to enhance the growth of chickens (Hope, 2006, p. 41).

⁵ Hope, 2006, p. 48 – www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuPx3R8cr78

⁶ Hope, 2006, p. 49 – Hope translates „guineagog“ with „master“ which seems to be imprecise (see www.bloodandfire.co.uk/db/viewtopic.php?p=187185&sid=e29943db176f5af3dfbabd498b66f9d3). Perhaps more suitable would be „overachiever“, „striver“ or „nerd“.

⁷ It is worth to distinguish between penis and phallus as well as vagina and vulva – the part of the body and its symbolic representation. The cited texts rather seem to indicate the tangible part of the body than symbolizations. The comprehension/interpretation is up to the recipients, not least because these are artistic products. The differentiation between the denomination and the sign allows the access to the semiotic theories for instance by Saussure or Peirce that can be connected to psycholinguistic and psychoanalytic theories (such as symbolization, mentalization, concretism or castration). They allow reflexion on gender relations in the intrapsychic and social context.

⁸ Tanya Stephens' "Yuh nuh ready fi dis yet, bwoy" (You are not ready for this yet, boy) from the year 1997 is still relatively harmless about telling off immature males (Hope, 2006, p. 51). – www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzavxXO9r_4 – pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/10022-the-50-best-dancehall-songs-of-all-time/?page=3

⁹ See A. Kasafi Perkins: *Love the Long Ding Dong*, in: Hope, 2013, pp. 94-123. – www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvfhjvzQU_s

¹⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=DL8x_G7wANY

¹¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQoOCVZAP7o – <https://genius.com/Popcaan-addictive-annotated>

Long ding dong vs pum pum: These texts reveal a gender struggle from which highly problematic and psychodynamically unavoidable consequences such as contempt of women, violence, and homophobia¹², emerge.¹³ Due to dancehall's tendency to name and also exaggerate central issues of everyday life, these themes are represented in controversial 'slackness', 'rudebwoy' and homophobic 'batty' tunes.¹⁴ But do such words depict the external world and behaviors? No. First and foremost, they are artifacts, and as such an image of the (unconscious) fantasies that emerge from the above-mentioned gender order. Because not everyone is able to adequately differentiate between imagination and external reality, confusion and unacceptable behavior is bound to result.

The circumstances surrounding the lived roles and behavior of men and women within dancehall culture are by no means as simple and clear-cut as the lyrics imply. With her book, Hope presents a fascinating kaleidoscope of roles and nuances in the context of sexuality and violence.¹⁵ Although they are related to the gender hierarchy, they are more complex than what is found in music lyrics and videos: 'independent ooman', 'matie', 'skettel', 'babymother', 'browning queen' and 'slack, black queen' are just some sounding examples of diverse female roles that can be found in this scene.

While it might not be a good idea to play the above-quoted songs without reflection in Europe¹⁶, if we Europeans believe that we should be outraged, intervene, enlighten, regulate, or even sanction in the name of justice, we are hypocritically ignoring the fact that sexism is not uncommon in our (electronic) music scenes.¹⁷ We also deliberately overlook the fact that our own culture is the starting point for the gender order seen in dancehall culture. Our interventions threaten to end up as cultural imperialism that reveals how little we have learned from the past 200 years of history.

Literature:

- Hope, D.P. (Ed.) (2015). *Reggae from Yaad. Traditional and Emerging Themes in Jamaican Popular Music*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers.
- Hope, D.P. (Ed.) (2013). *International Reggae. Current and future Trends in Jamaican Popular Music*. Kingston: Pelican Publishers Limited.
- Hope, D.P. (2010). *Man Vibes: Masculinities in the Jamaican Dancehall*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers.
- Hope, D.P. (2006). *Inna di Dancehall: Popular Culture and the Politics of Identity in Jamaica*. Kingston: University of West Indies Press.

¹² Heterosexuality originates in the suppression of homoerotic tendencies that can be found in all individuals capable of maintaining relationships (see e.g. S. Freud, 1905; *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie (Three essays on the theory of sexuality)*, Studienausgabe, Bd 5, S. 37-145, Frankfurt a/M: Fischer (1962, trans. James Strachey, New York: Basic Books)). Homoeroticism questions and threatens therefore every severely aligned heteronormative identity. For instance, it can be defended by projecting it on other individuals and denouncing it there. The result is a devaluing, hostile, militant attitude towards homosexuality whose mere existence is experienced as threatening (homophobia).

¹³ As already mentioned in the Basslines Column in the zweikommasieben Magazin #15, Prince Busters *Wreck a Pum Pum* (1967 – <https://youtu.be/Tu-fkomKxXk>) documents a remarkable sexualization of the lyrics already in ska. Statements by male djs/singers demonstrating a questionable attitude towards the female gender have existed in genuine Jamaican music long time before dancehall.

¹⁴ See the Basslines Column in the zweikommasieben Magazin #15.

¹⁵ Hope, 2006, pp. 54ff.

¹⁶ See E. Köhlings & P. Lilly: *From One Love to One Hate? Europe's Perception of Jamaican Homophobia Expressed in Song Lyrics*, in: Hope, 2013, pp. 2-29.

¹⁷ See for instance <https://groove.de/2017/06/22/giegling-gelebte-utopie/> or <http://groove.de/2016/10/25/club-kultur-diversitaet-kommentar-cristina-plett/> or Jo Burzynska: *Cosey Fanni Tutti: Memoirs of a Woman of Extreme Pleasures*, in: <http://datacide-magazine.com/magazine/datacide-seventeen/>.

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 at www.comfortnoise.com/blog/basslines.html

