

Three years ago, Buju Banton was slated for his homophobia. Now he is being talked about as the new Bob Marley. Kimi Zabihiyan witnessed his rapturous reception in London and afterwards talked to him about politics and prejudice.

A roar from the lion's den

HISTORICAL moments are a rare occasion in Rastafarianism. In 1976, on Sunday nearly three thousand people were witness at The Forum. It had been a long wait in the rain, security was tight, but everyone waited respectfully in a long queue that stretched right round the block. There was an air of anticipation. Buju Banton's new album had hit the streets four months ago, and people were curious. On stage, a thin young man from Jamaica, razor blade sharp with dreadlocks, held the audience rapt for over two hours. From the first word of the first song to the last word, it was like a gigantic karaoke session. Forget Bostlemania, this was Bujamania.

Buju Banton first commanded headlines with his controversial dancehall hit, *Boom Bye Bye*. Buju finds homosexuality a terrible and disgusting thing. The gay community campaigned successfully to have him banned from the airwaves. The legacy continues to this day. Buju's exposure in the press and music scene will always be tainted by this episode. Yet it is because he was driven underground that his grassroots support and credibility have grown. Despite his homophobia, he has even been compared with — dare one whisper — Bob Marley.

Like Marley and most reggae artists Buju Banton (born Mark Myrie) is a child of the turbulent, often violent, politics of the Jamaican ghettos. But like Marley he's also a child of a deeply spiritual and proud country. Jamaicans love pointing out that for such a small nation they have had a tremendous impact on western culture. And it's true. With a little encouragement the flame-name game can go on for some time. "I have come to the conclusion that Jamaica is a blessed land. We produced some of the most inspirational people, some of the most musical people," Buju laughs, "some of the worst gangsters." For Buju, like Marley, has a solid following in the ghetto youth. His dancehall lyrics, positively dripping with testosterone, are particularly popular.

As Jamaica, like everywhere else in the world, has grown more polarised into rich and poor, so reggae music has reflected this. Dancehall, with its angry, couldn't-give-a-damn kind of attitude has been the ghetto benny. Upstairs rarely went to a dancehall event, as fear of

violence or police raids grew. The gap was widening until Garnett Silk broke through in the early nineties. His angelic voice and inspirational lyrics crossed over. Garnett Silk was being mentioned as the next Bob Marley — able to unite. Since Marley's death no reggae artist has succeeded in pulling Jamaicans together.

But last January Silk died in a freak accident. The official report



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said that he was showing his gun to a friend when it accidentally went off, hitting a gas canister, which exploded and blew up the house, killing him, his mother and one other. Over 40,000 people came to his funeral.

After investing so much hope in Silk, no one could believe his death was an accident. Buju is ambiguous when asked about Silk's death. Does he think it was a plot or a tragic freak accident? "I don't know. I wasn't there." Which is the stock

answer in the ghetto when someone has a view but doesn't want to tell you. "All I know is that another soldier was killed. Artists are the bravest sort of people in the world, they're like soldiers. It takes courage to go up there, you can't see everyone. Many of us have died in the battlefield." And he proceeds to list the names.

Now that Garnett Silk is dead, the responsibility seems to be Buju's. He is surprisingly focused and talks of being on "a mission to uplift my people. We have a legitimate reason to get the way we set."

On stage Buju preaches — and when I say like a lion he corrects me and says like a "proud young lion", stands up, trips over his rollerblade feet and pulls a face. At moments like this you are reminded that he's only 22.

Upstairs, in his hotel bedroom, a pot of akee and saltfish, the Jamaican national dish, is being cooked for him on a portable hot plate. "It's better than eating where the neon lights are pretty but the kitchens are dirty."

Buju is determined to be heard. "I was being heard before I was signed and I will continue. They brand Buju as preaching hostility to remove white people from listening to my music. The record companies want everything to coincide with their culture. You have to transform to their culture, but I say it's important for every culture to have its own road to travel on. In my culture, in African Caribbean culture, homosexuality is totally unacceptable. It's good when cultures meet, but I have to deal with my people and stay true to my people. That is why I always kept my support, but even your enemy can do good for you. When they came out against Boom Bye Bye they drew attention to a poor ghetto youth. I'm an optimist."

But Buju has matured from that impetuous dancehall U.I. And this is not a marketing department's attempt to reinvent him in order to bury the past. Far from it. When he and his producer wanted to put out *Untold Stories* as a single, the record company objected. They felt it was too much of a departure from his old image. "They said they wouldn't know how to market it. So I said to Buju, 'let's do it ourselves', and we went ahead and put it out on the streets," says Donovan Germane, who owns one of Jamaica's top recording studios.

"I want to know," asks Buju, "do they sign us up or sign us not. They won't cross over just to sell merchandise for other people."



Urban warrior... Buju Banton is a hero on the streets but remains tainted by his rampant homophobia

to promote the authentic stuff. They want us to do this and that. Go with the reggae music I can't relate to, R&B or hip-hop. That isn't my culture. They want us to transform to crossover. I want to reach more people, but in crossing over we mustn't get lost. They want us to promote and sell their culture, but I won't cross over just to sell merchandise for other people."

"It only needs one person to take a chance. Look at Chris Blackwell. He took Marley's music as it was. Bob Marley became an international star but true to his own authentic style. When they told me they wouldn't know what to do with a song like *Untold Stories*, that was when I realised they were totally out of touch." *Untold Stories* is fast becoming an anthem on

the streets. Like Marley's *One Love*, people know the lyrics. In a year's time an awful lot more people will be singing Buju's song. "It's a song relevant for this generation. Every time they try to stop us, we get through with more success. They cannot snuff out these words. No record company controls our community. We control that. We rule that world. I tell Buju that he has a

special role to play for this last generation. He goes up there and holds everyone's attention," says Donovan Germane.

For now, he commands attention even more. Buju Banton rarely smiles. "I have no joke with the world. When I get on stage I sing my heart out for my brothers and sisters in captivity. I call it my battlefield and we, the artists are the sol-

diers. I fight for the liberation of the black race, and people who've been oppressed and down-pressed. Worse in a place like this with no sunshine in your life. I use the music to uplift people. To give them strength to carry on."

Such sentiments are shared by the rapidly growing Nation of Islam amongst the British black community. On Sunday night they were highly visible outside The Forum. But to the surprise of everyone, representatives appeared on stage and addressed the crowd. No one could recall a previous occasion when the movement had such a large platform here. The audience weren't sure what to make of it. Impatient for the music to start, they jeered at first, but this eventually died down and the message got through. "We want peace at all black events. We're going to monitor functions to make sure no weapons get in and it stays that way. To the bad boys, we know who you are. We want unity amongst our people and education is the key."

Buju Banton says that he didn't know that the Nation of Islam were going to speak, but he's fine about it. "My music is for the dispossessed. We may not share all the same ideals but we have to support each other. It was a good thing they did. Because they are highlighting peace and unification and for that, I say enough respect. Right now Islam is the only group that's coming up as an organisation that's taken up the black cause. I studied Eastern culture and I respect it."

Almost as significant was the fact that the event was trouble-free. For some years now going to a show involved weighing up the area, the venue, the kind of crowd that particular performer pulls, stuff you don't have to bother with if you are considering going to see Blur or Oasis. Violent incidents haven't helped in encouraging larger or more established venues to book reggae shows. No one wants the hassle. So major reggae events have become a rarity.

"We need to play at larger venues. The gigs are restricting the places we can play. Don't break down the music. It's not an easy road. Help I and I," says Buju and the audience is helping him.

WHEN Buju Banton last played London, the atmosphere was distant and tense. This time Buju is filling every void and people are leaving with the message. "Reggae music is here to give people hope and rise and open their eyes. When you come to see me you come not just to jump up and down but to get the spiritual vibe as well." Buju is trying to pull the uptown and downtown together. He's doing this with mesianic zeal. But then there's that kind of need around right now. Buju Banton is merely reflecting what is being expressed on the streets. That is what reggae and dancehall has always been — a kind of musical news bulletin — sometimes even an SOS from the ghetto.

But does Buju Banton relish the responsibility of carrying the Marley mantle? "Why would I want to be a Marley? His name shall live forever. I'm Mark Myrie. My life is different. I'm not changing my style, I'm growing."

Buju Banton plays the Starlight 2001, Leicester, tonight. Oyston Centre, Huddersfield, tomorrow and The Wilton's, London, on Sunday.