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AGAINST

Torn between the
righteous and the rude,

BUJU BANTON

has his eye on
reggae history

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STORY AND PHOTOS WES ORSHOSKI





HOSE WHO KNOW BUJU BANTON ONLY FROM HEADLINES AND SOUNDBITES

probably regard him as something of reggae's answer to a gangsta rapper—an unapologetic, homophobic alpha male defiantly beating his chest in the face of controversy. Considering just that perception, and nothing more, it's more than a little humorous that, at the moment, the dreadlocked beanpole of a man is nervously shooing a group of pot-smoking friends and hangers-on from the shady common area at his Kingston headquarters.



While he may have built up an impressive tolerance for marijuana, he must still be rocked from the massive hits he took a half-hour ago from a coconut-shell "chalice." In the midst of that high, from this far end of the driveway, he's just spotted his brother's Mercedes pulling through the gates, with his mother in the passenger seat. See, while Banton may be a gravelly-voiced tough guy—one of contemporary reggae's most powerful performers and one of Jamaica's biggest celebrities—he's still a little afraid of his mom. And at this moment, it's a hilarious thing to behold. Apparently, his mom wouldn't take too kindly to joining a smoke circle, so Banton is frantically breaking this one up, insisting that everyone leave—and *quickly*.

Everyone scatters like children who've just busted a window playing baseball, several curling around the backside of the spacious, two-story house that serves as recording studio, record-label office and all-around hang spot. After the smoke clears, Banton's father (a dead ringer for Lee "Scratch" Perry, but much taller and saner) and his 11- and four-year-old sons spend the next half-hour beaming and belly-laughing with the singer's tall, good-natured mother and portly brother. Banton's larger-than-life personality makes him the focal point, and, seemingly, the head of the family. With his arms around his sons, he breaks into roaring laughter—a sweet, endearing side that he reveals rarely, and that casts an intriguing light on the complicated star who some regard as a monster.

If not a saint—though some devotees would regard him as such—he's hardly a monster. While Banton and those in his camp are clearly tired of the admittedly old and sometimes dormant controversy that has nagged him for more than 15 years, it's an issue that can't be swept under the rug. And in a lot of ways, it seems like the heat that he's taken—and continues to take—for writing the violent, anti-homosexual song "Boom Bye Bye" back in 1992 has been a motivational force in his life.

At the very least, the story provides a fascinating backdrop to Banton's life today. Here's why: Now 35, the singer born Mark

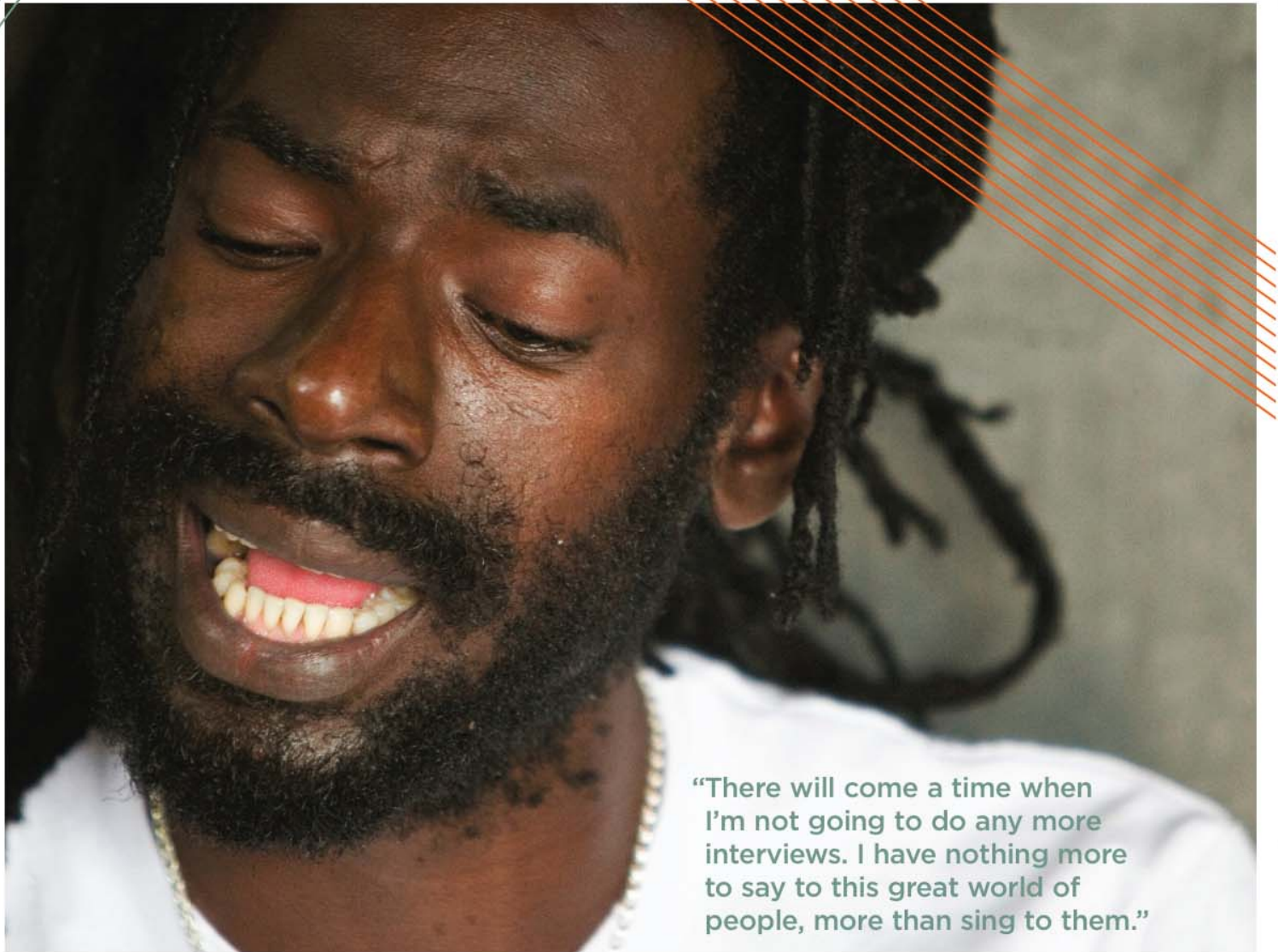
Myrie is coming into his own as an artist and businessman. He's writing some of the most entertaining and soulful music of his life, and he's one of the few Jamaican musicians of his caliber to release that music on his own imprint, Gargamel Music. Yet, as he grows both as a singer and entrepreneur, protesters continue to nip at his heels, intermittently reviving the old controversy with new rounds of bad publicity by pressuring promoters and venues to cancel his appearances in the U.S. and Europe.

"Here, we're among a people who drop a nuclear bomb in Japan and destroy lives," he told me during a recent visit to New York, "and they've never, ever said they're sorry—neither have they said they felt any remorse. Yet I have never done any of these things, nor do I have the intention to do these things. When history is written, a lot of people is gonna say that Buju Banton was homophobic. They will never, ever say Buju Banton did [the song] 'Destiny,' or Buju Banton is one who stand up for the black race, and give them something else for the soul."

While it might not be getting the media attention it warrants, that's exactly what Banton does from the stage and from his studio in Kingston: He's opening a pipeline from his soul to those of his true fans. It's the behind-the-headlines, big-picture story of Banton right now: one of a man who is finding success in spite of himself and his mistakes—a guy who's trying to shake off the villain tag the media has branded him with through hard work.

He deems the protests to be unjust and even racist, yet he doesn't seem to feel the urge to quell them, nor does he feel he should. "The homophobic situation is not a burden to I—it's just an injustice. I am a simple man, from a simple island," he says, referring to the fact that homosexual acts are crimes in Jamaica, one of the most homophobic places on earth.

Like Bounty Killer, Sizzla and other Jamaican stars who also refuse to be told what to sing, the stubborn Banton occasionally taunts his detractors, hinting at or even performing "Boom Bye Bye,"



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which describes the shooting of a gay man in the head. “I might as well sing the song,” he said to me recently, aggravated by the attention that a song he wrote as a teenager continues to bring from both protestors and journalists, and noting that his Operation Willy organization—which benefits HIV-infected children in Jamaica—seems to go unnoticed. “They refuse I to be human.”

Banton is of course aware that “Boom Bye Bye” offends people—some people. In the midst of one of his dizzying, sweaty performances, if he teases fans with even a few bars of the song, he’s met with cheers, and thus saluted for his rebelliousness. He knows it’s good for his image to continue to play the villain, and the juvenile side of him seems to enjoy the devilishness of it all. So because of pride—because he’s as stubborn and macho as he is charming and passionate—he remains in this weird metaphorical trap, caught between escaping the negative publicity of his past and enjoying the praise and respect due his current work.

AT THE MOMENT, Banton is sitting on an album that could cement his place as reggae’s contemporary king. A rare artist who can effectively switch with ease from roots reggae to digital dancehall, he has recorded a new

roots record that will endear him as much to Marley fans as his Grammy-nominated *Too Bad* did for dancehall junkies in 2006. Titled *Rasta Got Soul*, the project is a mature and moving collection of songs that somehow harnesses the emotion and fire of his famously exhausting stage performances, and it features a duet with Wyclef Jean that could be a mainstream hit.

“What I sing on this new record,” he says, “half of it is other people’s pain and sorrow, which I have been privileged to be exposed to, and for it to become the embodiment of music, which will go out and transcend to other people, and they will in turn feel the magnitude of what I’m saying, and be uplifted, too.”

But neither they — nor you — will hear the album any time soon, as Banton isn’t done with it, and probably won’t be for a while, even though the rough mixes could potentially deliver one of the things he strives for: a Grammy. “Not during a year when a Marley is nominated,” he deadpans.

With *Rasta Got Soul* on the back burner, Banton is busying himself with other tasks here at his Kingston HQ, which on the day we meet is being overhauled. The studio where the likes of Stephen Marley and ska-punk faves Rancid have recorded is being rebuilt, and work-

men are sawing, sanding and measuring, as Banton talks on his cell phone, clowns with friends and greets visitors, in between making up songs about his sons, to their wide-smiling delight.

All the cab drivers in town know this address, where butterflies float by and wild parrots streak across the sky. In Kingston, Buju's star is on the level of a Kobe Bryant, and everyone claims—or wants—to know him. Earlier I had asked the driver who brought me here to drop me at the gate, but he insisted on driving in, where he grinningly bumped fists with the gruff-voiced singer, who greeted me with an enthusiastic, "Welcome to Jamrock."

"You are hearing music from a clean and pure soul, who was without anything, and still sees himself without anything, and who's going to die and go back to the grave without anything in his hands."

If many artists' offices are dull, Banton's place of work is as colorful as the man himself. The interior side of the wall running along the street is one long mural, part dedication to peers (Wayne Wonder) and late heroes (Bob Marley, Joseph Hill), and part soapbox: There's a bust of Fidel Castro, a depiction of a black man crucified on the dollar sign, and a bleeding Jamaican figure. The head of George W. Bush, replete with bloody fangs, is attached to the body of an American eagle whose talons clutch a dripping heart. "That is George Bush eating the heart out of the world, out of America," he says. "And [the others] represent the youth of Jamaica being killed every day, and the national pride being flowd in the streets, our nationality *dying*."

When Banton was a child, the compound was just an empty lot where he and his friends used to pick cherries and shoot birds. Since 2000, he has honed his craft inside these walls, where he follows his every musical whim, unencumbered by traditional music-industry thinking. Because he is one of the few reggae artists of his stature to control his business, he's able to flip the script whenever he pleases. Gargamel was founded after stays on various indie and major labels, and is home to *Too Bad*, forthcoming albums by emerging talent like New Kidz and compilations like *Jamrock Classics, Vol. 1* (featuring Banton, Jah Cure and others).

Because the history of reggae is rife with swindlers and tales of poor artists routinely signing away their rights for a short-term payoff, Gargamel is a source of great pride for Banton. "Over the years, they have chosen to manipulate us and monopolize us rather than give us the opportunity to rule our own destiny," he says of the record industry. "However, through the goodness of the most high—God—Rasta must survive. Rasta must be always thinking outside of the box."

Banton, his father and the many others about are enjoying ganja, which is as pedestrian here in Jamaica as a bottle of imported beer in the States, despite the plant's status as a banned substance in both countries. Just a few feet away, local police discovered two mature marijuana plants in 2004, eventually fining



Banton thousands. On this day, a police cruiser will pull through the iron gates. It makes for an awkward moment, as I watch one of the cops enter the house (after conferring with one of Banton's friends or employees), while the other remains in the car, often looking in our direction. I don't ask Banton, and he doesn't utter a peep about it—as it's clearly not up for discussion.

Curiously, Banton puts off our interview for hours, acting busy at times, and then just disappearing at others. It's not the first time I've had to wait this long to speak to him—it's simply the first time he's ignored me in his presence. It's clear that he's unsure of my intentions, and, to be fair, I've given him a reason to wonder. The first time I interviewed him, I was speaking to him by phone about *Too Bad*, and when I asked him about the latest round of controversy over "Boom Bye Bye," he seemed to take it oddly lightly, and at one point appeared to be giggling about it to friends as he spoke unapologetically about the song. So I led my story with that instead of information on the new album, as it was one of the many times where Banton's actions, like having me wait or the often-suspicious gleam in his eyes, spoke louder than—or in place of—his words.

If hardly a shy person, Banton has learned to be careful when talking on the record. When I ask if the protests have made him weary of the press, he says that he's weary of everyone, that he listens three times before he speaks—"Why speak when you can nod?"—and that he now sees the media as a corrupt tool of the rich. When he finally does commit to the interview, I ask for a guided tour of the property. I inquire about the murals, and he demands a little more from me as an interviewer, asking for my interpretations first. I ask about the Bush mural and he says, "That's the only one that interests you?" Over the course of a brief chat, we repeatedly misunderstand one another, sometimes because of his thick accent, other times because he's misinterpreting my intention for asking individual questions. At one point, he tells me that I shouldn't be interviewing him in a certain way, and tells me what I should be asking.

"There will come a time when I'm not going to do any more interviews," he tells me at one point. "I have nothing more to say to this great world of people, more than sing to them."

THAT DIALOGUE, in song and words, germinated some two decades ago in the busy market of Kingston's Barbican Square, where young Myrie would marvel at the sound systems, getting to school early in the morning to discuss each neighborhood's emerging deejays with his friends. As a teen, he began sneaking out of the house at night to take in performances by the likes of Burro Banton and Sugar Minott and even to record, afraid to tell his parents he had fallen in love with a youth culture that was deemed derogatory and disrespectful. One day on his way home from work, a sound system operator (who was playing a new song by Banton at that moment) stopped Myrie's father and said, "Do you know who that is? It's your son!" In their only conversation about it, the senior Myrie warned his son to be weary of the many crooks in his chosen field.

As a 20-something, Banton cut a trio of albums—*Voice Of Jamaica*, *Til Shiloh* and the recently reissued *Inna Heights*—that introduced a global audience to a new breed of Jamaican superstar, one with one foot planted firmly in the dancehall, and the other squarely in roots reggae. His throaty vocals proved a perfect vehicle for both. "Buju got a charisma voice," says his peer Elephant Man. "The first time you hear it, you fall in love with it. He can change it like a gear stick, and make it extra slack. You'll see Buju, and you'll say, 'This guy got that crazy voice?' because you see a little skinny guy, but he got a big voice like a lion roaring."

And Banton loves using that voice, even simply to sing to himself, as he does often. Between its tone and his accent, nearly everything Banton says sounds musical. His sentences often ride a subtle rhythm, and are punctuated with a mellow "yeah" or assertive "Yes!" as if he's applauding his own sermon. It's appropriate then that his concerts find him kicking his knees high, running the stage like a revivalist preacher, his dreads dripping with sweat.

At the core of those performances are songs that range from the faithful and self-analytical to the romantic and political. The breezy "Destiny" and hymn-like "Untold Stories" have become undisputed

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BANTON BANGERS

Offering a blueprint for future generations of Jamaican stars, Buju Banton is equally at home delivering a hymn-like lyric over a roots rhythm as he is blasting the nightclub with rapid-fire vocals over floor-shaking digi-dancehall beats. Here's a peek at his most important recordings:



'Til Shiloh

(Mercury, 1995):

Following the murders of two friends, Banton turns to Rasta intro-

spection. The prayer-like "Untold Stories" is on par with Marley's best, while the stomping, hip-hop-meets-dancehall of "Champion" still holds up.



Inna Heights

(VP, 1997):

On his first disc to feel more like a complete, thought-out collection

of songs, Banton grows even further into the role of inspirational singer with high-lights "Destiny" and "Hills and Valleys."



Too Bad

(Gargamel Music, 2006):

Ignored by the mainstream, Buju puts a summer anthem to plastic in "Driver A," while revealing both a sweet and flawed side in the romantic one-two punch of "Girl U Know" and "Lonely Night."



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entries in the Jamaican songbook, while the bumpin' "Champion" and "Driver A" have emerged as timeless anthems. It's songs like these that have Banton on the fast track to being one of the greatest reggae artists ever, but at the same time, there's that controversy, still creeping up: In 2004, Banton was accused of taking part in a violent attack on five gay men at a house not far from his studio. Two years later, he was acquitted of all charges, but additional damage had been done to his reputation.

It's this duality that makes Banton's story that much more complex: Here's a man who is writing some of the most free and spiritual music in reggae, while shackled to this ugly, headline-ready image. If the sheer existence, let alone the continuing controversy, of "Boom Bye Bye" is disheartening to even some of his fans, it's never really threatened to derail his career—nor will it, at least in Jamaica and the Caribbean. His prospects of reaping the same success in the States—something he's capable of doing—is another story. The bottom line from his perspective is that you can either take or leave him, controversy and all.

"I don't receive much credit from other people out there," he says now, standing in the driveway at Gargamel Studios. "They gravitate toward illusion, carnality, vulgarity and all kind of disdain thing. I see myself as a son of a slave until the day I die."

When you do hear *Rasta Got Soul*, he insists, it will mark his evolution from a child to a man. "I see myself as a simple man, a featherweight man," he says, "but God love me, my Father above love me, and he inspire me to inspire people." Conversely, his new dancehall tracks are meant to "turn the vibes away from all the violence" in Jamaica, where the murder rate is one of the world's highest.

Standing here in the sun, Banton's forehead is beading with sweat. He's grown tiresome of this interview, and is probably unconvinced of the good that will come from it. And so he volleys this hurried conclusion: "What I offer to the world, no one in this world could pay me for, because what I have offered you—you don't even begin to realize that you are hearing music from a clean and pure soul, who was without anything, and still sees himself without anything, and who's going to die and go back to the grave without anything in his hands. So the works [is what] we have to leave on Earth. For those who respect and love it, for those who have been my friends and my strength over the years—through ups and downs, my rough times, my bad times, sometimes when I'm even fucking up—I say, 'Thanks.' And for those who hate, and for those who perpetrate acts of injustice toward I and I, I say 'Thanks,' because you've helped [too]. You've been a great source of inspiration over the years." 