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BLUE LINES
by Ian Bourland

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BLUE LINES

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Blue Lines



Ian Bourland

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Track Listing

1. "Safe from Harm" (5:18)
2. "One Love" (4:48)
3. "Blue Lines" (4:21)
4. "Be Thankful for What You've Got" (4:09)
5. "Five Man Army" (6:04)
6. "Unfinished Sympathy" (5:08)
7. "Daydreaming" (4:14)
8. "Lately" (4:26)
9. "Hymn of the Big Wheel" (6:36)

Introduction

Massive Attack's first full-length record *Blue Lines* was a warning shot in the new British Invasion of the 1990s, and a harbinger of what it might have been. If you remember the era as a time of Mancunian sneers, tabloid fisticuffs, and epic guitar rock, Massive was a marked counterpoint. They replaced nostalgia with futurity, a whitey rock 'n' roll format with a notably afro-diasporic one. They showed that England was more than lads and pints, as a cosmopolitan hub that would define European life—and dance music—for most of the 1990s and beyond. A knowing alchemy of soul hooks, hip-hop production, dub instrumentation, and urbane lyrical stanzas, *Blue Lines* was an opening salvo of an age to come, one that was more world-weary, more optimistic, and more interconnected all at once. The year was 1991, the long 1980s of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan was over, and the people marginalized by conservatism and its visions of cultural purity had reason for optimism. An era of musical sophistication, sensual contemplation, and new freedoms seemed to beckon, the jobs and Little Englanders be damned.

Some may say they've never heard of Massive Attack, but the sonic palette they ushered in provided the *mise-en-scène* for a great deal of popular culture. This was especially true in an increasingly integrated Europe, but also in global cities where new forms of electronic music cross-pollinated through raves and megaclubs, downtown bars and after-hours cafés—from Washington, DC, to Mexico, DF, from Tel Aviv to Tokyo. There was a new, borderless map of pop music just starting to unfold, and records like *Blue Lines*, with all of its stylistic catholicism, were its *lingua franca*.

Blue Lines conjures a specific time and place, but also envisions a dreamy placelessness, which is why it has often been called introspective or minimal. There's an intimacy and interiority to it that plays well basically anywhere with buildings and nighttime. If you missed that, you probably saw the movie *Hackers* in 1995, heard the song "Protection," with its spare wah-wah guitar and subtle breakbeat drifting under Tracey Thorn's heartswelling lyrics. It's the soundscape for the arch gen-X romance between Angelina Jolie and Jonny Lee Miller—unsentimental, but somehow sincere. "Protection" remains insistently familiar and, although it appeared on the 1994 follow-up to *Blue Lines*, its production and its sonic textures are emblematic of a style and ethos that the record conceived. The song defines a cinematic and urban sensibility that was very much of its time and, indeed, many people's deep memory pathways. With the exception of "Motown Philly" or "Smells Like Teen Spirit," it is the defining song of the early 1990s. Or, at least, the aural embodiment of a world coming into focus that was often defiantly and self-consciously "global."

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Of course, much of the optimism of the 1990s and its so-called “New World Order” feel misplaced in hindsight. Back then, the Cold War was over, prosperity and multiculturalism seemed to be on the march. But with Brexit and the Grenfell Tower inferno and the ascent of the far-right, it feels like the bad-old-days of the 1980s again—or worse. It’s bittersweet to look back on the comparative exuberance and innocence of that time. And Massive’s own material grew darker, more serious as the years wore on.

I’m not arguing here that *Blue Lines* was the group’s best record—that would be 1998’s *Mezzanine*, a definitive masterpiece with a coherent sound (all minor keys and subtle instrumentation). But *Mezzanine* is heavy listening. It’s suffused by a shadowy monochrome that looks ahead into the next decade, one defined by a global war on terror, surveillance, and all the rest. Its opener, “Angel,” was used to great effect in *The West Wing*, the unnerving crescendo as the President’s daughter is abducted by foreign agents. It also frames an inferno at a trailer park as Brad Pitt looks on, enraged, in *Snatch* (2000). And, of course, “Tear Drop” featured as the intro to dark medical drama *House*, which closed out the aughts on an acidic note.

Which is to say that *Mezzanine* revealed Massive as artists: people who make elegant, difficult work; people who name records after obscure islands in the North Sea; people who seem to disappear for years on end, sometimes resurfacing to tour with avant-garde filmmaker Adam Curtis, or speak out against a venue in Bristol named in honor of a prominent slave trader. *Mezzanine* is the kind of record that “serious” people take seriously, but it’s no

one's favorite record. It doesn't conjure warm memories or happy firsts.

Not so of *Blue Lines*. This is true of everyone I spoke to at a wedding in London last year, most of whom lit up with recognition when I told them about this project. If you are between the ages of thirty and fifty (as they were), there's a good chance that some part of *Blue Lines* factored into a perfect evening, or some romantic interlude during a formative time in your life. For me, it was moving to the American East Coast, experiencing lonely, hibernal walks for the first time, experiencing the big city, Europe, and many other things for the first time too, usually with *Blue Lines* on my Discman, murmuring along with Robert Del Naja and "living in my headphones . . ." The hip-hop journalist Michael Gonzalez recalls *Blue Lines* as the soundtrack to a voyage to Paris in 1997, driving into the countryside near Versailles with a lady, "Be Thankful for What You Got" pulsing away on the speakers. For music-video director Baillie Walsh, enlisted by Massive to visualize what was, to most, an anonymous studio project, the record was a revelation, a series of textured vignettes that inspired short films in his mind.

So while *Mezzanine* is the album built to stand the test of time, *Blue Lines*, as meandering and precocious as it is, lives on in hearts and minds of its listeners. Even so, I venture that all the recognizable facets of the Massive Attack they would become are there, on *Blue Lines*: the wide-ranging palette of influences; a rootedness in diasporic textures and production styles; a merger of the atmospheric, introspective, and cerebral; and, crucially, a subtle but distinct political edge.

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Critics were kind then, and history has been especially kind in retrospect. But *Blue Lines* was not a masterwork that arrived, as it may have seemed, from left field, fully formed. Massive were emissaries of several larger scenes, and they found themselves at the right place at the right time. Importantly, they came of age and aligned themselves with the rich and diverse musical underground of Bristol in the 1980s, a proving ground and wellspring that came to fruition as the Wild Bunch sound system became Massive, and collaborators such as Nellee Hooper went on to work with the likes of Sinéad O'Connor.

And on the topic of Bristol, I should note that this book places no stock in the idea of the “Bristol sound” that so fascinated music journalists looking for a hook or a marketing angle in the years after *Blue Lines* was released. After all, Grantley “Daddy G” Marshall himself wanted listeners to look beyond that connection because, “it gives the wrong impression. Because people will expect it to sound like something—the Bristol sound—which it ain’t.”¹

A few caveats here. For one, this book is not a fanboy letter or a critical hagiography. I’m a historian, so I tend to think about artifacts like *Blue Lines* as enmeshed in the culture and politics of where they were produced. This doesn’t mean that *Blue Lines* was a kind of passive transcription of the times—far from it. It and records like it were effectively histories of people written out of the history books, and it arguably set the tone of what the world to come could and should look like. But I’m also not necessarily suggesting that Massive were rogue geniuses, that *Blue Lines* is the greatest record of blah, blah, blah. As Marshall later recounted, “We were lazy

Bristol twats . . . It was Neneh [Cherry] who kicked our asses and got us in the studio. We recorded a lot at her house, in her baby's room. What we were trying to do was create dance music for the head rather than the feet.”²

Then again, Robert Del Naja, Grantley Marshall, and Andrew Vowles knew what played in the underground—they were good selectors, had good taste, knew which sounds might gel into something new. More importantly, they knew how to attract the right collaborators—people like Cherry, Walsh, Cameron McVey, Jonny Dollar, Smith & Mighty, Shara Nelson, Horace Andy, and others who could see the songs in what were, at the time, often inchoate ideas. They knew to strike when the iron was hot, signing a major-label deal with Virgin where others did not. And they were served well by a sense of openness and curiosity, a willingness to see where paths led rather than follow the well-charted course of the industry and their big-time peers.

A final note: this is compiled from my own archival research and interviews. Massive themselves are aware of this book but repeatedly declined to be interviewed. This is unsurprising: much like another rainy city that burst onto the global stage in 1991—Seattle—Bristol and its musicians seem to still suffer a long hangover and a good degree of weariness about the period. Like their Seattle counterparts, fame and celebrity were not the coin of the realm. Perversely, in the wake of *Blue Lines*, Bristol became a site of media frenzy, with journalists from around the world dropping in to get a story, and lookie-loos adding a new “x” on their map of vicarious cultural tourism. Beyond that, the current

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personnel of the group take the line of many artists—on the street and in the gallery—of letting the work speak for itself.

With that in mind, I owe a thank-you to all the folks who did care to talk and share their stories. This is a book about a record, but also about the lives and labor of dozens of people. At the time of its creation, *Blue Lines* was an experiment, a missive from the outside. In the end, it kicked the doors of the mainstream open to the margins, in the process shifting the course of popular music.

1

Cider Punks

Anyone involved in the Bristol music scene of the 1980s will invariably bring the conversation back around to a multistory bar at 52 Park Row called the Dugout. With its dingy carpet, orange walls, and precipitous staircase, it was located in the rough geographic center of the city. Now a Chinese restaurant, the former club was a stone's throw from the university, and served as a crossroads during a time in which subculture had higher stakes—when rivalries among factions meant a Saturday on the town often led to harsh words, or worse. The Bristol of the years 1979–82 was divided by neighborhoods, to be sure, but also by affiliation and affinity. There were punks, skins, soul boys, Rastas, and Blitz-styled New Romantics. There were new-wavers, football supporters, and, as Robert del Naja tells it, parachute-pant-wearing kung fu film fanatics carrying nunchaku. “Bristol was tough on a Saturday night. If you looked alternative you would get your head kicked in! In those days you wore everything on your sleeve—walking home from school with dyed hair and a skinny tie was running the gauntlet.”¹