



Babymother

Directed by: Julian Henriques

©: Channel Four Television Corporation

Production Company: Fine Line Features

For: Channel Four Films

Production Company: Independent Pictures, Formation Films

In association with: Arts Council of England

Supported by: National Lottery through the Arts Council of England

Presented by: FilmFour

Executive Producer: Margaret Matheson

Producer: Parminder Vir

Line Producer: Yvonne Isimene Ibazebo

Co-producer: Tracey Seaward

Unit Manager: Bill Mold

Production Co-ordinator: Chi Ukairo

Location Manager: Idris Ahmed

Post-production Supervisor: Alistair Hopkins

Post-production Co-ordinator: Nicola Armstrong

1st Assistant Directors: Sam Harris, Rupert Styles

2nd Assistant Directors: Pauline Oni, Siobhan Tucker

3rd Assistant Directors: Saloum N'jie, Richard Gold

Script Supervisors: Sam Donovan,

Jordan Vicky Harrison

Casting Director: Carol Dudley

Written by: Julian Henriques

Co-writer: Vivienne Howard

Anita's Monologue Written by: Trilla Jenna

Director of Photography: Ron Fortunato

Additional Photography: Peter Middleton

Camera Operator: Allen Stewart

Steadicam Operators: Roger Tooley, Simon Harding

Special Effects: Alan Whibley

Editor: Jason Canovas

Production Designer: Choi Ho Man

Art Director: Niall Moroney

Set Decorator: Rebecca Gillies

Mural Designer: Robert Wooding

Storyboard Artist: Herbert Adams

Costume Designer: Annie Curtis Jones

Costume Supervisor: Anna Kovacevic

Make-up Designer: Sue Wyburgh

Titles Design: Pauline Hume

Titles/Opticals: General Screen Enterprises

Music: John Lunn

Music Supervisor: Ivan Chandler

Executive Music Producer: Tracy McKnight

Music Editor: Richard Todman

Music Consultant: Carroll Thompson

Choreography: L'Antoinette 'Osun Ide' Stines

Sound Recording: Tim Fraser

Re-mix Engineer: Paul Golding

Dubbing Mixer: Aad Wirtz, John Falcini

Supervising Sound Editor: Nick Adams

Dialogue Editor: Gordon Brown

ADR Editor: Jay Coquillon

Foley Artist: Stan Fiferman, Brian Sweetman

Foley Mixer: Ken Somerville

Foley Editor: Paul Wrightson

Stunt Co-ordinator: Rod Woodruff

Sound System: JB International

Cast:

Anjela Lauren Smith (Anita)

Caroline Chikezie (Sharon)

Jocelyn Esien (Yvette)

Wil Johnson (Byron)

Don Warrington (Luther)

Tameka Empson (Dionne)

Diane Bailey (Bee)

Vas Blackwood (Caesar)

Andrea Francis (Yvette's sister)

Big Screen Classics

Babymother

Stuart Hall on 'Babymother'

Despite the much-acclaimed British cinema renaissance, Black British films are still rarer than gold dust. *Babymother*, the new 'reggae musical' from Formation Films, courtesy of Channel Four Films, the Arts Council and sundry foreign backers, will be one of the first of the new cinematic wave to test the treacherous waters of British film distribution. Directed by Julian Henriques, former *Arena* and BBC arts-documentary producer, and produced by Parminder Vir, herself a successful television-documentary producer and his partner in Formation Films, *Babymother* is grounded in the vibrant Black scene of dancehall – the latest musical sound (and look) to capture the imagination of Britain's urban Black youth. Shot on location in Harlesden, one of London's Black inner suburbs, using largely non-professional actors, it is a much expanded and transformed version of an idea first tried out by Henriques in a 1992 Channel 4 docudrama-with-music, *We the Ragamuffin*.

Babymother is the story of Anita, a young Black woman who has two children for babyfather Byron, an ambitious reggae singer. Anita is determined – along with her two rude-girl friends Sharon and Yvette – to become a dee-jay, make a successful recording and be the toast of the local dancehall scene. However, life as a babymother on a Harlesden housing estate is a difficult base from which to launch this project, and Anita is having trouble with both the babyfather (who is more dedicated to his singing career than to his paternal duties) and her mother and sister (who disapprove of her ragga style, attitude and ambitions), not to mention raising the money for the demo-tape session. The vicissitudes which accompany her struggles to survive, and her group's ultimate success in a competition with Byron, provide the film's main narrative drive.

This storyline, however, is merely the thin scaffold for the elements that really give *Babymother* its vitality and raw energy, which have everything to do with the dancehall scene. It is not the first film to be based on dancehall – but the low-budget, tape-to-film Hi-8 *DanceHall Queen* (shot by Don Letts and Rick Elgood for Chris Blackwell of Island Records fame), which commanded Jamaican screens without a break for six months, still languishes without a commercial release in Britain [although it had sell-out runs at the Ritz and Prince Charles in London – *Ed*]. Dancehall has been loosely appropriated into Britain's Black inner suburbs from Jamaica's burgeoning club scene. The music derives by way of a series of sliding transfers from 'roots' reggae, through hip-hop to dee-jay music and US-influenced gangsta rap: rhythms with which Black youth has been beguiling the hearts and souls of white 'wannabes' (that is, 'want-to-be Blacks') in the urban club scene for some time. The violent imagery, sexually explicit (often homophobic) lyrics and dance movements which characterised the so-called 'slackness' style of the dominant male ragga singers (such as Buju Banton) have been translated into the stunningly glamorous, recklessly minimalist fashion outfits, incredible hairstyle constructions and erotic body-moves of their followers, the ragga girls. Indeed, the women's display/performances in dancehall – to or at or for their 'men'? – have rapidly become its scandalous, spectacular centrepiece. The girls' taking of centre stage, putting their new-found independence (or, not to mince words, 'pussy-power') into the music and their bodies fully on the line – which is at the narrative heart of *Babymother* – represents the capture and overrunning of the last bastion of the male-dominated reggae scene. As the song puts it, 'No need no ring 'pon we finger to be a man's wife/The loving wha' we have man

Anton Rice (*Anton*)
 Saffron Lashley (*Saffron*)
 Corinne Skinner Carter (*Mistress Edith*)
 Suzette Llewellyn (*Rose*)
 Clive Buckley (*Matt*)
 Bushman (*DJ on radio*)
 Badi Uzzaman (*shopkeeper*)
 Tippa Irie (*MC*)
 Governor Tiggy (*Bee's act*)
 Peter Hunnigale (*Matt's act*)
 Barbara Lawrence, Stella Pilaya, Tanitia
 (*Dionne's posse*)
 Dujhan Dennis Planter (*blues party performer*)
 Superflex, Bubble Ranks, Richie Dan
 (*performers at Sound System*)
 General Levy, Lorna G, Caibo
 (*recording artists in studio*)
 Carlton 'Bubblers' Ogilvie, Trevor 'Fagan' Fagan,
 Tony 'Crucial' Phillips, Kenton 'Fish' Brown
 (*Ruff Cut Band*)
 UK 1998
 82 mins
 Digital

The screening on Mon 16 Nov will be introduced
 by director Julian Henriques and producer
 Parminder Vir

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want that for life/We live in the gym, non-stop exercise/And the body wha' we
 have make man stand up and rise.' So much for patriarchal power.

Almost everything to do with dancehall itself in *Babymother* is first rate. The
 recording-studio sequences and dancehall scenes – especially the final
 showdown between Byron and Anita – are beautifully shot and exciting to
 watch, transmitting an authentic feel of the cultural vibes. The music – ranging
 from slow reggae to ferocious rap put-downs like 'I Don't Care' and featuring
 some of the finest current Black British performers (including Carroll Thompson
 and Cinderella) – is of consistently high quality.

Babymother's audiences will be invited – perhaps for the first time – to look
 inside the engine of popular creativity, in all its raw excess, which is being
 tentatively invoked in more sober terms in New Labour's relentlessly empty
 hype about New Britain. This is a bit of New Britain little dreamed of by Norman
 Tebbit, or, one suspects, Tony Blair (though Peter Mandelson may have
 encountered it!). This film is wired directly into the motor of assertive energy
 which is powering so-called multi-cultural Britain, to whose rhythm London is
 increasingly swinging. Indeed, dancehall represents the thin, shapely,
 aggressively stylised and eroticised Black body of Hot Britain struggling to get
 out from inside the sleeker, fatter, complacent corporate figure of Cool
 Britannia.

Cultural critics – in Harlesden, Kingston and on Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue (for
 this is a Black diasporic phenomenon, as Isaac Julien's 1994 television
 documentary *The Darker Side of Black* clearly shows) – are already at work
 trying to unravel what *Babymother* has to tell us about the current state of play
 in the gender wars. For dancehall represents one form of the cultural
 emancipation of young Black women: the film's rude girls breaking out from
 being forever bossed about by the rude boys in the unthinkingly masculinist
 world of reggae culture. It transmits the sight and sound of an explosive
 declaration of independence – though the position of the rude girl who is also a
 babymother (implying the continuing importance but conspicuously absent
 presence of the babyfather) reminds us of the persistent ambiguities on which
 this independence is predicated. In dancehall women can simulate the wilder
 aspects of copulation in their dance movements on stage as explicitly and
 aggressively as any man, but they remain, as *Babymother* shows, emotionally
 centred on the absent male and are on display *for the men* (as well as,
 perhaps, for one another). Their sexual lives, their squabbles and jealousies, still
 revolve around the male figures to whom the performances appear to be
 primarily addressed.

These complex issues are well represented within the film through Anita's
 tender moments alone with her children, the scenes of them with their father,
 when he's at home (which avoid the usual sentimentality), and the film's theme
 song itself, which underlines the message: 'Baby-mother! Be a Mother to Your
 Child!' But they cannot be fully explored within the limits of its entertainment
 conventions. In that sense *Babymother* marks another episode in second-wave
 feminism's long, incomplete march. It reminds us that popular culture, despite
 its elements of celebration and resistance, is also and always an ambiguous
 and contradictory space. Among other issues, *Babymother* poses the question
 of just how, and by what complicated shifts, the liberation of women is
 connected to girl power. And, as an added bonus in an engaging Black British
 extravaganza, Anita, Sharon and Yvette make the Spice Girls look like convent
 fifth-formers at a Sunday afternoon tea party.

Sight and Sound, September 1998