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To cite this article: Lisa Amanda Palmer (2011) 'LADIES A YOUR TIME NOW!' Erotic politics, lovers' rock and resistance in the UK, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, 4:2, 177-192, DOI: [10.1080/17528631.2011.583454](https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2011.583454)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2011.583454>



Published online: 18 Jul 2011.



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## **‘LADIES A YOUR TIME NOW!’ Erotic politics, lovers’ rock and resistance in the UK**

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‘Lovers’ rock’ is a largely overlooked genre of ‘Black British’ reggae music that emerged in London during the 1970s through Caribbean nightclubs and ‘pirate radio’ stations. Lovers’ rock was an integral part of the reggae music scene of that period. However, lovers rock became gendered as genre that appealed particularly to the romantic aspirations of black teenaged girls growing up in ‘Thatcher’s Britain’. Within the political context of the dancehall scene, both lovers rock and roots reggae are seen as binary opposites of each other – lovers being ‘soft’ feminised reggae concerned with romantic love, and roots as masculinised ‘serious’ reggae concerned with black oppositional politics. Using black feminist theories on love and the erotic, this paper challenges the gendering of lovers’ rock by suggesting that the genre was part of a much broader and complex political expression of love and rebellion amongst Caribbean communities in Britain. Indeed, while the gendering process is highly problematic, this paper also argues that Caribbean communities had also used the erotic and political intersection of both genres to reconfigure racist and sexist representations of their identities. As such Caribbean males and females had created their own ethic of ‘loving blackness’ as a way of restoring and validating their experiences within Britain’s often hostile urban centres.

**Keywords:** lovers’ rock; reggae; erotic; love; blackness; black Britain; black feminism

### **Introduction**

I felt I needed to be taken seriously as a ‘conscious sister’ in my teenage years, and so I developed a haughty snobbish disdain for all sorts of music that sounded remotely ‘smoochy’ or ‘romantic’, things I considered highly damaging to my ‘conscious credentials’. However, most of my female friends and cousins disagreed with my antipathy towards love songs. A reggae blues dance was ‘lame’ if the right selection of lovers’ rock music was not played. The dance was a complete disappointment if my cousin did not ‘*get a dance*’ with the right boy, to the right lovers’ rock tune, in her case, preferably Peter Huningale’s ‘Won’t You be My Lady’, or even better, ‘Hopelessly in Love’ by Carol Thompson. My cousin’s dad had the most meticulous and extensive collection of lovers’ rock vinyl LPs and 45s which were lovingly and routinely polished with a special alcoholic fluid and a velveteen cloth. The fluid, the cloth and the treasured collection were all completely out of bounds to us children. Any evidence of scratches or smudges would automatically be traced back to us with

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serious consequences. Rather than face the consequences, we decided not to ‘farce’ (interfere) with his treasured lovers’ rock records, and left them well alone.

**‘OK people, this is lovers’ rock ...’**

This paper is concerned with the politics of erotic love as expressed through the genre of lovers’ rock music and its emergence inside a highly gendered, erotic and political reggae scene that developed within the social context of Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. Lovers’ rock was an integral component of the reggae music landscape of that period and has remained so to this today. Nevertheless, within scholarly, critical and historical reflections on reggae cultures, lovers’ rock’s fleeting if not invisible presence, is often obscured by the predominance of the genre’s more raucous reggae relatives, namely ‘conscious’ roots reggae and ragga ‘slackness’ (Cooper 2004; Henry 2006; Noble 2000; Stolzoff 2000). On the occasions when lovers’ rock has been inscribed into the historical and cultural narrative of the reggae music scene in Britain, its romantic and erotic expressions are frequently seen as apolitical and antithetical to the ‘conscious’ political impulses of ‘roots reggae’ (Barrow and Dalton 2004; Hebdidge 1987; De Koningh and Griffiths 2003).

The binary positioning of lovers’ rock’s soulful melodies against the hardcore political ‘toasting’ and ‘chat’ of ‘conscious roots’, is theoretically and culturally organised along the lines of gender. Here, both lovers’ rock and conscious roots reggae are generally allotted respectively to categories of femininity and masculinity. Lovers’ rock is gendered as strictly black female territory, whereas the oppositional politics of conscious reggae is primarily assigned to the interests and concerns of black men. Although lovers’ rock is by no means exclusively performed, consumed or enjoyed by black women, the genre has commonly been designated as some sort of female sanctuary both within the dancehall space and within reggae culture at large (Barrow and Dalton 2004; Hebdidge 1987).

Below, I will explore with ways in which lovers’ rock has been rendered and interpreted as a ‘special’ form of reggae for black women (Barrow and Dalton 2004; Hebdidge 1987). Whilst there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the popularity of lovers’ rock amongst black women in the reggae dancehall scene, I am arguing that its designation as a ‘special’ female space is problematic. The differentiation between lovers’ rock from the politics of ‘conscious roots’ and culture reinforces rigid categories of gendered participation within the dancehall space. This process of gendering also works to downgrade and marginalise discourses on erotic love in such a way that erotic and loving identities are perceived as being at best unimportant and at worst irrelevant to the radical political ambitions of ‘conscious roots’. I wish to demonstrate that such divisions obscure the discursive interconnections of erotic love with radical politics and thus undermine the complexity of black erotic/political identities. I will challenge the gendering of lovers’ rock as a predominantly feminised space, aiming to retrieve a complex and sometimes contradictory interpretation of the ways in which lovers’ rock both affirms and disavows its discourse on love whilst interrogating how these contradictions work through the politics of gender.

Lovers’ rock is also a distinctly transnational cultural project emerging from the creative, political and erotic impulses of Caribbean communities in Britain. The transnational spirit and cultural formation of lovers’ rock has been highlighted elsewhere by Paul Gilroy (1993). I wish to support Gilroy’s claim that lovers’ rock has

a distinctive transnational sensibility by further suggesting that Caribbean communities in Britain have used the erotic and political intersection of lovers' rock and conscious roots reggae to reconfigure the stereotypical, loveless and nihilistic representations of their identities found within popular discourses in the British press (Gilroy 2006). Through the intersection of the erotic and the political, Caribbean communities created complex discourses that asserted a love ethic as a way of expressing and validating the complexity of their existence within Britain's hostile metropolitan centres.

My discussion of lovers' rock has been greatly influenced by black feminist discourses on love and the erotic (Hill-Collins 2005; hooks 1992; Lorde 2007), in particular, the writing of bell hooks who argues that love is a highly political activity (hooks 1992, 2000, 2001, 2004). In her book, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks writes 'Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life' (hooks 1992, p. 20). I would add that loving blackness also enables us to highlight and reinterpret cultural practices of love amongst distinct and different black communities that illuminate the ways diverse groups of black people have expressed love beyond the perceived limits, myths, and narratives mapped onto our existence. However, in the erotic arena of lovers' rock this love ethic is often complicated and sometimes compromised by gendered conceptualisations of love and rebellion that re-inscribe binary gendered discourses that discount love as a serious and valuable tool to the politics of black liberation (hooks 1992).

I seek to rehabilitate lovers' rock within critical discourses on dancehall by taking seriously its erotic political import into the reggae dancehall scene. I wish to counteract the critical and theoretical tendency to routinely undermine and thus devalue lovers' rock's significance within academic scholarship on the emergence of dancehall reggae cultures in Britain and the wider diaspora. This paper seeks to explore the genre's discursive role within the dancehall space as a whole. It is at this discursive point of lovers' rock's intersection with other reggae genres that its more radical possibilities can be revealed.

### **The emergence of lovers' rock in Britain**

The 'lovers' rock nomenclature was coined in Britain by music producer Dennis Bovell his co-producer and guitarist John Kapiaye, alongside husband and wife music producers Dennis and Eve Harris. Bovell, Kapiaye, and the Harris team are credited as the original architects of the 'lovers' rock sound in Britain (Barrow and Dalton 2004; Garratt 1985; Hebdidge 1987). During the mid-1970s in the early stages of lovers' rock's development, music producers such as Bovell were in search of a distinctive 'Black British' reggae sound beyond merely imitating the songs being produced in Jamaica (Cumming 2006; Garratt 1985). During this period, as far as Caribbean audiences in cities such as London and Birmingham were concerned, the best and most popular reggae was still being recorded and imported from Jamaica to England (Hebdidge 1987).

Love songs have long been a staple feature of the Jamaican reggae music lexicon. Male singers such as Dennis Brown, Owen Gray, Alton Ellis, Ken Boothe, Sugar Minot, and Gregory Isaacs are considered as some of the most important lovers'

rock reggae artists of their generation (Hebdidge 1987). However, despite the success and popularity of Jamaican balladeers both at home and throughout the Caribbean diaspora, lovers' rock as a recognisable term was only named in London during the mid-1970s through the emergence of the British based lovers' rock trio, Brown Sugar (Garratt 1985; Hebdidge 1987). Their song, 'I'm in love with a Dreadlocks', was the first track to be released under Bovell and Kapiaye's 'lovers rock' label (Garratt 1985). By this time, the lovers' rock sound had already been established by artists such as Louisa Mark, Marie Pierre, and 15, 16 & 17 before the term emerged. As Bovell began placing the lovers' rock name on to more record labels, the name gradually caught on (Garratt 1985; Hebdidge 1987). Indeed, it was after the term emerged in the UK that the lovers' rock name became attached to romantic reggae singers throughout the Jamaican diaspora who sang about love.

Bovell had previously co-founded the British roots band Matumbi in 1971. He went on to produce Janet Kay's lovers' rock album, *Silly Games* (1979), as well as writing and producing the soundtrack to Franco Rossos's film *Babylon* (1980). Many young female musicians had entered the lovers' rock scene through auditions and talent competitions organised by Bovell and Kapiaye at various venues across south London (Hebdidge 1987). Lloyd Coxson, a hugely influential and important figure within the development of sound system culture in the UK, was instrumental in the recording of Louisa Mark's 'Caught You in a Lie' (1975), a track considered to be the first definitive lovers' rock song (Garratt 1985). Bovell and Coxson saw Mark as the 'natural choice' to record a cover of the Robert Parker original (Barrow and Dalton 2004). Mark introduced herself to Bovell at a blues dance where his sound system, Jah Sufferer HI FI was playing. According to Sheryl Garratt, her yearning vocal wherein she discovers that the girl her boyfriend has been seeing is not his cousin after all, was recorded in one take and became an instant hit (Garratt 1985). Mark's brilliantly produced version of 'Caught you in a Lie' still remains a classic lovers' rock recording, belying any dismissal of the track as a foray into 'teeny popping' drivel and gross. The popular face of lovers' rock in the UK was frequently characterised by young black teenage girls, like Mark, who were supposedly eager to cover African American soul songs on top of the deep and heavy baselines of roots reggae (Garratt 1985; Hebdidge 1987).

### **Outernational 'Blak'ness**

Lovers' rock's popularity was established through the 'free' (pirate) radio stations and underground local blues party networks and venues across the UK during the 1970s and 1980s (Barrow and Dalton 2004). Despite the recent demise of vital reggae music venues in cities such as London and Birmingham, these local clubs had previously served as both porous and hidden locations for engaging with lovers' rock as well as other transatlantic musical styles and forms. In these intimate subaltern spaces, working-class Caribbean communities came together for leisure, celebrations, and entertainment. Sound system nights, engagement parties, weddings, christenings, and Rastafari gatherings all provided 'safe' spaces of sanctuary where black urban music was central to easing as well as expressing the tensions of urban inner city life. Lovers' rock musicians were carving out their own dynamic vernacular and rhetorical spaces within the British reggae music scene. Lovers' rock brought soul and reggae so close together that it became a fusion of the two styles of music (Hebdidge 1987).

Indeed, young Caribbean musicians and audiences utilised other black diasporic musical dialects and sounds by blending and interweaving the heavy Jamaican reggae baseline with 'soft-soul' vocal harmonies emanating out from Chicago and Philadelphia, thus creating a unique diasporic lovers' rock style and aesthetic (Barrow and Dalton 2004).

This new genre had its own transnational sensibility. Lovers' rock signalled the emergence of an early *Blak* British transnational soundscape that would later give rise to UK soul acts such as Soul II Soul, whose leading vocalist Caron Wheeler, had previously emerged as one of the early forerunners of first generation lovers' rock artists (Barrow and Dalton 2004; Gilroy 1993). At the age of 15, Wheeler was one member of the trio Brown Sugar alongside fellow band mate and lovers' rock veteran Kofi. Brown Sugar were amongst that first group of young women who attended Bovell and Kapiaye's auditions in south London (Barrow and Dalton 2004; Hebdidge 1987). Brown Sugar achieved early success within the lovers' rock scene with tracks such as 'I'm In Love With A Dreadlocks' and 'Black Pride' which also signalled the arrival of 'conscious lovers', a politically inspired sub-genre of lovers' rock music.

Following her later success with the group Soul II Soul, Wheeler's 1990 debut solo album entitled *UK Blak*, would be instrumental in cultivating and articulating the idea that British-born Caribbean decedents had an 'outernational' understanding of their 'blak'ness in Britain. In other words, blackness in Britain was intimately formed within the social confines of black urban settings as well as upon the outward trajectory of postcolonial and transnational forms of blackness dispersed through the cultural mesh of Caribbean, African, and North American transatlantic flows. The cultural and political significance of the term 'blak' (as opposed to black spelt with a 'c') was subsequently cross-referenced into the cultural and political theories of both Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and William 'Lez' Henry *What the Deejay Said* (2006). Blak is mobilised within these theoretical discourses to underscore a countercultural black consciousness and the influence of the black diaspora in shaping the cultural politics of black Britain. Gilroy locates the transnational logic of 'blak' and its meaning within the formation of musical subcultures that emerged from Britain's urban inner cities. These subcultures drew heavily from a range of 'raw materials' supplied by transnational currents from the Caribbean and black America (Gilroy 1993). Henry further provides an explicit historical context for the emergence of the term 'blak':

The usage of 'blak' emerged in urban London during the late 1980's and when Caron Wheeler of 'Soul to Soul' fame released an album entitled 'UK Blak' for EMI records, the word became known in mainstream British society. By omitting the letter 'c', Wheeler was making a profound Africentric political statement that reflected a conscious move by certain members of the black community to distance themselves from the negative connotations of black as the colour of doom, oppression, bad luck etc. This meant that the term blak, which was created within the counter cultures of the Afrikan Diaspora, had much currency and signified an alternative way of thinking about the black presence in Britain. (Henry 2006, p. 27)

As Henry further argues, Caribbean communities in the UK have continuously looked to resources outside of Britain to facilitate its cultural and psychological survival (Henry 2006). Dancehall culture in Britain, and in particular the role of the

dancehall deejay in providing a 'critique from the street' helped to create counter-cultural 'self-generated concepts' such as 'Blak' (Henry 2006). These self-generated social critiques were created from African centred outernational resources that allowed 'downpressed' Caribbean communities in Britain to counteract their racialised marginalisation and social exclusion. The dancehall deejay's critiques provided an energetic and politically engaged intellectual discourse that highlighted the day to day problems of surviving within a racist social environment (Henry 2006). Henry further argues that the cultural templates of dancehall from the 45 inch single, 'sound (cassette) tapes' with live recordings of sound system events, to the dancehall space itself, furnished alternative public arenas for working-class black youth in Britain (Henry 2006). These cultural templates enabled young people to link 'disparate elements' of black oppositional histories, making their identities 'outernational and whole' (Henry 2006). 'Outernational' notions of 'blakness' provided important cultural, psychic, political and emotional links back to the Caribbean. It was also an important critical resource for developing oppositional critiques of the British nation state. By espousing an 'outernational consciousness', black Caribbean youths born in Britain developed critical perceptions and intellectual frameworks that deliberately transcended the racialised geography of Britain (Henry 2006).

Although I support Henry's insightful arguments, I argue that he proceeds to overlook the cultural and political context of lovers' rock in the formation and intellectual conception of an 'outernational consciousness'. After all, it was Caron Wheeler, a black female artist and pioneer of lovers' rock who mobilised the term 'blak' to demarcate the very specific diasporic journey of black Britain's post-Second World War emergence and cultural formation. The cultural context of the lovers' rock scene was indeed critical to Wheeler's emergence as a politically 'conscious' lovers' rock artist, and too, as a soulful musician who successfully and brilliantly utilised a 'blak' diasporic political sensibility throughout her *UK Blak* (1990) album. While acknowledging and mobilising the political and intellectual significance of Wheeler's use of the term 'blak', Henry does not situate this critical moment within lovers' rock's transnational tradition nor within the genres discursive contribution to the dancehall scene in which both the erotic and the political are interdependent paradigms that inform the cultural aspirations of dancehall aficionados.

By overlooking the cultural interdependence of political and erotic discourses that emerge within lovers' rock, critical interpretations of reggae dancehall cultures obscure the significance of complex discourses by black women that affirm the intersection of erotic and political identities. They further undermine the ways in which the mutuality of these identities is indeed relevant to the development of oppositional politics and social movements in Britain. Within dancehall culture, this oversight can be explained by the fact that the position of the male deejay reins supreme (Henry 2006). Male singers, and to a lesser extent female singers, remain highly valued but in general terms occupy a less elevated status in contemporary dancehall culture (Cooper 2004). This is true both within Jamaica and the diaspora. The skills of deejaying and singing are deeply attached to notions of gender that demarcate 'chatting' and 'toasting' (a form of 'rap' that precedes hip hop) as a discursive space that privileges talk between males, whilst singing and harmonising within the dancehall becomes a designated space of communion first and foremost for women. These demarcations become particularly evident through the overt *gendering* of lovers' rock as a feminised reggae genre against the more covert gendering of roots

reggae and deejaying as the domain of countercultural or oppositional black masculinity. Of course, both men and women can be deejays and singers. However, it is the gendering and social construction of these musical forms that is under scrutiny. This paper situates lovers' rock at the heart of the reggae music scene to demonstrate that such divisions are not always so clearly defined and are in fact more discursive than is often imagined.

### A feminised sanctuary

Within the dancehall space, lovers' rock became gendered by male selectors and DJs as specifically 'female time' – '*Ladies a your time now!*' This rallying call could be heard during the blues party after a 'serious' conscious roots session had finished to be followed by the 'softer' intimate vibes of lovers' rock. For the most part, 'ladies' would reply with agreement to this clarion call to take centre stage. Black women in particular were presumed to be waiting in anticipation for a well needed break in tempo from the serious 'toasting' and 'chatting' performed by male deejays during a blues session. At this moment, the erotic interplay of black female and male bodies would engage in a 'slow wine', an open, erotic, and public display where couples dance together. However, rather than this moment being engineered exclusively for women, it was in reality eagerly anticipated by men and women alike. The 'slow wine', sometimes known as 'big people dance' due to its erotic nature, blurred rather than reinforced the gendered boundaries of the dancehall space. Amorous dance movements where bodies would rock, rub, slide, dip, and whine, not only disrupted the borders of gendered demarcations they also challenged wider public perceptions of black erotic identities. Open public displays of erotic intimacy between black bodies were uncommon outside of the dancehall in the UK. Whereas black male and female sexualities were often fetishised and objectified in wider dominant cultures, lovers' rock provided safe countercultural spaces for the erotic expression of black sexual subjectivity. In this view, 'lovers' rock music sits in tandem to roots reggae as opposed to in opposition to it in providing alternative countercultural representations of blackness. For the erotic as expressed in the genre of lovers' rock furnished notions of hot spaces, sensual sanctuary and intimate communion where black sexual desire was juxtaposed with the politically combustible space of the dancehall as a countercultural revolutionary location for critiquing black oppression in Britain.

In the making of black expressive cultures, lovers' rock affirmed the importance of the 'erotic as an essential source of power' (Lorde 2007) in the formation and transformation of loving countercultural identities. As Audre Lorde reminds us, the erotic is often confused with the pornographic, although they are 'two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual' (Lorde 2007, p. 55). Whilst the pornographic 'emphasizes sensation without feeling' the erotic provides opportunities to share and feel deeply any pursuit with another person (Lorde 2007, p. 56). Loving identities in lovers' rock were not solely concerned with the 'trials and tribulations' of interpersonal relationships although the trials of romantic love are without question the genre's dominant focus. Lovers' rock suggests that the 'personal' erotic domain also shares much emotional and political investment in the 'conscious' politics associated exclusively with roots reggae culture. Again, Lorde helps us to understand that the dichotomy between our psychic/emotional selves from the political is a false one that results in an incomplete understanding of the erotic (Lorde 2007, p. 56). I am arguing



that within the social context of the dancehall setting the music of lovers' rock and conscious roots reggae create a discursively flexible space where erotic and political boundaries are at once established and at the same time agitated and dismantled to open up multiple ways of feeling.

### **Black female vocalists within the lovers' rock scene**

Lovers' rock has a distinctive Black British male tradition where artists and crooners such as Vivian Jones, Winston Reedy, Victor Romeo Evans, Peter Spence, and Peter Hunningale have enjoyed popular success in the UK reggae charts on a par if not more so than their female counterparts (Barrow and Dalton 2004). However, it is the voice of black females within the genre that I wish to focus on to explore notions of the erotic, of love and blackness. As I have suggested, lovers' rock was not exclusively performed, consumed or enjoyed by women even though the genre was commonly designated as a feminised sanctuary within the reggae dance hall culture. Whilst lovers' rock created an important erotic space, conversely it also succeeded in creating essentialised notions of women and love. Dick Hebdidge argues that 'lovers' rock is important because it gave British Black women a chance to make themselves heard in reggae music' (Hebdidge 1987, p. 131). This view is also reinforced within the dancehall space itself where the genres preoccupation with love and romance is often deemed to be the primary and sole concern of women. Within the critical commentary that exists on lovers' rock, most critics have been quite right to stress the popularity of lovers' rock amongst many black female audiences (Barrow and Dalton 2004; Garratt 1985; Hebdidge 1987). In Dick Hebdidge's account of the lovers' rock scene he states,

What Lovers' rock did was to give young women a voice inside reggae without forcing them to deliver sermons when they didn't want to. It didn't ask them to lay down the law for the 'righteous.' In some cases, in records like *Indestructible Women*, it implied that all laws were made by men anyway and that women didn't have to bow down to any man-made law unless they wanted to. Most importantly, Lovers' rock made it possible for women to sing about real things close to home – things that affected *them*. (Hebdidge 1987, p. 135, emphasis in the original)

But the literature on lovers' rock has not attempted to deconstruct the popularity of the genre amongst black women within the broader contextualisation and socialisation of love as 'women's work'. What I am suggesting is that gendered notions of love combined with historical patterns of sexism and patriarchy have positioned women to be the 'natural' providers of care, nurturance, compassion and service. bell hooks argues that it is common for women to see themselves as intrinsically knowing more about love than men. In her book, *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, she writes,

Women are not inherently more interested in or more able to love than are men. From girlhood on, we learn to be more enchanted by love. Since the business of loving came to be identified as woman's work, females have risen to the occasion and claimed love as our topic . . . Our obsession with love is sanctioned and sustained by the culture we live in. (hooks 2003, p. 75)

In reggae dancehall cultures, lovers' rock is one such space where women learn to be enchanted by love and are encouraged to see love's work as their business. There are spaces for women to claim contradictory forms of female autonomy within lovers' rock, in spite of the fact that lovers' rock can be legitimately critiqued for positioning women into roles of patriarchal dependency (Hebdidge 1987, p. 131). Indeed, it is also necessary to recognise that autonomy is never clear cut. It is always negotiated within relationships of power. It can be consciously fought for and gained, while imagined or frequently lost. Thus I am scrutinising Hebdidge's claim that suggests that black female vocalists simply found their voice, agency and autonomy in lovers' rock music, enabling them to articulate those 'things that affected them', namely romantic love, within the broader oppositional culture of reggae (Hebdidge 1987,

p. 135). With good intention, Hebdidge's assertion sets out to support young black women both as active participants in the cultural production of lovers' rock and as active critical agents giving voice to 'their' own reality. Whilst this observation seeks to underline black female autonomy, I believe it can also dangerously essentialise the black female experience because it suggests that what actually affected 'them', black women (as opposed to black men), was a specifically gendered female preoccupation with everyday love and romance. Thus love and romance are positioned by Hebdidge as being antithetical to those 'sermons' and chants of 'righteousness', voiced by male contemporaries in the 'conscious roots' reggae tradition. Although Hebdidge acknowledges that some common yearning may exist between our 'yearning for a lover and deliverance from Babylon' (Hebdidge 1987, p. 134) the assertion rests on the false dichotomy between erotic desire and political aspiration. Quite often the so-called 'sermons' were part of the everyday social realities that impacted upon the experiences of black men and women. Within the UK reggae dancehall scene, racialised forms of oppression became entangled with complex gender politics and class marginalisation which were also interwoven into our loving and erotic relationships. Films such as *Burning an Illusion* (1981) and *Babylon* (1980) represented the intersection of these structural and social factors that affected both black men and women in very specific ways. The soundtrack to both films utilise a mixture of conscious roots reggae and lovers' rock as the cultural back drop to Caribbean life in Thatcher's Britain during the early 1980s. Within *Illusion*, the erotic is an important space for suggesting that loving relationships between black men and women (romantic or otherwise) served as critical sources of affirmative and transgressive power that sustained marginalised communities. However, these relationships were also under frequent pressure from social factors such as unemployment, poverty, social marginalisation, domestic violence, and racism. Directed by Menelik Shabazz in 1981, *Illusion* demonstrated that black consciousness as a counter-cultural critique of racism and imperialism was as 'close to home' for many black women as it was for black men. Furthermore, these political factors were intimately connected and determined the realities of the trials and tribulations of erotic loving relationships amongst black working-class communities in Britain.

Many female lovers' rock artists began performing as teenagers during the early development of the lovers' rock scene (Barrow and Dalton 2004; Garratt 1985; Hebdidge 1987). One group by the name of '15, 16 and 17' were exactly 15, 16, and 17 when they recorded their track, 'Black Skin Boy'. It is commonly reported that Louisa Mark, was possibly as young as 13 when she recorded her cover version of

'Caught You in a Lie' (Garratt 1985). In an interview conducted by Sheryl Garratt for *The Face* magazine in 1985, lovers' rock veteran Janet Kay lamented, '... I'm sick of the term "Lovers' Rock." It's got so that every time a woman opens her mouth to sing, she's stuck with that label' (Garratt 1985). Leading lovers' rock vocalist Caroll Thompson elaborates on how as a young black woman growing up in England, the struggle to be taken seriously as a musician informed the direction her career would take as a lovers' rock artist. This was equally determined by her deep love and enjoyment of both reggae and soul music,

I grew up hearing the Supremes, Stevie Wonder, The Jacksons ... Then there was Minnie Ripperton, Aretha, so many. But *Catch A Fire* came out when I was still at school, and it really got to me – Bob Marley and the I-Threes. I really started listening and becoming aware of my roots, my culture, where I'm coming from, and how I should be. That's still there – I love reggae music, and that is my first, natural kind of music ... In Jamaica, it's always been roots and the men singing about their culture and Rasta ... And because of that, women always had a low profile. At first it was the same in England, because you only had Louisa Mark, Janet Kay, 15, 16, & 17 and Brown Sugar who had any real success, and I don't think the producers really took women seriously. They thought, 'Oh, they'll just get pregnant and give up, or a man will give them a whole heap of trouble, and there's no point putting money into it.' So they didn't really concentrate on them and give them the credit that was due. Then after a while it changed as they realised that women weren't stupid, that they *did* want to make a career out of singing. (Garratt 1985, pp. 69–70)

As Thompson's commentary highlights, female lovers' rock artists were engaged in an uphill struggle to be taken seriously to achieve any level of autonomy or agency within the music scene. Indeed, Thompson was emphatic about establishing the parameters of respect which determined how women were both perceived and treated as credible musicians. Having the will to sing was not enough. Thompson suggests that young black women had to employ a high level of self-determination to navigate sexist obstacles and prejudices that faced many black females within the reggae scene:

It depends on your mentality and what you want to project – if you're the kind of woman who wants to go through all that shit, then you go through it. If you show them that this is your profession and tell them that if they want a woman to mess around with, then they should go to a club and find one, then they'll treat you with respect. And in this business you have to have respect if you're a woman, otherwise you want get far. (Garratt 1985, p. 70)

Thompson became so frustrated with waiting for attitudes and prejudices to change, that she formed her own company C&B, where she wrote, sang and produced her own records (Garratt 1985). In an industry where young women often felt pigeonholed by male peers into being merely 'lovers' rock singers', female agency for young women in lovers' rock could not be so easily claimed by notions of 'giving voice'. It is important to take seriously how such agency was negotiated and compromised by age, a lack of female ownership of recording studios, the rarity of finding female musicians to form female bands and the fact that some male bands were reluctant to be seen in public playing love songs for girls (Garratt 1985).

Thomson's account of her experience as a lovers' rock artist also challenges the presumption that black women as both artists and as listeners had very little interest

in black oppositional politics (Barrow and Dalton 2004; Hebdidge 1987). Black women were assumed to be generally disengaged cognitively, emotionally, and socially from the political discourses and aspirations that were troubling black men. Hence, black conscious music was presumed to offer very limited expressive opportunities for black women in Britain in comparison to African American soul music:

And to most black British girls living in places like Tottenham and Handsworth, Africa didn't look much like home. For behind the success and popularity of Lovers' rock among the female audience there was another message. The message was that the soul of the big American cities, of Aretha Franklin and Dianna Ross and new singers like Gwen Guthrie, was there to teach women about a different set of options. (Hebdidge 1987, p. 135)

As Thompson's discussion above suggests rather than being an alternative option to conscious roots music, African American soul music was one option amongst the many discursive transnational sound cultures that contributed to the syncretic noise of lovers' rock. I would also add that whilst Africa may or may not have looked much like home, Handsworth and Tottenham did not always *feel* much like home either particularly as it was these locations that exploded with successive urban uprisings ('riots') during the 1970s and 1980s. These urban areas were centres of intensified racial tensions and social resistance in the UK where black women were very much a part of, and in specific cases, the impetus for community struggles against police harassment and brutality. Take for example the shooting of Dorothy Cherry Groce by police officers in Brixton that sparked the Brixton uprisings of 1985, and the death of Cynthia Jarrett who died a week later during a police raid of her north London home in Tottenham, an incident which became the main driver for the Broadwater Farm 'riots' (Gilroy 2006).

When lovers' rock is constructed as a sanctuary for 'female concerns', we underestimate the complex relationships that black women have formed with oppositional black movements alongside sexual politics and the politics of gender. It is not only possible, but necessary for black women to be thinking through and feeling our way around our multiple political and erotic positionalities concurrently without these identities necessarily being at odds or separated from each other. The feminisation of lovers' rock does not allow for the intersectionality and multi-dimensional engagement of black female experiences. It also fails to recognise the ways in which sexism can create the conditions that keep these feelings and experiences disconnected. Our intersecting experiences can pull together the complexities of location, sexuality, race, and gender alongside an engagement with love and decolonising politics that permits lovers' rock not to be simply antithetical to roots and culture but engaged in a much more dialogic and discursive relationship with notions of freedom and black liberation within the social contexts of black people in Britain and beyond.

### **Blocking the vibes of Jah**

As discussed above, the cultural emergence of lovers' rock took place in a social context where reggae music was characterised by the predominance of sound system/

deejay culture. The scene was also highly populated by reggae bands and artists from the UK and the Caribbean including Aswad, Matumbi, Steel Pulse, The Wailers, Burning Spear, and Third World amongst many others (Barrow and Dalton 2004). Roots and culture became synonymous with blackness, or indeed, Africaness, as a political identity in reggae music. Conscious roots music incorporated an African centred narrative of Rastafari repatriation back to Africa, resistance to and liberation from 'Babylon' oppression, whilst articulating racialised discourses that affirmed and validated black humanity (Campbell 1985). Indeed, within conscious roots music, love as a political category had taken a revolutionary stance. Love was conceptualised beyond the domestic sphere and used to service broader political concepts of freedom and emancipation. Love as a form of psychological political insurrection demanded decolonisation of our minds from the self-destructive and harmful remnants of black subjugation and brutalisation as a consequence of three centuries of plantation slavery and white colonial rule. In one obvious example of psychic decolonisation, Bob Marley charged us to, 'Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds.'

However, black humanity and black redemption in reggae music was framed predominantly through male vocal chords. Black female participation was certainly evident in conscious reggae music. The I Threes from Bob Marley and The Wailers and the African American, Sandra 'Puma' Jones from Black Uhuru are just a few notable examples. Indeed, black female audiences could actively chose to occupy their own positions of solidarity within narratives of Rastafari liberation and liberation, whilst seeking, feeling and believing in the liberatory messages that arose from songs and verses of redemption. However, our loving roles also remained tied to the domestic sphere as the backbone that supported the 'worldly' work of Natty Dread in the quest for righteous redemption. Take for example, the Jamaican lovers' rock track by Horace Andy and Tappa Zukie's 'Natty Dread a Weh She Want', where Rasta love is depicted as a superior if not a more righteous form of loving. Andy and Zuki inform the female object of their desire that she needs love from a Natty Dread, above *all* other men, so *she* can keep him and care for him without the need to share him! Thus, the 'girl' is enlisted, for her own good, to love, serve, and facilitate the needs of a 'righteous Dread'. Far from an ethical or equitable form of righteous love, this patriarchal form of love is supplied abundantly from women to nurture and care for men without any acknowledgement of how righteous love leaves women short changed, without any reciprocated desire to fulfil or cater for our own need for love and the erotic.

Female or feminised loving could also be seen to be standing in the way of 'righteous' men. Carolyn Cooper argues in 'Virginity Revamped' that the lyrics of Bob Marley's love song 'Waiting in Vain' expresses an ambivalent representation of women and male sexual desire (Cooper 2000). Cooper suggests that from a male point of view, the transgressive woman in the song becomes synonymous with Babylon as whore, becoming an 'alluring entrapper, seducing the Rastaman from the path of righteousness' (Cooper 2000, p. 350). Similarly, in the UK, it is said that many male reggae bands frowned upon playing lovers' rock music and felt that any female presence on stage could actually be 'blocking the vibes coming from Jah' (Garratt 1985). Lovers' rock was not only characterised as the softer, sensitive side of reggae it was also seen as an obstacle on the path to righteousness. Lovers' rock was

disavowed as a musical interlude which allowed women to escape into the frivolity and utopian fantasies of romantic love. As these critics write,

For teenage black girls, whose dreams of escape were more likely to involve marriage to a caring man than repatriation to Africa, lovers' rock 45s presented a welcome alternative to the diet of militant roots being presented by many UK sound systems. (Barrow and Dalton 2004, p. 396)

The separation of lovers' rock from the labour of radical 'conscious roots and culture' follows a pattern of sexist thinking that engenders what counts as 'serious' and 'trivial' to the transformative political concerns of black people. This creates a false and gendered dichotomy between erotic love and rebel politics which in turn become gendered as female and male respectively. As Lorde suggests, this pattern of thinking falsely separates the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political (Lorde 2007, p. 56). In a further example of this 'ism and schism' between rebel politics and erotic love, 'Poko' Walford Tyson lead vocalist of the 1970s roots reggae band Misty Roots from Southall, puts it like this, '[We] no longer wanted to sing about love and women. We wanted to do progressive protest music' (Simpson 2007). For Poko 'progressive' music was defined by the expulsion of both women and love from their repertoire of radical political songs. Indeed, for Poko, the frontline of serious struggle was shared not with women, but with white punk bands of the 1970s and 1980s at gigs such as 'Rock Against Racism'. The guitarist, Peter Harris, described the bond formed between roots reggae bands and punk bands as 'very simple'. He explains, 'The punks were the same . . . They were seen as dregs of society. We were all anti-establishment, so there was a natural synergy between us' (Simpson 2007). Harris's comments suggest that much more rebellious camaraderie and bonding appeared along the lines of a 'natural' masculinity between black and white male dissidents than across the lines of gender between black males and black females. For 'Poko' and Harris, love and women were one of the same things, monolithic obstacles that 'blocked' or 'got in the way' of serious rebel politics and spiritual matters.

## **Conclusion**

Lovers' rock stands as a forerunner for a distinctly black erotic music tradition in Britain where sexual politics and public politics converge upon the discursive acoustic environment of the blues party and dancehall. Lovers' rock emerged against the back drop of successive urban uprisings up to and during Margret Thatcher's rein as Prime Minister of Britain. Deep seated feelings of injustice, disaffection, and social alienation were not uncommon to young black people in Britain during this period (Gilroy 2006). Black communities in Britain on a social level were facing a crisis of deepening levels of marginalisation born out of institutional forms of racism. Irruptions of anger and rebellion against police authorities were not rooted in mindless violence but within a malaise of rage against repeated violations against black humanity (Gilroy 2006). The rage which permeated the inner city streets of Handsworth, Brixton, Toxteth, and Chapeltown, repeatedly during the 1970s and 1980s, was triggered by a cauldron of social factors including high unemployment, police brutality, and harassment alongside racialised social alienation (Gilroy 2006).

I am arguing that this period in British history was filled with deep and abiding levels of social neglect, lovelessness, and carelessness ingrained within a vile disregard for black life amongst the British press and wider society. The event that seemed to epitomise sentiments of lovelessness happened in 1981 where The New Cross Massacre killed 13 young black teenagers while they were out attending a house party in south London. The fire is believed to have been racially motivated and remains a tragic yet powerful reminder of the British media's attitude and public disregard for black life which was commonplace during that period (Gilroy 2006). As Gilroy observes,

The 'black party' had become such an entrenched sign of disorder and criminality, of a hedonistic and vicious black culture which was not recognisably British, that it had become fundamentally incompatible with the representation of black life and experience in any other form. (Gilroy 2006, p. 130)

Critically, within this social context of anti-black sentiment, lovers' rock amplified and affirmed that blackness, through a complex and contradictory gendering process, was nonetheless, worthy of being loved with all of love's imperfections. Lover's rock articulated a discursive narrative that said black males and females were deserving of a space to express an erotic interlocking politics of desire, joy, pleasure, love, and justice. bell hooks argues that, 'Erotic pleasure requires of us engagement with the realm of the senses, a willingness to pause in our daily life transactions and enjoy the world around' (hooks 1993, p. 116). The public display of the erotic, in the form of song lyrics as well as by the intimate 'slow wine' dance to lovers' rock music, can be interpreted as an open expression and validation of black male and female sexualities and humanity through the public display of erotic pleasure. Indeed, it could be argued that love expressed through lovers' rock was, in of itself, an act of radicalism and rebellion. As Patricia Hill-Collins (2005) notes, oppression works by not only forcing people to submit, it also works by rendering its victims unlovable: 'In this context, resistance consists of loving the unlovable and affirming their humanity. Loving black people (as distinguished from dating and or/ having sex with Black people) in a society that is so dependent on hating Blackness constitutes a highly rebellious act' (Hill Collins 2005, p. 250). Erotic desire expressed through lovers' rock formed part of a wider discourse on rebellion and revolution that helped to revitalise black life in Britain.

Lovers' rock became a highly syncretic political and erotic concern in the vernacular traditions and transnational networks of Caribbean communities as both producers and audiences of the genre. I have attempted to challenge the way lovers' rock is frequently disavowed and overlooked both within reggae music culture and within scholarly and journalistic accounts that exist on lovers' rock. As suggested above lovers' rock and conscious roots are much more dialogic and discursive than is frequently imagined. Lovers' rock has since its inception remained an integral and consistent component of 'black expressive cultures' where a preoccupation with erotic concerns have long existed in tandem with pragmatic and utopian notions of black liberation (Gilroy 2006). As Gilroy (2006) has suggested both reggae and soul place issues of sexuality, eroticism, and gender conflict as prominent thematic concerns alongside discourses that were previously aligned with notions of freedom. Carolyn Cooper also asks us to reconsider the

erotic in the oversimplification of reggae categories specifically in relation to reggae 'culture' and ragga 'slackness':

But even that politically conscious reggae tradition is much more textured than is often acknowledged. The erotic was contained in the protest and often disrupted the simple logic of ascetic cultural warfare. This seductive tension between the erotic and the political continues to energize the dancehall, rub-a-dub style. Acknowledgement of this carnal element in 'conscious reggae' makes it possible to hear the continuities in the work of the contemporary 'slackness' DJs and that of their forebears. (Cooper 2004, p. 76)

A closer 'textured' reading of lovers' rock that takes into account the politics of black consciousness, love and sexuality reveal the tensions between the erotic and political energies that Cooper discusses. I am arguing that the marginalisation of lovers' rock as an erotic soundscape, is due to the following factors: the feminisation of erotic love, the masculinisation of black public politics, and the false separation of erotic discourses about love from the radical politics of liberation found in roots reggae. The gendered fissures of blackness fashioned around sexuality, gender conflict, and the erotic exist in a much more complex and ambiguous relationship to black liberation and resistance struggles than is often imagined. Such complexities do not furnish uncomplicated readings of lovers' rock as a genre that simply expresses 'female' concerns for female audiences. The intertwined forces of erotic politics reconfigure the dancehall not only as a countercultural revolutionary space but rather one that exists at once as discursive location to engage the multiple energies of rebellion, joy, pleasure, and love.

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