

PARADISE PARADISE

IF YOU KNOW YOUR HISTORY / THEN YOU WOULD KNOW WHERE YOU COMING FROM
THEN YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TO ASK ME / WHO THE HECK DO I THINK I AM?

— BOB MARLEY, "BUFFALO SOLDIER"

JAMAICA, C. 1952:

A brightly painted delivery truck towering with a mile-high mountain of wires and crude speakers pulls into an empty Trenchtown lot. A gang of scraggly rudeboys (one particularly scrawny and positively twisted-looking, another with the build of a boxer and the smile of a saint) pile out and begin the meticulous process of setting up a dancehall/bootleg liquor dealership on top of the overgrown remains of the impoverished lives that last set up shanties here. When it's time, it's time. The first sounds of the Sir Coxsone Downbeat Sound System don't trickle out; they explode in a green-and-yellow blast that tells the police that they'd best keep their red faces as far from this fire as possible. With any luck, there'll be a thousand locals here within the hour. The island isn't *that* big, and these sounds are massive. As Clement "Coxsone" Dodd strolls his terrain with the 50-foot gait of a real-life king, his protégés Scratch and Prince (Perry and Buster, respectively) take turns spinning American proto-soul—45s and 78s—the labels soaked off to keep the competition from getting wise. If Duke Reid the Trojan shows up with his crates and his belt full of revolvers, there's going to be violence. This is the birth of the Jamaican recording industry. People are dying over dubplates, but the British colonial presence is waning. And progress is progress in any case.

THE BRONX, C. 1974:

Clive Campbell packs up his record crates on the second floor of one of the nicer apartment buildings lining Sedgwick Avenue. He and his mother moved there from Jamaica several years before in search of a life less threatened. (Clive was born in Trenchtown in 1951.) The Bronx ballers called him Hercules for his prowess on the asphalt, but he'd always fancied himself a deejay like the kind he saw rattling fences in the Kingston ghetto. "Hercules" wasn't bad, but "Kool Herc" was a name better fit for toasting, the Jamaican art of smooth- and shit-talking while you spin. With his arms full of funk, Kool Herc loads up his Herculords sound system and heads to the park. He's got this idea, right—it's gonna be real nice. Because he noticed that when the vocals drop out and the beat comes in on that one Dynamic Corvettes jam—"Funky Music is the Thing"—or on, shit, anything by James Brown...he noticed that the crowd just comes alive. And well, he's got this idea that if he has two copies of each record, he can just pass that breakdown back and forth between his turntables over and over until the people just can't dance anymore. On the way there, Herc passes an abandoned el station still sticky-sweet with the smell of Krylon. Wildstyle is literally taking over the streets, and within five years this thing called hip-hop will own the airwaves.

DAMIAN MARLEY AND THE ROOTS OF JAMROCK

by: Chris Martins | photography: Colby Katz





DANCEHALL MUSIC PROVIDES A DOOR FOR A LOT OF SUFFERERS WHO HAVE NO OTHER OUTLET TO MAKE IT.

MIAMI, 2005:

The son of a lion, Damian “Junior Gong” Marley is lounging around in some grass, on some grass, feeling the sun and the breeze work their soothing magic. His mane is long and healthy, locks swinging down to his waste, and he’s handsome like his father was at his age—charming in his coolness, and absolutely devilish when he smiles. Tomorrow Damian leaves his stateside home to tour the country opening for U2 (of all bands), but right here, right now, on one of the last nice days before the weather turns and sends him back to his Jamaican stomping grounds, Damian isn’t going anywhere. And why should he? He’s becoming a young king in his own right. Marley’s latest album *Welcome to Jamrock* has seen unprecedented success (it set the record for first week reggae sales upon its debut in September to the tune of 86,000 units moved), and the single of the same name is a crossover hit the likes of which reggae music hasn’t seen since Bob was alive. “Welcome to Jamrock” is a starkly painted portrait of the side of Jamaica that the tourists and honeymooners would just as soon ignore: behind the club sodas and sandals, beyond the lighthearted flexing, posing and smooching by the beach, there’s a world of poverty and overbearing heaviness that’s seen little improvement in 50 years. In his keyed-up dancehall baritone, Junior Gong chants: “Come on let’s face it/A ghetto education’s basic/And most of the youths dem waste it/And when dem waste it, that’s when dem tek the guns replace it/Then dem don’t stand a chance at all!” It’s a simple observation, but over that deep dubby bounce punctuated by air horn blasts and that piercing Ini Kamoze sample—“Out in the streets they call it murrrrrrrrrrrdah!”—it’s damn poignant. And as papa Gong taught us, sometimes the best ideas are the most simple.

“Well, I mean, I guess it’s relative to a lot of situations on Earth right now, youknawhamean?” Damian says in that mesmerizing island patois. It’s as much credit as he’ll take for “Jamrock.” Even so, he speaks

unhurriedly with a sly confidence in his eyes. That combination of poise and humility is one of the many dualities that the youngest Marley son embodies. His father, of course, needs no introduction—the man’s face is an international symbol for the triumph of human spirit, adversity be damned. Damian’s mother, however, was an uptown girl named Cindy Breakespeare—Jamaica’s Miss World 1976. He was born two years after she took home the title, and two years after that, Robert Nesta Marley died of the cancer that had overtaken his body. Cindy made sure that school was Damian’s first priority, but music was in the boy’s blood. By age 13 he and a friend had formed a band called the Shepherds that made it all the way to 1992’s *Reggae Sunsplash* before petering out, and in high school—with the help of brother Stephen—Damian made his first album. *Mr. Marley* was a strong debut that earned him a touring spot on *Lollapalooza ’97*, but it was on 2001’s *Halfway Tree* that Junior Gong’s sound took shape. The album—named for a Kingston intersection that separates uptown from down—was a sometimes gruff, often inspired breakbeat-driven affair that ended up winning the Grammy for reggae album of the year. Damian saw the title as a metaphor for not only the bridging effect that his music had at home, but for himself—he is the *Halfway Tree*, a product of either side of the tracks.

The conversation steering back to the song in question, Damian offers one last thought on the matter: “I think with this song, it’s more about exposure. There’s a lot of good music out there that could be big songs, but they don’t get played.”

Perhaps, but the important songs find their way out whether or not the artist’s birthright affords him a few benefits. It just takes more time. Back in Trenchtown, back in the day, the cutthroat nature of the soundclashes had an interesting effect; Dodd, Reid and the other top deejays were becoming record producers. Why spend time and money importing the latest hit from America only to hear it blasting out of your rival’s setup days later? Instead, the sound system giants opened up

ramshackle recording studios and ushered in local talent to cover whatever they wanted to play at the next duel. The U.S. Top 40 sounds collided and swirled with the island riddims and from what was once a violently competitive affair confined to the ghetto floor emerged a new kind of music: ska. By 1963, Sir Coxson’s Studio One label was one of Jamaica’s most prolific and well-loved. That year he’d taken on a young group that he thought he could develop. They sounded like a carbon copy of the Impressions but they had a great name, and a short-haired 18-year-old songwriter named Robert Nesta Marley. In their second session with Dodd, the Wailers recorded “Simmer Down.” It was the first ska song—and hence the first recorded Jamaican song—to express a ghetto perspective (rudies were urged to think twice before scrapping), and it was a number one hit by February of 1964. Here was a song that came from nothing and became everything, with no help but hard luck and providence.

And as it turned out, Kool Herc’s idea back in ’74 was more than a success, it was the foundation of hip-hop music. The inspired moment that created the breakbeat (which, like Dodd’s move to the studio, was intended simply to extend the party) also created song sampling, turntablism, a reason to rhyme and the excuse for breakdancing to not only exist, but become yet another massive phenomenon in a city where ghetto dynamism was creating what seemed like a movement daily. People were plugging into lampposts, and laying down linoleum in the streets, hi-jacking the municipal power for the benefit of their turntables and mics, and the b-boys and girls who came to break. Crews emerged, all kinds of battles were being waged, parties were popping up everywhere at any given time. Essentially, the New York poor were living like they hadn’t since the days of the Harlem Renaissance. And though it was all *Rapper’s Delights* for the first few years, in 1982 Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five released “The Message” and, yet again, everything changed. The lyrics were an incredibly grim portrayal of



the other side of inner city life—rats, roaches, suicide, junkies, prostitution, murder, the homeless and the barely housed—book-ended by the rallying cry for all rap, conscious and gangsta, to come: “It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder/How I keep from goin’ under.”

Here in 2005, “Welcome to Jamrock” holds another distinction aside from its commercial success (and as far as commercial success goes, it’s a more compelling case than Damian’s lineage). In a genre of music typically tied to gun-clapping, bawdy sexcapades and rowdy rudeboys, “Jamrock” is the first bonafide dancehall hit to feature conscious lyrics. And like his father, or Grandmaster Flash before him, Damian writes from the viewpoint of a bredren, one whose enemy is the system, not his countrymen. Though his song is a diamond in the ruff and tuff, the youngest Marley son doesn’t draw a line between himself and ragga’s more rugged stars.

“It’s a honest living and nothing beats that,” he says, leaning against a wall in his Miami studio, the Lion’s Den. *Welcome to Jamrock* was recorded here and at 56 Hope Rd. in Kingston, the family-owned studio/museum and the last permanent residence of Bob. “It’s better that somebody be boasting and bragging than selling crack, so in that sense you can never knock it. Dancehall music provides a door for a lot of sufferers who have no other outlet to make it. We can’t expect everybody to want to say the things that we say or be how we want to be. Me a big gangsta rap fan. Would I say that it’s the best influence on our kids? No, but me love gangsta rap. It’s really all about giving the people something to choose from. You push gangsta rap into their face everyday, then yeah, that’s all that’s going to influence them, but if they love gangsta rap and them still get some KRS-One or some Bob Marley or some Bunny Wailer, then probably they going to be more balanced persons themselves.”

And if anybody knows, it’s Damian. *Welcome to Jamrock* opens with a spoken word blessing from Bunny Wailer, then breaks into a blazing epic of an anti-war freedom chant interspersed with crackling snippets of a Marcus Garvey speech. “Confrontation” comes to a dramatic close and the fever-pitch marching pace

is smoothed into a classic roots jam with Damian’s hoarse croon pulling the live band through four-and-a-half minutes that stonily slow time to a clear 20-year reverse. The chipmunk soul of “The Master Comes Back” sounds like Kanye West reimagined through Rastafari, and “Pimpa’s Paradise” is a traditional hip-hop narrative (albeit inspired by Bob Marley’s original version) tossed back and forth between Junior Gong and Black Thought from the Roots. Towards the end, Nas stops by for a spiritual session over some of that old ’93 boom-bap, Marley preaches perseverance on a fantastic chant-roots hybrid, and the dancehall is ceded without contest to the deadly triumvirate of Marley, Bounty Killer and Eek-A-Mouse. The album shifts eras, styles and topics with every track, but it works magnificently.

So it makes sense that this son of a lion who splits his time between Jamaica and America—who walks between the rich and the poor, the past and the present—should name check KRS-One and his father in the same breath. American soul and rock and roll made it to the island and ska was the result. In 1966, the scorching summer heat slowed ska’s breakneck tempo to a steady rocking beat. Then it was rocksteady to roots, while back in the shadows Coxsone’s more obsessive audiophiles (Lee Perry and King Tubby in particular) toyed with dub. U-Roy and Big Youth made chanting an art, and over in NYC a young deejay was laying the groundwork for hip-hop. And here we have this son of a lion who sits calmly amongst it all, resting momentarily on the laurels of his latest album—a near-perfect full-circle in action.

“To me I really see it the other way around,” Damian says when asked if American rap has influenced dancehall. “But really still, as time goes by, not just in reggae and hip-hop, but in all genres of music, you see that lines become a little bit more blurred. People start borrowing from other sounds, and music on the whole, I think, is just becoming more like music.”

Back in 1950s Trenchtown, Dodd’s still sleeping with one eye open, but in the Boogie Down Bronx, Kool Here’s snoring to whatever beat he pleases. The idea worked. The people danced. And the story’s still writing itself. **F**

IT’S BETTER THAT
SOMEBODY BE BOASTING
AND BRAGGING THAN
SELLING CRACK.

