Dub Poetry and the Power of Bass

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TRANSCRIPT

Hello, and welcome to Poetry Off the Page. This is the podcast of the research project “Poetry Off the Page: Literary History and the Spoken Word, 1965-2020.” We explore recent developments in British and Irish poetry performance. Find out more about us on www.poetryoffthepage.net.

I’m Rachel Bolle and I am part of the Poetry off the Page team. My project focuses on the aesthetic of dub poetry in the work of the Jamaican-British poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, also known as LKJ.

The brief dub snippet you just heard, taken from Brotheration Records, is intended to highlight the deep, resonant bass that defines dub and reggae music—the soundtrack on which dub poetry is often performed. Dub poetry draws inspiration from these genres, and bass plays an important role in it. It is indeed a key feature associated with the poetic style of dub poetry.

And in this episode I aim to answer the question why the bass is so significant in that poetic tradition. I will contextualise my discussion by looking at the history of dub poetry. I will then use an analysis of LKJ’s poem *Bass Culture* to see manifestation of that bass in a poetic context.

My interest in bass began a long time ago. I vividly remember attending a sound system party in Brixton, hosted by the Jamaican DJ Jah Shaka. I was struck by the sheer power of the bass—it was a deeply visceral experience. I could feel the vibrations through my clothes, my skin, my hair, my heart.

Later, while working on my PhD, I encountered Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poem *Bass Culture*. The entire poem revolves around the bass, which led me to realise its central role in this Caribbean diasporic environment, not just within the music scene but also in the literary world (Bolle-Debessay 252-253).

As a musician, I am naturally drawn to sound and its ability to communicate beyond words. Also, having an Afro-diasporic background, I am particularly interested and aware of the different forms of identification that can happen through sonic experiences. With that in mind, I wanted to use this podcast episode as an opportunity to direct our attention to the sonic dimension of poetry performance.

But first, some historical context of dub poetry. The term dub poetry appeared in the late 1970s and refers to a type of Afro-Caribbean poetry that can be presented in various formats. A dub poem can be performed live, studio-recorded, with or without music, or appear in print. In the UK, dub poetry is represented by pioneering poets such as Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Michael Smith, and Benjamin Zephaniah, to name just a few. Dub poetry emerged within a Caribbean community where social injustices shaped a consciousness and militancy expressed in literature, music, and visual arts. It has its roots in the style of Jamaican DJs from the 1950s, and the poetry is deeply politicised. Both poets and DJs provide 'witty social and political commentary' on musical tracks, functioning as underground media (Markham 36). This political responsibility is central to the poetic practice. It is used to document social and racial injustices and to denounce the brutal police attacks on black youth common at the time.

LKJ also came to poetry through politics. Born in Jamaica, he moved to the UK in 1963. He then became involved in the Black Panther movement in London, an organisation that fought for the rights of black people and racial minorities in the country. There, he discovered Black literature. He became inspired to articulate in verse how he and his generation of black youth felt about growing up in a racialised society. The link between the development of dub poetry and the poets' political engagement is undeniable.

In 2014, about 40 years after the poetry's first popular years, the Jamaican writer Kei Miller published a eulogy announcing the death of the form. He argued that because the political urgency that prompted the emergence of that poetry no longer exists, the form began 'dying away' (Miller n.p.). This premature eulogy is problematic as it limits the emergence and the life of that poetic style to a specific time frame and restricted geographical space. In such a view, the sole *raison d'être* of the poetry is the political environment in which the poet lives and writes. At the Ostróda Reggae Festival in 2019, the poet Oku Onuora, interviewed by Bartosz Wójcik, reminded us

that dub poets act as social reporters, connecting their work to both local and international consciousness, without being restricted to historical and geographical boundaries.

Extract from an Oku Onura Interview

As I have argued extensively in my doctoral dissertation, dub poetry arises from the fruitful intersections of diverse literary and performance traditions circulating within the cultures of the Black Atlantic. While it is undoubtedly shaped by the poet's immediate surroundings and the local context in which the writing occurs, I contend that the development of this poetic form cannot be reduced to a localised cause-and-effect dynamic. Rather, its evolution must be understood within a broader framework of Black political expression that transcends the boundaries of the immediate environment in which the poetry is produced.

In broadening the analytical lens, I propose that sound plays an important role in the transmission of political expression that reverberates beyond the geographically and historically specific context outlined by Miller. Instead of relying on the conventional approach that prioritises textual analysis as a means of interpreting social conditions—an approach often limited to descriptions of the local environment that the poetry addresses—I emphasise the role of sound in articulating a political commitment. This approach situates dub poetry in dialogue with other cultural forms such as blues poetry, jazz poetry, and rap, all of which share a recognition of sound as a medium for political expression.

Extract from an LKJ Interview with Paul Gilroy

The extract that you've just heard is part of a conversation between LKJ and Paul Gilroy, the sociologist and cultural studies scholar. Situated in the deep structure of sound, in the low frequencies of the bass that often characterise the aesthetic of that poetic style, the political discourse found in the poetry can be understood both in the immediacy of its delivery and within a broader cultural context.

Before delving into the poem *Bass Culture*, let's look at the importance of the bass in dub poetry. Dub poetry is often associated with the phrase "bass culture," first used by LKJ to title the poem discussed here, and later as the name of one of his albums. The term "bass culture" is commonly employed to describe heavy bass-driven genres like reggae, ska, dub, jungle, drum and bass, garage, dubstep, and grime.

Black music journalist Lloyd Bradley used it as the title of his book on reggae history, discussing how the production, diffusion, and consumption of heavy bass govern practices from Kingston to London. The book extends the term beyond music, referring also to “a people . . . a culture . . . an attitude, a way of life” (Bradley 3). Mykaell Riley, director of the Black Music Research Unit and PI for Bass Culture Research at Westminster University, says that it is as much “about the instruments, techniques, and performances captured in recordings as much as it is about the culture and location of our accumulated experience” (Mykaell Riley 144).

In the dub poem *Bass Culture*, written in 1980, bass serves as the central motif. The poem captures the culture and highlights the accumulated experience expressed in the bass. It is a description of the bass’s social functions and its effects. It is also about the sonic qualities of that instrument. The poem evokes a sound system, an immersive street party with loud and heavy music, very common in reggae culture. The poem has been described as a ‘meta dub’ as there is a self-reflexivity on the use of reggae, and more particularly the bass, in the political activism of the poetry (Bucknor 263). The poem expresses through words what reggae music conveys through sound. Natural imagery associated with strength and violence is used to describe this bass: volcano core, thunder, lightning. Vocabulary expressing extreme violence is also used: ‘muzik of blood,’ ‘frightful form,’ ‘righteous harm,’ ‘form resembling madness,’ ‘boun fi harm di wicked.’ Strength and violence resonate with the sociological reading of the bass discussed earlier in LKJ and Gilroy’s exchange. Contrasting this overwhelming violence, there is also a sense of general love that emerges from the final lines:

> still breedin love / far more mellow /than di soun of shapes chanting loudly SCATTA- MATTA- SHATTA- SHACK! What a beat!

There is joy in the recognition of the aggressive force of the bass. The immersive experience in sound that the poem proposes through its description of a night in a sound system is embedded in ambiguous feelings of joy and pain, bad and good, pressure and relief.

When the poem moves to the space of the performance and is accompanied by music, the actual sound of the bass is an added element. We do not simply read about the bass; we also hear its sound in the recording. This new sonic layer

introduces the presence of low frequencies in a different way. Interestingly, these low frequencies are not only conveyed through the instrument itself but are also embodied in the poet's voice during the performance.

Extract from LKJ and Caspar Melville

Let's explore how this talking bass unfolds in the audio version of the poem. Due to copyright restrictions, I can't play the entire poem here, but you can easily find it on YouTube by searching *Bass Culture LKJ* or by clicking the link provided below. Instead, I'll guide you through the listening experience, drawing your attention to some key sonic features.

Bass Culture

We hear a heavy bass running through the whole poem. To convey the struggles of everyday life and the state of emergency in which people live, LKJ uses a voice that "sounds" like a bass. The poet's declamatory style strongly correlates with the movement of the bass. After a short pick-up phrase played only by the drums, the poet begins reciting. From the very start, his vocalisation mirrors both the melodic and rhythmic lines of the bass. To emphasise this symmetry, both the voice and the bass pause simultaneously. This shared musical and vocal silence reinforces the connection between the poet's voice and the bass. The joint break acts as an introductory phase, presenting the relationship between the two. To get a sense of how the voice and bass interact, and to hear the sound of LKJ's "talking bass", I have extracted them both from the recording. In the following audio, which corresponds to the first few seconds of the poem, you will hear the voice and then the bass.

Extracts from *Bass Culture* (isolated vocals and bass)

Right from the start, we hear the sound of the poet's talking bass. Phrases like 'Bubble an di bounce', 'bubblin bass', or 'di leap and di weight-drop', which come right after this introduction, refer to specific qualities of the bass soundscape. The use of alliteration on the consonant "b" is another strategy to bring the sound of the bass into the performance of LKJ's talking bass. Around one minute into the poem, in the stanza starting with "spirit riled…", we are surprised by a change of declamatory style. Here, the poet's voice breaks free from the melodic and rhythmic constraints of the bass. Here again, to highlight this transition, I have

isolated the voice from the musical accompaniment. In this audio, we hear how the voice moves between different declamatory styles.

Extract from *Bass Culture*

Mimetic movements between the voice and the bass are back at ‘SCATTA – MATTA – SHATTA - SHACK’ and continue until the end. Going back to the print version, this return of the talking bass is also marked through the use of a different font. Indeed, it is the only line that is written in capital letters. The sudden change makes the words appear shouted or louder than what comes before, and associates them with the sound of the bass, just like in the performance, when the poet returns to a voice that mimics that bass.

In *Bass Culture*, the poet explores the possibilities of aural communication that operate in the non-verbal space created by the sound of the performance. The political commitment to addressing actual life, everyday struggles, and the "state of emergency" (to borrow LKJ’s words) is expressed not only through the choice of words and their semantic meaning but also through the poet’s engagement with and commitment to low frequencies. The above discussion does not contradict Kei Miller’s observations about the connection between the political urgency behind dub poetry’s emergence and the creative drive shaping its poetics. Its development is undeniably rooted in a political commitment. However, rather than situating its *raison d’être* strictly within a specific historical or geographical context, this podcast episode invites us to hear how the realities of Black lives and their everyday challenges in a racist society are reflected in the deep structure of sound. In so doing, dub poetry’s sociopolitical engagement is not only understood from the specific references of the written text. Instead, it uses a sound in which the tensions of urban society are expressed and recognised as rooted in legacies of racial oppression. A sound in which a state of emergency is heard in the dreadness of the bass. And this expression in sound makes dub poetry resonate with broader patterns of racial injustice that continue to shape our contemporary context, extending its relevance far beyond the spatio-temporal limits that Miller’s eulogy might otherwise suggest.

Here, I have merely opened a pathway to thinking about the complex interplay between aesthetic choices – in other words, the *talking bass* and its different

manifestations – and political commitment. I hope this episode will inspire further interest in the sound of poetry. With that, I bid you farewell for now.

You've been listening to Rachel Bolle, at Poetry off the Page Project. Thank you.

The "Poetry Off the Page" project is based at the University of Vienna. It is conducted in collaboration with the poetry organisation Apples & Snakes and supported by the European Research Council and the Austrian Science Fund. You can find out more about the project and all our partners on www.poetryoffthepage.net. Our podcast page there includes a list of references and the transcript of this episode.

Finally, don't forget to follow us on Instagram, Facebook, Bluesky, and Spotify.

My particular thanks go to Bartosz Wójcik, Caspar Melville, Paul Gilroy, and Linton Kwesi Johnson Records for giving me permission to use the archival material.