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## **Dub: Rhythm, Rhyme, Roots**

Tamara Belinfanti

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## TAMARA BELINFANTI

I grew up in a household where food, music, and language reigned. My mother cooked the most mouth-watering curry chicken and was a stickler for words. While in med school, my father joined an up and coming reggae band, and as a result our small house was filled with music.

Alongside these general memories are more specific ones, like my mother reading to me at night from *The Book of 365 Nursery Rhymes*. This book had a red clothbound hard cover that made me feel like I was about to embark on adventure, and the rhymes and accompanying colorful illustrations on the inside fulfilled that promise. After my cup of Milo and brushing my teeth, I would snuggle down in my bed with Clownie, my beloved stuffed clown who was now down to one eye, and my mother would sit next to me as she began our night time ritual, which was to read *all* of the 365 nursery rhymes contained in that clothbound book. There was no skipping because I had memorized each one. I loved those rhymes and their turn of phrase, from people losing their sheep and their shoes, to dishes running away with spoons, to—of course—these three men in a tub, or depending on the version we were reading, the three maids in a tub. Nonetheless, the thought of these grown-ups in a tub left many a question, like *Why? How? Where?* similar to the questions that the grown-ups around me would ask as they tried to make sense over Red Stripe and scotch, of the political turmoil in our capital, and this new sound coming out of Downtown Kingston.

This sound was ever evolving and acquiring additional layers, each reminiscent of the one that had come before, yet each entirely its own, from mento, to ska, to roots, to rocksteady, to something called dub. As a child growing up in 1980s Jamaica, I cannot say that I made the connection then between this music that I loved and my beloved nursery rhymes, but now as an adult it all seems so clear. In fairness, this may be a function of the fact that to be a lover of nursery rhymes is to submit to a way of thinking that is all about relishing unseemly connections, unlikely mash-ups, and curious juxtapositions like the rub-a-dub-dub nursery rhyme and the musical style of rub a dub, which, depending on who you ask, is a form of dub but not the totality of dub. What is also clear, is that dub as a word and as a music is nonlinear. In this vein, it seems only fitting that any discussion of dub follow a similar path, beginning with laying a foundation, layering in variation, looping back to add one's own twists, and integrating disparate pieces into a unifying whole, with the promise that it all comes together at the end.

In terms of the foundation, it is interesting to note that whether you are talking about a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker in a tub or a pulsating reggae beat, depends on that extra "dub." This short three-letter word makes all the difference. Without it, we are talking about the raw yet highly sophisticated stripped down to basics sound of the likes of Lee Scratch Perry and King Tubby. A sound sometimes stripped of vocals, but filled with riffs, reverberations, and pulsating bass. A sound that once you hear it, you understand why Bob Marley in "Bad Card" was insistent on blowing his speakers to "full watts... in a rub a dub style."

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word "dub" has several meanings. As a verb, it could mean "to confer knighthood," to "trim or cut," to give a nickname, to "add sound effects or dialogue," to "make a new recording." While as a noun, it could mean "pool" or "puddle," or perhaps most apropos for purposes of this piece, it could mean a style of "Jamaican music in which audio effects and spoken or chanted words are imposed on an instrumental reggae background." Now while this dictionary definition is accurate, it errs on the side of formalism while eliding the complexities and spiritual substance of the thing being described.

For me, dub is uncompromising spirit stripped down to its basics, yet intact in its core, with layered complexities, techniques, echo, and vision, laced over a track, so that it becomes something entirely new. A true dub composition converts the job of engineer into artist, so that a stripped down *chune* now soars with its own *riddim* and soul. It becomes generative so to speak, so much so that you can make different "versions," you can keep it mellow, or you can "*PULL UP*," "*WHEEL AND COME AGAIN*," giving the people something new that is both simultaneously deeply soulful and mind expanding across multiple dimensions— musically, linguistically, and spiritually.

Musically speaking, dub is both genre and sub-genre. It provides a bridge between itself and other reggae artforms like roots reggae and dancehall, and it offers an intricate template for other non-reggae music forms, like electronica. Even within dub itself, there are different types of dub from the mellow sounds of Scratch Perry's "Cloak and Daggers" to a Stone Love sound system "dub plate" mix. Both have the essence of taking out excess and then selectively building back up. One perhaps more suited for a reflective night at home, the other for the sweat, heat, and lighters of the dancehall, but dub, nonetheless.

Linguistically, it is the word that connects the fourteenth century *rub-a-dub-dub* Anglo nursery rhyme to the twentieth century island rhythm. This connection is of course deeper than syntax. It is interesting to note that both nursery rhymes and dub music employ similar techniques of version, sub-version, and connection of dissimilar elements. In terms of *versions*, having multiple versions of a track is a core feature of dub the music form, as it is in nursery rhymes. Both evolve with time and context, with each version borrowing pieces of the one before, but becoming something new. In music, the dub version was originally found on the B-side; in nursery rhymes, the sanitized version was generally the one that was memorialized in print, while the more illicit version seemed to survive by way

of oral tradition, the musical equivalent of the B-side. Now if we were to mimic a bit of dub technique and keep the root word “version,” but add the prefix “sub,” we can create a whole new word—*subversion*—which allows us to see another connection between the two forms. *Subversion* pervades both the nursery rhyme artform and dub. Both rely on double entendre, a play on words, and layered meaning. For example, when Bob Marley (albeit, not a traditional dub artist) says that he would “push the wood” and “blaze your fire,” yes he could be talking about lighting a literal fire maybe to make cornmeal porridge, but at least some segment of the population would say he is engaging in sexual innuendo.

At root though, dub is soul-work. Dub is wisdom. It provides a template, or if you make it your own, a dub plate, for how the stripped down and refashioning nature of dub *qua* art form actually has personal lessons for living a life that reverberates with Dub’s soul and consciousness. Once stripped down, how do you reassemble and rebuild? How do you simultaneously forward and rewind? These questions make me think of the various times in my life where I have been stripped down to basics and have had to engage in a bit of personal dubbing by reassembling and refashioning while still trying to hold on to my core.

As a young adult, the first time it happened was when at eighteen years old I left the comfort of Jamaica, my physical home, and went to Belgium for a one-year student exchange program. This was my first time away from home for any extended length of time. Stripping down to basics came in the form of being stripped of language and having to learn a foreign tongue, and being stripped of familiar foods, my beloved reggae music, my culture, my friends, and family. All of a sudden, things that I had taken for granted as regular and every day, now became extraordinary experiences that I had to work to recreate. For several months, I tried to make do on a diet of fries and mayonnaise, folk music and alternative rock, and whatever Flemish words I could knit together to communicate. But there was something about the arrival of winter that was my undoing. The frozen ground and endless sea of grey felt too much to endure without the warmth of my music and food. I sought out reggae wherever I could find it. My host family said that the closest approximation to “my” food was to be found on a one-hour train ride plus a good walk to the African “ethnic” market in Brussels. Roughly a four-hour round trip to find curry, ginger, and a scotch bonnet pepper cousin. When I returned, my host family was curious and intrigued. They had never seen or tasted curry before, and they were excited to try.

I washed the chicken with lemon, dried it off, and seasoned it with salt and pepper. As I meticulously chopped up the onions, garlic, ginger, and the substitute herbs of chives for scallion and the scotch bonnet pepper cousin, I wondered how this curry attempt would taste. It was not lost on me that even as I stood in the kitchen trying to replicate “my” curry chicken from home, my curry chicken was itself a replica, a version of the original Indo-Caribbean dish that made its way to our shores through a combination of migration, colonization, and indentured servitude. I was dubbing curry and hopefully creating a version that would be satisfying in its own right. Finally, when the meal of curry chicken and white rice was ready, we all sat down at the large circular dining table. As I spooned the hot curry over the white rice, the snow flurried outside. It *looked* like curry with its bright saffron-yellow color and the gravy had the right amount of thickness. It smelled like curry with its hint of cardamon and cumin, but what would it taste like?

After the curry had been plated, I slowly brought the first forkful to my mouth. The taste was divine – the turmeric and the aromatic herbs (substitute or not!) had come together to create a deeply satisfying dish that was savory, sweet, and soulful. It was roots and culture in food form. My host family could not get enough of this curry, they said they had never tasted anything like this before, and thankfully the scotch bonnet pepper proxy was not too hot for them. It was a simple thing, but the warmth and spice of the curry was all I needed to feel like I had enough to sustain me in this strange land and on that snowy winter night.

The second time was a few years later during law school in the United States— *Lawks!* Talk about having to reassemble and hold onto my core. The history, the doctrines, the norms, the culture, the values, and truths that were said to be self-evident, but which, for me, felt anything but evident. Whose life, liberty, and property were being protected under the law? All citizens? Those of a certain color and creed? Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and immigrants alike? How to square the realities of America with the noble ideals on which it was founded? And how to square all of this with my Caribbean specificity? Yes, of course there was overlap, but a far cry from an exact facsimile. There would be much to learn, much to unpack, much to disassemble, and much to refashion into something that was my own. You have to learn to crawl before you can walk, my grand aunt would say, and so, as I learnt to crawl, I cooked jerk chicken and invited friends over.

Like the curry, the jerk chicken was a version of a version, but at least the pre-made *Walkerswood* jerk seasoning gave me a good base from which to add my own touches – toops of sugar, more scallion, a little bit more vinegar, and a dash of cinnamon and all spice. Those evenings turned into a mash-up of study sessions, Bob on the stereo, and heated argumentation. Bob was a bridge, a good foundation, because everyone knew his music— if not intimately, at least they had heard of him. You could play Bob all night, or depending on the mood, you might mix in anything from The Beatles to Buju to American R&B. My good friend, Charmaine, a fellow yardie, would often embark on a deep analysis of slackness versus roots, while my American friends would draw analogies to rap, hip hop, and African American spirituals. Only the sun rising or knowing that we had to get up early for a lecture in the morning would end our mash-ups. And to tell you the truth we would feel *mash up* when we pulled ourselves to class in the morning, but these late-night limes were worth it. At core, they were dub sessions— the laying of foundations, the mixing in of versions and narratives from different perspectives, and the attempts to bring them together to a larger point. What started off as rhetorical riffs and retelling of encounters, eventually gave way to reflections, and us being able to see ourselves in each other's story. Finally, when I felt I could walk, I tried my hand at analyzing the American judiciary system through the lens of Bob Marley songs. Judging from the grade I received, I guess the gamble worked, but more importantly the wisdom of dub worked— strip it down, keep the essence, add your own sound effects to create something new.

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After graduating law school and starting off as a young professional, the pattern repeated – having to start from scratch, losing one's sense of community, a perception of being stripped bare. This time the challenge took the form of proving myself as a professional while trying to bring along and assimilate my immigrant self within the constructs of my white shoe Wall Street law firm. Moreover, the life of a junior law firm associate largely consists of thankless work. As I worked late, night after night, reviewing and drafting language for contracts and prospectuses, I had a nagging sense that as I gave all to my work, I was giving nothing to me. Although it was now eight years since curry chicken in Belgium, there I was again with the same sense of being unmoored. Getting home from work at 9pm,

11pm, 3am became standard fare. There was no time for cooking, Bob, socializing, or healthy debates. Which is why when Neville, a fellow Jamaican, who worked in IT asked: “Do you like your work? Why are you doing this?” Followed by: “You are more like a ‘bashment barrister’ than a corporate lawyer...,” it caught my attention.

“What do you mean a ‘bashment barrister’?” I asked quizzically. I had never heard that term before.

“How you mean?” responded Neville, “You need to do another type of law...something fun, like entertainment, or something in the music business.”

Neville had made up the term “bashment barrister” on the spot, but I understood his meaning. Moreover, his deeply astute observation was like a “bubble” in a dub mix, which changes your perception of the rhythm. For me, it disrupted the assumed sequence of slaving away each night and reminded me how far away I had drifted from center. I needed to return, but thankfully dub provided a template—slow down to learn, observe, strip, assimilate, reassess, interrogate, insert your own voice, say something new.

Three distinct instances, but all bearing the marks of having to return to basics to understand oneself and make one’s way given the particular context and circumstance. For me, this simultaneous return to self while opening up to new ways of being, has always come down to a combination of *nuff nuff* internal work, and externally, food, music, language. The same food, music, language, that informed my childhood. Whether it be making my mother’s curry chicken on a cold winter’s night in Brugge, blasting Bob to full watts in my student apartment in law school, or passing down my love of nursery rhymes to my children at bedtime, as the reverie of sharing these words with them reverberates off my tongue and someplace deep within me.

I could not, however, just read nursery rhymes from any old nursery rhyme book; I needed the very book that my mother used to read. The problem, though, was that my original red clothbound-covered book of nursery rhymes was nowhere to be found. It got passed down to my cousins and years later when they migrated, it did not make the cut for a relocation to America. Of course, this is part of stripping down to begin anew; you have to let go of things that no longer seem to serve a purpose to make space for fresh beginnings. Create something fresh, mix it up, mash it up, and forward. This is true, but at the same time, sometimes you have to rewind and come again. Reclaim things forgotten, repurpose them, upcycle them, and fashion them into something new. This is what happened when I found myself a big woman mourning the absence of my nursery rhyme book.

“Just get another one,” my husband said, “Barnes & Noble has nursery rhyme books.”

“No, but it’s not the same,” I said, “I’ve looked, but none of the books have the full complement of nursery rhymes – all 365.”

*(Eye roll)*

“Well maybe, Amazon?” he offered, as he turned his attention to finding his Yankees game on tv.

That was a solid thought; for sure Amazon would have some version of what I was looking for, even if not an exact replica. My search revealed that they did have used copies of the book because it was no longer in print. It was slightly heartbreaking to think that this beautiful book had been allowed to fall by the wayside like this. Nonetheless, the used copies available said they were “in great shape,” with “all pages intact with bright photos.” The “bright photos,” for certain, sounded exactly like the colorful illustrations I remembered. I clicked “Add to Cart” and waited for delivery.

When the book arrived, there was no red cloth-bound cover, but the format and content of the inside pages were exactly the same as I recalled. That night, my children had no choice of what bedtime story we would read. We were going to read *The Book of 365 Nursery Rhymes*.

“Okay,” they said, perhaps sensing that this was not a time for backchat.

We all snuggled up together in one of their beds, as I slowly opened the book.

“Why are you taking so long to open the book?” one of them said.

“Just give me a minute,” I replied.

I needed that minute as a way of pausing to silently acknowledge the connection across time from my childhood to theirs. There was no need for me to articulate this thought because this was a connection that could be felt and intuited without explicit explanation. To explain the details would have been just as bad as a deejay coming on the mic and explicating the inner workings of how they came up with a dub mix. Sometimes you have to just let the track run and trust the listener to do what they will with it.

I began reading. My children giggled at the silliness of some of the rhymes and spotted things in the pictures that I had never noticed, even though I had read or been read this book, hundreds of times. Now instead of a “Clownie” stuffed toy with one eye, we had a stuffed pig named Piggie, and an octopus, named Warner. Instead of kicking off the covers to keep cool from a hot Caribbean night, we wrapped ourselves tight in wool blankets to generate heat against the frigid New York winter. The parallel was not lost on me. The scene that had unfolded some thirty plus years ago in a small, concrete and steel house in Kingston, Jamaica, was now repeating three decades later, roughly 1600 miles away, on a brownstone block in Brooklyn. The scene had been remixed: roles were reversed, stuffed animals swapped out, and where there had been one child, there were now three. Yet, the essence of the exchange remained intact— in fact, it was the same.

Their questions were once my questions:

*Why is she eating curds and whey? Plus it sounds gross! – what is that?*

*Why did the cow jump over the moon?*

*Why are these men in a tub?*

Ha!

So it flows and so it continues. Generative and dynamic.

This is the playfulness and mash up of dub.

Rub a dub or perhaps, rub a dub dub.

Whatever floats your boat, or for that matter, your tub.

In language and in verse yet mirroring a larger whole of meaning-making and connectivity.

My sense is that the work is never done. This is how it goes. Dub wise! In music and in life, ever evolving, fractal not static. One word, multiple meanings, hidden understandings, context and circumstance, version upon version, B-side, flip side, stripped down, passed down, revived, reassembled.

Renewed.

Anchor Image: Annie Paul, Beat Street and environs, February 2019

*Tamara Belinfanti is a law professor and author. She recently completed a memoir on her childhood in Jamaica, which explores themes of being stripped down and needing to reassemble. A graduate of Harvard Law School, she lives in Brooklyn with her husband and three children.*