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How Jamaica's Volatile Dancehall Scene Can Avoid a Biggie vs. Tupac Tragedy

By Baz Dreisinger
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Mavado, keeping his cool, David Corrio

Bounty Killer, on blast David Corrio

It's that time again: Dancehall reggae is taking the heat. Not that Jamaica's resplendently lewd and crude export ever *stops* courting controversy—a lyrical bounty of violence and *slackness*, not to mention sporadic yet egregious forays into homophobia, make it ever-ready for reproach. But for months, the backlash has intensified. As gun-talking dancehall stars escalated beefs with each other, the Jamaican government began beefing with *them*, performing weapons raids at concerts and selectively enforcing the Noise Abatement Act, which holds parties and other public events to strict curfews. Meanwhile, media pundits went into attack mode, blaming dancehall for Jamaica's record-level murder rate and epidemic of violence. Climactically, Red Stripe, after a peaceful seven-year partnership, nixed its sponsorship of Reggae Sumfest, the premier festival held every July in Montego Bay.

So, in time for the genre's warm-weather close-up—on American airwaves, at the West Indian Day Parade on Labor Day, and, especially, at the premier Irie Jamboree show in Queens on August 31—I humbly offer five bits of advice to the dancehall *massive*: artists, listeners, critics. This wisdom comes not from me but from dancehall's close relative, which has been there and done that, enduring many a beating from pundits and cultural gatekeepers yet still maturing into a multibillion-dollar industry: hip-hop.

Lesson #1: Monitor the beef.

Beef has been a staple of the reggae diet since the '50s, when legendary sound-system pioneer and proud gunslinger Duke Reid went viciously sound-to-sound with Studio One's Coxsone Dodd. And while dancehall feuds, from Super Cat vs. Shabba Ranks to Bounty Killer vs. Beenie Man, were once entirely lyrical, that's no longer always true.

A rough timeline: In January 2005, Gerald "Bogle" Levy, an iconic Jamaican dancer, was shot dead; the posse of John Hype, a rival dancer affiliated with Beenie Man, was suspected. Controversy soon settled on the Alliance, a crew of ferocious DJs led by "the Warlord," Bounty Killer. When slick-talking DJ Vybz Kartel left the Alliance in late 2006, he feuded with the posse's remaining members, especially the rising superstar of the group, Mavado, whose most famous song, on his 2007 album *Gangsta for Life*, is about marrow flying and bodies being sent "to the grave park." The beef between Mavado and Kartel produced some wickedly biting tracks—and, allegedly, several high-profile shootings in Kingston. Then, in February, after Jamaican tabloids ran a photograph of Kartel and another artist seemingly modeling a gun collection, Operation Kingfish—the Jamaica Constabulary Force's gang-dismantling task force—requested an interview with the artists, who'd been unleashing lyrical ire at another **Alliance DJ: Busy Signal**.

"Yes, every now and again, fans that's following me and fans that's following another artist have a quarrel," Busy Signal acknowledges to me during an interview in a Kingston studio. "But at the end of the day, you don't have a death—a blood violence—because of music and because of followers." Sporting camouflage pants and a matching cap, the baby-faced 25-year-old—whose album *Loaded* hits stores in September—smiles earnestly when asked if dancehall could ever produce its own Biggie-and-Tupac tragedy. "Me *nah* think so." Pause. "Well, it could happen—it's not impossible." Pause again. "We do need to take more responsibility for our actions."

At Sumfest last month, Bounty Killer blasted longtime rival Beenie Man throughout his performance, but Beenie, onstage, laughed it off and kept on dancing. And last year, Mavado and Kartel took a page from hip-hop's PR book and staged a press conference to formally end the beef between them. (Think 50 Cent and the Game, in patois). Mavado, 27, never quite believed the drama would reach tragic proportions because, as he tells me: "Me nah inna de dead thing!" But Biggie, Tupac, Jam Master Jay, and plenty of other hip-hop stars initially weren't, either.

Lesson #2: Take responsibility, but don't be a scapegoat.

February 2008 was officially declared Reggae Month, and newspaper editorialists seized the opportunity: "The dominant trend in dancehall represents a betrayal of reggae; the tragic case of the child doing violence to his mother," fumed Ian Boyne in the Jamaica *Gleaner*. Historian Kevin O'Brien Chang followed suit in the same newspaper, lamenting the "dancehallisation of Jamaica" and asserting: "We are already about as violent as a state can get without descending into actual warfare."

Flash back to 13 years ago, when C. DeLores Tucker and William Bennett published "Lyrics From the Gutter," a scathing *New York Times* op-ed piece that attacked hip-hop for glorifying violence and misogyny and called on music companies to dump the offending rappers in order to forestall "America's slide toward decivilization." Such media firestorms come seasonally—"Fuck Tha Police" sparked one in 1988, as did the 2 Live Crew obscenity trial in 1990, Ice-T's "Cop Killer" in 1992, and, most recently, the Imus scandal last year—but the debate never really evolves. One side blames hip-hop wholesale: During 1994 congressional hearings, Tucker cited gangsta rap as the reason "why so many of our children are out of control and why we have more black males in jail than we have in college." The other side, represented by elder statesmen like Russell Simmons, defends the music by arguing that it reflects—not produces—ghetto tragedies. University of the West Indies professor Carolyn Cooper epitomizes the Jamaican version of the Simmons defense, delivering metaphorical readings akin to the one that Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates gave on the stand at the 2 Live

Crew trial. (Gates argued that Uncle Luke and crew deliver the "sexual carnivalesque"—stereotypes in comically exaggerated form.) At a recent UWI conference, Cooper spoke of dancehall "clashes" as "a trenchant metaphor for the hostile interfacing for the warring zones in Jamaican society."

"Every time the youths from the garrison communities try to make something of themselves and out of life, [the Jamaican government] try to pull them down," Mavado laments. "They are trying to blame a problem that *they* put *we* in on *us*. They are turning dancehall into a scapegoat."

Mavado knows about scapegoats. Born David Brooks in Cassava Piece, a ghetto in the heart of uptown Kingston, he's affiliated with an alleged gang called the Cubans; because his music and his lyrical personas are separated by a line as thin as the one dividing, say, 50 Cent's, he's the eye of the anti-dancehall storm. The cases just keep coming: a 2006 charge for wounding, assaulting police, and resisting arrest; a 2008 charge for possession of ganja; talk that he and his entourage beat up a journalist in March; an arrest that month for two counts of shooting with intent to kill and possession of a firearm. The gun charges were dropped in June—Mavado's lawyer told the press that her client was innocent and had been accused only because "he's a high-profile man whose name is easy to call"—but by then, the star had lost his U.S. visa and been banned from various Caribbean countries, including Guyana and St. Vincent. In Trinidad, an editorial blamed a stabbing on "an artiste like Mavado who says he's a gangsta for life and has the youths emulating that lifestyle."

"There's no way gun lyrics affect the youths," Mavado fires back, plainly pained by his predicament: Visa-less, he can't perform before an American audience just now learning his name. "You know what affect the youths? Poverty. And hunger. *Dem*"—he slips into patois as he blasts the Jamaican government—"*dem* mash up de country! *Dem* make the youth dem a do crime! How long now people a dead inna Jamaica? Years! Bob Marley and his days right up to now—people never stop die because of *politics*. And them try fi blame it 'pon the music."

Dr. Travis Dixon, assistant professor of communication at the University of Illinois, explains that a causal connection between violent action and violent music is not consistently supported by scientific evidence. "With violent TV and aggressive behavior, there's no debate—there's a stronger link there than between cigarettes and cancer," he says. But with music: "Moderators matter. Context matters. It's so hard to say that if you listen to a song, you're going to do X. It's not just a straightforward link." Blaming music, then, is an easy way out of an uneasy conundrum.

Lesson #3: Big Brother is watching.

Since Prime Minister Bruce Golding took office in September 2007, his Jamaican Labor Party has taken a stand against violence by, among other things, selectively enforcing the Noise Abatement Act. Their first target was a given: Mavado. At his Kingston birthday party late last year, Jamaican police and soldiers surrounded the outdoor venue, locked exits, and searched patrons for weapons.

"I perform all over the world, and no one die at any one of my shows," Mavado tells me. "All my shows are so beautiful—just music." He has a point. With rare exceptions—in March, one man was killed and eight others injured at a "unity" party put on for two feuding Jamaican sound systems—concerts and dances are not prime sites of violence. This is partly because many events, such as Kingston's famous Passa Passa street party, take place in gang domains patrolled by powerful dons. It's also because, as Mavado explains, parties keep people dancing instead of shooting: "You know how much time a man in a dance and really want to go kill somebody, but the dance so nice, him *cyaan* leave the dance?"

Busy Signal points out another, more economical problem with the clampdown. "Vendors make money," he says of the music's international lure. "People that have the bars make

money. People that's charging to get into the venue make money. People who playing the music make money. Tourists come in. This is Jamaica, and what we have is *music*."

Lesson #4: Take the good with the bad.

Hip-hop isn't a presidential candidate—you can't be "for" it or "against" it. (Unless, of course, you're Bill O'Reilly: so ill-informed about the complexities of the genre that dismissing it indiscriminately is easy.) Pop culture is a mixed bag of the good, the bad, and the ugly; until one makes peace with that fact, one can't enjoy dancehall, that messy mélange of the pious and the profane.

Take the self-styled Gangsta Ras. Nothing could be more contradictory than a hot new DJ—Munga, who rhymes about Selassie and *bigs up* Jamaica with a staccato flow and swollen-headed style that's all hip-hop—billing himself as part Rastafarian, part gangster. "The day the concept came to my head, I knew it was controversial—but then, entertainment is controversial, and I need to make my mark," he explains during an interview at the Kingston studio of Don "Corleon" Bennett, his producer. A gang, he continues, "is a group—not a *violent* group. So I represent for a group that happens to be Rasta." A towel resting atop his long locks, he lisps through the gold grill casing his teeth. "I'm not the first—Peter Tosh. And was Bob Marley a pushover? No, he was a rebel. Him say him shot a sheriff!"

Gangsta-for-life Mavado also considers himself a Rasta—"a gangster for Jah." Even when he's lyrically filling coffins, his intonation carries such anguish, it's hard to argue that he's wholly glorifying violence. His current hit, the stunningly spiritual paean "On the Rock," is bona fide church music, stirring enough to inspire fans, hot enough to lure Jay-Z onto the remix.

Contradictions in dancehall are as abundant as pum-pum shorts in a Kingston club. Vybz Kartel talks guns and graves with the best of them, but recently recorded anti-violence public-service announcements. On one track, Busy Signal spits lyrics like "wuk gal, bust guns, smoke weed"; on another, he talks about never going to jail again (he spent nine months there in the U.S.), which he sees as "a positive movement" that will "make the youth dem know that jail is not a tourist resort—it's not a graduation or a degree." Sizzla is on the one hand a picture of Rasta piety—his latest compilation, *The Journey: The Very Best of Sizzla*, showcases tunes whose titles alone bespeak self-help values ("Ain't Gonna See Us Fall," "Be Strong," "Thank You Mama")—and, on the other, a man who delivers lyrics like "big long gun run up 'pon dem," and whose entourage beat up another artist at a show last fall. In Jamaican music, the good and the bad are longtime bedfellows.

Lesson #5: Gangsters usually mellow with age.

What do Ice Cube, Ice-T, Snoop Dogg, and Flava Flav have in common? All were once boogeymen to the American public, gangsta-fied corrupters of youth—and all are now well-lodged in the American mainstream via movies, network dramas, and reality TV. Give Mavado, Munga, and others time (and the opportunity to expand their perspectives beyond their blocks and beyond Jamaica), and they'll likely do the same.

After our interview, Mavado invites me to preview tracks from his upcoming album, tentatively titled *David Constantine Brooks: Better Tomorrow*. "I'm still singing about gangsters and all of that," he says. "But I'm doing more teaching—about righteousness. Actually, that's the name of a song on it. If you want to teach the youths, you have to start from somewhere. You have to get the youths to listen to you."

A striking cross between a little boy—small, sweetly mannered—and an old man (his face is worn, weary, and scarred), Mavado scrolls through track after mournful track; I hear few mentions of bullets and brawls. Meanwhile, he mentions his charity, Connect Jamaica (which provides computers to

schools on the island), and the school he built up in his neighborhood. He complains that the legal drama and visa trouble have distracted him from doing "all the positive things I want to do." Time will tell if he'll be able to do them, but if hip-hop history is any indication, the outlook is murky indeed.