

Jamaican Sound Systems Shaped UK Music Culture

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In 1955, Vincent George Forbes, better known as Duke Vi, arrived in West London from Kingston, Jamaica, bringing a passion that would reshape British music. A British Rail employee by trade and a keen entrepreneur, Vin built his first sound system using a second-hand turntable, a speaker bought for around £15, and an amplifier constructed for just £4. Though rudimentary, it reflected the vibrant sound systems he had grown up with in Jamaica

street-based setups where DJs, known as “selectors,” entertained local communities with music.

For Vin, the goal was more than playing records. Unlike the modest 20-watt radiograms popular in West Indian households, he wanted 200 watts of power to deliver deep bass, a key element in Jamaican music largely absent from the British scene. The additional wattage, initially met with concern by the engineer who helped him build the system, introduced a new auditory experience to the UK: bass that could be felt as much as heard. This innovation expanded the country’s musical landscape, moving beyond the high-frequency-driven pop of the era.

Initially, reggae, particularly “dub” echo- and bass-heavy B-sides by artists such as King Tubby and Duke Reid dominated sound systems. Over time, the influence of Vin and his successors extended across genres, laying the foundation for drum’n’bass, jungle, grime, and drill. Artists such as Nia Archive, Headie One, and Stormzy draw inspiration from this legacy, while contemporary fashion designers and authors incorporate bass culture into their work. Steve McQueen’s 2020 film *Lovers Rock*, part of his *Small Axe* anthology, further illustrates the cultural significance of these systems in British life.

Vin’s early years in London were marked by rivalry and community engagement. He competed with Count Suckle, another Kingston émigré, in the first British “sound clash” at Lambeth Town Hall in 1958, where DJs competed to captivate crowds—a contest Vin won. Sound-system culture soon spread beyond London, with crews in Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, Bradford, and Huddersfield establishing vibrant local scenes. Across the Atlantic, similar setups influenced the rise of hip-hop through Jamaican DJ Kool Herc.

The 1980s brought further evolution. Norman Jay founded the Good Times Sound System, integrating soul, disco, and house music, while northern acts signed to Warp Records experimented with Bleep’n’Bass, combining synthesiser stabs with heavy sub-bass. Drum’n’bass stalwarts such as Dillinja later amplified this approach, with systems outputting tens of thousands of watts. The influence of sound systems transcended race, attracting white audiences who embraced the immersive bass experience.

Academics and historians have highlighted the broader cultural significance of sound systems. Professor Julian Henriques of Goldsmiths, University of London, describes sessions as immersive events where music envelops the audience from multiple speaker stacks, creating an experience akin to spiritual engagement. Historian Dr Aleema Grey,

curator of the *Beyond the Bassline* exhibition at the British Library, emphasises their role in community cohesion and ancestral remembrance. For many members of the Windrush Generation and their descendants, these gatherings offered refuge from systemic racism in education, employment, and housing, as well as from discriminatory policing under the “Sus” laws.

The political climate of the 1970s and 1980s amplified these challenges. The far-right National Front campaigned for the repatriation of Black Britons, while political figures like Margaret Thatcher stoked anti-immigrant sentiment. Sound systems, however, offered a space for Black communities to assert identity, celebrate culture, and resist marginalisation.

This intersection of music and social struggle is depicted in Franco Rosso’s 1980 film *Babylon*, which follows a fictional Deptford crew navigating harassment from both far-right groups and the police. The narrative underscores the sound system as more than entertainment; it was a cultural lifeline, providing solidarity, expression, and empowerment in a hostile environment.

Today, the legacy of Duke Vin and his peers resonates across British music, literature, fashion, and film. From Notting Hill Carnival to underground clubs, the beat of the sound system continues to shape the nation’s cultural landscape, a reminder of how immigrant communities have contributed to Britain’s artistic and social fabric.