

Sound System

Definition:

A Sound System is the equipment and associated personnel used to broadcast music within a specific location. Typically it would consist of a means of playing music (record player or more recently CD players and laptops), amplifiers, speakers and Deejays (mic men), operators (equipment controllers), selectors (selecting what music to play) and so on.

By the late 90's onwards the exact definition has been disputed as the term Sound System has been employed more as a marketing term and by individuals/groups who operate a full sound system in the traditional sense, see the Soul Jazz Sound System for example.

History

The 50's to the 60's

Sound Systems began as a way of playing amplified music to outside gatherings in Jamaica. Initially this was just a small gramophone and speakers on a street corner or private land used to entertain friends or attract business to commercial establishments such as liquor stores. By the late 40's/early 50's larger dedicated sound systems emerged to provide popular music (mainly Rhythm & Blues) at larger outdoor gatherings and parties.

Early prominent sound systems included Tom the Great Sebastian, Count Nick The Champ and Count Jones.

With the start of mass emigration to the UK in the late 50's the tradition of Sound Systems was transported to the UK. The UK Sound Systems tended to play exclusively inside; the lack of other suitable entertainment for West Indian emigrants encouraged the development of blues parties, where the UK Sound Systems flourished.

By the late 50's Sound Systems were big business in Jamaica and sounds of varying sizes and popularity were to be found in every Jamaican parish, and the larger sounds, such as Coxson Downbeat had two to three sets so they could play in several locations on the same night. The competition for audiences and to be seen as the best engendered a deep seated rivalry between systems. A situation reflected in the development of Sound clashes that has become an integral part of Sound System culture.

Early Sound System selectors/deejays would copy their American radio counterparts and introduce records, talk over them and generally attempt to add to the atmosphere. This, over time, was to lead to a separation between the deejay (as mic man) and selector/operator (as the person playing the tunes) this is unlike the situation in all other forms of popular and broadcast music where the deejay (short for disc jockey) is acknowledged as the person who plays the records. The earliest star sound system deejay was Count Machuki, closely followed by Sir Lord Comic and King Stitt.

The 70's and 80's

In the late 70's Sound Systems played a pivotal roll in the rise of Dancehall. The emphasis on the deejay as a live performing artist and development of the dance as a central part of the way the music was understood and articulated itself were primary factors in this change. In the late 70's the phenomenon of sound tapes saw its birth and by the early 80's it had become a major factor for spreading sound systems name and fame. With these tapes sound systems could now be heard from people not only by people that couldn't attend but also by listeners abroad.

It is worth noting that in the 80's Jah Shaka's sound system in the UK resisted the trend towards Dancehall. Whilst not a successful ploy at the time by the 90's his championing of Steppers Roots Reggae won him many admirers. He was almost single-handedly responsible for an entire wave of Roots Reggae Sound Systems in the 90's and 2000's as a result.

In the 80's live deejays continued to dominate Sound Systems however towards the end of the decade there was a slow but steady drift towards dub plate specials at the expense of live performance. Initially specials were an additional weapon in a Sounds armoury and had existed as such throughout the 70's. By the late 80's their prevalence grew at a much faster pace and by the early 90's live celebrity deejays on Sounds was the exception and not the rule.

The late 80's saw the transition from one turntable to two as the mixing skills used in the USA by DJ's (Disk Jockey's) to create backing tracks for rappers before samplers, and to keep the ebb and flow of parties started to spread. This allowed sound systems to drop multiple tunes which had the same rhythm track.

The 90's to the present

Radio DJ's and sound systems would go on version excursions blending numerous pieces of a rhythm. These tracks would include singers and DJ's and led to the demise of toasting on the version/dub of a track and the rise of hype man on the mic.

By the late 90's there was a significant rise in Sound Systems throughout Europe, Japan and other parts of the world. This was in part fuelled by the availability of dub plate specials through the internet. Dub plates specials started off as just that. One off tracks and promos usually with the artist bigging up the sound and its members. Over time dub plates became less "special" as artists began to mass produce dub plates. Sounds were no longer to say "played by this sound alone" or "One inna di Island" Listen to the latest sound tapes or CDs and they are very similar in content and order of play!

The same period saw the (contested) shift in definitions of what actually constitutes a Sound with the physical equipment; amplifiers and speakers etc no longer being essential for an individual or group to call themselves a Sound System.

This change (United Kingdom) was also due to changes in the law relating to noise pollution. Environmental Health Officers were employed by local councils. These officers would be called to deal with complaints in general but it was not uncommon for them to appear at dances to deal with loud/heavy bass music. Their powers allowed them to stop the dance/party (lock off the sound), issue fines and at worst seize the amplification equipment. In addition to this, they may prosecute the person/s responsible. The maximum penalty for breaching an abatement notice is \$5000 (£20,000 for a trade or business i.e. clubs). It became harder to hold dances in halls and community centres, therefore Selectors/DJs were only required to carry record boxes to clubs rather than the full set (amps speakers etc). Record Boxes became CD cases and now even laptops/MP3 players!

Sound systems worldwide aspire to have a wicked set (clear quality with a rich and heavy bass line). Noise as well as the content of some songs (slackness lyrics) have caused sounds to get shut down by the authorities.

Members of a Sound System

There were often certain roles members of a sound would fill. Even though it would vary from sound to sound many or most of these were often to be found at sound. The bigger the sound of course the more people would be involved with it.

The selectors

A selector chose the music that would be played and stood by the turntable. Outside of reggae this role is often known as a DJ. Every sound had one or more resident selectors which would often be the foundation. Many selectors were so known for their trade that they became celebrities in their own. Known selectors include Danny Dread (Volcano, Stereomars, etc), Ainsley Grey (Killamanjaro and Stereomars), Rory (Stone Love) and many others.

Selectors in the 70's and 80's would take pride in being the first to drop a fresh tune in a fresh tune in a dance. This became harder with the introduction of pirate radio stations and fuelled the demand for dub plates.

The artists

A sound would often have resident deejays and singers. Many artists would become successful primarily through the sound system circuit and often honing their skills to one sound primarily. It wasn't odd that artists left one sound and joined another. Even though there would be artists just passing by and appearing on a dance one evening most sounds would often have a core of artists that would appear every night and get paid to stay with the sound. Not only known artists would appear on the dance but often up-and-coming/struggling artists would stand around the control tower begging for a chance to do their thing over a rhythm. This would often be controlled by the operator or the main deejays of a sound. Some sounds had sound effect artists whose only roles would be to nice up a dance by making sound effects or introduce songs/people. Two well known artists doing this was Joey Lickshot and Jackie Knockshot who would imitate gun noises, bombs, airplanes and all kind of other sound effects.

Modern day sounds have a Mic man/Hype man to work up the crowd while numerous dub plates are played.

The operators

The operator role was often played by the selector but it was also common for sounds to have a dedicated operator who would tune up the sound system for the venue and operate it. Purist will relate to the terms pre amp and amplifier, as well as Bass, Mid range and Tops.

The ritual of the "sound check" was a ritual to behold. After stringing up the sound, the selector would play the test tune (You could be outside of a dance and know instantly which sound it was, because of the track played). Initially there was the high frequency of the tweeters for a short period. This was followed by the midrange speakers. The two frequencies when merged would allow the vocals of the test track to be heard. Shortly after you would here the infamous "Mic check". "Ch Ch. Check. Microphone check. Check one!" After a little fine tuning of the pre amp, crossover and equaliser you could expect to hear crystal clear music being played. Once happy with how things sounded the operator would drop the bass. Instructions would be given to secure trailing wires in readiness for the masses to arrive.

The box boys

Even though an often unknown and uncredited mass, these individuals where crucial to many sounds and would consist of friends and affiliates to the members of the sound crew. The box boys would carry the boxes and help with other leg work of that kind when the sound was transported and set up.

Lifting boxes was also a way of trying to get into a dance without paying an entrance fee. Help out and then hope it is assumed you are with the sound! For some it was a first step on the soundbwoy ladder...

The technician

A technician would help fix up the set and resolve any technical problems that might occur during the stringing up of the sound i.e. blown fuses or loose wires/connections that required soldering. Like the sound check, "stringing up" was a precise ritual. The tech would enter and assess the venue, consult the operator and then instruct the box

boys. All connections would be checked (pliers and screwdriver at the ready). Once the all clear was given you would here the thud of the power switch being turned on.