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BROOKLYN BEATS

The dancehall/hip-hop hybrid of Jahdan and 77Klash

By Jesse Serwer

In the two decades between the disco days of Tony Manero and the hipster colonization of Williamsburg, no music made itself more at home in Brooklyn than reggae/dancehall. Sure, WKTU-style freestyle fueled portions of the borough during the '80s and early '90s but, ever since a wave of Jamaican immigrants began settling in Flatbush during the late 1970s, the rumbling low-end of reggae "riddims" and the sound of rapid-fire patois have given Central Brooklyn its colorful vibe.

As the area became home to the thickest concentration of Jamaican people outside of the islands, local sound systems (the mobile DJ crews that form the backbone of dancehall music and culture) quickly sprouted to keep locals abreast of the latest one-drop riddims, sweet lovers rock and badman 45s from "yard." Buoyed by the international success of locally-based producers like Jah Life and Philip Smart, NY-based "deejays" (rappers, or "toasters"; in dancehall, the record-spinning DJs are known as "selectors") Mikey Jarrett, Louie Rankin and Red Fox landed record deals in the early 1990s. But, ever since Shaggy bussed out of Flatbush in 1993 with "Oh Carolina," (and ultimately became dancehall's first major pop crossover artist), records by Brooklyn-based dancehall artists have been few and far between.

Take a stroll down Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, though, and dancehall is more prevalent than ever; the kiosks on Flatbush Avenue remain devoted to the latest CDs from yard, and dancehall-centric venues like The Elite Ark in East New York and C-PAC in East Flatbush continue to be among the city's most vibrant clubs. Central Brooklyn's also home to about a half-dozen pirate radio stations predominantly spinning reggae. So why aren't there more Brooklyn dancehall artists making noise?

The answer may lie in the borough's contributions to hip-hop. Caribbean and non-Caribbean BK MCs from the Notorious B.I.G., Foxy Brown and Shyne to Lil' Kim, Mos Def and Talib Kweli have all routinely



SOUND?CLASH: Jahdan (left) and 77Klash.

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colored their rhymes with patois, sampled reggae in their music and collaborated with Jamaica-based dancehall artists. Like Bobby Konders and Salaam Remi before him, local product and self-described "Remix King" DJ Obsession has made an art of reworking dancehall and soca vocal tracks for the hip-hop dancefloor.

"That amalgamation of reggae and hip-hop is Brooklyn music," says Michael "Gize" Burrowes (aka 77Klash), a Crown Heights-based producer and deejay whose musical resume includes working with both hip-hop and reggae artists. "KRS-ONE and Slick Rick started it and then Brooklyn heisted it and made it it's own. But that sound that people like Shyne have defines Brooklyn perfectly."

Of course, all hip-hop can trace its roots directly back to Jamaica. When Kool Herc, the Jamaican-born DJ credited with creating hip-hop, began talking over funky breakbeats at Bronx parks and recreation centers, he was essentially just adapting sound system culture to a new milieu. Today, it's routine for hip-hop artists from all over the country to collaborate with Jamaican dancehall artists and youth in Jamaica are more in touch with hip-hop and American culture than ever before. Dancehall, many purists now argue, sounds too much like hip-hop.

Still, Brooklyn remains home to its own unique sound clash, as evidenced by the work of 77Klash (spoken as "Two Sevens Clash," the Rastafarian terminology for apocalypse) and Jahdan. Together, the two have teamed up with Manhattan-based production unit Team Shadetek for the aptly titled single, "Brooklyn Anthem" (Sound-ink). A Flatbush-based singjay (a vocalist combing elements of a singer and a toaster), Jahdan is a member of local reggae band Noble Society and previously collaborated with such Brooklyn hip-hop figures as Dead Prez, DJ Premier, X-Clan and the Boot Camp Click. He was featured on Smif N Wessun's classic 1994 track "Soundbwoy Bureil," perhaps the ultimate example of the Brooklyn hip-hop/reggae hybrid. 77Klash, or Gize as he's known when working behind the boards, is best known for producing the Scallawah riddim, the instrumental track which spawned Turbulence's 2005 hit, "Notorious." Both Jahdan and Gize had worked with East New York rapper Afu Ra and played in roots reggae bands with strangely similar names before linking up.

"Brooklyn Anthem" updates the notion of "Brooklyn music" by synthesizing not only dancehall and hip-hop but also UK grime, London's interpretation of the Jamaica/hip-hop interface. Team Shadetek's beats are heavily influenced by UK grime, and the 808 drum machine claps on "Brooklyn Anthem" evoke Lethal B's "Pow," which might be the only grime track to have touched mainstream American radio.

Whatever the producers' aims, the vocalists are clearly trying to reach their BK brethren at home. Jahdan's chorus co-opts aspects of Courtney Melody's rebel anthem "Dangerous" while 77Klash reminds us, among other things, that "Brooklyn girls are the sexiest."

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"Cats need something to feel proud that they're from Brooklyn," Gize/Klash explains. "Brooklyn really needs a vibe, 'cause there ain't nothing popping [dancehall-wise] here right now."

They're clearly onto something. It's unclear if he was aware of the Shadetek song but Jamaican dancehall star and frequent Brooklyn visitor, Vybz Kartel, recently recorded a "Brooklyn Anthem" of his own. While it's not yet pressed up as a single, that track is already making waves at area clubs.

Sensing their chemistry, Jahdan and 77Klash plan to continue collaborating with one another. "I ain't going to let this commercial American scene go without knowing that dancehall, reggae music runs the fuckin' place," Jahdan explains. "We have to bring the light to it now and make people know that [reggae and hip-hop] are one and the same. It is just business and the monopolies that tried to separate it. The whole thing is divide and conquer, seen?"

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