

# **Sonic Bodies**

**Reggae Sound Systems, Performance  
Techniques, and Ways of Knowing**

*By Julian Henriques*



continuum

## BODY OF SOUND

*Sonic Bodies* claims that thinking through sounding is relevant well beyond the particular example of the Jamaican sound systems. It argues that there is a distinct and different *way* of thinking expressed through sounding. This emerges from the intimate nature of the relationship between sound and embodiment, one that is only matched by that between vision and the disembodied mind, as an entirely different sensory modality and another kind of object altogether. Otherwise, of course, the body's ear is quite different from the mind's eye. With the current corporeal turn,<sup>19</sup> this auditory connection to embodiment is gaining an increasing purchase. It has certainly been aided and abetted by renewed interest in the senses, often from within an anthropological tradition. Here the work of Paul Stoller, Katheryn Geurts, David Howes, Constance Classen and others has been most important. Crucially, the turn *towards* the body is also a turn *away* from the discourse, language and inscription with which so much in arts and social sciences has been preoccupied. It is also a turn *away* from any hierarchy of the senses and the dominance of vision in particular, *towards* a pattern of cooperation of sensory modalities in which each contributes its unique qualities for our negotiation through the "ambient energy flux."<sup>20</sup> While readily recognising surfaces, edges and patterns, the eye is most accurate with alignment by the straight line of sight. The ear, by contrast, is at home in the depth and textures of timbre, recognising the complexities of melody, harmony and octave transposition most readily. This not to essentialise the sensory modalities, but rather to recognise their affordances.

The dancehall session provides *Sonic Bodies* with a test bed for understanding the full-bodiedness of sensory experience. Here, the crew's performance techniques together with their *phronēsis*, or practical wisdom, exemplify the kind of complexities, subtleties and sophistications of which the body is capable – far more so than when the dominant dualistic tradition condemned it to being the mind's extension, or its fleshly slave. Philosopher Richard Rorty sums this up most succinctly: "If the body had been easier to understand, nobody would have thought we had a mind."<sup>21</sup> In this way, the crew's connoisseurship and expert evaluations express their embodied ways of knowing, or "logic of practice," to use Pierre Bourdieu's phrase.<sup>22</sup> Dealing with sound and music, their performance expresses a kind of rationality that is not necessarily tied to formal logic, discourse or representation, though of course it can be so purposed. The sound crew's evaluative techniques are described as the *analogia*, rather than the logic, of their practice, as they are not restricted to analysis, calculation, inscription or visual representation. This develops the

idea of the *ratio* of rationality, as the kind of expertise both of, and at the heart of all manner of other performance and re-performance settings, situations and practices. Many contemporary creative practices of these techniques often cannibalise existing recordings, as with Hip Hop scratching, Chris Cutler's "plunderphonics" or MP3 file "mashing," for example. This remixes the traditional distinctions between production and consumption.

On the basis of a fine-grained account of the performance techniques of popular culture sound system practices, *Sonic Bodies* challenges some of the most widely held assumptions about what knowledge itself actually is. One such assumption is that knowledge resides in "the mind" – as if this could be separate from its body. Another is that knowledge is information about things, rather than relationships and dynamic patterns. A third assumption is that knowledge originates with peer-reviewed research in the academy, rather than subaltern or lumpen street cultures. So, some questions to start with: What kind of knowledge may a person have without knowing it? When is tacit *know-how* more important than explicit *know-what*? How is thinking through *sound* any different from thinking through *images*? What is meaning when it has nothing to do with representation? Thinking through sound encourages an auditory epistemology. The central idea is *propagation*, as with the periodic disturbances of sound waves through a medium. The longitudinal waves of sound, as with the transverse ones of light, need to be continually propagated. Without the periodic movement of vibrations there would simply be silence. The verb *sounding*, as distinct from the noun *sound*, emphasises such activity. Sounding always requires kinetic movement, with the corporeal agents of sonic bodies – whistling, clapping or singing; blowing, scraping, banging or otherwise playing a musical instrument; or pressing "play" on a recording of any of the above. Indeed, the echo and reverberation – the signature sound of Reggae dub – are music studio production methods for elongating this auditory life.

The practices and processes of propagation ensure an approach that is dynamic as well as structured, addressing energetic fields rather than separate static objects. It is concerned with *rhythmos*, the patterning of intensities through time, rather than the pattern of symmetries, systems and codes in space. The foundation of this auditory epistemology is the crowd's visceral immersive experience of *sonic dominance* in the dancehall session.<sup>23</sup> This sensory experience is the pivot around which thinking through sound turns and returns – its *leitmotif*. Thinking through sounding also calls for a practical methodology of listening, where sound is a subject, a vehicle and a medium for the thinking process. As sounds displace images, thinking itself becomes more than just a cognitive manipulation of representations, and knowledge is

not only visual. Listening concerns depths rather than surfaces, disposing it to evaluation, as with “sound judgement,” further than mere monitoring. It is a haptic sense and, as touch itself, simultaneously both makes a connection between one and another, and recognises their separation. The ear serves as the organ of balance, readily “making sense” of things and recognising resonances and proportions between the frequencies of sound waves – as with an octave, for example. The eye can make very accurate alignments, but has no way of telling the proportional relationships between the frequencies of light.

The sound crew’s phonographic re-performance obliges them in their practice – as we do in our investigation – to pay particular attention to the three dimensions of longitudinal waves. These are: frequency or pitch, amplitude or volume, and timbre or sound “colour.” The crew’s skilled techniques “build the vibes” of the crowd in the dancehall session in the way the music producer “builds” the beats, harmonies and melodies of a “riddim” (rhythm) track from auditory vibrations. As sonic bodies themselves, the crewmembers are built out of such vibrations. Furthermore, the dynamic patterning of these vibrations offers the opportunity for an understanding of how the crewmembers “make sense” of what they do, which may include – without being entirely dependent upon – any conscious calculation or visual representation. The multi-sensory extremes of the sonic dominance of the sound system session make it a living laboratory for investigating the crew’s embodied ways of knowing. *Sonic Bodies* aims to expand the idea of sound, with the concept of *sounding*, in the way that Christopher Small has done for the concept of music, with his concept of *musicking* (but using the popular culture of the dancehall session, rather than Small’s culture of the classical symphony concert).<sup>24</sup> Sounding encompasses everything, everyone and all the activities that go into the making of sound. This includes listening, as sounding is always reciprocal and often rhythmic: impression and expression, crescendo and decrescendo, as well as the corporeal routine of breathing – as both inspiration and expiration.

## BODY OF THOUGHT

In theory, thinking through sounding takes on an altogether different complexion than it does in practice. Sounding boasts a radical edge, entirely absent from habitual patterns of thought in terms of light and image. From the trumpets sounding the downfall of the walls of Jericho, the destabilising influence of audition has long been recognised. This critical attack that sound can be used to mobilise literally strikes at the heart of the predominantly ocularcentric character specific to Western metaphysics, and it has been

extensively documented.<sup>25</sup> Seeing is believing, but hearing is only hearsay. But it should be noted that visual dominance is far from universal. It is not the foundation of many Eastern philosophies, for instance.<sup>26</sup> In fact it can be argued that sounding initiated Western philosophy, with the Orphic cults and Pythagoras' "music of the spheres," as Joscelyn Godwin suggests in *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth*. Before Plato's cave wall becomes the screen on which shadows played, the cave's rather more distinctive – and mysterious – characteristic was as a resonating echoic chamber. Sound certainly lingered on in the unwritten dialogic tradition of pre-Socratic philosophy, as it did in scientific investigation up to the start of the seventeenth century, with Johannes Kepler's *Harmonices Mundi* and the "sound-house" of Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*.<sup>27</sup> Early twentieth-century avant-garde art was more concerned with making itself heard than with harmonics. The Italian Futurists were famous for their noise machines, Russian revolutionary art less so for its invention of "artificial sound."<sup>28</sup> Far from being a "natural" phenomenon, sound has a rich social and cultural history, much of which remains to be written.

More currently, in the context of the corporeal turn, the resonances of sounding and body can become a weapon against the reflections of lighting and mind. Thinking through sound thus evolves into a philosophy of resonance, which is, in almost every respect, rather different from more commonplace philosophical reflection. But what does a philosophical resonance sound like? It is likely to be concerned with relationality, that is, mixing, mingling and synthesis as well as analysis, similarities as well as differences, and continuities as well as dichotomies. Most critically it includes embodied practice and subjective sensory experience as well as the manipulation of mental images or cognitive process. In short, this way of philosophising exploits a vocabulary of auditory mechanisms and a repertoire of models and metaphors from sound and listening, in the way traditional philosophy has relied on visual support. This is certainly not to abandon reason, but rather to consider it as ratio, rather than only representation, as I do in the concluding chapter with the idea of "sound judgement."

Sounding also has a critical edge against the text, the discourse and the formalist and structuralist preoccupations of much recent work in the arts and humanities that the philosophy of light has underpinned. While these, in their time, proved useful against positivism and behaviourism, such reductionism no longer occupies the dominant position it once did. As might be expected, the critical questions sounding raises for text is orality and voicing (to which Chapter Seven, on the MC's vocal performance, is devoted). For language, the questions sounding raises concern the importance of phonetic expression of the particular utterance. Sounding turns away from Saussure's

*La Langue*, or language system, towards precisely what this eschewed, *Parole*, or speech itself. Sounding draws attention to analogue variation, rather than the diacritical differences of a system of signification; contingencies rather than abstract types or essentialisms; it is concerned with communication as an embodied, situated and particular process in the way feminist epistemologies have pioneered. The reorientation from a discursive to an embodied emphasis, that working through sounding encourages, might seem to favour a sensory gear change from eye to ear. The mind's eye for text was invariably privileged over and above the body's ear for speech. But thinking through sound does not call for a reconfiguration of the senses as such – other than recognising their multiplicity.

There is currently a growing interest in a metaphysics that refrains from the traditional ocularcentric obsession where vision stands as the paradigm for all perception, as Casey O'Callaghan argues in *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory*. This is a philosophy of sound, rather than a philosophy that is in any way itself auditory – as with the kind of auditory methodology advocated here. From within the tradition of analytical philosophy, O'Callaghan makes no mention of European thinking on sound and audition. This favours enquiry into listening and the voice, as with Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening*, Peter Szendy's *Listen: A History of Our Ears* and Mladen Dolar's *A Voice and Nothing More*. Prior to this comparatively recent work, such interest came from phenomenologically oriented thinkers, such as Don Ihde with *Listening and Voice*, David Michael Levin with *The Listening Self* and Joachim-Ernst Berendt's *The Third Ear: On Listening to the World*. Jean-Francois Augoyard and Henri Torgue in *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds* describe the empirical detail of sound as effect. As Adriana Cavarero details exquisitely in *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, sound has always been an anathema to the dominant traditions of Western philosophy. This is because the sound of the voice makes it impossible to ignore our human embodiment, both in general and in particular, as with the distinctive sound that each individual's voice expresses. To be sure, a person's face is key to our relational identity with the Other, as Emmanuel Lévinas has proposed to be the foundation of philosophy as ethics.<sup>29</sup> But equally important is their voice, where the *value* of this distinctiveness is very different. This is due entirely to the mechanical characteristics of auditory propagation, compared to those of light – that is, physics, rather than metaphysics. Our eyes see a face, or the surface of any object, to the extent that it reflects or absorbs an ambient light source. The face itself has no say in the matter – exactly the opposite when the face chooses to speak, that is, to take responsibility for its own propagation in the auditory sphere. Similarly, in the dark, a person might be forced to identify him or herself by shining a light on their own face.

It is such practical properties of the propagation of sound that configure thinking through sounding to produce an “auditory imagination,” to use the term T. S. Eliot originally coined for the understanding of poetry.<sup>30</sup> The idea of an imagination has merit compared to the more formal alternatives of auditory philosophy, epistemology or metaphysics, in so far as it expresses the potentialities embodied in knowing that sounding is being used to explore in this volume. From the point of view of light, sound always remains in the dark shadows. From the point of view of listening, there are questions on which light always remains silent. It is these that *Sonic Bodies* begins to ask.