

## Lose the Noise and you Lose the Meaning

Colin Pantall

Noises in the Blood by Lua Ribeira is a supremely ambitious work. Rather than seeking to place Dancehall in a subcultural tradition, or as something exotic and other, it has expanded outwards to see the dress, dance and ritual of Dancehall as an active cultural tradition that has its roots in ancient representations of female power and sexuality. Ribeira shows Dancehall to be an example of what Dr Carolyn Cooper (author of the book that gave the project its name) calls '...a cultural space that asserts the authority of the native as a speaking subject.'

It's a place of empowerment then, a place where 'active cultural production' takes place. It is also intensely theatrical, filled with drama that Ribeira has drawn from her numerous visits to the Birmingham homes and venues where most of the series was photographed. Here, Ribeira's photography is informed by a depth of research that connects to painting, mythology, and how women express themselves and derive power from communal spaces.

This research process not only helped Ribeira understand Dancehall and the women who took part in it, but also helped her understand herself, transforming the way she worked and saw the world as the project progressed.

"I started listening to dancehall artists I love, like Spice or Vybz Kartel," says Ribeira. "After looking at the very sexually explicit lyrics, I was a bit scandalized, and that feeling bothered me, I did not fully understand it. Where was that puritanism coming from? I did not consciously identify with that feeling. But, of course, it was coming from a Judeo-Christian background, that is not particular to me, but to the European context. Women in the dancehall, very often, seem to be in control of their sexuality and make gestures and moves that will make many people blush. Their behaviour within the dancehall time does not match the western understanding of femininity."

We see that control of sexuality evident in images where the women of Dancehall dominate the frame. When they pose in blonde wigs, or arch their backs across the frame, there is a power that is anything but supine and benign.

There is also an underlying empathy in Ribeira's approach which originates from her upbringing in Galicia in Spain. 'I am from a place in which, not long ago, during Franco's dictatorship, my language, culture and traditions were forbidden and punished often with death. I think this makes me identify with the importance of the expression of a culture that has been oppressed.'

The dilemma for Ribeira was how to overcome this stigmatisation of Dancehall Culture but also avoid the photographic temptation to focus on the exotic nature of Dancehall dress and rituals. The way she did this was by approaching it head on and engaging with her own outsider status and the impossibility of understanding the complexity of the lives she was visually documenting.

Ribeira in this sense is going beneath the surface signs of Dancehall and seeing it as part of a history and a life of which she is not part. The approach is a humbling one where the power of the image is handed over symbolically through Ribeira's confessional approach to her outsider status. This is not the photographer as All-Knowing Conqueror Seer, but the photographer as Bewildered Supplicant.

This bewilderment was there from the outset when Ribeira began photographing. At first she had no idea what she was getting into, initially making images that she felt didn't have any substance.

“It started with me going to parties and taking photos, using the amazing light, from the camera man that makes the videos. I thought those images were pretty, and were representing the night, subculture, hip hop, gangsta culture... But they were failing to condense what I was looking for, so I started to make different pictures.”

Elements of Dancehall began to resonate with her Spanish and Galician heritage, she began to feel the passion and the physicality of Dancehall and the way it touched on universal expressions of womanhood, desire and sexuality. This in turn connected both to the layers of struggle, oppression and release that are apparent in Afro-Caribbean history, and women’s history in particular but especially to the archetypes and mythology that ultimately formed the conceptual framework for the images shown in this exhibition.

“I am interested in mythology, not in fiction. I am interested in rituals, not in performance,” says Ribeira. Her research for the project was directed heavily towards the interplay between political history and cultural expressions of protest, with elements such as Norman Stolzoff’s tracing of Dancehall back to the music that emerged during slavery revolts, Jamaican Mento music, all the through to jazz, ska and reggae part of this process.

Ribeira also identifies Dancehall as part of an oral tradition that connects to Afro-Caribbean religions such as Obeah, Myal, Ettu, and Kumina, as well as performances of everyday life which have a richness of vocal expression that is unique to Jamaican and Afro-Caribbean culture. This is the ‘Noise’ that is apparent in the title of Ribeira’s project, ‘Noises in the Blood’, the Noise that is central to the rituals of Dancehall. It’s brash, it’s in your face, it’s noisy. Lose the Noise, says the poet Kamau Braithwaite, and you lose the meaning; ‘The Noise that it makes, is part of the meaning, and if you ignore that noise, then you will lose part of the meaning.’

Dancehall is the arena where the Noise takes place, a space where people transcend the rigours of everyday oppression and deprivation to be reborn in rituals that are, in Ribeira’s images, both a celebration and a statement of intent. So Dancehall is a performance with historic roots and that is part of the reason why it is an assertion of a way of being against the hypocrisy of dominating cultures. It’s something that challenges restrictive definitions of sexual morality. It’s an escape from the difficulties of everyday life then, and also a place where women (and men) can create a sexually liberated identity.

And that ultimately is what Ribeira is doing with her Noises in the Blood. It is a celebration of the power of women, a ritual power that has its roots in a world beyond our rational control. With this project, Ribeira connects into that world, linking the past, the present, the actual and the mythological in images that are both beautiful and above all completely physical and real.