# 4.6 Making a scene! Linking Black British Sound System practices with the lesbian music scene in London in the 1980s

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## × Abstract

In the face of the racist, sexist and homophobic mainstream clubbing worlds, Black and white lesbians created their own queer music scenes in liminal spaces in London in the 1980s and 1990s. These informal spaces of consumption provided escape from work and the family, affirmed our worlds, and developed a sense of identity and community (Buckland, 2002). This scene emerged from 1970s counterculture and was influenced by Black British sound system culture. We were schooled in protest at inequalities, had witnessed racist police violence and uprisings in the UK. Our involvement in music expressed escape and hope (Gilroy, 1993). Preceding the rave scene and corporate superclub culture, these one-off events took place beyond the view of the mainstream. Nights were often short-lived and the publicity relied on word-of-mouth and self-made flyers. Culture was created by the DJ's and dancers, promoters and their friends (Melville, 2020; Pini, 2001).



***Keywords:*** lesbians, clubbing, London.

## 1. Making a scene!

'Making a scene' is often an admonition to women to be quiet, to calm down, an accusation of being too emotional. Women of the 1980s had had enough of the patronizing legal, social attitudes of the male-dominated world. This paper aims to shine a light on the club scene that Black and white lesbians created in London in the 1980s and 1990s, under the radar of the straight world and in liminal spaces. Along with other marginalised and outsider groups London lesbians put their labour into creating alternative music scenes in autonomous spaces beyond stereotypical domestic spheres. Lesbians upset the power relations of the city's spaces (Massey, 1994) in making their scene, and music was the conduit that embodied this process in the club and through the dancing bodies on the dancefloor. The work of Black lesbians here, and the influence of British Black reggae sound system culture, challenged the dominant mappings of London. "If these hierarchies are spatial expressions of racism and sexism, the interrogations and remappings provided by black diaspora populations can incite new, or different, and perhaps more just geographic stories." (McKitterick, 2020, p. xv).

The lesbian music scene is largely invisible in writings on club culture, subcultures and queer history. While the London lesbian music scene encompassed a range of musical genres and sub-scenes, I will concentrate here on the scene where music of the Black Atlantic was played, danced to and provided sonic sanctuary. I suggest that the methods employed by this scene's activists owed more to the strategies and influence of the UK's reggae sound system culture than to a DIY ethos passed down via 1970s punk in lineage from the Situationists

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International. I discuss the increasing visibility and agency of lesbians in the capital during this period as queer activities expanded into public spaces, and call for this undocumented history's place in the archive.

I am writing this from the inside as a white lesbian. This is not a definitive account, but is based on my own experiences, collected ephemera from the time and remembering with others who were there. I DJ'ed and danced on the overlapping gay and straight Black music scenes where rare groove, reggae, jazz, funk, hip hop, and emerging Black UK sounds moved Black and white, gay and straight, to the dancefloor. This was a time of political and cultural DIY activism. Marginalised groups responded to oppressive forces through formal and informal collaborations across domestic, employment, political and cultural spheres and made connections with the fight for liberation within and beyond the UK. The liberatory activism of Black and white lesbians making a scene existed in the context of 1980s London, developing, as with sound system culture, a creative response to the restrictions of mainstream society. This scene challenged the racist door policies, and sexism of the gay and straight clubbing scenes.

Being out as a lesbian in London in the 1980s and 1990s took effort and necessitated conscious and constant vigilant navigation through the city's political, cultural and physical spaces. London's attraction as a site of escape and safety for lesbians, gays, queers and marginalised groups did not in itself offer protection from the right wing and reactionary elements of mainstream society. However, as we will see, sanctuary and resistance were found and emphatically created across the critical spheres of music and protest.

Two key intersecting elements therefore energised this marginal scene: the social and political landscape, and the emerging Black music scene.

## 1.1 The social and political landscape

In the 1980s and 1990s Margaret Thatcher's Tory government were set on controlling the public and private lives of the working classes, Black people, queers, immigrants, and trades unions through reactionary legislation and police powers. Restrictions on the funding of local councils to provide affordable housing, the proposal to limit discussion in schools of homosexuality through Clause 28, cosying up to Ronald Reagan's nuclear arms project and the violent racist policing of Black people resulted in regular protests, strikes, marches, actions, and uprisings. For the left and marginal groups in the UK there was solidarity and political affinity with international struggles. Trades Unions and individuals rallied to support the *Sandinistas* in Nicaragua, and there was a constant demonstration against apartheid outside the South African embassy in Trafalgar Square. Throughout the 1980s, before increasing crackdowns from the police, solidarity marches took place through the capital almost every weekend. Lesbians were visible and active in the wider political landscape, through housing co-ops, squatting, attending marches and demonstrations, supporting awareness raising around HIV and AIDS, setting up self-help organisations such as Women and Manual Trades, Women's Aid, Rape Crisis, lobbying for safe transport for women and taking part in Reclaim the Streets actions.



While unemployment was high, welfare benefits at the time enabled many to make productive use of their time through film, music, theatre and the arts. Many publicly funded feminist, lesbian and gay and women-only projects with their own spaces and workers gave women and lesbians increased economic and cultural control. The anti-racist and anti-discriminatory policies and actions of the Greater London Council (GLC) and local councils did not overthrow Capitalism's structures, however these initiatives touched many individuals and groups and provided visions of alternative ways of relating and self-organising. The GLC and local authorities provided spaces and funding for a range of projects, these included the London Filmmakers Co-op, Camerawork photographic darkrooms, Chats Palace community centre, Copyart printing resource in Kings Cross, Centreprise Books in Hackney. There were also many publicly funded feminist, lesbian and gay and women-only projects with their own spaces and workers e.g., the print workshops See Red, Lenthal Road Print, and women's centres in many boroughs. The London Lesbian and Gay Centre, the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre and Wild Court Women's Centre provided political and cultural meeting spaces and access to public space that women and lesbians would not otherwise be able to obtain. In the early 1980s benefit nights and celebratory events linked causes from the UK to worldwide struggles.

This is by no means an exhaustive list or full account of the social and political environment but illustrates the amount of overlapping political and cultural activity taking place that Black and white lesbians were a part of an inhabited. The effects of participating and being part of this setting gave many young people and marginalised groups a powerful sense of agency and community in an otherwise hostile world. As many

lesbians lived in squats and housing co-ops these were additional premises to put on parties and blues nights and take control of their clubbing sites of pleasure.[2]

The effects of participating and being part of this setting gave many a powerful sense of agency and community in an otherwise hostile world. In this context and alongside the emerging Black music scene lesbians had access to formal and alternative spaces which were free from mainstream society's surveillance and restrictions. This was energetically utilised to create club nights where music, dancing, partying and politics overlapped.

## 1.2 The emerging Black music scenes in London and the South East

During the late 1970s and 1980s the straight 'rare groove' scene was emerging, (Melville, 2020). It was here that the legacy of sound system culture transformed London's Black music scene. ''(...) these gatherings addressed the critical lack of social and cultural interactions in the UK that many of that generation were used to 'back home'." (Reid & Rosenior-Patten, 2021, p. 127).

Now the sons and daughters of the Caribbean British who had arrived in the 1950s and 1960s were building their own scene playing reggae and soul music to increasingly mixed audiences. London sound system crews took over the empty houses and abandoned warehouse spaces of London's dying industrial landscape and re-purposed them as one-off club nights. This was in response to the lack of safe places available throughout the UK for the Black community to party and to the racialized door policies of London's music venues where Black clubbers were turned away. These acts and interventions reconstituted clubbing into utopic visions for those attending. "In the space that music creates the social structures imposed on us were reworked, imperial space remade as post-colonial space, the past reconfigured in the present, divided city space made over as a space of multiculture." (Melville, 2020, pp. xi – xii).

As a white woman I have not experienced racism and must acknowledge here that I have benefited in many ways from Black music. The music of Black America carries messages of liberation and redemption, moves back in time and carries us forward to the present and to hopes of future liberation, these aesthetics and messages resonate with the struggles of marginal groups worldwide. Black music provides ways of relating through dance, and a curriculum to read and understand the world. Listening and dancing to Black music we navigate history, emotions and key points in our lives. As Attali reminds us "Music is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world. A tool of understanding." (Attali, 1985, p. 4). The mixed crowds attending warehouse parties found shared enjoyment moving to the grooves. The DJ's curated the tracks, taking the dancers on journeys of joy and communion on the dancefloor. The lesbian Black music scene emerged and grew alongside the straight Black music scene where overlaps of clubbers and DJ's met and danced at mixed (straight and gay) club nights, for example Norman Jay regularly played at mixed nights and the legendary house DJ Paul 'Trouble' Anderson played at Gay Pride.

Sound system's influence was enriching the city's clubbing scenes and airwaves with a proliferation of Black music nights as the city echoed with pirate radio stations transmitting reggae, soul, garage, and hip hop through its sonic spaces.

## 1.3 The lesbian music scenes

At the same time lesbians were organising their own autonomous club nights playing Black music, following and influenced by Black British sound systems' methods and strategies.

The lesbian club scene that grew through the 1980s and 1990s provided places to meet, to dance and to share a sense of community. The scene offered clubbing lesbians' ways to affirm their identity through cultural expression and create a sense of belonging in a hostile world. This was all relative as the lesbian community was not exempt from prejudice. While several longstanding regular gay club nights and venues were established in the 1980s not all musical, fashion, political tastes were met. The majority of regular gay nights and bars were white, gay male and did not welcome lesbians. The London lesbian scene was in its very early incarnation and this period saw a real shift in the range of clubs beginning to emerge for lesbians. The post-war scene and opportunities for gay women were limited, as was lesbian visibility generally, (Jennings, 2007). The gay scene for men and women existed in a context of oppression, police surveillance and violent homophobia where there was no protection



**2.** "'club' is a shorthand for the totality of sound spaces people set up with dance music to get together and dance, in the absence of a better word (...) whatever that meant or might mean in any one place at a time." (Hossfield et *al.*, 2020, p. 21).

on being outed at work or within the family. Black lesbians and gays faced the double oppressions of racism and heterosexism. During the 1980s lesbians started kicking back and creating their own informal alternative club spaces. The kind of lesbian scene that the Gateways bar represented held little or no appeal to many 1980s lesbians who had emerged from 1970s punk, RAR's promise of rebellion and feminist teachings. These disrupters to the status quo energetically demonstrated their anger at oppression, racism and sexism through emerging identity politics and activism. The few regular women's nights that had emerged in the early 1980s were renowned for playing bland, crowd-pleasing music that catered to a stereotypical white lesbian audience and where Black lesbians often faced racism from door staff and punters. In response to this context a diverse range of one-off nights, niche events and sub-scenes emerged counter to the prevailing gay and lesbian scenes.

Many Black lesbian promoters and DJ's had grown up with sound systems and brought this knowledge and approach to the lesbian club scene. In the mid-1980s the club promoter Claude brought the reggae artist Lorna Gee to perform her ragga classic *3 Week Gone (Mi Giro)* (Gee, 1985) at The Entertainer women's night in Dalston. At the same time Yvonne Taylor's Systematic collective took over Saturday nights at the South London Women's Centre in Brixton, running into the early 1990s, providing safe women-only club nights in response to the lack of Black music and accessibility for Black women, at the regular predominantly white, women's bars.

The DJ Sista Culcha regularly played at women-only gigs and benefits, for example the Solidarity with SWAPO Namibian Women's Day event at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden. This venue hosted many seminal music nights including Jazzie B's who would go on to chart success with Soul II Soul. Here we see political and cultural overlaps where politics and the UK's Black music scene merge with the influence of sound system culture.

Flyers of the time demonstrate the mix of politics and music on the lesbian club scene and the lineage of sound system culture and aesthetics.

Lesbian clubs playing music of the Black Atlantic offered DJ's, dancers and promoters opportunities to connect with each other. This was cultural and political labour. Sourcing a venue to run a lesbian event took time and effort, promoters were faced with racism and sexism from the straight landlords. This made any club night fragile and a risky venture. Getting a regular item in the listings magazines and gay press was out of the question. The organisers designed and printed flyers and distributed them to friends and allies relying on word of mouth and reputation to advertise the club.

These actions were motivated by political beliefs, a love of Black music, obsessive crate-digging, joyous resistance and came out of necessity. Strategies were employed to ensure the spaces were accessible, safe, and affordable and had great music playing where sonic imaginary worlds could exist. By organising events autonomously lesbians could assert control over the door policy, the music played and the behaviour of the patrons. Friends were recruited to publicise, be on the door and cloak room and keep an eye on proceedings. Considerations of transport available and affordability was also considered by charging a sliding scale for entrance and there were often shout-outs for lifts at the end of a night. The scene made a stand for music and conviviality and was a community-building project. These actions did not set out to commodify a social scene. The monetary and labour outlays in setting up and putting on events often just covered the costs but did not render financial profit to be capitalised and taken from the clubbers or see them as consumers to be exploited. Nevertheless, the rewards were many. This cultural activity was a form of resistance, offering social space and alternative world-making for lesbians from marginalised ethnic groups and their white allies.



> *"Whatever their make-up, these worlds or landscapes speak of alternatives to the conditions and possibilities which surround us on a day-to-day basis. They hold the promise of something more or suggest something beyond that which is immediately attainable. In such spaces lies the potential for re-figurations of the here and now, the possibilities for creating alternative fictions or narratives of being, and the opportunities for the development of new (albeit temporary, incomplete and constituted partly in fantasy) 'identities' (...) (Pini, 2001, p. 2)*

The importance of these spaces where connections were made through music, through sharing a physical space and moving on the dancefloor with other lesbians, offered new possibilities to affirm our identities. "In a club itself, more than one thing happened. Human action and interaction shaped clubs, and participants shaped themselves by going to them." (Buckland, 2002, p. 11).

## Conclusion

There are gaps in the writings on club cultures and a lack of recognition of women's work and contributions. London's club scene that emerged through the 1980s paved the way for superclubs, superstar DJ's, and the music festival industry. And while LGBTQI+ visibility is now a given in the West, it is important to acknowledge the history and diversity of the many sub-scenes that rubbed against each other in London in the late twentieth century. On the margins of the straight and gay scenes Black and white lesbians musicked[3] and politicked, disrupted normative values and asserted their identity and belonging. "The urgency of owning a space with people who look like you and share some of your experiences increases the further against the margins you are." (Abdurraqib, 2017, p. 221).

The social and political context of the 1980s and 1990s enabled lesbians to usurp spatial, racial, gendered hierarchies, and create autonomous sites of pleasure on the dancefloor. In these often-precarious sites, lesbians found their own fleeting escape.

> *The ecstatic dissolution of the self on the dancefloor, the transformation of ordinary codes of physical and verbal interaction, is still experienced by many as a life-changing experience which encourages and enables new relationships to the body of both self and other/s (...) it's this which remains one of dance culture's most concrete sites of political potential. (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999, p. 107).*

In conclusion, I end with a quote from Yvonne Taylor of Systematic, describing the creativity and joy created through music as she recounts the women's club, she set up at the South London Women's Centre in the mid-1980s:

> *(...) We bought everything and cooked the food, made the café respectable... And we played a whole variety of music, so we didn't have to listen to pop music. S Source: Author we played old school soul, Aretha Franklin, anything that was rare groove, reggae, lover's rock.*

So, basically, everyone was welcome. We had this whole room full of a diverse group of women who, for a minute, were united about the music.[4]



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**3.** Here, I borrow Small's idea of 'musicking' as a creative, social act (Small, 1996).

**4.** Retrieved from: http://www.whisper2roar.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Yvonne-Taylor-finalphotosummary191116_0079.pdf from an archive of lesbian oral histories at http://www.whisper2roar.org.uk/oral-history-archive/