Popular Music (2006) Volume 25/3. Copyright © 2006 Cambridge University Press, pp. 447–470
doi:10.1017/S0261143006000997 Printed in the United Kingdom

The riddim method: aesthetics, practice, and ownership in Jamaican dancehall[1]

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Abstract

The Jamaican system of recording and performance, from the 1950s to the present, constitutes a distinctive approach to notions of composition, originality and ownership. Emerging from a tradition of live performance practice mediated by (and informing) sound recordings, the relative autonomy of riddims and voicings in the Jamaican system challenges conventional ideas about the integrity of a song and the degree to which international copyright law applies to local conceptions, as enshrined in decades of practice, of musical materials as public domain. With the spread of the 'riddim method' to the sites of Jamaican mass migration, as evidenced by similar approaches in hip hop, reggaeton, drum'n'bass and bhangra, reggae's aesthetic system has found adherents among artists and audiences outside of Jamaica. This paper maps out, through historical description, ethnographic data, and musical analysis, the Jamaican system as a unique and increasingly influential approach to music-making in the digital age.

The advent of commercial, mass-mediated popular music genres in the twentieth century has contributed to the spread, in many music cultures worldwide, of a certain conventional 'mainstream' form of song, comprising an original, autonomous and reproducible entity with a relatively unique integration of lyrics, melody and chordal accompaniment. In mainstream Western music culture, the thirty-two-bar AABA structure, perhaps repeated twice or thrice with some sort of variation, constituted a quintessential type of this conventional song form. In the latter half of the century, especially in connection with new technologies and African–American ostinato-based practices, some conspicuous alternatives to this mainstream song form have emerged, such as remixes combining elements of different familiar songs, hip hop songs whose accompaniment consists of a sampled riff, or loosely structured James Brown-style funk songs based on ostinatos. In this article we explore aspects of another, unique and distinctive form of song construction, as represented by Jamaican dancehall reggae.

From the early 1970s reggae music – whose most popular form since around 1980 has been called 'dancehall' – has relied upon the phenomenon of the 'riddim', that is, an autonomous accompanimental track, typically based on an ostinato (which often includes melodic instrumentation as well as percussion). While a dancehall song consists of a deejay singing (or 'voicing') over a riddim, the riddim is not exclusive to that song, but is typically used in many other songs – a practice which is, for example, uncharacteristic of rap, which also uses sampled accompanimental



Figure 1. London-based selector Lloydie Coxsone cues up a record while a DJ works the microphone. Credit: Urban Image.yv/Bernard Sohiez.

ostinatos.[2] On occasion, the same voicing may be re-released with different riddims. Accordingly, the riddim has its own name, its own producer and owner, and its own musical life independent of particular voicings by deejays.

This system of what we may call 'riddim-plus-voicing', in which songs are built from separable component parts, is familiar to and largely taken for granted by those immersed in dancehall culture, whether as fans, producers, or music journalists. Nevertheless, the system is so unique that it well merits focused scholarly attention. In this essay we present a general description of the system and a cursory outline of its evolution, and comment upon its distinctive compositional norms, aesthetic attitudes, historical considerations, relations to live performance practices, and patterns of ownership as reflected in copyright and common practice.

The development of the riddim/voicing system

A standard explanation for the practice of recycling riddims is that Jamaica is a poor country, and it has been natural to minimise the expense of record production by re-using accompaniment tracks rather than paying for studio time and live musicians. While there may be an element of truth in this explanation, the reality is certainly more complex, especially since counterparts to riddims have not come to be used in the numerous societies that are even more impoverished than Jamaica. The reliance on riddims is better seen as being conditioned by and constituting part of the entire evolution of modern Jamaican music culture, including such features as its special

emphasis on sound systems and studio production, rather than live bands. In general, it is easier to trace and describe the evolution of the riddim system than it is to explain it.

Although the riddim-plus-voicing system did not become the mainstream norm in Jamaican popular music production until the latter 1970s, its roots lie in the early formation of Jamaican commercial music culture in the 1950s. One precondition was the convention, which still predominates, of dance music being provided by sound systems, playing records, rather than live bands. This orientation stands in contrast with other nearby countries, especially of the Hispanic Caribbean. Thus, for example, on a Saturday night in the mid-1950s in the city of Santiago in the Dominican Republic, dancers could gravitate toward any number of sites where accordion-based merengue groups would be playing; in Kingston, by contrast, music at lower-class dances would overwhelmingly be provided by sound systems, with their own equipment, personnel, dedicated followers, and exclusive record collections. In the 1950s these records would consist primarily of R&B singles acquired from the US; distinctively Jamaican commercial popular music did not really flourish until the early 1960s, with the advent of ska. Subsequently, the primary locus of creativity and production became the recording studio, again in contrast, for example, to the Dominican Republic, whose recording industry stagnated until the 1970s. A distinctive feature of the record industry in Jamaica, since its effective emergence in the 1960s, is that many records have been produced less for mass public purchase than for use by sound systems; this distinction would apply in particular to various sorts of custom-made 'specials', often recorded on acetate which wears out after repeated playing.

Related to the orientation toward studio production, and to the relatively late emergence of a local sound, was the vogue of cover versions. Many early ska recordings, including the 1964 hit 'My Boy Lollipop', were cover versions of obscure R&B songs, enlivened by the bouncy ska off-beat syncopation. Given the effective absence of copyright restrictions on such local releases, and the fondness of hearing local versions of foreign tunes, the covers elicited neither legal restrictions nor aesthetic disapproval. The trend has continued, with many 1980s 'lovers' rock' releases consisting of cover versions of contemporary African–American R&B songs, and many modern dancehall songs freely borrowing tunes from various sources.

A step toward the actual use of riddims began in the early 1960s, when producer Clement (Coxson/Coxsone) Dodd of Studio One would record a vocalist like Larry Marshall singing over an existing imported record (Barrow and Dalton 2001, p. 100). But the most important development was the rise of the deejay (DJ) as an artist. From the early sound-system days, the DJ might shout at various points into the mic while playing a song, encouraging dancers and 'bigging up' himself and the system; in the 1960s, as these interjections – especially as rendered over instrumental recordings – became stylised and valued in themselves, the art of the DJ, and the practice of voicing over riddims, became established. (Accordingly, but confusingly, the term 'DJ' generally came to denote the vocalist or 'artist', rather than the 'selector' or, occasionally in this essay, the 'disc jockey' who selects and spins records.) The next step was to make studio recordings of such DJ vocalisations, as was allegedly done first in the late 1960s by King Stitt. More prominently associated with this development, however, was U-Roy (primarily as produced by King Tubby), whose recorded voicings over instrumental tracks of earlier rocksteady hits topped charts in Jamaica from around 1970 and established the vogue of DJ recordings. The trend was further consolidated
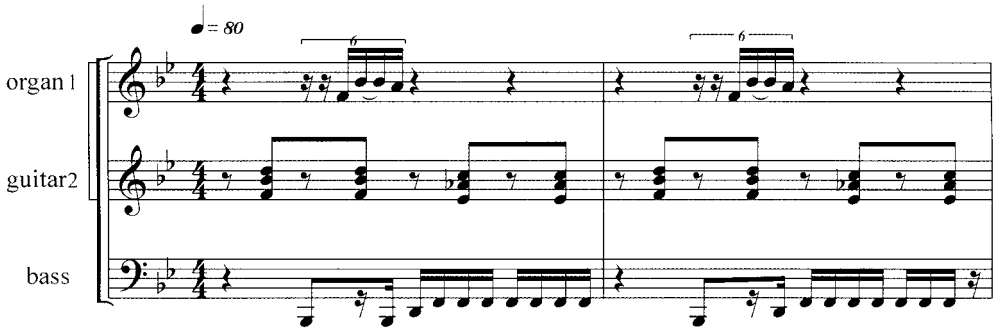


Figure 2. Clement 'Coxsone' Dodd at the Studio One mixing board. Credit: David Corio.

in the early 1970s by Big Youth and Dennis Alcapone, and later in the decade by Lone Ranger and Dillinger.

Related to this development was the convention, from around 1970, of having the B-side of a 45 rpm single contain not another song, but an instrumental 'version' of the song on the A-side; this version might simply consist of the instrumental accompaniment, or it might consist of a 'mild' remix in which certain instruments, and sometimes vocal fragments, would drop in and out.[3] One offshoot of this development was the advent of dub (not to be confused with dub plates or dub poetry), comprising radically original remix recordings in which an engineer like King Tubby, Lee 'Scratch' Perry, or Scientist would dramatically manipulate the sound with faders, reverb and delay. More relevant to this essay were the more straightforward instrumental B-sides and the uses to which they were put. As sound system selectors discovered from the 1960s or earlier, audiences at dances enjoyed singing along with the B-sides, but more importantly, the sides soon came to be used primarily as backup tracks for DJs like U-Roy to voice over, offering audiences the pleasure of hearing familiar songs presented in a new manner (see, for example, Katz 2003, pp. 166–7). As Barrow and Dalton (2001, p. 275) note, 'Throughout the 1970s, producers had often followed their big vocal hits with deejays or musicians giving their variations on a theme, employing the same rhythm track. They also sometimes looked further back to the music's past, particularly the rocksteady era, issuing their own cuts of earlier producers' rhythms'.

By 1980 the DJ-based riddim-plus-voicing format – whether in the form of a recording, or a live DJ 'toasting' over a riddim at a dance – had become the dominant idiom of popular music in Jamaica. The 'roots' or 'classic' reggae of Bob Marley,



Example 1. The 'Real Rock' riddim.

Jimmy Cliff and others – with its more conventional 'song' format of melodies sung over extended chord progressions, often with bridge sections – was certainly familiar to and cherished by most Jamaicans, but since the latter 1970s it had come to constitute an internationally oriented music quite distinct from what the younger generation of Jamaicans favoured and were likely to hear at a Saturday night dance. Instead, the norm was dancehall – an older term now applied to the performance-oriented DJ art – in which a vocalist like Yellowman would voice, in a text-driven style with a simple, often one- or two-note melody, over a familiar riddim. The system prevailed both in record releases and in live shows, where aspiring DJs would line up to voice 'pon de mike' while the selector played a vintage riddim over and over. In the early 1980s the competitive spirit of the sound-system rivalry extended to record production, and producers rushed to release new DJ voicings over popular riddims. As Barrow and Dalton (2001, p. 275) note, 'By 1983, indeed, it was unusual for anyone to have a Jamaican hit employing a completely original rhythm track'.

In the first half of the 1980s these riddims generally consisted of vintage B-side tracks from Coxsone Dodd's Studio One or, to a lesser extent, Duke Reid's Treasure Isle studio. Riddims of some songs, like 'Real Rock', 'Nanny Goat', 'Mad Mad', and 'General' (all from 1967) and 'Heavenless', 'African Beat', and 'Full Up' (from 1968), were used this way on innumerable DJ records. (The incomplete listing on reggae-riddims.com, which is a vast and useful resource, cites 269 recordings using 'Real Rock' and 249 using 'Answer' riddims.) Alternately, DJ songs used updated re-licks of these classic tracks made by the Channel One studio's house band, whose renditions of these riddims, influenced by American funk, tended to be more stripped down in texture and often reduced the songs' chord progressions to simple ostinatos. Songs like 'Real Rock' that were originally instrumentals lent themselves particularly well to being used by DJs. Invariably, the classic riddims used the familiar beat associated with the roots/classic reggae of Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, and others, with its distinctive 'skank' guitar or keyboard chord on the off-beat of each beat, and the 'one drop' drum rhythm with kicks on beats two and four.[4]
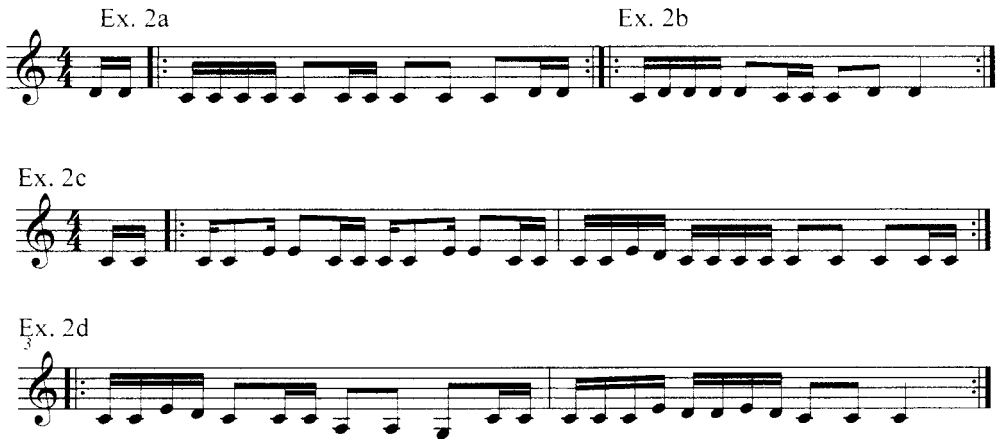
In voicing over pre-recorded instrumental riddims, DJs like U-Roy established the basic format of what subsequently became known as dancehall. However, 1970s-style deejaying tended to differ in several respects from the modern dancehall style that more properly emerged in the mid-1980s. A primary distinction, pertaining to the use of classic riddims, involved the typical 1970s practice of deejaying over tracks to whole songs, rather than two- or four-bar ostinatos. In the late 1960s, before instrumental B-sides had come into vogue, these songs might either be instrumentals like

'Real Rock' or vocal songs. Often a DJ like U-Roy, Dennis Alcapone, or Lone Ranger would retain the entire original recording, including, in the case of vocal songs, its sung tracks, inserting his own lines in the gaps between the verses of the original.[5] In other cases, the sung verses of the original might be cut out, but the track would retain the original's choral refrains, with which the DJ might sing in a call-and-response fashion.[6] The lyrics in such DJ versions (as well as the titles) would often relate thematically to those of the original. In some cases, the DJ might be regarded not so much as carrying the whole song, as in modern dancehall, but as following it, interjecting short verses and shouts here and there, and interweaving his vocalisations around the original's verses and/or refrains.

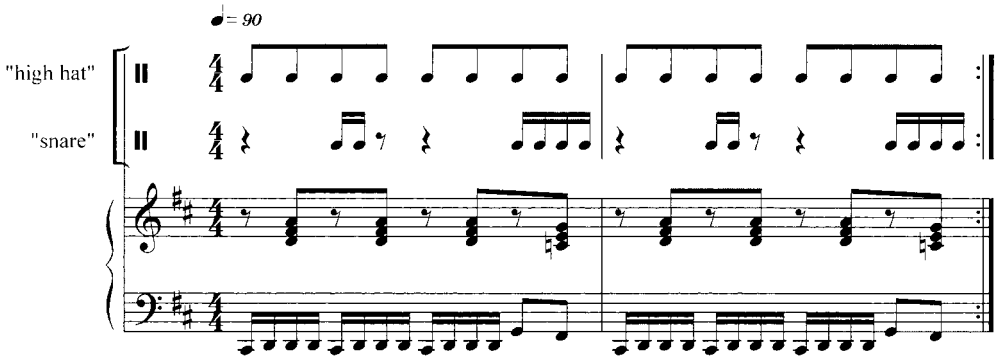
Even when the original vocals were entirely removed, or were absent to begin with, the use of accompaniment tracks to entire songs could oblige the DJ to voice over extended harmonic progressions. Thus, while commonly used songs like 'Throw me Corn', 'Real Rock', or 'Never Let Go' contain only simple repeated chordal ostinatos, others like the popular 'Satta-Masagana' have more varied chord progressions and even bridge sections.[7] Dancehall DJs, to be sure, 'sing' in the sense that they intone their verses using specific pitches (even if often only one or two notes); in this sense dancehall contrasts with hip hop, where vocals more commonly resemble speaking than singing. At the same time, dancehall DJs do not necessarily cultivate the art of singing *per se*, and they are generally distinguished in emic discourse from 'singers' like, for example, Barrington Levy (or, for that matter, Bob Marley), or from 'singjays' who do both. (Hence our preference in this article for the standard emic terms 'toast', 'voice' and 'chant' to describe the DJs' technique.)

Accordingly, DJs from the late 1970s to the early 1990s tended to voice in simple two- or three-note melodies or even virtual 'reciting tones', such as are shown in Examples 2a, 2b, 2c, and the slightly wider-ranged 2d. These tunes easily cohere with the sorts of chordal ostinatos common in most reggae riddims, which typically alternate a major tonic chord with ii, IV, V or ♭VII. As dancehall matured, the practice – first appearing in the late 1960s – of using riddims made especially for deejaying gradually became the norm. Many of these riddims, as mentioned, were crisper, minimalist re-licks of vintage riddims – or of their fundamental chordal ostinatos – especially as produced by Channel One and the house bands the Revolutionaries and the Roots Radics. In the years around 1980, Coxsone Dodd produced many re-licks of his own vintage Studio One riddims. Paralleling this development was the change in DJ style from the loose, fragmentary phrasings of U-Roy and his contemporaries to the sort of more rhythmic, steady, 'on-the-beat' chanting, using melodies such as those shown in Example 2; this sort of phrasing, which appeared in the 1970s voicings of Lone Ranger, became standard in the early-1980s deejaying of Yellowman, Toyan, and Eek-a-Mouse. The influence of rap is not to be discounted in this regard, especially as a Jamaican cover of the seminal 'Rapper's Delight' of 1979 appeared only a few months later, in Welton Irie's 'Hotter Reggae Music' (1980).

An oft-noted landmark in the production of riddims occurred in 1985 with the release of Prince/King Jammy's and Wayne Smith's 'Under Mi Sleng Teng', whose riddim was generated entirely on digital keyboards, including, according to some accounts, an adaptation of a pre-packaged rhythm on a Casio. The rendering of this riddim as Example 3 does not attempt to do justice to its synthetic-sounding timbres (especially the overtone-rich bass). 'Sleng Teng' was seminal in various ways, aside from coming to be used as a riddim itself in a few hundred songs (of which reggae-riddims.com lists 180). 'Sleng Teng' further consolidated the trend toward the new



Examples 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d. Four conventional dancehall melodies, typical of the 1980s and early 1990s; 2a and 2b are typical of verses, and 2c and 2d of refrains.



Example 3. The 'Sleng Teng' riddim.

production of riddims based on short ostinatos, rather than reliance on vintage B-side tracks, with their occasionally problematic chord progressions. Further, with its catchy and thoroughly novel-sounding timbres, 'Sleng Teng' promoted a departure from the overused Studio One classics, whose dominance in the earlier years has been cited as a sign of conservatism, or less charitably, lack of imagination (see, for example, Barrow and Dalton 2001, pp. 261, 275). Thirdly, in popularising the digital production of riddims (the trademark of what in the UK is called 'ragga'), 'Sleng Teng' showed how any aspiring producer with a keyboard synthesizer, sequencer, and drum machine, or access to these, could generate a new riddim, without having to spend money on studio time or studio musicians. Although sampling *per se* has only recently become common in dancehall, the use of digital techniques has greatly increased with the rise of personal computers, music software, and more sophisticated synthesizers. While posing a challenge to larger studios like Channel One, the digital era has also led to an exponential rise in the number of studios, large and small, and increased demand for keyboardists. (Meanwhile, as for Wayne Smith's voicing on Jammy's riddim, the song also perpetuated the dancehall tradition of adapting earlier tunes and phrases, with the catch phrase 'Under me sleng teng' reworking both Yellowman's earlier 'Under me fat ting' as well as Barrington Levy's 'Under mi Sensi'.)

Riddims and voicings in modern dancehall

Since the latter 1980s, the dancehall scene has not undergone revolutionary changes, whether in styles, performance and production practices, or other parameters, such that one can speak of a relatively cohesive 'modern' period commencing around two decades ago. As before, roots reggae songs – whether classics of Marley *et al.* or newer releases by artists like Beres Hammond – continue to occupy a niche in the music scene, being cherished as evergreens and still played on radio and by sound systems at clubs and 'oldies' sessions. Moreover, roots riddims (as in Example 1) and 'culture' tunes periodically crest in popularity, captivating even the 'hardcore' dancehall massive for a season or two. However, youth tastes, concerts, clubs, and record production are overwhelmingly oriented toward contemporary dancehall (and hip hop from the US).

The riddim-plus-voicing system continues to prevail in dancehall, whether in concerts, dances, or on recordings. 'Live' events occur in a variety of formats, with their own conventional uses of riddims. At neighbourhood sound-system dances in Jamaica, DJs, whether aspiring or established, may still take their turn 'pon de mike', voicing over pre-recorded riddims, although there is considerably less of this sort of live toasting than in the 1970s and 1980s, when a DJ might also be closely associated with a particular sound system, as was Ninjaman with the Killamanjaro system.[8] In such live contexts a DJ might be obliged to toast over whatever riddim was being played by the selector, rather than requesting a particular riddim or providing his own. For their part, established DJs who perform stage shows are generally accompanied by live musicians – typically trap drummer, bassist and keyboardist – who will endeavour to reproduce the riddims used in the recordings of the songs performed. While recordings in other music genres may aim to present the ambience of a live performance, the opposite aesthetic can be seen in dancehall stage shows, where the band may attempt to imitate studio or record-selector effects like the sound of a record being rewound (or 'wheeled-back'/'pulled-up'). Most typically at a dance club or street dance, music is provided by a sound system, whose selector may play a potpourri of roots-reggae classics, contemporary dancehall hits, and custom-made remixes of these (often alongside hip hop, R&B, and even disco). Often, in a practice called 'juggling', the selector may play a medley of several songs which use the same riddim. Another 'live' format is the unique institution of the sound clash, in which rival sound systems compete, primarily by playing 'dub plates'; these are short custom-made recordings (traditionally acetates) in which, typically, a DJ will sing part of a known song of his or hers, to the same melody and riddim, but with new lyrics which 'big up' the sound system paying for the plate.[9]

Recordings themselves come in a variety of formats. The 'classic' mode of vinyl seven-inch singles, with an instrumental B-side, is still widely marketed in Jamaica today, to some extent as before, mostly for use by sound systems, and also for international disc jockeys and reggae connoisseurs. Cassettes, whether legitimate or pirate, were popular in the 1980s and 1990s but are less encountered today. Most common, both in Jamaica and elsewhere, are CDs, as variously released by foreign labels – especially Greensleeves (UK) and VP (New York) – by small- and middle-scale Jamaican producers like Penthouse, by sound systems and mixtape disc jockeys, and, last but not least, by unauthorised 'pirate' producers. Most pirate CDs are compilations of songs by various artists, including many songs legitimately released only on seven-inch Jamaican singles and thus often difficult to acquire in other

formats. Pirate CDs, which are often put out by local sound systems or disc jockeys providing music at parties, also sometimes have the most informative liner notes, in the sense that they often specify the riddim in parentheses after the song title; often the songs are grouped by riddims, such that when played at dances they evoke the 'juggling' effect popular in live performance. Such CDs typically contain only a minute or so of each song, such that sixty or seventy songs can be included. Greensleeves, VP, and smaller labels also release many single-riddim CDs, featuring up to twenty different vocalists on the same riddim. Individual-artist CDs or albums, although the norm in most popular music cultures, are the exception in dancehall. Thus, top artists like Beenie Man and Bounty Killer might record thirty or forty songs a year, but produce a full CD of their own only every two or three years, the remainder of their output instead appearing on various compilations.

As in the 1980s, the vast majority of songs are set to established riddims – typically one of the dozen or so riddims that are popular at any given time.[10] Generally, it is only individual-artist CDs – especially of top-rankers like Buju Banton – that feature songs that do not use established riddims. Classic riddims like 'Real Rock' and 'Sleng Teng' retain the names of the original songs they accompanied, though occasionally a re-lick can prove popular enough to lend its name to the riddim as well. The 'Mad Mad' riddim, for instance, is also known as the 'Diseases', 'Johnny Dollar', and 'Golden Hen' after three popular songs recorded on subsequent versions of it. Most modern riddims, however, are composed independently of any given song or voicing, and are given original names by their creators.[11]

The riddims themselves may vary in origin. Vintage classics like 'Real Rock' still occasionally surface, whether in their original form, or in re-licks by Coxsone Dodd, King Jammy, or subsequent producers. However, since the early 1990s the classic roots-reggae rhythm, with its moderate tempo skank (ca. 60 bpm), has become less common than a faster 3+3+2 beat, as popularised by a new generation of producers. Prominent among these are such figures as Gussie Clark, whose hi-tech Anchor Studio products have been known for their glossy, to some extent internationally oriented sound; the veteran duo of Sly and Robbie, who have long moved from being top studio musicians to producing their own riddims on drum machines and computers; and Bobby Digital, who graduated from working as an engineer at Jammy's to producing digital roots riddims and slick re-licks for Jamaica's most popular vocalists. The late 1990s saw the ascent of crossover-sensitive and computer-savvy producers such as Dave Kelly and Jeremy Harding. The ranks of producers have swelled in recent years with the advent of small, computer-based studios. The Greensleeves and VP riddim compilation series are now dominated by young producers such as Stephen 'Lenky' Marsden, Donovan 'Vendetta/Don Corleone' Bennett, and Cordel 'Scatta' Burrell.

The most popular digital studio staple is the Korg Triton keyboard; the Akai MPC is also common, especially for composing drum patterns. Software programs, especially synthesizers and sequencers, such as Reason and Fruityloops, are increasingly coming into use, and digital multi-tracking software, such as Nuendo and Pro Tools have, for practical and financial reasons, superseded analogue tape, despite the opinion of many Jamaican engineers, producers and artists that digital sound is cold and harsh compared to the warm, round sound that tape takes on, especially when performances are recorded 'hot' or 'in the red'. Acoustic instruments are still used, however, and a percussionist/producer like Sly Dunbar takes pride in using drums or drum pads instead of or in addition to relying on programmed sequences and effects (see Bradley 2001, p. 513).

Compositionally, the riddim generally precedes the voicing, especially in the modern period. Most typically, a producer – more specifically, a 'beat-maker' (who 'builds' riddims, as opposed to the person who pays for the studio time or recording media) – generates a riddim, and then contracts a given DJ to voice over it. The DJ, presumably after hearing the riddim, must come up with a song, that is, lyrics and a tune. DJs are closely identified with their lyrics, even though some verses, especially in the case of prolific vocalists like Bounty Killer, are sometimes ghost written, or perhaps openly authored by a producer/songwriter like Dave Kelly. Alternately, in the case of a particularly popular and 'hot' riddim, a DJ might contract the producer to voice on the song, perhaps offering terms more favourable to the latter.

The riddim-plus-voicing system engenders its own idiosyncratic marketing conventions. As mentioned, most songs appear – initially, at least – on seven-inch singles in Jamaica (which are shipped abroad to the selector and connoisseur market) and/or on compilation CDs, including Greensleeves and VP single-riddim CDs. Although the singles sell primarily to sound systems rather than individual consumers, sound-system sales can easily exceed two thousand, constituting a decent profit for an inexpensively produced record. Various factors and strategies may condition marketing procedures. A label like Greensleeves might limit the number of songs it releases on a given riddim in order to promote a given song and CD using it. Such restrictions seem to have been enacted, initially, at least, with some of Elephant Man's songs, such as 'Pon de River', whose riddims are effectively exclusive to him. Similarly, 'Selecta' of jamrid.com observes that the Penthouse label seldom releases more than five songs on a given riddim; he opines:

> I would think this is a planned strategy. If you have a stable of artists that you are building, as Germain has done with Buju for example, it is probably wise not to have too many artists on one riddim, because when the riddim is played [i.e. at a dance] the time will be shared between the different cuts and if there is 12–15 cuts very little will be played from each cut, especially when played on radio. People won't be able to discover artist if he just appears a few seconds in some sort of megamix styled playing.[12]

Bounty Killer has voiced the same reservation about the desirability, from a marketing perspective, of having too many songs on a riddim:

> Having ten man on the rhythm shorten the lifespan of your song, cause they have to shorten the play of your song to give a next man a play [i.e. in juggling at a club]. If you alone on the rhythm, they have to play your song till they tired of it. If they want that rhythm again, they come back to it.[13]

The vogue of single-riddim CDs is also a controversial strategy, with some critics arguing that they debase the market by undercutting the more significant individual-artist CDs, while others applaud the sense of creative competition that they can engender.

Style and structure

Just as the timbres used in riddims vary, the composite rhythmic structures of dancehall riddims are similarly less standardised than are, for example, the rhythms of mainstream merengue, salsa, or roots reggae. Thus, for example, 'Clappas' (2003) has a distinctive swing-style triplet feel, 'Military' resembles a march, and 'Joyride' is like a medium-tempo polka. Nevertheless, in the period of 1990–2003, most riddims have featured a basic 3-3-2 pulse, at a tempo of around 90–110 bpm (although several

	1			2				3			4				
kick drum:	x			x				x			x				
snare:							x							x	
hi-hat:	x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x

Example 4. The quintessential dancehall riddim.
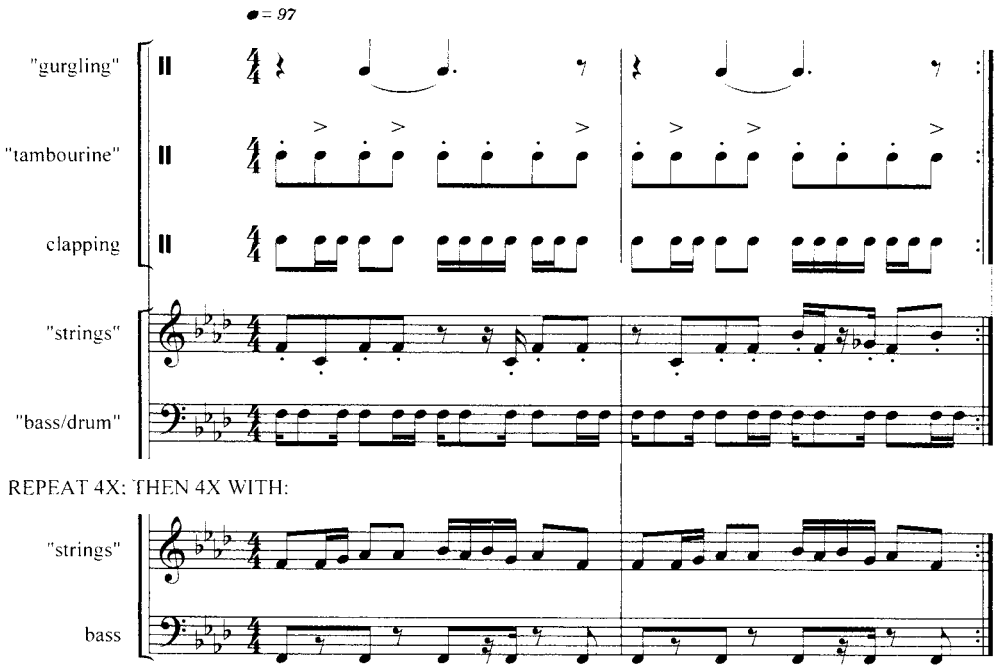
songs in recent years have been faster). This pulse is far less prominent in the standard roots reggae rhythm, although it can be found in mid-century mento. In fact, in some cases, it is much closer to the rhythm of contemporary Trinidadian soca, which is, however, usually faster (ca. 130–60 bpm). The quintessential dancehall riddim, as boiled down in a minimalist fashion characteristic of the 1990s, can be skeletally represented as shown in Example 4. The chart shown in Example 5 schematises the default dancehall drum pattern of the late 1980s and early 1990s (as in the 'Bam Bam' riddim), which also has become the basic beat of reggaeton, as it was during this period that dancehall gained massive popularity in Panama, New York and Puerto Rico.

Many riddims, rather than being indefinitely repeating ostinatos, have two or three different sections, in which instrumental sounds appear or drop out.[14] These sections may be varied and looped in different ways for particular voicings; typically, some 'instruments' might drop out during verses and return in refrains, but arrangements are often irregular. In general, in a practice growing out of the dub tradition, form is enhanced or even created by bringing various layers in and out over the course of the track. Nowadays, producers like Lenky Marsden may make customised versions of his riddims (as with 'Diwali') to match individual songs, adding melodic lines that mirror the melodies the vocalists sing and punctuating particular passages with 'stop-time'-like interjections of silence and other effects. A few riddims foreground acoustic instruments, like 'Drum Song', with its 'nyabinghi style' drumming, or 'Equinoxx', with its (squeaky) nylon-stringed guitar. More common, however, since the 'Sleng Teng' revolution, are futuristic-sounding digital timbres.

Many riddims since the early 1990s (like 'Punnany', 'Pepper Seed' and 'Mud Up') have been minimalist and spare, often consisting only or predominantly of percussion, but many others, especially in recent years, have tended to be more elaborate and densely layered in their textures. As such, they are quite resistant to staff notation, although Example 4's schematic representation of the popular 'Diwali' may give some idea of the sorts of sonorities that can be involved. As with the notation of 'Sleng Teng' in Example 3, this transcription is unable to do justice to the synthesised timbres of the various parts. Other riddims have simpler textures and more clearly recognisable hooks, as in the case of 'Bam Bam' (most popularised in the Chaka Demus/Pliers song 'Murder She Wrote'), with its guitar riff: //: F F - C E♭ C E♭ - ://.

	1				2				3				4			
kick drum:	x				x				x				x			
snare:				x			x					x			x	
hi-hat:	x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x	

Example 5. The default dancehall drum pattern of the late 1980s and early 1990s.



Example 6. The 'Diwali' riddim.

While the structure of dancehall songs merits more expansive analysis than can be provided here, a few general observations can be made. Most songs alternate verses and refrains. Before the 1990s, when a small set of relatively simple stock melodies were in vogue (like those in Example 2), there might not be a dramatic melodic contrast between the verse and the refrain, which would thus be distinguished primarily by the recurring and catchy text phrase (e.g. as in the case of 'Under Mi Sleng Teng'). More modern productions, particularly as emerging in the 1990s, generally present a greater contrast and thus have a more clearly defined structure. Typically, the verses are voiced using a simple, static melody, often based around one or two pitches, while the refrain is more melodic and is sometimes sung by the DJ and a back-up chorus and frequently 'doubled' by a synthesizer of some sort in order to provide further contrast.

In the 1970s and 1980s, DJ songs might be highly irregular in their phrase lengths, reflecting the spontaneity and informality of live toasting at a dance. By the late 1980s, however, song forms became much more regular, typically with eight- or sixteen-bar verses and choruses. This trend may reflect a shift in the dancehall industry toward an emphasis on recordings, which at this point were proving increasingly viable in metropolitan centres of the Jamaican diaspora and elsewhere. As the recording-as-commodity became a priority for producers, DJs receded from the sound-system scene and increasingly spent their time in studios. Today, selectors man the mics, while DJs, who are now full-time recording artists, put on concerts alongside singers and accompanied by bands.

Different songs using a given riddim can vary dramatically not only in their thematic content, but in their style and general character, as can be verified by listening to any single-riddim compilation, or a 'juggling' medley on a pirate CD.

Thus, for example, songs on the 'Diwali' riddim include Bounty Killer's hard-driving, empathic 'Sufferer', Sean Paul's bouncy party anthem 'Get Busy', and Wayne Wonder's tuneful, romantic pop crossover hit 'No Letting Go' (with the riddim mixed in at a low volume below other instruments).[15] Similarly, the venerable 'Real Rock' undergirds songs as different as the Clash's punk-style 'Armagideon Time' and Sanchez's version of the ballad 'If I Ever Fall in Love' (discussed below), not to mention a few hundred other settings.

'Out-of-tune' songs and the independence of riddim and voicing

As we have suggested, one of the most distinctive and unique features of the riddim-plus-voicing system is the relative independence of the two entities. A given riddim may be set to dozens of different voicings, and conversely, a given voicing might, in various contexts, be set to different riddims. Thus, for example, Elephant Man's 'Jook Gal', which originally appeared on a nameless hip hop beat produced by Lil Jon, was popularly remixed and reissued over the 'Coolie Dance' riddim. Similarly, as mentioned above, DJs at a live stage show might be obliged to voice their songs over whatever current popular riddims the selector is playing. Further, CDs of remixes – especially 'underground' ones – circulate widely, often combining voicings with riddims other than their original ones. Such remixes often take advantage of *a capella* voicings which might be recorded as vocal tracks over riddims or as dub plates, but then come to circulate on their own, often without the DJ's control.

One particularly conspicuous indicator of the independence of riddim and voicing is the way the two entities may occasionally be more or less 'out-of-tune' with each other. Most commonly, this phenomenon occurs as a result of the DJ relying on variants of the same simple melodies, such as are shown in Example 2, which may or may not fit perfectly with the chords or tonality of the riddim. As we have seen, 1980s DJs often essentially ignored the extended chord progressions of riddims deriving from songs like 'Satta-Masagana'. Even when newer riddims with simple chordal ostinatos came to predominate, tonal irregularities still occurred. Thus, for example, Papa San, in voicing his 'Dancehall Good to We' (1991),[16] uses a simple tune akin to that shown in Example 2c, with a prominent major third degree; however, the riddim ('Just be Good to Me') is in a minor rather than a major key, oscillating clearly between minor tonic and subdominant chords.

A common and somewhat different sort of incongruity can be heard on Buju Banton's popular album *Mr. Mention* (1993), some of whose songs use variants of the melody shown in Example 2d. This melody strongly suggests a C major tonality, and is sung accordingly (in appropriate transpositions) on a few other songs from that album. However, in 'Woman no Fret', while he sings the melody from the starting and central pitch of C, the riddim (the vintage 'Nanny Goat') consists of a I-I-IV-V ostinato in its original key of F major. The melody's central pitch of C is, of course, the fifth scalar degree of F major, and was presumably chosen by Banton (who is a more 'musical' singer than many DJs) because it fit his range and was sufficiently consonant. To an outsider's ear, however, the effect may seem odd, as can be appreciated by playing Example 2d on the piano while adding the chordal accompaniment: / F / B♭ C7 F - /. In this case, as in many others, Banton has simply applied his stock melody to a pitch level that sounded roughly, and sufficiently, harmonious to him.[17]

A third, and similar kind of irregularity can be heard in several songs of Shabba Ranks, who, with all due respect, might be regarded as particularly casual in terms of

matching pitch to accompaniment. Thus, for example, in his 'Fist-a-ris',[18] he commences his simple tune – resembling the one shown in Example 2a – in consonance with the riddim's clear A major bass and keyboard ostinato, but subsequently drifts upwards, through B-flat, then B-natural, such that by the end of the song he is singing the tune in C major, while the riddim resolutely reiterates its clear A major ostinato.

In some cases, the incongruity is not a simple question of an individual DJ's voicing, but involves more elaborate singing, as in a chorus rendered in two- or three-part harmony which, when heard against the riddim, may sound dissonant to observers accustomed to mainstream Western tonality.[19] In some cases, these irregularities can occur when a producer making a (typically underground) remix (mis)-matches an *a capella* voicing with a riddim in a different key. In other cases, where the recording appears to be legitimate, the combination is enigmatic.

Incompatibilities may also occur in the case of cover versions of songs. Thus, for example, Sanchez recorded a cover version of Shai's song 'If I Ever Fall in Love', which, in its original *a capella* vocal version, clearly outlines an extended chordal progression (e.g. the harmonies of its refrain proceed, in B♭ minor: G♭-F-G♭-F-G♭-F-B♭sus4-B7 . . .). However, while Sanchez sings the original melody faithfully enough, he sets it to the simple chordal vamp of the 'Real Rock' riddim, with its simple and tonally incongruous B♭(major)-A♭-B♭-A♭ ostinato (as shown in Example 1).[20]

In this article, the purpose of the discussion is not to make a digressive point about dancehall aesthetics, but to show how a tolerance for 'dissonance' both reflects and enables a relative autonomy of riddim and voicing. In order to be effective, the two must match in tempo, aspects of phrase structure, and perhaps *ideally*, tonality. But the very tolerance of tonal 'incompatibilities' both enables and is a product of the practice of coupling riddims and voicings that have their own independent origins, uses, and sometimes tonalities.

Riddim aesthetics

The 'riddim system', with its distinctive form of song construction, has engendered its own aesthetic norms and arguments, as reflected in various forms of emic discourse voiced by assorted fans, critics, journalists and bloggers. One category of discourse comprises commentary on riddims and voicings themselves. Discussions of DJs and voicings tend to be circumscribed by the difficulty of describing – whether in words or via notation – the expressive nuances that are crucial to the art; hence, in some contexts, the lyrics may receive more critical attention than they might merit, insofar as they may be valued by dancers primarily for their rhythmic flow rather than semantic message. For their part, riddims may certainly be praised or disparaged by hard-core fans and bloggers. A few fanzine excerpts may give some flavour of the kind of discourse encountered:

> [The 'Ching Chong' riddim] jumps right into a seriously bubbling mix of up tempo drum tracks and orchestral string punches. Ching Chong is a perfect crossover riddim in the Dave Kelly vein: Clean, up-tempo with just enough rude bwoy flavor to remind you of some dirty Kingston shit. This first time I played this riddim out, I brought it in from the 'Fiesta' riddim and everything flowed lovely – All the Yardies will love the hardcore tunes on this riddim and the crossover crowds won't blink an eye when you mix it in from Diwali.[21]

> The remaining tracks are efforts for the brand new 'Boasy Gal' riddim, presently one of the hottest and most anticipated riddims in Jamaica. The riddim caused such excitement on the dancefloors that it led to the introduction of the new 'Boasy Gal' dance. There's even an island-wide competition to find the best 'Boasy Gal' dancer.[22]

A different level of aesthetic discourse comprises commentary on the riddim-plus-voicing system as a whole. Such commentary could be seen as a subset of general assessments of dancehall, which, while naturally cherished by fans, is criticised by many (especially older Jamaicans) for its frequent vulgarity, sexism, obsessive homophobia, and glorification of violence. Disparaging perspectives on the riddim system focus on a number of issues, several of which are presented in Lloyd Bradley's informative, if aesthetically conservative, book, *This is Reggae Music* (Bradley 2001). Bradley quotes vocalist Dennis Harris, who deprecates dancehall as the 'karaoke phase' of reggae:

> The whole thing about groups fell apart, the whole thing about learning your craft fell apart . . . just buy a Casio, plug it in in the studio and chat what you wanted to chat . . . Everybody used the same programs, you had no group input any more . . . And they don't even rework [a riddim] like it used to be, building a new track on an existing riddim, because it's so minimalist it's exactly the same . . . [All you need is] just a playback, and one microphone, and one man to chat some rubbish on it. (*ibid*., pp. 501–2)

Bradley quotes at length Gussie Clarke, who despite being a leading dancehall producer himself, articulates familiar criticisms of the riddim dominance. The system of having dozens of DJs sing on the same riddim, he argues, breeds a lack of creativity, a situation of more followers than leaders, more reproducers than producers, and more versions than originals. It also promotes, he asserts, a spirit of rivalry that generates not originality but decadence:

> With all this sort of competitiveness, the only way people could get the better of each other is by being more extreme. They can't do this by writing better songs, because this isn't about good songs. The riddims start to get more and more raw, and the lyrics of so many of the new records is just about slackness and gun and that. (*ibid*., pp. 510–11)

Bradley goes on to quote Sly Dunbar, who laments how the availability of synthesizers and digital production techniques has generated a torrent of amateurish producers who lack musical training, talent or imagination (*ibid*., pp. 512–13). Kingston-based producer Mikey Irving, as observed in a recording session by Marshall, seems to agree with Dunbar – at least about the lack of musical training – but also recognises that dancehall aesthetics have come to revolve around these less conventional approaches to rhythm, harmony and form. 'The difficult thing about this kind of music', he said, referring to contemporary dancehall as well as hip hop, 'is that you have to fake illiteracy'.

As might be imagined, there are many (including Bradley) who are quick to counter by pointing out the distinctive merits of the riddim/voicing system. While some might disparage DJs as uncreative for singing over stock riddims, it should be remembered that most of the top DJs are remarkably prolific, often recording thirty or forty songs a year (not to mention dozens of dub plates). Audiences also derive a particular pleasure from hearing several radically different voicings on a given riddim, especially on the dance floor, where the riddim generates an ongoing groove. Singing over different riddims can also offer its own pleasures to the DJ, as in the case of 'Nathan', who opined on the versionist.com forum, 'Personally, I get my kicks from the fact that I can step on a stage and put my songs over any riddim. That's where I'm good at, that's my music'.

Another merit frequently voiced by fans is the profoundly democratic nature of the system, in which obscure, amateur, up-and-coming DJs compete, as it were, on a level playing field with established stars. No one can hide behind the skill of the

producer, or rely on their good looks or on music-industry promotion. As one fan wrote on the futureproducers.com forum,

> All the artists being able to lay down vocals behind any given riddim is what makes dancehall what it is. And sometimes the smaller artist may have the big tune on the riddim even if Beenie [Man] or Bounty [Killer] is on the same riddim. That is what makes dancehall more of a fair competition than hip hop.

Bradley describes how this populist character pervades the sound system dance scene:

> The beauty of deejaying has always been the lack of investment needed for talent to show up: even the smallest sound systems will attract their share of outgoing types who'll beg the operator to let them *hol' the mic, nuh*, and all that is needed is lyrics, an ability to ride a riddim, verbal dexterity, and a quick mind. No cash up front for studio time or for backing musicians; or, as would be likely, no need for a producer's patronage. And as for auditioning, the crowd would soon let you know if you were rubbish. Practically anybody could get up and have a go, and if a newcomer started seriously rocking the set down there on the corner, the bigger operations would soon snap him up. From which, the recording studio was just one (small) step beyond. (*ibid*., p. 504)

The recycling of a riddim, while in itself arguably 'uncreative', serves at the same time to foreground the very uniqueness and creativity of an individual voicing, which is so readily differentiated from other artists' voicings. Thus, intrinsic to the riddim/voicing system is the pleasure of hearing how different DJs will perform over the same raw material. In that sense the re-use of riddims, far from being an unfortunate drawback of the system, is an essential aspect of it. To quote another futureproducers.com fan:

> I like to hear diff artist on the same riddim. IMHO [in my humble opinion], this is part of dancehall and it should remain so. I want to hear capleton, ele, assasin, mega banton, cecile, wayne marshall, and the others on the same riddim. After that, I want to say, 'PULL IT UP SELECTA'.

Ownership and copyright in the riddim/voicing system

Just as the riddim/voicing system of song construction is unique, so has it at once engendered and evolved in tandem with distinctive notions of authorship and ownership, as reflected both in popular attitudes and in copyright practices. The wide circulation of riddims can give rise to various superficial impressions. One impression is that of a fair, orderly and well-regulated system of contracts, licensings and the like; another is the notion of the pool of riddims serving as a creative commons, undergirded by an anti-materialistic Jamaican willingness to share; a third impression is that of a Hobbesian wild-west scene in which ownership and profits are determined at best by handshakes and more often at gunpoint. Each of these scenarios contains a kernel of truth, although the reality is considerably more complex.

Music copyright in Jamaica, like the riddim/voicing system and Jamaican popular music in general, has gone through several evolutionary stages since the 1950s (which have been succinctly outlined, in particular, by Larisa Mann [2000]). As discussed above, Jamaican popular music culture from the 1950s onward largely centred around competing sound systems, with their reliance on vinyl records. Exclusive ownership of repertoire was important to the rival systems but was secured

not through copyright protection of original compositions, but through possessing copies of obscure R&B records whose identity was unknown to other systems.

The 1960s saw a dramatic increase in the small-scale production of records, especially of ska and cover versions of American songs. Such releases could take the form of an acetate for a particular sound system, a run of fifty to a hundred vinyl singles for sale to numerous sound systems, or larger quantities for public purchase. As Mann documents, several factors inhibited implementation of any sort of copyright norms. Enforcing local copyright was a low priority for a government struggling to maintain basic law and order. Jamaican copyright law itself was outdated, being technically the same as the British copyright act of 1911, which did not reflect developments in technology and practice. Authorship and ownership of compositions were often unclear, and in any case were generally unimportant to musicians, most of whom had little knowledge of copyright, could not envision earning royalties, and hence made records primarily for prestige, pocket money, and future opportunities. Records tended to be identified not with the musicians, who generally worked for hire at various studios, but with their producers and/or the sound systems that played them (which were frequently one and the same, a united commercial entity); often, the systems kept the origin of the records anonymous in order to maintain exclusivity.[23] For their part, producers would expect to earn money not through royalties or licensing their songs to other artists, but through direct sales of their own records and revenue from sound-system dances. Meanwhile, since Jamaica was not a signatory to any international copyright conventions, local producers could freely record cover versions of American R&B songs, while not enjoying any foreign protection for their own products. The entire situation both promoted and reflected a popular aesthetic in which audiences avidly enjoyed 'new' recordings which, more often than not, were reworkings of already familiar material (Mann 2000, pp. 12–16).

In the 1970s–1980s, as the riddim/voicing system took shape, the centrality of sound systems and their reliance on vinyl records continued, especially as state radio largely shunned dancehall. Foreign sales of records took off, both with the growth of emigrant West Indian communities in the UK and the US, and with the international popularity of Bob Marley and other artists. Copyright practice, however, continued to be informal and irregular. Both composers and performers on records which were made as exclusives for sound systems – whether based in Jamaica or the UK – often remained anonymous, without any claims to royalties. As before, producers' profits derived mostly from direct sales of their own records; hence, for example, other producers freely re-licked riddims deriving from Coxsone Dodd's old Studio One songs, and Dodd re-licked his own vintage riddims to keep up. In the effective absence of copyright protection, a lively and contentious rivalry developed between Channel One and Studio One, with the former re-licking the latter's riddims and Dodd attempting to 'scoop' Channel One's own original songs by copying them (as guided by his informant, Sugar Minott) and releasing his versions first (Katz 2003, p. 227). Attempts made in the 1970s to regularise local copyright practice were largely unsuccessful. While DJs on riddim records were sometimes able to negotiate some royalties shared with the producer or, perhaps with the author of the riddim, more often they accepted a flat fee as payment (Mann 2000, pp. 16–17).

Since around the late 1980s, conventions of copyright practice have come to be fairly stable, although by no means free from conflict and dissatisfaction. Jamaica adopted a modern copyright act in 1993, although negotiation and registration of copyright and collection of subsequent royalties by musicians and composers

continue to be irregular. Hence, most DJs, except for major stars, may continue to value making records primarily for the flat fees they may receive, and for the prestige which can lead to more stage shows – especially abroad, where a top artist like Buju Banton may charge around thirty thousand dollars for a show. Producers, for their part, profit primarily through the sales of their own singles, as before. However, many artists and producers are becoming increasingly aware of the advantages of copyright, and now take greater care to negotiate proper royalties and register their works (e.g. through ASCAP, BMI, or in Jamaica, JCAP, the Jamaica Association of Composers, Authors and Publishers). Copyright norms, including royalty payments, are particularly likely to be observed by international record companies marketing dancehall (such as VP, Greensleeves, Jet Star, and Mad House); hence, producers and artists are eager to get their material distributed by such companies. However, many people also feel that such companies have ruthlessly and unscrupulously exploited Jamaicans on the island, who are largely unable to litigate or otherwise demand just recompense. The companies themselves may often have considerable difficulty ascertaining who is the rightful owner of material they would wish to release (as with the Sean Paul hit discussed below).

Typically, as mentioned above, a beat-maker will set up his own publishing company, register and copyright his riddim, pay DJs – via flat fee and/or a share of rights – to voice upon it, and market it, ideally through a large record company; he may also license the riddim to other producers (usually on a non-exclusive basis).[24] In many cases, an aspiring producer may contact a DJ and contract him or her to voice on his riddim, with the two parties generally dividing the subsequent rights and royalties, and the producer taking responsibility for marketing the song. (When licensed to a riddim compilation, for instance, DJs generally receive writing credit/publishing and accompanying royalties.) Recordings using unauthorised samples of known riddims certainly abound, but these circulate largely as low-level, 'underground' entities, especially on the Internet, in sound-system circuits, and in pirate compilations sold on sidewalks and other venues. A high-profile unauthorised use is likely to generate legal action, as was the case in Pit Bull/Lil Jon's 'Culo' (2004, mixing Spanish and English), which used both the chorus tune of Mr. Vegas' 'Pull Up' and a minimally remixed version of its accompanying 'Coolie Dance' riddim.

More relevant to this essay are the problems which derive specifically from the idiosyncracies of the riddim/voicing system. One category of conflicts pertains to the ongoing use of classic 1960s–1970s riddims, many of which, rightly or wrongly, have come to be treated as if they were effectively in the public domain. In accordance with the contemporary British law which accorded ownership to the party which financed its production, a great many of these riddims would have been theoretically owned by Coxsone Dodd (d. 2005), who oversaw Studio One productions. As we have seen, in the 1980s Dodd attempted to counter the rampant versioning of his riddims by re-recording several of them himself. In the next decade, according to one informant, he waged a crusade to protect his property, negotiating deals with studios like Penthouse that had been re-licking his riddims, and suing the Stone Love label and sound system for using his originals.

The difficulty of ascertaining ownership of 'classic'-era material has in fact become a central issue in a number of recent copyright disputes. One of these involved the use of the vintage 'Stalag' riddim by Bounty Killer for his song 'Gun Down'. 'Stalag' has been technically owned by Winston Riley, who organised and financed its

original 1974 recording, although, like producer Coxsone Dodd, he neither composed nor played an instrument. Despite having tolerated many recyclings of the riddim, Riley reportedly demanded ten thousand dollars from Bounty Killer for its use. The latter has threatened to countersue, pointing out that his album more properly credited ownership of the riddim collectively to Riley and to Ansel Collins (a main musician in the session), and to his own producer Jazwad, who altered it. Bounty also expressed his frustration in dealing with older producers due to the ownership ambiguities involved in their material, resolving only to work with younger producers (Massouri 1996).[25]

Ambiguity of ownership of vintage material has also generated litigation involving the 2004 Sean Paul/Sasha hit, 'I'm Still in Love with You Girl', released by VP Records on the multi-million-selling *Dutty Rock.* At question here are the rights not only to the riddim, but to the voicing, whose chorus is a cover of the original song by that name recorded in the 1960s by Alton Ellis, produced by Coxsone Dodd. As has so often been the case, little attention was paid to publishing rights until the song belatedly came to involve a large sum of money. Since that point, royalties have been frozen, as they are being variously claimed by Jamrec (the current publishing arm of Dodd's Studio One), by Ellis (despite his having earlier sold his rights), and drummer Joe Isaacs, who played on the original recording.[26]

Both these disputes involved the uncertainty of ascertaining ownership of material dating from the 'classic' era, when copyright was largely ignored or, at most, determined by a handshake – or perhaps flashing a gun. Both involve recordings whose publishing rights came to rest not with the actual musicians who composed and/or recorded them, but with 'producers' of one sort or another who had little or no creative input *per se.* Thirdly, both involve situations in which ownership was effectively irrelevant until genuine sums of money came to be involved, illustrating the general rule: ambiguity of ownership, plus real money at stake, equals litigation. Finally, both have reflected the inherent problems in incorporating dancehall into a modern system of copyright.

A related contentious area involving an ambiguity inherent to the riddim/voicing system pertains to the ownership of re-licks, that is, fresh recordings of existing riddims. Re-licks pose a formidable challenge to copyright law. One could well argue that a composite ostinato like that of 'Real Rock' is too brief, simple, elemental, and common in its form to merit protection as even part of a 'composition' (aside from the mechanical rights pertaining to use of a pre-existing recording). Further, the new recordings of such a riddim might be so distinct and fresh as to arguably exempt them from any copyright restrictions pertaining to the original model. Alternately, it could be argued that producers of re-licks, as with cover versions of songs in general, should pay royalties at the statutory rate to the copyright holder of the model – especially in the case of re-licks that faithfully reproduce the sound of the original, or that involve particularly distinctive-sounding riddims. As can be imagined, there is vast potential here for ambiguity, for allegations of plagiarism, and for actual litigation. Fear of such litigation might partially explain why there seem to be fewer commercially released re-licks of riddims in the last decade, in comparison to the rampant versioning of the 1980s. Questions may also naturally arise as to whether a given riddim can be regarded as a version of an earlier one. Reggae journalist Rob Kenner, for example, refers to the accompaniment tracks of KRS-One's 'Black Cop' and 311's 'All Mixed Up' as versions of the 'Real Rock' riddim (Kenner 2004), but one might well question whether these tracks have anything in common

with 'Real Rock' aside from sharing bass lines and alternating tonic and flat-seventh-degree chords (like hundreds of other rock songs).

If some producers of re-licks may be testing the boundaries of what they can get away with, so are the many DJs who perpetuate the venerable Jamaican tradition of borrowing tunes. While the tunes of most dancehall refrains are original, many DJs freely avail themselves of American and European pop melodies, presumably in the thus-far correct assumption that no one will bother to sue them.[27] Elephant Man is particularly outstanding in this regard, with his borrowings being too numerous to cite.[28]

The multiple recycling of riddims is occasionally interpreted, e.g. by members of Internet forums, as implying an anti-materialist, perhaps Rastafari-inspired aesthetic of sharing among Jamaican musicians, whose beat-makers are free from the grabby copyright system and are happy to contribute their art gratis to the creative commons. However, other forum members are generally quick to refute such assertions. (As one wrote on futureproducers.com, 'This ''share share share'' argument is an old lie'.) Evidence strongly suggests that despite the wide circulation of riddims, Jamaican musicians are neither more nor less concerned about money and ownership than are musicians elsewhere. Many musicians voice their bitterness over how they have been ripped off, whether by individuals, record companies, or 'the shitstem'. Renowned producer Lee 'Scratch' Perry, who burned down his own recording studio in 1979, stated in one interview that he did it out of frustration from having his music stolen so rampantly (in Bradley 2001, p. 499). At least two people have been murdered in efforts to grab parts of Bob Marley's inheritance. Meanwhile, in popular discourse about dancehall itself, while the re-use of riddims is taken for granted, people often comment, whether bemusedly or critically, about various forms of 'tiefing', be it Elephant Man's plagiarism of melodies or Beenie Man's tendency to copy other artists' styles. In these respects one may say that concepts of proprietary ownership and individual creativity are certainly operant in the riddim/voicing system, albeit in idiosyncratic forms.

Conclusions: riddims as a creative commons?

From one perspective, the riddim/voicing system is not entirely new. Virtually all established music genres, whether folk, classical or popular, operate by drawing from and building upon an extant body of raw materials, synthesising original creations from extant sources of inspiration. Many folk music genres worldwide rely on stock melodies and rhythms, with which audiences are expected to be generally familiar. The riddim/voicing system, in this respect, can be seen as one particular instance – albeit an especially distinctive one – of a worldwide practice of using stock accompaniment patterns. These are the ways that music and culture work, and the borrowing/signifying practices in dancehall simply signal a more explicit acknowledgment and embrace of the underlying processes of artistic creation and cultural production.

At the same time, however, dancehall is quite unique in the relative autonomy of the backing track from the 'song', and the way that the riddim can take on an independent life of its own, both through being used with different melodies and, in many cases, being rearticulated in the form of fresh studio re-licks. The instances in which a given voicing may itself be set to different riddims even more dramatically

illustrate a remarkable detachability of components which, in most world popular music, are generally more linked as integral elements of a given song.

As we have seen, the riddim system evolved in a very specific set of conditioning circumstances, characterised by the relative absence of copyright laws, a lively small-scale record production industry, and a distinctive performance scene which combined live vocalising with use of vinyl records. By the time that certain copyright norms eventually came into effect, and aspects of both the live and recording scene had changed, the riddim/voicing system had developed its own aesthetic logic, integrity and sophistication. Such, indeed, was the creative vitality of the evolving system that some of its innovations predated – and to some extent influenced – developments in the equally dynamic and demographically far larger African–American music culture. Thus, for example, while Jamaican musicians have long found inspiration in black American music, Jamaican DJs were voicing over records and using turntables as musical instruments at least a decade before their counterparts in the Bronx. More dramatically, the way that riddims and voicings are detached and recombined in dancehall has been an important precursor to and a direct influence on the vogue of remixes and 'mash-ups', especially as they now abound in hip-hop and R&B. The socio-musical circumstances of the Jamaican crucible have been unique, but they also can be seen as one efflorescence of the kind of musical creativity accompanying a broader condition of postmodern, secondary orality embracing new technologies.

A concomitant of this secondary orality, as intensified by globalisation and mass access to tools like computers and the Internet, has been the postulation and, to some extent, genuine growth of a 'creative commons' of artistic materials which defy conventional copyright practices. The multiple recyclings of riddims, with some qualifications, constitutes a remarkable instance of this sort of phenomenon. Insofar as the notion of the creative commons implies a set of raw materials which are accessible to all artists, without the confines of copyright, dancehall is only exemplary to a limited degree. It is true that especially in the relative free-for-all of the 1970s and early 1980s, many riddims were effectively treated by musicians and producers as if they were in the public domain. Even today, riddims widely circulate via dub plates and unauthorised 'underground' remixes and mash-ups which are, in their own way, dynamic rather than destructive parts of the reggae scene. However, since the 1980s the use of riddims, especially on internationally marketed commercial recordings, has come to be incorporated into a broader system of international music copyright. There are those, of course, who decry this system, and who might argue that riddims are precisely the sort of resource that should be in the public domain. Others might not necessarily denounce the notion of copyright itself, but would criticise the way that ownership of Jamaican music, including riddims, has so often tended to rest with financiers (if not outright thugs) rather than the creative musicians themselves. Still others might argue that, at the very least, a system of compulsory licensing should be established for riddims – and for samples in hip hop – such that a musician would not need formal permission to use a riddim (or sample), but would simply have to pay the owner at a fixed statutory rate, as is the case with cover versions of songs.

Aside from the complexities of ownership, there is another, broader sense in which the riddim system already constitutes a remarkable instance of a creative commons. The notion of such a commons could imply an aesthetic sensibility, in which listeners not only tolerate but relish the particular sorts of recycling and repetition that might in other contexts be seen as uncreative or plagiaristic. Such

recycling can be enjoyed precisely because of the way it can serve to highlight the individuality and distinctive creativity of the 'original' aspect of the song, that is, the voicing. Similarly, working with the raw material of the voicing provides the artist with particular rewards and challenges.

The riddim system in this sense prefigures the entire aesthetic of the remix, less in the quirky and often simplistic combination of two pre-existing entities (e.g. the mash-up), than in the artful creation of a new entity to accompany a given raw material. Hip-hop and other offshoots (including jungle, drum'n'bass, UK garage and grime, modern bhangra, and reggaeton) have maintained and, with digital sampling, even intensified these practices. These genres show that, as unique as the Jamaican system is, it is also simply a more explicit and dramatic example of what is increasingly becoming a generalised form of popular music production in the age of mechanical, and now digital, reproduction.

Acknowledgements

While assuming full responsibility for the contents of this article, the authors wish to thank Derrick Ashong, Mikey Irving, Dave Hucker, 'Mr. Marlowe', Ramsey Foster, Hopeton Browne, and other informants too numerous to mention.

Endnotes

1. The term *dancehall* in Jamaican parlance has a broad set of significations. In this article, we focus on the music that has been played in the Jamaican dancehall over the last several decades. Unfortunately, given space constraints, we do not address aspects of dance, space, fashion, phenomenology, or other 'extra-musical', but crucial, features of dancehall. See Stolzoff (2000) for an ethnography and social history of the Jamaican dancehall; see also, Stanley-Niaah (2004) for an article which explicitly focuses on the role of dance, space, and bodily performance in the dancehall, as well as White (1984).
2. A few recent hip hop songs have featured versions or remixes of Jamaican riddims, including uses of the 'Diwali' riddim by Lumidee, Busta Rhymes, 50 Cent, and Fabolous, and of the 'Coolie Dance' riddim by Nina Sky and Pitbull. Usher and Jennifer Lopez have both sung on the same Rich Harrison beat (released as Lopez's 'Get Right' [2005]), but the Usher recording was not released.
3. The term 'version' is used inconsistently in Jamaican music discourse to mean: (i) an instrumental side of a record, that is, what we refer to in this essay as the 'riddim'; (ii) the different, fresh recordings or 're-licks' of particular riddims (e.g. the Studio One and Channel One 'versions' of the 'Mad Mad' riddim); (iii) a song (that is, an original voicing) recorded on a given riddim, e.g. Bounty Killer's 'Sufferer', recorded on the 'Diwali' riddim. Barrow and Dalton (2001), for example, use 'version' in this latter sense repeatedly (e.g. p. 275). In this essay we avoid this ambiguous usage, referring to these latter entities as 'songs'.
4. Funk influence may also account for the tendency for these early 1980s re-licks to shift to a kick-on-one/three, snare-on-two/four drum pattern.
5. See, for example, Dennis Alcapone's 'Nanny Version', sung over 'Nanny Goat' (on *Forever Version* [Heartbeat CD 3505]) or his 'Ba-ba-ri-ba skank', over 'I can't hide' (on Dennis Alcapone, *Ba-Ba-Ri-Ba Skank* [Lagoon LG2-1048]).
6. See, for example, U-Roy's 'Natty Rebel', sung over 'Soul Rebel' (both 1976), on Frontline Records (1869).
7. See recordings of this song on The Abyssinians and Friends, *Tree of Satta: Volume 1.* Blood and Fire BAFCD 045.
8. Aside from 'stage shows', which are events specifically intended for live DJ performance, the DJ as a soundman has largely been phased out of the sound system scene. Interestingly enough, the void has to some extent been filled by the selector, who no longer is necessarily the same person who cues and pulls-up (repeats) the records. Popular contemporary selectors, such as Tony Matterhorn or Fire Links, are major attractions in their own right, drawing thousands to the dances they headline. They tend to scream over the riddims, announcing the tune, calling for pull-ups, and exhorting the crowd. Typically, while shouting at the audience, the selector – with one hand on the mic and the other on the volume knob – turns down the underlying track to make himself heard, often doing so at odd and unexpected moments.

9. Dub plates are generally recorded at small, inexpensive studios dedicated to that function; they use pre-recorded versions of well-known riddims and increasingly employ digital sampling to provide the desired accompaniment. Seen as an integral part of the reggae industry locally and internationally, the dub plate business coexists peacefully with more 'authorised' industry niches.
10. See Pacey Foster's website, libraryofvinyl.blogspot.com/2005/06/six-degrees-of-reggae-riddims.html, for a computer-graphic representation of patterns of riddim use by different artists. All websites cited in this article were accessed in July 2005.
11. Whether or not the names are printed on CD covers, dancehall fans generally know the names of the popular riddims at any given time.
12. See his text for 'Heads Roll'. In the text for the 'Splash' riddim, he speculates that Greensleeves has limited the number of songs on that riddim in order to promote Mr. Vegas' song using it (see text regarding 'Splash').
13. From an interview in www.reggaematic.com, as cited in jamrid.com
14. 'Selecta', on jamrid.com, observes that several riddims seem to have three sections; see his text on 'Grass Cyat'.
15. Two of these are on *Diwali* (Greensleeves GRLCD 727).
16. On *Dancehall Superhits* (Powwow 1952-77425-4).
17. A more familiar, if indistinct, example of this phenomenon is the voicing of Chaka Demus on the hit 'Murder She Wrote'. Insofar as his tune resembles Example 2x, but sung from the fifth rather than tonic degree, the major third (or is it a fourth here?) is dissonant with the flat seventh of the 'Bam Bam' riddim (shown in Example 5).
18. On *As Raw as Ever* (Sony ET47310).
19. For example, the song 'Mama', by Ghost, on the 'Mad Instruments' riddim (on Fire Island 7″ single, flip side of Elephant Man's 'Mad Instruments Dance').
20. 'Fall in Love', on Sanchez, *One In a Million* (VP Records).
21. From a review by the Deadly Dragon Sound system, on http://deadlydragonsound.com/v3_writing.php
22. On http://reggae-vibes.com/rev_var/latino.htm
23. Guitarist Ernest Ranglin related that he did not even want to be associated with the local songs he composed and recorded, as involvement in such 'ghetto music' might imperil his employment at the 'uptown' venues where he performed (Bradley 2000, p. 55).
24. As before, the ambiguous term 'producer' can connote either a beat-maker, or someone who arranges and oversees the recording, handles mixdowns and edits, coaches the artists, pays for studio time and recording media (e.g. digital tape, to which masters are often still recorded), and/or handles licensing and marketing.

    A recognised artist, depending on his affiliation with the producer in question, might typically charge a few thousand dollars (plus rights and royalties) to voice upon a riddim. Alternately, an aspiring DJ might buy a riddim on the Internet for a few hundred dollars to use on demo recordings; purchasing a riddim for a legitimate recording might cost several thousand dollars.
25. See http://www.bountykiller.com/echoes.html. In an interview cited therein, Bounty stated, 'Stalag is the wickedest rhythm an' we ask Winston Riley before remixing it for the *Gun Down*, though we a good yout' an' we don't wanna be like some old nigga, y'know. Cah we is manageable people an' we are lookin' to act professional in our dealings with others. Anyway, 'im ask fi all that money, even though 'im clear a sample fi it already one million times and don't even play it (i.e. Riley requested the large sum despite having earlier allowed dozens of samples of it, and he didn't actually play on the recording in the first place). We find out that Ansel Collins play it, so we put the rightful credit pon the album – that's Ansel, Riley as the owner, and Jazwad, 'cause 'im mek our version more compact, with more kick drum an' percussion inna it. Winston Riley don't like that so 'im tek my song an' release it on Techniques! I'm gonna sue him, man. I mean, look at all them people who don't want fi record fi him. It only Sly & Robbie, Steely & Cleevie, Bobby Digital an' certain other long-time man we'll voice for now. But all the elders, we don't wanna work with them'.
26. See, for example, http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/html/20040614T010000-0500_61168_OBS_ROYALTIES_FROZEN_FROM_SEAN_PAUL_S__I_M_STILL_IN_LOVE_WITH_YOU_GIRL_.asp
27. 1980s star Joe Gibbs, in covering both lyrics and melody of Charley Pride's 'Someone Love you Honey', pushed the limit too far, and was sued and effectively ruined, such that for a period he was reportedly reduced to working as a clerk in a grocery store.
28. A prominent lift is his recycling of the tune of the German song '99 Luftballoons', via John Fortes' resetting, in his 'Elephant Message' (On *Diwali* [Greensleeves GRLCD 727]). See also, for instance, his adaptation of Celine Dion's 'I'm Alive' on 'Signal de Plane' or the Bee Gee's 'Stayin' Alive' on 'Doing It Right'.

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Discography

Cited here are only the more important of the numerous recordings mentioned in this article. Most of these have appeared on several different reissues, which the authors make no attempt to cite. Samples of many riddims cited can be heard on websites like jamrid.com.

The Abyssinians and Friends, *Tree of Satta: Volume 1.* Blood and Fire BAFCD 045
Alton Ellis, *Get Ready for Rock–Reggae-Steady!* Jamaican Gold JMC 200.241
Bounty Killer, 'Gun Down', *My Xperience.* VP 1461
Buju Banton, *Mr. Mention.* Polygram
Chaka Demus and Pliers, 'Murder She Wrote', *Ultimate Collection.* Hip-O 586695
Elephant Man, *Good 2 Go.* VP Records/Atlantic 83681
Lone Ranger, *On the Other Side of Dub.* Heartbeat CD 3504
Mr. Vegas, *Pull up.* Delicious Vinyl 9019
Sanchez, 'Fall In Love', *One In a Million.* VP 1483
Sean Paul, *Dutty Rock.* VP Records/Atlantic 83620-2
Scientist, *Rids the World of the Evil Curse of the Vampires.* Greensleeves GREWCD25
Shabba Ranks, *As Raw as Ever.* Sony ET47310
Sound Dimension, 'Real Rock', *Studio One Rockers.* Soul Jazz SJR CD48
U-Roy, *Natty Rebel: Extra Version.* Frontline 1869
Various Artists, *1985 Sleng Teng Extravaganza.* VP 2284
Coolie Dance: Greensleeves Rhythm Album #45. GRELCD0745
Dancehall Superhits. Powwow 1952-77425-4
Diwali: Greensleeves Rhythm Album #27. GRELCD0727
Riddim Driven: Mad Instruments. VP 2256
The Biggest Rhythms. GRELCD274
Tougher Than Tough: The Story of Jamaican Music. Mango/Island 518 399–2
Yellowman, 'Zunguzung'. *Look How Me Sexy: Reggae Anthology.* VPCD 1580
'Natty Sat Upon a Rock', *Mister Yellowman.* Shanachie 48007