

Dubship I – Black Starliner 2019

An African Robots vs SPACECRAFT project

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One hundred years ago this year, in 1919, the Black Star Line shipping company was established by Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, as a wholly black-owned and staffed shipping line with the eventual aim of repatriating the descendants of African slaves from the Americas and Caribbean back to Africa.

Named to rival the established White Star shipping line, which numbered the Titanic amongst its vessels, the Black Star line raised funding from hundreds of black families in the diaspora to buy a series of old liners, renaming them after contemporary black heroes. These ran cargo between the Caribbean and the United States, in a short-lived attempt to set up a viable shipping business.

Under pressure from the US government, which infiltrated Marcus Garvey's organization using the first black agents in the recently established FBI, and in financial and legal difficulties, the Black Star Line collapsed after only three years of operation, and Marcus Garvey was jailed for mail fraud.

While it was short-lived, the Black Star Line has resonated onwards through history. Some fifty years later, in Kingston, Jamaica, the reggae singer Fred Locks wrote and recorded the song 'Black Star Liner' (1976). The lyrics of the song describe 'Seven miles of Black Star Liner, coming into Kingston harbour' – the Black Star line had become, in Rasta imagination, a mythical ark coming to take black Africans home to the motherland. Marcus Garvey himself is a Moses-like figure for Rastafarians – the religion had been founded on his prediction that "a black king shall be crowned" in Africa; a prediction realized in the ascendance of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia.

Fred Lock's track came with a B-side – a dub version of the song, with the lyrics removed, the bass and percussion emphasised, and early electronic effects used to create echo and delay and a feeling of spaciousness in the track. Dub emerged in late 1960s Jamaica through the advent of new technologies for manipulating sound, reproduced through huge sound systems at dancehall parties. It has been hugely influential on electronic music production, influencing much popular music today.

Dub also influenced imagination in other arenas – the iconic 'cyber punk' novel by William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984), includes a spaceship called Zion crewed by Rastafarian former mine workers, "the irregular, discolored plates" of its makeshift hull "laser-scrawled with Rastafarian symbols and the initials of welders". "The music that pulsed constantly through the cluster... was called dub, a sensuous mosaic cooked from vast libraries of digitalized pop; it was worship... and a sense of community".

Imagery of space exploration appears on dub album covers and in song lyrics. The form has an intrinsic relationship to technology, emerging "as an example of how cold, alienating Western technology can be domesticated by those not intended as its users" in the words of Jamaican writer and artist Louis Chude-Sokei. David Toop writes about dub as a foreshadowing of Virtual Reality, in conjuring imaginary spaces through sound.

This sculpture, *Black Starliner*, takes these elements to produce its own 'version' of an imagined spacecraft, depicted in wire art and an electro-mechanical musical sound system. This 'Dubship' operates not between the continents of Earth, but into space and between stars. It speaks of a desire for return or a new home which is both rooted in the African diasporic experience, and more universal – the desire for a refuge, a homeland; a transportation through technology.