



Reggae Demo's Aims Broaden

August 23, 2007

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As a coalition of LGBT activists plan for an August 25 demonstration protesting the appearance of two Jamaican dancehall artists whose songs preach the murder of gay men, leaders of the group have arrived at two critical decisions - they are not asking the city to intervene in the reggae event being held on Parks Department property and they intend to broaden their message to take aim at violent homophobic and misogynistic messages across the music industry.

"We will do a protest, one about all anti-gay violence, worldwide, and about all areas of music, not focused solely on these artists or on reggae music," said Mark Milano, an activist affiliated with the Queer Justice League. Milano was the first activist to focus attention on Saturday's Reggae CariFest planned for Randall's Island after he came across a subway flyer indicating the artist line-up includes Buju Banton and Bounty Killa.

Activists who have joined with Milano, from the QJL and a wide array of other groups, have insisted that Banton and Bounty sign the Reggae Compassionate Act (RCA), developed by an international Stop Murder Music campaign, in which they would pledge not to perform songs urging the killing of gay men and refrain from re-releasing any such songs previously recorded. Some other leading reggae musicians have signed onto the manifesto.

But, emphasizing the broadened goal of educating the public about violent lyrics targeting gays and women in the music industry generally, Milano said that the demonstration will take place Saturday even if the artists comply or are bounced. Neither outcome is anticipated.

Banton is infamous for his anti-gay songs, one example of which is "Boom Bye Bye," which features sounds of gunfire "in a batty-boy's head" - "batty-boy" being Jamaican patois for "faggot" - and says of any "batty-boy," "burn him up bad like an old tire wheel." Among Bounty's lyrics are: "Bun a fire pon a puff and mister fagoty" ("Burn a fire on puffs and faggots") and "Poop man fi drown an dat a yawd man philosophy" ("Shit men [gay men] must be drowned and that's a yardy man [Jamaican] philosophy").

For Staceyann Chin, a Jamaica-born poet and performance artist who has joined with Milano in planning Saturday's demonstration, despite the violent lyrics of these reggae artists and the well-documented cases of anti-gay violence in her homeland, it is critical to engage a more complex dialogue in the LGBT community and the mainstream media.

"I am a Jamaican lesbian," she said. "I have worked to steer the conversation away from it being as if this homophobia is only found in reggae or is unique to Jamaican culture."

Even as she explained that she "left Jamaica because I could not be the kind of lesbian I wanted to be and because of threats to my physical being," Chin argued that "homophobia in the American Bible belt is the same except maybe here there is more legal recourse."

She added, "It is important to name other genres, like hip hop, but not to leave it there because this raises a racial dynamic. It incenses me how we can take an old Irish song about killing a man and it can be a lovely ballad, while a young black boy singing it is horrible."

Chin said there has long been concern in the LGBT Caribbean community about violent lyrics coming from Jamaica to the US market - though she noted many other less sensational musicians from the islands are ignored by the powerful North American market - but that many of her peers have told her they don't want to get involved in protesting such artists "because [the efforts are] spearheaded by the gay white male community."

"We are begging for all members of all different communities to come stand with us," she said. "We cannot do this without diversity. People will not listen if it is only white gay men or only black women."

Milano expressed a similar hope, saying he has been working to make sure Saturday's protest is not top-heavy with men from the largely white gay Queer Justice League.

Chin and Milano appear to have substantial support to achieve their goal of diversity. The planning group for Saturday's demonstration includes Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), POCC, the Brooklyn-based HIV prevention group also known as People of Color in Crisis, the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project (AVP), the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Foundation**.

Early in the organizing around Saturday's concert, Milano had hoped to pressure the promoter, Alfonso Brooks, of the Brooklyn-based Team Legendary, to either prevail on Banton and Bounty to sign the RCA or remove them from the program. Brooks spent several days in discussions with activists, elected officials, and Parks officials, and voiced sympathy for the spirit of the RCA. However, he said the artists had already been paid and had signed contracts which held them to Team Legendary's code of conduct - which Brooks pledged would prevent the performance of hate music - but placed no restrictions on what they agreed to sing elsewhere.

According to Rashad Robinson, GLAAD's senior director of media programs, Brooks did not respond to the group's August 21 deadline for coming back with signed RCA agreements from Banton and Bounty, nor had Power 105.1 Radio, a sponsor of the event, or its parent company Clear Channel, provided any satisfaction on the issue.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: On August 23, after this newspaper published, Newsday reported the following on its Web site: "Hip-hop radio station Power 105 withdrew its sponsorship of Saturday's Reggae Carifest because two artists on the bill have used anti-gay language in their songs... Clear Channel, which owns Power 105 (WWPR/105.1 FM), quietly withdrew its support from the festival on Wednesday after receiving a call from The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation..."]

Brooks spoke to Gay City News for a story published August 9, but did not respond to a request for additional comment this week.

Kim Fountain, AVP's director of community organizing and public advocacy, spoke to the thorny question of whether the city should exercise any oversight of music like Banton's and Bounty's being performed on Parks Department property, saying, "I do think it is condoning of a message of violence by the city. I would hope that they wouldn't invite such performers." However, explaining that she wished the issue had been "worked out in advance," she added, "I am little more skeptical about the Parks Department stopping them now. We support the right of the artists to perform, we just don't support their right to perform music that incites violence against our community."

The question of censorship has colored discussions among activists, clearing posing a challenge to them in forging an appropriate response.

Two weeks ago, Milano told Gay City News, "For the concert promoter or the city to allow the appearance in a public park of performers, who have adamantly refused to sign the RCA, solely

because they've agreed not to sing these songs at this location is unacceptable to gay and lesbian activists and to the Queer Justice League."

The same week, State Senator Tom Duane, an out gay Chelsea Democrat, told the Daily News, "Randalls Island is a [city-owned] public space. A private promoter cannot use that space if it is not in the public interest."

But, in the same article, Bill Dobbs, a longtime gay, First Amendment, and antiwar activist, was quoted saying, "The effort to use the government to interfere with a message, however offensive, is despicable."

Milano and Chin this week echoed the view that banning the singers was not the right approach.

"We are not pushing the city to shut down the artists," Milano said. "That's not something we want government doing, deciding who can perform or not."

Chin emphasized that calls to bar an artist like Banton and focusing only on offending reggae or black performers allow those who produce objectionable music "to claim the moral high ground."

"They feel picked on," she explained regarding what she said was a prevailing view among reggae artists that they are held to a different standard than other musicians.

Just as importantly, Chin said, it is critical that white gay men, who may not listen to reggae, consider the enormous cultural impact that artists like Banton have.

"He says many things that are true about race and class that resonate deeply with me," she said. "Miles Davis used to beat his women. Can you imagine what Buju could do if he were a gay rights activist?"

One player in this debate who remains unconvinced that a free speech threat is involved is Peter Tatchell, the leader of the militant British gay rights group Outrage! With the Jamaican Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG), a civil rights group in the island nation, and the British Black Gay Men's Advisory Group, Outrage! was instrumental in developing the Reggae Compassionate Act, which Banton signed several months ago and has now repudiated. In an August 22 e-mail to Gay City News, Tatchell wrote, "Free speech does not include the right to incite the murder of other human beings, which is what murder music does. We are not complaining about these artists because they are homophobic. It's because they advocate, encourage, and glorify the murder of LGBTs. Incitement to murder is a criminal offence in Jamaica, USA, and everywhere."

The gathering of New York activists at Randall's Island Saturday will be the first of three actions targeting reggae performances, the other two focused toward On Da Reggae Tip at Manhattan's Hammerstein Ballroom on the evening of August 31 and the Irie Jamboree in Roy Wilkins Park in Queens the afternoon of September 2. What plans are in the works to gather at venues hosting other musical genres are not known.