

“To Unprotect and Subserve”: King Britt Samples the Sonic Archive of Police Violence

Sounding Out! Authors

Blog post published July 24, 2017 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/xjpxk-zr925>

Abstract

Author’s note: In line with the ethics of listening considered below, I’ve chosen not to embed the videos of police violence that I discuss. But I’ve linked to them when available for readers who’d like to see/hear their content.–Alex Werth “I’m scared to death of these police.”

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Black Studies, Installation, Live Music, Music

Recommended citation

Authors, S. O. (2017, July 24). “To Unprotect and Subserve”: King Britt Samples the Sonic Archive of Police Violence. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/xjpxk-zr925>

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“I’m scared to death of these police.” Dave Chappelle’s voice—pitched down, but nonetheless recognizable—calls from the speakers, cutting through the darkness of Oakland, CA’s Starline Social Club. It’s closing night of the 2016 [Matatu Festival of Stories](#), an annual celebration of Black diasporic narratives, technologies, and futures routed through the San Francisco Bay Area. [King Britt](#)—an eclectic electronic pioneer and producer, and former DJ for Digable Planets—has landed with the third version of “To Unprotect and Subserve: A Sonic Response.” (It was first performed after a march for Mike Brown in Ferguson in 2014.) I can barely see Britt, his solemn look bathed in the dim glow of electronic consoles and the red-and-blue pulse of police lights. “First money I got,” Chappelle continues, “I went out and bought me a police scanner. I just listen to these mothafuckas before I go out, just to make sure everything’s cool. ‘Cause you hear shit on there: ‘Calling all cars, calling all cars. Be on the lookout for a Black male between 4’7” and 6’8”.’” With this double invocation, Britt invites us to listen. Specifically, *à la* Chappelle, he invites us to listen *back*—to attune to the agents of a racialized security state that, from [ShotSpotter](#) to [CIA surveillance](#), profile and police the world’s sonic landscapes.

<https://youtu.be/uiMSDCjg2y0>

This essay considers the ethical effects/affects in King Britt’s work of sampling what I call the sonic archive of police violence. From Oakland to Ferguson, the [Movement for Black Lives](#) has raised critical questions about the mass surveillance of Black and Brown communities, the undemocratic control of data in cases of police misconduct, and the use of smart phones and other recording devices as means to hold the state accountable. But the failure to indict or even discipline cops in police killings where audio/video evidence was not only available but overwhelming, from Eric Garner to Tamir Rice, casts doubt upon the emancipatory power of simply recording our race-based system of criminal (in)justice. And when re-presented *ad nauseum* on the news and social media, these recordings can retraumatize those most vulnerable to racist state violence. Indeed, at a discussion among Black artists at Matatu, each panelist admitted to limiting their exposure to what poet [Amir Sulaiman](#) called “e-lynching.”

What, then, can we learn from Britt about the praxis and politics of listening back when the circulation of what KRS One dubbed the “[sound of da police](#)” is now daily, digital, and ubiquitous? How can we make sense of audio recording when it’s come to signal repression, resistance, and painful reprisal all at the same time?

<https://youtu.be/aqT6mJmvDpA>

Back in the darkness of the club, Chappelle’s voice dissolves into a conversation between Darrin Wilson and a dispatcher from the Ferguson Police, who sends him to find the body of Mike Brown—a “Black male in a white t-shirt,” reportedly “running toward QuikTrip” with a stolen box of Swishers. The optimistic waves of sound that open the piece resolve into a throbbing pulse of 1/32nd notes that sounds like a helicopter. Britt begins to loop in other elements: a low bass tone,

a syncopated stab. With kicks and reverb-heavy snares, he builds a slow, head-nodding beat (60 bpm) that coalesces around the vocal sample—swaddling, softening, and ultimately subsuming it with high-pitched legato tones. The synths are sorrowful. But the mesmerizing beat embraces listeners in their mourning.

This act of listening to the state differs from the one parodied at the start. Chappelle attends to the police scanner as a form of *precaution*, checking whether it’s safe for him to enter a realm where he can be marked as criminal (“Staying in the crib tonight! Fuck that!” he concludes). But Britt’s sonic bricolage is more therapeutic than protective. He uses repetition, reverb, and improvised melody to score a sonic altar—to open space, rather than control time—where we can meditate on the archive of police violence with the intention to *heal*. “Sometimes to push through the trauma we need to experience it in a different context,” he tells me over email. “There is room for healing within the chords and sounds that are carefully curated.” Britt thus reactivates the pathos buried inside this archive—reclaiming what [Susan Sontag](#), in “On Photography,” recognizes as an “ethical content” of representational form that can fade from careless repetition (21).



Picture of King Britt courtesy of Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi for the Matatu Festival of Stories.

After removing the loops one-by-one, until the helicopter sound is all that remains, Britt releases a new sample into the mix. It’s audio from a [cell-phone video](#) taken in 2013 by two Black men as they’re harassed by White cops during a stop-and-frisk in Philadelphia (Britt’s hometown). He scores the somber scene with dissonant organs and an offbeat percussive note that reminds me of stress-induced arrhythmia—a heartbeat out-of-place, aggravated, precarious. Vibrating with anxiety, the soundscape temporarily snatches listeners from mourning, demanding that we listen in witness, instead.

The video reveals that the police tear the two men apart, pinning them to the cruiser. But the violence of the encounter is verbal as much as physical. The cops’ language and tone become increasingly abusive as the men contest their treatment in a sounding of agency that [Regina Bradley](#), writing about Black women, calls “sonic disrespectability.” Philip Nace, the more audible of the officers, embodies a double bind built into what [Jennifer Lynn Stoever](#) calls the “sonic color line.” He threatens one of the men when he speaks out (“You’re gonna be in violation if you keep running your mouth when I split your wig open.”). But he turns around and ridicules him when, instead, the man refuses to speak (“You don’t know what we know...Right? Right?! What, you don’t hear now?”). As Stoever notes, the demand that African Americans speak when spoken to, but in a way that sounds their submission to Whites, is a feature of anti-Black oppression stemming from the “racial etiquette” of slavery (30-32).

Britt’s manipulation of vocals speaks to the centrality of sampling in hip-hop. According to [Tricia Rose](#), hip-hop artists have long prioritized the sample as a way to recognize and renovate a communal repertoire of songs and sounds (79). And given the realities of anti-Black oppression in the U.S., this repertoire has often entailed the “sound(s) of da police.” From sirens to skits to verses, rappers and producers have remixed the sounds of the state to characterize, caricature, and critique the country’s criminal justice system. But Britt’s trespass on the state’s sonic sovereignty differs from classics like “Fuck tha Police,” in which N.W.A. conducts a mock trial of “the system.” Whereas N.W.A. reappropriates the rituals of legal testimony and judgment to condemn the police (“The jury has found you guilty of being a redneck, white-bread, chicken-shit mothafucka.”), Britt’s musical re-mediation of police violence favors grief over moralizing, dirge over indictment.



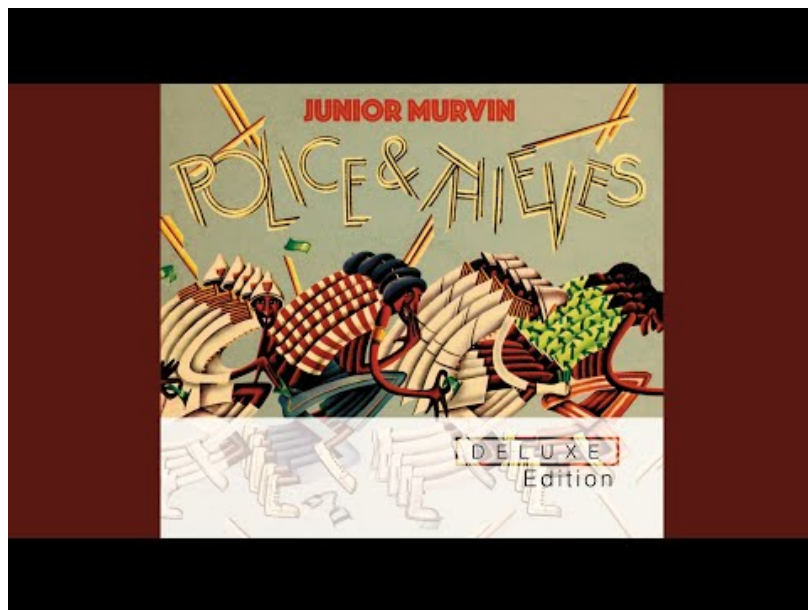
https://youtu.be/tke_27wbW-0

In this vein, the musical/ethical demand to witness waxes but then wanes. The soundscape becomes more and more dissonant until the vocals are consumed by a thunderous sound. Suddenly, the storm clears. Britt hits a pre-loaded drum track (136 bpm) with driving double-time congas and chimes over a steady sway of half-time kicks. He starts to improvise on the synth in an angelic register, revealing the impact of his [early encounters with Sun Ra](#) on his aesthetic. The

catharsis of the scene is accentuated by the sporadic sound of exhalation. This sense of freedom dissolves when the beat runs out of gas...or is pulled over. In its stead, Britt introduces [audio from the dashboard camera](#) of Brian Encinia, the Texas State Trooper who arrested Sandra Bland. Encinia and Bland’s voices are pitched down and filtered through an echo delay, lending an intense sense of dread to his enraged orders (“Get out of the car! I will light you up!”).

Here, I sense the affective resonance of dub. Like the musicians on rotation in [Michael Veal’s *Dub*](#), Britt manipulates the timbre and texture of voices in a way that demands a different sort of attention from listeners who, like me, may be desensitized to the sonic violence of the racialized security state as it’s vocalized and circulated in and between Ferguson, Philly, and Prairie View.

Britt reworks the character and context of the vocals into a looping soundscape, and that soundscape sends me into a meditative space—one in which the *vibes* of humiliation and malice “speak” to me more than Encinia’s individual utterances as an agent of the state. According to Veal, the pioneers of dub developed a sound that, while reverberating with the severity of the Jamaican postcolony, “transport[ed] their listeners to dancefloor nirvana” and “the far reaches of the cultural and political imagination” (13). Now, conducting our Matatu, Britt is both an engineer and a medicine man. Rather than simply diagnose the state of anti-Black police violence in the American (post)colony, he summons a space where we can reconnect with the voices (and lives) lost to the archives of police violence amid what Veal refers to as dub’s Afro-sonic repertoire of “reverb, remembrance, and reverie” (198).



<https://youtu.be/-Jw8FTKo4Yc>

What Sontag once wrote about war photography no doubt holds for viral videos (and the less-recognized soundscapes that animate them). Namely, when used carelessly or even for gain, the documentary-style reproduction of the sonic archive of police violence can work to inure or even injure listeners. But in Britt’s care-full bricolage, sampling serves to literally re-mediate the violence of racialized policing and its reverberations throughout our everyday landscapes of listening. It’s not the *fact* of repetition, then, but the *modality*, that matters. And Britt draws upon deep traditions of scoring, hip-hop, and dub to sonically construct what he calls a “space to breathe.”

Featured image of King Britt’s performance courtesy of **Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi for the [Matatu Festival of Stories](#)**.

Alex Werth is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography at UC Berkeley. His research looks at the routine regulation of expressive culture, especially music and dance, within the apparatuses of public nuisance and safety as a driver of cultural foreclosure in Oakland, CA. It also considers how some of those same cultural practices enable forms of coordination and collectivity that run counter to the notions of “the public” written into law, plan, and property. In 2016, he was a member of the curatorial cohort for the Matatu Festival of Stories and is currently a Public Imagination Fellow at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. He lives in Oakland, where he dances samba and DJs as Wild Man.



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