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## HAUL AND PULL UP: HISTORY, *MENTO* AND THE eBAY AGE

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*Daniel Tannehill Neely*

### ABSTRACT

Since eBay's emergence in 1997, the international market for vintage Jamaican records has surged, yielding a bounty of rare and previously unavailable materials. This article asks whether Jamaica's history in sound is becoming irretrievably fragmented and explores how this development affects the academic study of music in the Caribbean.

History and historiographic data are crucial in some kinds of ethnographic research. While the material traces of traditional musics fall outside the collection mandates of many research institutions, eBay has emerged as an excellent alternative for researchers looking for important archival materials. In Jamaica today, an increasing number of entrepreneurs sell such material on eBay, which has become a viable part of the country's informal market economy. While creating a global engagement with traditional Jamaican music on one level, the sale of these records may also be seen as part of a process of de-contextualization. By looking at the trade of early Jamaica *mento* music, this article addresses how collecting across borders, the process by which cultural artifacts move across national boundaries and into private collections, opens discursive authority over these objects more broadly.

**Keywords:** *mento*, Jamaica, eBay, ethnomusicology, collecting, historiography

### RESUMEN

Con el surgimiento de eBay en 1997, el mercado internacional para discos jamaicanos antiguos (*vintage*) aumentó repentinamente, dando paso a una abundante cantidad de materiales raros y previamente inaccesibles. Este artículo plantea si la historia del sonido en Jamaica está siendo fragmentada irremediablemente y explora cómo este desarrollo afecta el estudio académico de la música en el Caribe. Los datos históricos e historiográficos son de crucial importancia para algunos tipos de investigación etnográfica. Mientras que los trazos materiales de las músicas tradicionales no forman parte de las guías de colecciones de numerosas instituciones de investigación, eBay ha surgido como una excelente alternativa para los investigadores en búsqueda de importantes materiales archivísticos. Actualmente en Jamaica un creciente número de empresarios venden dichos materiales en eBay, lo que se ha

convertido en una parte viable de la economía del mercado informal del país. Además de crear un compromiso global con la música jamaicana, la venta de estos discos también se puede ver como un proceso de de-contextualización. Al estudiar el comercio de la música *mento* jamaicana, este artículo aborda cómo el coleccionismo entre fronteras, el proceso a través del cual los artefactos culturales se mueven cruzando los límites nacionales hacia las colecciones privadas, abre más ampliamente la autoridad discursiva sobre estos objetos.

**Palabras clave:** *mento*, Jamaica, eBay, etnomusicología, coleccionismo, historiografía

### RÉSUMÉ

Avec l'apparition de eBay en 1997, le marché international des disques anciens de la Jamaïque a connu un succès fulgurant en facilitant l'acquisition du nombre de matériels qui étaient préalablement inaccessibles. Cet article s'interroge sur une éventuelle fragmentation de l'histoire de la Jamaïque avec du support sonore et comment ce développement influence l'étude des musiques de la Caraïbe. Les données historiques et historiographiques jouent un rôle crucial dans certains travaux de recherches ethnographiques. Tandis qu'un grand nombre d'institutions de recherche ne disposent d'aucune trace de matériels de musique traditionnelle, eBay s'est imposé comme une référence de qualité pour des chercheurs en quête d'importants matériels d'archives. De nos jours, le nombre d'entrepreneurs intéressés à la vente de ces matériels sur eBay va grandissant, ce qui entre autres fortifie le marché informel du pays. D'un côté, la vente de ces disques supporte la musique jamaïcaine traditionnelle; mais, de l'autre, elle peut être considérée comme un processus de dé-contextualisation. En étudiant le commerce de la musique *mento* jamaïcaine, cet article s'est proposé d'aborder comment le collectionnisme entre frontières, le processus par lequel les matériels culturels vont au delà des limites nationales et intègrent des institutions de collection privées, peut être une source d'ouverture.

Mots-clés: *mento*, Jamaïque, eBay, etnomusicologie, collectionnisme, historiographie

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**T**he *haul and pull up* is a performance technique found in Jamaican sound system dances where a disc jockey or *selector* stops a record part way through, lifts the stylus and replays the track from the beginning. Sometimes it may be to break in a new instrumental groove, or *riddim*, by getting its hook into listeners' ears; more

often, however, the crowd demands the replay, especially if the track is the “big tune,” or popular hit, of the day. In both, the technique is an act of intentional fragmentation that stops the music, leaving the rhythmic flow in suspension and the night’s jollity in the balance. Although one might equate such interruption with dislocation, in the right hands the haul and pull up draws attention to the shattered groove and ultimately intensifies a dance.<sup>1</sup>

In Jamaica, a “haul” is also an act of curation. For record collectors, the haul is an integral part of collection building. A “good haul” is a compliment used to describe another’s fortune, whether it be an acquisition of many good records or a couple of great ones. Like a deejay’s “haul” at a dance, the “haul” of record collecting draws attention to dislocation and can be seen as a kind of interruption (Cunningham 2006:218; cf. Benjamin 1968:61-62). However, it is one that works against fragmentation—a haul is an accumulative act, a means of reclaiming and bringing physical unity to a performed musical history that was recorded, pressed to disc and ultimately dispersed as commodity.

The tension between these two kinds of haul finds an analogy in the roles fragmentation and accumulation have in the mixing strategies of dub reggae. There, engineers rely on these techniques to interrupt the groove with a momentary dropout of sound, add an abrupt overload of signal processing, or both, to generate new sonic spaces out of once-familiar material. The outcome and interpretation of these techniques is open-ended; listeners are challenged to hear poetry in the tangle and bring their own unity to the deconstructed groove. Michael Veal has argued in *Dub: Soundscapes & Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* that such studio-based acts echo on record the interruptions and discontinuities of African cultural identity in the Caribbean through sound. Seen in this way, fragmentation and accumulation are ways of provoking and embodying cultural memory in the studio, on record and in the dancehall (Veal 2007:64-80; 196-219; see also Cooper 2004:231-235).

How, though, might records, and in particular, record collecting echo the kinds of dislocations and convergences found elsewhere in Jamaican music and extend Veal’s argument? Since the 1950s, the vinyl record has been a particularly important location for expressing ideas about diaspora, roots and homeland. During my field research in Jamaica, it seemed that everyone—from local deejays, musicologists and businessmen and women, to collectors from Europe, Asia and the Americas—was constantly on the lookout for old records to collect and to play at dances.

I, too, have been a collector, my focus primarily on early *mento* records. *Mento* is a traditional Jamaican music and dance deeply engrained in the dislocations of Jamaica’s Colonial history. Although

the genre's story begins in the nineteenth century and continues today, its on-disc representation is a complicated pastiche of commercial and nationalist interventions. Dubbed *Jamaica calypso*, or simply *calypso* at the end of the 1930s by Jamaica's Tourist Trade Development Board (Neely 2007, 2008), *mento's* musical identity and some of its performance conventions were transformed to reflect a tropicalized, island-music aesthetic that would help better market the music to foreigners. The more I collected, the more I wondered how open-ended *mento's* interpretation has been, or more directly, how hearing *mento* only through this representation implicated the act of collecting records in the silencing the past (Rolph-Trouillot 1995; see also Cooper 2004:9-10).

As aggressive as some have been in recovering this history locally as collectors, the Internet now provides an international market unprecedented access to Jamaica's past, largely through the American auction site eBay.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I will explore the notion of collecting across borders, or the process by which cultural artifacts move across national boundaries and into the hands of private individuals. Important questions arise as these record hauls accumulate and larger amounts of original press Jamaican music are more widely distributed around the world than ever before. How does this process affect the academic study of music in the Caribbean? What about the notion of the haul? Is the groove of Jamaica's history in sound becoming irretrievably fragmented? By making aspects of Jamaica's musical past increasingly unrecoverable as a result of international sale, are cultural interruptions of the distant past not simply evoked, but reinvented?

In what follows, I bring together my research on Jamaican *mento* with my own experiences as a collector and the findings of scholars who have investigated the meanings of collecting and global Internet commerce. Today, there is a vital and lively community of eBayers based in Jamaica who enable good hauls to happen online. Auction sites like eBay grant economic centers direct access to objects and materials from smaller local markets with a speed and precision never before possible. While this access can afford some, particularly scholars, a degree of insight into the histories of distant cultures, it also opens intellectual authority over these objects to the imaginings of those who have little more than access to the Internet.

### **Hauls, and Pulling Up: On Collecting and Fieldwork**

The sun was setting on a November evening in Kingston when, as a matter of routine, I did my daily perusals for *mento* records on eBay. At that point in 2002, I had two keyword searches that I used to find research-relevant materials. The first, "Jamaica and calypso," always yielded the large-

est number of items. Unfortunately, these results had to be sorted through carefully as few of the mostly American vendors were careful in how they worded their descriptions. For example, records from The Bahamas and The Virgin Islands were often described erroneously as “Jamaican”; these I generally passed over. The other search, “mento,” produced many fewer results, much of it related to Mentos candy. When something relevant appeared, however, it was always important and bid worthy.

That particular evening, the “mento” search yielded a copy of Glen Washington’s recording “Rockers (Nuh Crackers).” It came up because the seller “manayard” had included a line from the song’s refrain in the auction listing:

Down in the ghetto,  
Don’t want no *mento* sound,  
Don’t want calypso,  
Don’t want no other sound,  
Only rockers.

While the way Washington positioned *mento* against ghetto intrigued me because it provides a candid insight into the 1970s pop music scene, I was more interested to see that someone in Spanish Town, Jamaica had listed the record. Without hesitation, I emailed the seller about my work and asked about meeting; Luke replied promptly, writing that I was welcome to come by later that week and look at any *mento* records he might have.<sup>3</sup>

I arrived around 11:00 a.m. and found Luke’s house, the last of a long row of houses just before a large field. He met me in the driveway and introduced himself gregariously. We chatted for a while. He wanted to learn about my research and collecting interests, and I explained that I was particularly interested in 78 rpm records from the 1950s, but figured I could more realistically expect to find (and afford) *mento*-themed reggae music from the 1970s. Luke smiled, explaining that he did not know as much about *mento* as he did about gospel, rocksteady and reggae, but he added he might have one or *two* things I would be interested in. We went inside.

It was like walking into a candy store. On the white tile floor were small piles of 45 rpm records, neatly arranged in a grid to facilitate packing and shipping. On top of each was a scrap of paper with the winning bidder’s name and address. In the corner a six-or-seven year old child sat on a stool, carefully cleaning a stack of approximately 50 caked-on-muddy records with a toothbrush and a bucket of water. On the other side of the room a computer sat unattended, its browser left on an eBay search page. Luke invited me to take my time and search through a couple of four-foot-tall shipping cylinders full of 45 rpm records to see if I could find what I was looking for. I dug right in.

I was tempted by each record I turned over. Familiar reggae titles, important dub versions and a Rastafari narrative in label graphics and song titles, all material traces of an important social moment in Jamaica's history, told a compelling story mostly of the 1970s. However, I was there with a certain kind of record in mind. At one point Luke asked if there was anything I might be looking for; "yes," I replied, "anything *mento*, even reggae *mento*, like Stanley Beckford...or 'Lizard in Bed' by Wisdom and the All Stars."

Luke laughed. In 2002, none of these records were particularly popular among most collectors—too "country" I was told—and "Lizard in Bed" particularly so. I told him that I had met the track's singer, Vernal Morgan, in May Pen (now the lead singer of the Blue Glaze *Mento* Band) and wanted to hear the song so I could ask him better questions about the song and his work. I had a use for what Luke (at this point, at least) considered detritus. While I was there, I found several nice, clean copies and set one aside.

Collecting is a common practice among academics. For ethnomusicologists and others, this includes books, CDs, MP3s, DVDs and musical instruments. We collect ideas for projects, bibliography for articles and tunes for performing. Anything is game, if it helps give life to an argument. How collections are organized and accrue meaning, however, varies according to the individual collector. In her book *On Collecting*, for example, Susan Pearce outlined an insightful poetics of collecting that considered "how people experience the process [of collecting]...what their relationship to it is and how it might be analyzed by the investigator."<sup>4</sup> She makes a compelling argument to support the idea that collectors organize objects in ways that can create knowledge and steer discourse. However, Pearce does not ask what, if any, role collected objects might have in stimulating cultural memory in ethnographic research.

Working through such a question begins with the distinction Maurice Halbwachs made between autobiographical and historical memory. While autobiographical memory is based on events actually experienced by the individual, Halbwachs argued that historical memory reaches the individual only through collectible trace documentation—photos, documents, records, etc. (Halbwachs 1992). The challenge, then, is to reconcile these kinds of memory. The potential collected objects have in research is limited if the social institutions and cultural practices of which they are a product are not taken into account. For objects to accrue meaning in ethnographic work, there must be socially grounded enactment—experiencing how a record is used in a haul and pull up at a dance, or how a rim shot is mixed through a deep reverb in a dub, for example—to balance the autobiographical and historical most effectively.

Since the 1970s, anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have incorporated history and historiographic data into ethnographic research. Early on in my own research, I was drawn to the work of John and Jean Comaroff who, in *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (1992), explored “history’s” methodological definition in a critique of how it should be used in ethnographic work. What followed were several suggestions, the first of which was that a historical ethnography “must begin by constructing its own archive” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:34). This idea seemed important to me because the questions I was asking about Jamaican music history—and those motivating my own collecting habits—were generally those not asked by journalistic publications, while the sounds I wanted to explore were those most often overlooked—and for some time, even sneered at—by reggae collectors.

Where, though, to look? In preparing for my different trips to Jamaica to do field work, I explored archives in Jamaica, England and the United States in search of anything relevant to a study of *mento* music. I found important manuscripts, sheet music, field recording collections and archival newspapers that provided a significant amount of outstanding and largely unexamined material about Jamaica’s music history. What I still lacked, however, were the everyday materials that the musicians I would meet either talked about or had a hand in creating. Based on the Comaroffs’ imperative, I started thinking about what constructing one’s own archive meant, and realized that collecting documents like travel guides, promotional pamphlets, festival catalogs, trade magazines, trinkety art objects of a musical nature, photos and postcards of musicians, and of course commercial recordings, could all be used to open a dialogue with contemporary *mento* musicians about still relevant but historically rooted issues.

The main problem was that most of the items my research would require were aggravatingly hard to find—not so important that major research libraries would organize collections around them, but important enough so that someone “out there” might think to squirrel them away. My great hope was that I could find them piecemeal either through an as-of-then undefined network of antiques and ephemera dealers or through felicitous moments of serendipity in the field.<sup>5</sup>

Then, with the emergence of eBay in 1997, things changed. Because a breadth of otherwise “lost” historical artifacts began appearing online, my research and collecting habits changed dramatically. Materials that once were scarce slowly became available in quantities commensurate with the scale upon which I had suspected they were originally mass-produced. My collection of *mento* music grew quickly and cheaply because I could dig from any computer terminal without having to spend the time and energy working through flea markets and stores. A little creativity



in running Boolean searches quickly uncovered still more important new material unavailable anywhere else. As was the case for other academics, eBay became for me a transient archive of the ephemeral and a crucial research tool (Gardiner 2006; Trodd 2006).

Although accumulating this material imparted a prosaic earnestness to my early historical inquiries, I wondered how I could better marshal its intellectual value. In *The Convict and the Colonial* (1998), Richard Price described using both ethnographic and historical data to “unfold meaning” (1998:xii) about culture and power in the Martiniquan colonial experience. “Time, or rather the experience of it that we call memory,” he argued “is like an old-fashioned Martiniquan concertina—alternately being squeezed and pulled apart, compressing some things, stretching out others, and in the process making music.” The notion that historical data mined from archives and artifacts collected from eBay could become part of a participatory experience something like “music” to help access memory and make sense of ethnographic experience spoke to how I wanted to conduct my research and organize my collection. I hoped to hear *mento* musicians critique the established canons of documentary evidence that told a version of the genre’s story, albeit without acknowledging their various roles or asking their input.

This approach was often very successful. *Mento* has a complex history of overlapping narratives, and having access to a wide range of materials and musical sounds (often acquired on eBay) helped me distinguish which history and musical repertory a musician might have had more experience with, and therefore, which memories to pursue. Older artifacts and cultural commodities of an earlier time very often helped musicians remember aspects of *mento*’s history that I could not have anticipated. A cursory knowledge of an object’s background, for example, enabled me to participate more effectively in conversations than I would have been able to without, and often led to new questions, new people, new archival sources and new sounds. It also helped untangle (and in some cases completely reevaluate) the meanings of objects and ideas that I had accepted unquestioningly from secondary sources.

I stayed at Luke’s Spanish Town house picking through vintage records—thousands of them—for a couple of hours until Luke indicated it was time for me to go; outside, a group of young men with a box of records stood waiting next to a car. “Hunters,” he told me. We settled up and I went home with a dozen or so unfamiliar reggae-mento 45 rpm records—my best haul ever. While none of the tracks were the kind of “big tunes” that sellers say “full up you pocket with money,” they were important to me because each illustrated how local musicians (many of whom, I learned, were still alive) filtered the *mento* tradition on record in 1970s reggae.

## eBaying From Jamaica

On eBay, materials surface continually that help modify and sometimes subvert the now-canonical historical ideas about Jamaican music typically rehearsed in the popular literature. Every new recording, pamphlet or photo that appears seems to initiate a flurry of interest and a range of interpretations among collectors which influence demand for pieces of Jamaica's historical past. Access to these materials via the Internet, directly from Jamaica, is faster and easier than ever before; technology has transformed collecting (Ellis and Haywood 2006; Taylor 2003).

But what are the processes by which traces of the local—the bits and pieces of cultural memory found on eBay—find their way from a periphery to a global center? How (to paraphrase a question Walter Benjamin once asked of bibliophily) do local sounds cross the threshold of a collection and become the property of a foreign collector (Benjamin 1968:61)? In Jamaica, before objects are posted to the Internet they pass through the hands of hunters, men who drive the Jamaican countryside, going door-to-door to buy antiques from private individuals, and eBay-ers, the kind of *comprador* elite they sell to, who in turn make these items available to the world.<sup>6</sup>

I bought most of my first Jamaican 78 rpm records in Jamaica in 2001 through a colleague, so of course when I first learned of the economy of eBay-ers, I asked around in search for more. Unfortunately, Luke never seemed interested in *mento* 78 rpm records. He did not have any (his personal collection focused on gospel 45s) and rarely sold them on eBay because they often arrived broken—it was too much of a hassle. However, when I asked if he knew of any major collections of *mento* 78 rpm records in Jamaica, he told me about his brother Owen, who not only had a large collection of early *mento* records, but might be willing to pare it down if he had extra copies. With further probing, Luke revealed that Owen also sold records on eBay under the name “telegift,” and that it was his brother who set Luke up to sell on eBay by providing him a computer, some knowledge of how to use it, a cache of records to start and a network of hunters. Excited to be introduced and perhaps gather some discographic data if not actual records from Owen, I asked Luke to call him on my behalf about getting together. He picked up the phone, called and we arranged to meet the following Sunday.

Owen and his family lived in a modest middle class neighborhood in uptown Kingston. He met me on his veranda and before he invited me in, we took some time to talk; he wanted to know about my *mento* research and I asked about his collection. I was delighted by how open minded he was about allowing me to look at labels and collect discographic

information for my project, but was disappointed when he told me he was not interested in parting with any of his 78 rpm *mento* discs. I asked Owen what other kinds of records he had and about his history as an eBay seller. Although impressed by his selection of 45 rpm records that were available to me, I was more interested to learn that he was not simply the earliest eBay in Jamaica, but one of eBay's earliest users.

Internet commerce was not Owen's intended career path. In high school, he studied mechanical engineering and after graduating got a job working for Air Jamaica. The position paid little, however, and offered scant room for advancement. He soon quit and joined his father building reproduction antique furniture. Unfortunately, the two came in conflict over his position in the business and, again, Owen struck out on his own. In his last year of school he became interested in collecting antiques. Inspired by a friend of his father's, a Kingston-based antiques dealer, Owen tried his hand in the business and found early success. In 1996, he bought a Macintosh computer and soon he discovered a small number of online websites through which he could more easily move his stock. One of the first items he sold was a nineteenth century bottle opener on a site for wine enthusiasts. The US\$1,800 the buyer paid for it represented a substantial return over his initial investment.

"In the quest of trying to find someplace to sell," Owen told me, "I found eBay." He became a registered user in late 1997, shortly after eBay first emerged from another site called AuctionWeb; his first sale on the new site was a broken gold Patek Philippe wristwatch that sold for US\$3,500. He believes his was the first watch sold on the site. After an undisclosed issue with his original user name, Owen re-branded himself "telegift" on July 22, 1998 and began selling antiques more aggressively—watches whenever he could find them—but diversified, adding relatively inexpensive and locally common items, such as Royal Doulton porcelain and Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee, to his portfolio of offerings.

Although Owen was able to obtain some of his auction merchandise on his own, the antiques he dealt came mostly from the antique hunters. For the first few years of Owen's relationship with hunters, he purchased decorative items, jewelry, furniture and art objects. In 1998, however, a Hunter named Ben, wanted to sell Owen a box of old 45 rpm records. Owen was wary—he was not sure that selling vintage records would be a profitable endeavor, but would list them for Ben if he could sell them on consignment and share the profit. Ben agreed. The amount the records yielded represented a substantial return over Ben's initial investment and took everyone by surprise. From then on, Owen's business changed; the hunters were told to be on the lookout for old records.

Owen's experience selling on eBay illustrates well how the boundary between the local and global is becoming less distinct. He ships almost

everything he auctions overseas; an estimated 60% of it goes to Japan. In addition, most of what he offers is little known and hard to get outside of Jamaica, and is rarely if ever reissued.<sup>7</sup> With this improved access, people living abroad now have better awareness of the kinds of small, local histories that Daniel Cunningham has wondered might be in danger of “becoming irrelevant, too difficult to preserve and comprehend” since the formats they are on have become redundant (Cunningham 2006:219).

In the early days when there was less competition among sellers, there seemed to be no limit to how much Owen could make. His biggest one-day haul, for example, was US\$22,000. Today, the number of eBayers has grown dramatically. Contemporary vendors—Best\*Ones, MusicArchives\*\*, myjamaicantrade, Fatherstereo, Mr.Moments, customlineauto, vintageja, shellyann2002, Tony5585, all names reminiscent of those seen on the windshields of Jamaican taxis and country buses—bring intense market competition. However, while Owen’s costs have risen and his profits leveled since he first started, the market for vintage Jamaican records remains strong; a collection of particularly valuable 45s can yield a monthly gross of US\$15,000.

The eBay economy has not simply proven lucrative for eBayers. While those who have eBay businesses are primarily responsible for the global dissemination of records, it is the hunters who facilitate their availability. In finding vintage records, hunters follow leads and travel by car from parish to parish in small crews. A record hunt may be completed in just one day, but stories circulate of hunters being away for up to three days at a time before returning home. Because records are valuable and do not take up a lot of space in transit or in storage, they have become a particularly important commodity. Since their value has become more widely known, the number of record hunters has increased dramatically. In the 1990s, for example, Owen recalled working with a small handful of hunters who specialized in bringing him only antiques. In the last five years, this number has ballooned as the number of record-only hunters has grown. As of 2006 he was working with 33 people, a number he believes is only a fraction of the total number out there.

With so many people looking to buy vintage records wholesale, the network of hunters has developed and grown wiser; most can afford to be discerning about those to whom they sell. Different eBayers pay out for records differently and there are sometimes intense negotiations over what even a single record is worth. While most records carry little value on the international market, the right pressing of the right song with the right label can make a hunter several thousand Jamaican dollars (several hundred US), and sometimes more. If hunters do not get what they feel their records are worth from a buyer, they will move on.

Some hunters sidestep eBayers and deal directly with individual collectors. Meetings with foreign buyers are pre-arranged by phone or by word of mouth. Traveling with hunters is something well-connected travelers and dedicated collectors sometimes do, often with portable, battery powered record players in hand.<sup>8</sup> Hunting, however, can be dangerous business. The competition between crews is intense and many hunters travel with firearms. Some collectors I have met have compared it to the kind of violent competition in the drug trade.

In my work, I never traveled with any hunters but I was a customer for one particular crew. At Owen's house one day, I was formally introduced to "Denny," "Juvenile" and "Greg," three men I recognized from Luke's place in Spanish Town. I explained what I was looking for and we exchanged numbers. They told me they might have a "big pile" of *mento* records for me. Within a week, they were at my apartment with a stack of 78 rpm records, some of which I had, many I only knew of and some of which I did not yet know existed. Knowing that they were not eBay sellers, I negotiated a pricing scheme that I felt would have been slightly more than Owen or Luke would have paid out but less than what they would sell for on eBay. Over the next few months, the group visited periodically with stacks of vintage 78s in tow. As their perception of the market for these records changed, so too did their asking prices.

In negotiating prices for records, the hunters often countered my offers by suggesting that they could go straight to eBay. I later learned, however, that the technological boundary between hunters and eBay vendors is substantial and not commonly crossed. Hunters tend to look for a quick payoff, and few seem to have the capital, the commitment or the access to the resources necessary to start and maintain an online business. While Ben is one example of someone who has made the jump, he has mixed results. Starting as an antiques hunter in the 1990s, Ben paid careful attention to how eBay worked after seeing how well the records he brought Owen sold, and eventually bought his own computer. With Owen's help, he registered himself on eBay c. 2001 as Delroy1966.

Since then, unfortunately, Ben's seller rating suggests a series of questionable decisions. In 2002, shortly after I first began buying records from eBayers in Jamaica, Delroy1966 already had a reputation among collectors for taking money on an auction and sometimes sending an empty cardboard mailer. His excuse for irregular email communication was restricted access to the Internet; when records failed to show up, he blamed customs inspector's greed (Delroy1966, personal communication, October 2001).

While Delroy1966 is no longer an active eBay identity, the caveats about dealing with him are still strewn throughout the Internet. This example is by no means predictive of how well another hunter might

make the technological jump from on-the-ground hustling to cyberspace. However, Ben's seller history gets at one of the anxieties international bidders have about trust and the anonymity of unregulated and distant markets. In its early stages, eBay from Jamaica presented a particularly complicated set of challenges, not simply because online auctions were novel terrain, but because Jamaica—whether deserved or not—had an international reputation for fraud. The fears as imagined through eBay are not unfounded. I have indeed heard sellers reflect on moments of collusion and price fixing in the early days of the record trade and it is certainly not beyond some I have met to misrepresent the condition of a record if it meant a better, more “perfect” price. (For an analysis of the “perfect price” concept, see Epley 2006.) Ultimately, the shortsighted actions of sellers like Delroy1966 reflect poorly on the other vendors and help reinforce negative international stereotypes about Jamaican business practices.

Trust is an important issue that can complicate an eBay's effectiveness, especially given the informational asymmetry of an unknown and potentially fraudulent market. Some sellers assuage buyer anxiety by including detailed pictures and short audio clips of the actual records up for bid. Lyn Van Swol has stressed the importance of trust in domestic eBay relationships, arguing it essentially drives commerce and is built on “a decidedly old-fashioned method of reputational gossip,” the “town square” model (Van Swol 2006:137). Her research focuses on mechanisms within eBay that help regulate and measure trust, including the feedback and rating system. Generally, eBay's internal system is effective at maintaining what Kylie Jarrett has called “an (almost) perfect articulation of self-directed governance” (Jarrett 2006:108). However, that few Jamaican vendors have a 100% feedback rating fuels buyer anxieties, despite my observations that negative feedback often involves issues on the buyer's end and has little to do with how well a responsible eBay has followed through on a successful auction.

Part of the way foreign bidders address this asymmetry is by communicating information about their experiences with specific eBay sellers. This information is generally disseminated on Internet bulletin boards and in chat rooms.<sup>9</sup> It is an effective (although by no means foolproof) system. So, while Delroy1966 is no longer an active eBay user (likely because his abysmal feedback rating and Internet reputation kept bidders away), dedicated collectors are able to communicate their experiences as buyers and report to others in distant parts of the world. A perusal of these sites suggests Ben still deals records under other eBay identities, including kareennow and record\*man.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the feedback rating for both of these more recent online personas is poor.

In Jamaica, eBay presents an important business opportunity for the informal market economy (Hart 1973, cf. Straw 1999-2000:169; see also Comitas 1973). As hunters pass on their finds to eBayers, collectors are no longer simply left to imagine what might be out there; a little patience will likely be rewarded with an long-desired find. eBay is an accumulative technology, because it brings objects to market that carry aspects of Jamaican historical memory (in this case, music) more directly and faster than ever. It offers local sellers a powerful way to engage with global markets. As I will show, however, the technology that accumulates these objects also divests them not simply of their context, but irretrievably removes from them all memory of their circulation; this act is also one of fragmentation and is similarly accelerated. While eBay enables new insight into Jamaica's history, the new access it provides opens the discourse of Jamaica's historical memory via its bits and pieces to a greater number of people, many of whom know Jamaica only through recorded sound.

### eBay's Effects on Research and Historical Memory

My research into *mento* began in 1998. In those days, I had almost no competition as I scoured eBay for records and nothing cost more than a few dollars. Then, in early 2001, I wrote a short article about *mento* for *The Beat* magazine in which I addressed its history and current state in very general terms (Neely 2001). Although I was not the first to write about it, the international reach of this publication and the release of *Boogu Yagga Gal*, a CD of reissued *mento* recordings from the 1950s, probably inspired some collectors to look for *mento* on eBay. In the next several months following its publication, the market for *mento* records changed dramatically. Prices soared as the number of people I bid against increased.

Will Straw's claim that "neophilia is the mechanism underlying all consumption and, in particular, that of the collector" (Straw 1999-2000:166-167) is an unusually apt way of accounting for the motivations of those who collect old records. As new aspects of Jamaica's music history are "discovered" and publicized, one finds a spike in the collectors' market caused by those looking for original pressings to add to their collections. The neophilic moment that began in 2001 represents an important time in *mento*'s history. For perhaps the first time, objects from *mento*'s past were widely desired by people outside Jamaica. A rash of new releases and reissue projects on CD emerged that helped even casual collectors become familiar with the names of important *mento* artists. As ending bids for early 78 rpm records increased, more and more records came to auction.<sup>11</sup> I watched important collections in the



United States, England, the Netherlands, Japan and Germany grow by paying attention to which eBay users won what. As more records came to market, competition for them grew even more intense.

More important to this moment, however, was how discourse about *mento* mushroomed on the Internet. A historical memory emerged based on how people from all over the world reconciled these newly discovered 78 rpm records with the scant information found in the many books written about reggae that quietly acknowledge *mento*. Ideas about *mento*'s lineal and stylistic relationships to other genres of Jamaican music (notably, *ska* and reggae) were widely and wildly speculated, but these were based on nothing more than what the music on these records sounded like. Conspicuously absent from this discourse was the narrative input of those with some autobiographical memory of the music. The histories being constructed did not relate to those I heard from *mento* musicians.

Anxieties in Jamaica over eBay's role in opening discursive power to "any" are perhaps best demonstrated through responses to the proposed auction of a guitar shaped like an M16 rifle that once belonged to reggae icon Peter Tosh. On November 14, 2006 the Flashpoint Film Festival, which claimed control over the disposition of the guitar, sent out a press release announcing it was going to auction Tosh's guitar on eBay on the 26<sup>th</sup> of that month. At the time, the guitar was in the possession of Tosh's common law wife Andrea "Marlene" Brown, who agreed to let Paul Bucknor, the festival's cofounder, use it to raise money. About the guitar, Bucknor said: "Peter Tosh's M16 Guitar is a Jamaican icon that has been misunderstood as promoting violence when in fact it's quite the opposite. Tosh used music as a weapon to fight injustice, and so too film is our weapon to fight the misconceptions about life in our home, Jamaica. Flashpoint wants to make Jamaica better understood through films" (Young 2006). The auction's starting price was rumored to have been set at US\$250,000.

Despite the fact that the guitar's whereabouts were long unknown (it had been in a closet in the United States for nearly 20 years), the press release caused a stir in Jamaica. On November 16, journalist Tanya Batson-Savage reported on the sale in the *Jamaica Gleaner* and criticized Jamaicans who undervalue their history. She argued that those who could afford the guitar either would not see its true value or would not want to associate with its symbolism. Poet and radio personality Mutabaruka laid out local concerns succinctly: "obviously, I think somebody from foreign going to get it."

Over the next few days, Tosh's friends and former associates expressed further outrage. Tosh's onetime manager, Copeland Forbes, sent a mass email to members of the Jamaican media and musical community (Copeland Forbes, email to list, November 17, 2006) in which



he described how the guitar came into Tosh's possession and expressed outrage that "this piece of history" was not "in a museum in Jamaica where visitors can come and see the weapon the great musical freedom fighter PETER TOSH used in Southern Africa to help fight the fight to tear down apartheid." Two days later, another of Tosh's managers, Herbie Miller, wrote an impassioned article in which he pointed out the ironic parallel between the auction of Tosh's guitar as a militant symbol of revolution and the auction of Africans as slaves in the new world (Miller 2006).

This ire was assuaged somewhat on November 24<sup>th</sup> when the BBC reported that the auction had been cancelled due to a legal dispute over the instrument's ownership (Jarvis 2006). Auctions of this sort of unique item are not unheard of (in March 2007, for example, a reggae historian and sound system operator in England won an original speaker enclosure from King Tubby's "Hometown Hi-Fi" sound system from a Jamaican seller [eBay item #320091605269; see Whitwell 2007]), but this episode involving Tosh's guitar was important because it made Jamaica's material music history a vital political issue.<sup>12</sup> Similar concerns were underscored in early 2008 when it was reported that a "massive" collection of records and compact discs was missing from the archives of the former Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation.<sup>13</sup> This is a staggering circumstance, not simply because it will affect research into Jamaican music, but because international competition for records on eBay will make it more costly (and, sadly, less likely) than ever to replace what's been lost.

Records indeed present a unique set of issues because they are, in their very nature as commodified, mass-produced items, endowed with "portability, transportability and transmutability" (Feld 1992:259). This portability was once designed to give artists exposure and to grow local business. The new commercial scale eBay offers, however, not only takes artists and practitioners out of this equation, but increasingly their interpretation of historical data. As records are "removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences" (Belk, cited in Shukur 2004:312), the new meanings they receive reflect the interests and assumptions of those who possess them.

78 rpm records are an especially sensitive case because there were relatively few of them to begin with. The most updated edition of *Roots Knotty Roots*, a discography cataloging singles released between 1950 and 1985, included approximately 47,500 individual titles. The vast majority of these are 7" 45 rpm discs and, given the number of titles, one imagines that tens of millions of these records exist. In comparison, labels that produced mainly 78 rpm records pressed them in very limited numbers. For example, correspondence from Decca, the pressing agent for MRS and Chin Radio Service, reveals press runs that typically ranged from

250 to 1,000 copies of every record.<sup>14</sup> Of this number, no one is sure how many still exist. I came across many who described these old records as “worthless” and simply threw them away or burned them with their garbage. The children of early producer Stanley Motta were more creative: growing up they used extra copies of their father’s records for BB gun target practice (Philip Motta, personal communication, April 2004).

As the eBay economy draws the relatively small number of 78 rpm *mento* records out toward global centers, the conceptual boundaries separating Jamaica from the rest of the world are surely becoming less distinct. In general, collectors have a deep love for the music they collect. But how are those who collect vintage records and breathe life into the discourse about them claiming discursive power and therefore authority over another culture’s music? What kinds of narratives are circulated among collectors?

One example is the tendency to equate original technology with musical authenticity. Jeremy Freeman, the owner of the Manhattan-based record store “Deadly Dragon Sound,” has observed this, as have I. Freeman, who buys his store’s stock wholesale both from Luke and Owen, and from hunters he accompanies on trips in Jamaica, has noticed that 45 rpm records of *mento* artists have a limited market, including those reissued on 45 rpm discs from original 78 rpm pressings and later records by artists who originally recorded onto 78. Freeman’s experience is that the people who collect *mento* music tend to have a romantic view of it and want it in its “original” form, noting “the people that like *mento* are the same people that admire the almost untouched quality of it; who have a fantasy of it being a primitive blues thing, some guy sitting in a dusty road playing his rumba box.”<sup>15</sup> This holds true for records of artists like the bamboo saxophonist Sugar Belly. A legend in the tradition, Sugar Belly never recorded as a bandleader in the 1950s when *mento* records first came out on 78 rpm disc. Rather, his first records were released in the early 1960s on 45 rpm disc, well after the 78 era had passed. Despite his important place in *mento*’s history (Barrow and Dalton 1997:10), these records, made in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, attract comparatively less interest on the international market than those by artists who recorded onto 78 rpm disc in the 1950s.

A second example that grows out of the first is the notion that the 1950s was *mento*’s “golden age.” The source for recent claims about this era is *mento* enthusiast Mike Garnice’s website, <http://www.mentomusic.com>. He explains it this way:

[I]t wasn’t until the early 1950s that true *mento* recordings first began to appear on 78 rpm discs. This decade was *mento*’s golden age, as a variety of artists recorded *mento* songs in an assortment of rhythms and styles. It was the peak of *mento*’s creativity and popularity in Jamaica

and the birth of Jamaica's recording industry.

These recordings reveal *mento* to be a diverse musical genre, sometimes played with reckless abandon and other times with orderly precision. In addition to *mento*'s African and European roots, by this time it has also encompassed pan-Caribbean influences, as well as American jazz. Although it was informed by a world of music, *mento* is clearly, uniquely Jamaican. And as Jamaica's original music, all other Jamaican music can trace its roots to *mento*.

Some styles of *mento* would evolve into *ska* and reggae. (As a matter of fact, some *mento* songs are still being recorded inna dancehall stylee today.) Other styles, while purely *mento*, seem to have done less to contribute to the development of later Jamaican music.<sup>16</sup>

Describing himself as an enthusiastic fan, Garnice created his site in January 2003, "to give Jamaica's *mento* music a presence on the web" because he "loves this music and want[s] it to be remembered, documented and celebrated. As someone who had enjoyed *ska*, rock steady, and reggae for more than 20 years, discovering *mento* was a fantastic treat for the ears as well as a revelation. This foundation chapter in the history of Jamaican music was finally revealed." Lavishly illustrated, it is an invaluable discographic resource that collectors turn to for information, and families of *mento* musicians living in the diaspora use to reconnect with their cultural past. An avid eBay (the auction site is even mentioned on his *mento* site's homepage), Garnice now has what I consider the premier collection of original *mento* recordings. And yet, while the idea that the 1950s were *mento*'s golden age was one he told me he essentially made up, it is now generally accepted and taken up by others, most recently in David Moskowitz's 2006 book, *Caribbean Popular Music: An Encyclopedia of Reggae, Mento, Ska, Rock Steady and Dancehall* (Moskowitz 2006:205).

I have never heard *mento* musicians make claims about the 1950s being a golden age. If anything, the 1950s was a time when an overriding commercialism motivated rapid musical change. The older musicians I have spoken with who were active in this era remember that *mento* artists actually lost work to mobile sound systems at community dances and to juke boxes in bars and rum shops (cf. Howard 2008). Further, records from this period often contained music intended to appeal to a tourist market interested in "calypso" and did not always accurately reflect local practice. That producers preferred to record musicians who could conform to the industry's tastes meant the percentage of *mento* musicians that actually made records in this era was very, very small.

For *mento* today, there are two major historical paradigms that will affect any future research on the subject. One represents the traditions and history of its practitioners. For contemporary musicians, records

—particularly those made in the 1950s—represent a real, albeit tenuous, aspect of the music's historical memory. While musicians are generally aware of its recorded history, *mento* music is passed on orally and rarely do recorded artifacts take precedence over the word of an older musician. The other, however, exists outside the tradition and is based in a commodity culture concerned with authenticity and originality. Fueled by collector neophilia and facilitated by eBay, it represents an artificial and largely invented memory of tropicalized nostalgia. Because this historical approach is almost exclusively written by those with no stake in the tradition and is disseminated quickly and easily through the Internet, it is fast becoming the genre's dominant narrative. With it, the stories told by its practitioners comprise only a local counter-history.

## Conclusion

Jamaica's vintage records, the big tunes, are now played at modern dances the world over. On one of these records, you might hear a crash cymbal's strokes of echo wash over a rhythmic dropout before the bass and drums are reintroduced to restore the track's original flow. If it is played at a dance, the audience may call out to the selector for a rewind; in these moments, musical continuity is again suspended as the tune is started over from the beginning. A record collection full of big tunes is crucial for any successful sound system, and soundmen are always on the lookout for records—usually 45 rpm singles—that can best make the dance ram. More and more often, they turn to eBay to find them.

As I pull up to the beginning of this article, I return to the hauls, the batches of records that move beyond Jamaica and accumulate in the collections of people in the United States, Brazil, Canada, Germany, England, Japan, Australia and elsewhere, and think about how increasingly fragmented some parts of Jamaica's historical past have become. eBay has given the world access to Jamaican symbols and objects, and has enabled people to collect across borders with an intimacy and efficiency never before possible. For Jamaican entrepreneurs these new markets have been a blessing, providing economic incentive to hunters, sellers and private individuals to preserve materials once considered worthless that now have value, and help inject life into Jamaica's economy.

For students of Jamaican music—and I suspect for students of music from other geographical regions—eBay has been revelatory. The breadth of rare historical materials that has been otherwise unavailable has allowed stunning and unprecedented insight into Jamaica's musical past. Knowledge of and occasional ownership of these objects has become important to an ethnomusicological field methodology that looks to history to better understand music, culture and society. Here, fragmentation

and accumulation bring a kind of unity to the deconstructed groove of Jamaican music history. As an ethnomusicologist, I am keenly aware of the politics of collecting and realize that my work can be read in multiple ways. I am aware, too, that other collectors have expanded their purview to include mento, making international competition for Jamaica's music history substantially more intense than ever before. This competition not only curtails my own collecting habits, but it seems to silence the voices of those who make the music and puts control of their history in jeopardy.

As collections continue to go global, the established canons of documentary evidence are increasingly found online. Because so few mento musicians have access to this virtual world, we are—at least in the short term—seeing a movement from a local tradition with an orally-passed historical perspective to one that will by necessity include the meanings of those whose only stake in the tradition is ownership of its artifacts. How this will change Jamaica's music history over time, “or rather the experience of it that we call memory,” is still to be determined.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The haul and pull up is a performance technique that some readers will also recognize as a “wheel,” a “wheel and come again,” a “rewind” or a “forward” (Stolzoff 2000:207).
- <sup>2</sup> Today, there are also auction sites similar to eBay based in the Caribbean. In Jamaica, these include <<http://www.jamdeal.com>>, “The Place to Buy and Sell in Jamaica” (launched in September 2006; this company later established similar sites <<http://www.TriniDeal.com>> for Trinidad and <<http://www.WiDeal.com>> for Barbados) and <<http://www.TheAuctionHouseLtd.com>>, “Everything, Easily...at the Best Price!” (Launched in September 2007). Because almost vintage music is not generally sold on these sites, and because these sites do not yet attract a global market, I do not address them in this article.
- <sup>3</sup> In talking about eBay's feedback system and the importance of reputation, Lyn Van Swol described the role trust plays in both driving eBay commerce and “in fostering consumer-to-consumer transactions in a high-uncertainty environment” (Van Swol 2006: 147). Because sellers earn buyer trust over time through the reputation of an anonymous commercial online identity (and vice

versa), I have chosen to change sellers' names in this article in an effort to not disturb the balance of these commercial relationships.

- <sup>4</sup> Pearce 1995:31. The three modes of collecting Pearce identified are "souvenir," "fetishistic" and "systematic," each of which embodies a specific kind of relationship to the object world. Souvenir collecting, she explained, is wrapped up with inventing a romanticized past for one's self. A fetishistic collector on the other hand makes objects paramount to the point that one's self is defined by them. Systematic collectors follow an intellectual rationale and demonstrate knowledge by having a comprehensive and objective approach to curation. For these collectors, only a complete collection can be considered a knowledgeable one.
- <sup>5</sup> I considered records crucial to my work, but was discouraged at how most collectors I had met described the scene in Jamaica. In an email, author and historian Allen Kaatz put it succinctly: "from what I saw the last time I went to JA, it's totally dried up and picked over at this point, unless you get really lucky. It used to be so easy, and all the records I bought cost between 25 and 50 cents apiece" (Allen Kaatz, email to Daniel Neely, February 18, 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> While I suspect the term "hunter" is not a uniquely Jamaican term, it is not particularly common in the literature. In fact, few sources address this particular collecting class. One exception is William Gibson, who in describing his experience in a similar practice referred to himself as a "picker" (2006:19). These hunters represent an important step in eBay's economic hierarchy in Jamaica. For an interesting take on the comprador class within modern transnational capitalist flow, see Averill 1996.
- <sup>7</sup> This includes, for example, records pressed to promote a person's sound systems, for musicians who self-distributed, for churches to raise money and for stores that needed promotional material. Although sometimes found outside Jamaica, I would include 45 rpm tourist board records in this group.
- <sup>8</sup> I have met some Americans who have done this, but Owen's observation is that most are Japanese; of their dedication he deadpanned, "as one leaves, another one is here."

Although having no direct relation to collecting in Jamaica, Frank Conakry, a collector of African music, talks about digging for local funk records in different parts of West Africa on his blog, [voodoo-funk.blogspot.com](http://voodoo-funk.blogspot.com). There, he call himself as a "vinyl archeologist,"

and explains in the blog's "about me" page:

I used to run the Soul Explosion, a party in Berlin for those who enjoy raw hard and rare Funk 45s. Before that I hosted the infamous sleazefest Vampyros Lesbos in NYC but that would be another story... The Soul Explosion started in 2000. In the summer of 2005 I turned the night over to my friend Mark and left Europe to dig up funk records even more obscure and elusive than US Funk 45s: I moved to Guinea on the coast of West Africa where I retired as a DJ and dedicated my entire time to the pursuit of African Funk Records. This blog is about my travels and experiences in a region that despite being plagued by civil wars corrupt governments and other diseases has so much more to offer. Maybe this site will inspire some of You to just go and buy a plane ticket and come to see where we all came from. You might find things more valuable than the rarest records and sometimes you won't even have to dig through dusty boxes to find them.

Conakry's blog sheds light on the issues and motivations that concern collectors who go to other countries in search of records.

- <sup>9</sup> Bulletin boards where these kinds of discussions take place include sites such as <<http://www.bloodandfire.co.uk>>, <<http://www.trojan-records.co.uk/forum/index.php>>, <<http://djgreedyg.proboards77.com>> and <<http://www.verygoodplus.co.uk>>.
- <sup>10</sup> I learned about these identities online and had them corroborated by other eBayers. In fact, several dealers maintain multiple identities. Sometimes it may simply be to deceive potential bidders; other times, it is to rehabilitate an earlier business rating established before the seller took his business seriously. Some sellers have different identities because they maintain US residences that they sell from as well.
- <sup>11</sup> These often came straight from Jamaica. As I stated above, by 2002 hunters were well aware of the value of mento 78s. These records came less frequently from England, Canada and, on rare occasion, Australia.
- <sup>12</sup> It also drew attention to bringing them back. Much has been said and written about Michael Lee-Chin's (CEO of the AIC Limited and the Chairman of NCB, one of Jamaica's largest banks and listed on Forbes's "World's Richest People" list) potential acquisition and planned repatriation of the Roger Steffens Reggae Archive. Although the deal was rumored complete in 2004, the collection still



languishes as of winter 2009.

- <sup>13</sup> This is not the first time the Jamaica Broadcasting Company's archives have been vandalized (Seaga 2008). This particular episode, however, seems to have taken place over the three year period 2004-2007, when oversight of the building's security was in the hands of the Belgian firm *Besix*, under contract to work on a nearby transport center (*Jamaica Gleaner Online* 2008a 2008b). It is unknown whether any of this material has appeared for sale on eBay.
- <sup>14</sup> There are no data available for the other companies. Because Ken Khouri owned Jamaica's first pressing plant (Records Ltd.), popular records that came out on his own Kalypso label likely went through many pressings and probably number in the thousands. The number of records pressed on labels that used Records Ltd. as a pressing agent (including Trojan, Hi-Lite, Lasher Disc, Maracas, early Chin's and others), however, was likely very limited. Dada Tewari, proprietor of Jamaica's second major pressing plant, Caribbean Recording Company, seems to have been far less ambitious than Khouri. Caribou, the house label, produced many fewer records than Kalypso, and given their availability, probably pressed them in smaller runs. Labels that used Caribbean Recording Company as a pressing agent (Tanamo, Back Beat) are extremely rare and probably went through single, limited pressings.
- <sup>15</sup> Freeman's statement here resonates strongly with Marybeth Hamilton's (2007) work on the mythologizing of Delta blues music. There, she argues that the fascination white record collectors had with "primal" black music on 78 rpm disc helped create a myth about the Delta blues that perseveres today. For more on record collectors, see Milano, 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> <<http://www.mentomusic.com/WhatIsMento.htm>> (retrieved November 6, 2006).

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