

## Reggae Fest to Draw Protests

Censorship issues arise when gov. officials try to silence anti-gay performers

By Clay Cane

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A coalition of gay-rights groups is ready to protest this Saturday's Reggae Carifest concert on Randall's Island. Two headlining acts, Buju Banton and Bounty Killer, are known for their homophobic lyrics, which advocate the abuse and murder of gays and lesbians.

**Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), Queer Justice League, People of Color in Crisis, The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the New York City Anti-Violence Project have called for the artists to be thrown off the bill and have asked Clear Channel to withdraw the sponsorship of its Power 105.1 radio station from the Aug. 25 event. Newsday reported on Friday, Aug. 24, that Clear Channel has withdrawn its sponsorship of the event.**

Alfonso Brooks, the promoter of the Reggae Carifest event, could not be reached for comment and has not issued a public statement.

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum and state Sen. Tom Duane said that because the concert is on public property, city-owned Randall's Island, it cannot have a performance that incites violence.

"I do not think that the Parks Department should've signed a contract with anyone who spews hate speech or hate lyrics and gets paid for it, or where the Parks Department gets paid to allow someone to do it," Sen. Duane said.

Not everyone in the gay community is in synch with government involvement in the controversy. Longtime gay activist Bill Dobbs views the move as censorship. "I'm not used to people thinking it's a good idea to shut somebody up," he said. "We gays get shut up often, so it just opens Pandora's Box."

Svetlana Mintcheva, director of the Arts Program at the National Coalition Against Censorship, agreed. "A call for censorship coming from the [gay and lesbian] community then opens the door to other calls of censorship coming from, say, the religious right. The problem arises is when there are calls by city officials, government officials, to cancel a performance because of what these artists say."

Rashad Robinson, senior director of Media Programming for GLAAD, stressed that the media watchdog group is in no way involved in government banning. "GLAAD would like to see [Buju Banton and Bounty Killer] go off the bill, but we would like to see that through public pressure, through citizens speaking out," Robinson said. "We do not advocate or lobby the government in anyway."

## **REGGAE COMPASSION ACT**

Robinson said the concert controversy could have been avoided if the performers would have signed the Reggae Compassion Act (RCA).

The one-page contract was created by the international gay activist group Stop the Murder Music. Artists sign the RCA to ensure they will no longer use violently homophobic lyrics in their music and performances.

Bounty Killer has not signed the act, and Buju Banton claimed his signature was forged. Their notorious lyrics clearly incite violence against gays. Buju Banton's song "Boom Bye Bye," for example, implores listeners to take a "batty-boy" (slang for gay man) and "burn him like an old tire wheel." Bounty Killer's track "Another Level" claims that gay men "must be drowned" according to Jamaican philosophy.

The Stop Murder Music campaign has resulted in worldwide protests against this music and in concert cancellations for artists who haven't signed the RCA.

"If Bounty Killer and Buju Banton had signed the act we wouldn't be in this place right now," Robinson said about the current Randall's Island fray.

Sen. Duane agreed. "I believed the Parks Department were not going to let any group perform that had not signed the Reggae Compassionate Act," said the senator. He is openly gay but said he would speak out against hate speech against any group.

## **EFFECTS OF HATE MUSIC**

"Commercial speech is protected in commercial venues, said Sen. Duane. "First Amendment rights are protected in public venues, but public venues should not be in the business of basically endorsing hate lyrics by renting the space, by making money off it and allowing promoters to make money off it."

Dr. Marc Lamont Hill, professor of American Studies at Temple University, has a different take on the First Amendment issue and its relation to hate crimes. "If you consistently articulate sentiments that disrespect or support terrorism against gays and lesbians, then our response is not to support your music, to protest the people who distribute your music and to create economic hardship for all of you so that the market will push you out. To that extent it is not a

First Amendment issue at all.”

“To reduce these human rights issues to the First Amendment issue is to ignore their effects on gay and lesbian people,” Dr. Hill said.

How, exactly, this music affects the lives of LGBT people is a central issue in the debate about anti-gay lyrics.

Is the music the root cause for violence? “I don’t have an answer,” said GLAAD’s Robinson. “But it promotes violence, it promotes a culture of violence in a society against certain people because of who they are—that’s wrong.”

Gay activist Dobbs questions whether hate lyrics even result in hate crimes. “I do not think Buju Banton or Bounty Killer are actually inciting violence,” he said. “This is a kind of argument where people say violent video games cause people to commit assault.”

Dr. Hill maintains that homophobic lyrics incite violence implicitly and explicitly. “On the one hand, you’re going to have people who are going to go out and do the deed,” he said. “Then, you have people who sit as jurors and find people not guilty [of doing the deed]. They won’t demand from politicians that hate-crime laws are imposed,” he said.

“For gays and lesbians, if for some reason these messages are normalized, no one is willing to be an activist,” Dr. Hill said. “If abuse of gay and lesbians become normal—no one is going to be willing to fight it. That to me is probably the most vicious affects of these types of lyrics.”

Dr. Hill concluded that, “When gay and lesbian bodies are on the line, everybody is a cultural relativist. In Iraq they say, ‘Oh, the women have no freedom—we have to fix that!’ In Jamaica they say, ‘Oh, let them do what they do.’ There’s no interest in protecting gay and lesbian bodies.”

According to GLAAD, the coalition of demonstrators will meet 4 p.m., Saturday, Aug. 25, at GMAD, 103 E. 125th St., No. 503, and travel to Randall’s Island to speak out against those who encourage violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.