



Buju Banton's Untold Stories

The Dancehall Legend Shares Tales Behind 7 Of His Biggest Songs

Patricia Meschino - GRAMMYs - September 18, 2023

"Love Mi Browning" - Mr Mention (1991)

Over a bubbling organ riff, **Buju** declares his love for a Black woman with a light complexion (referred to as a browning in Jamaican parlance). Some listeners perceived the song as **Buju** expressing a preference for lighter skinned women ; the ensuing controversy propelled "Love Mi Browning" to n° 1 in Jamaica and increased the popularity of the captivating, coarse-voiced deejay who recorded it.

*"I went to Penthouse Records where I met up with producers **Tony** and **Dave Kelly**, **Stumpy** the engineer and **Wayne Wonder**. We started making music and **Dave Kelly** wrote "Love Mi Browning" about his then-girlfriend. We started working the song and it just became natural" **Banton** says.*

*"We received a lot of backlash, saying we were favoring women of lighter complexion, so I went back in the studio of my own volition and recorded "Love Black Woman" ("**Wi nuh stop cry fi all Black woman/big up all de girls dem wid dark complexion**"), which brought balance and silenced the negative energy that was on the surface."*

"Deportees (Things Change)" - Voice of Jamaica (1993)

Between 1990 and 2005, Jamaica received (proportionately) the largest number of Caribbean nationals deported from the U.S. Canada and the UK. **Buju**'s huge dancehall hit "Deportees" addresses individuals who had established good lives overseas - perhaps fueled by drug money or other illegal means - with little regard for the well-being of the family members they'd left back home.

His lyrics detail the dramatic changes that occur when these individuals are arrested and convicted : their luxurious lifestyles implode, and they are deported to the land of their birth. *"Things change, now unu (you) see say life hard, you never used to send no money come ah yard/You wretch you, you spend the whole ah it abroad, squander your money now you're living like dog."*

*"I wrote the lyrics and **Dave Kelly** made the beat," **Buju** recalls. "Nowadays, everyone is just frolicking, singing about abstracts; back then, we had to sing about real issues. That was one of the songs that empowered many people, not just in the Caribbean region but throughout the world, to remember where they are coming from, strengthen the Diaspora and make sure they have something at home to fall back on because if you can't grow where you are transplanted, you have to grow where you are planted."*

"Murderer" - 'Til Shiloh (1995)

At the height of **Buju**'s frenetic dancehall success, he dropped a forceful commentary, recorded on the classic 1980s Far East riddim, which had great resonance in the dancehall but also appealed to fans that preferred the more cultural side of Jamaican music. "**Murderer**", initially released as a single in 1993, decried the island's escalating violence that claimed the life of one of **Buju**'s close friends (**Anthony "Panhead" Johnson**).

*"The song was written at a time when the murder rate exploded in Jamaica, everyone had an enemy, and one of our beloved entertainers got caught up in that drama," **Buju** proffers. "I was on tour in Japan when I got the news that **Panhead** was killed; I sat in the passageway of the hotel with **Frankie Sly** and **Wayne Wonder** and started writing "**Murderer**", *blood is on your shoulder/kill I today you cannot kill I tomorrow.*' Jamaica gravitated towards the song's realness; the sentiment that was expressed was one that we shared because 'you can hide from man but not your conscience.'"*

Thirty years after he wrote and recorded "**Murderer**" bloodshed in Jamaica, and throughout the world, remains out of control. *"If you understand the political system that is in place, all these things are designed," **Buju** adds. "I try to guide the world with positivity, despite all the negativity in which my name has been typecast."*

"Untold Stories" - 'Til Shiloh (1995)

Throughout '**Til Shiloh** — which means until kingdom come — **Buju** masterfully blends his boisterous dancehall foundation with Rastafarian roots reggae, Nyabinghi drumming and African choral chants, among other influences.

The album's most surprising track, "**Untold Stories**" is a stunning, semi-acoustic ballad, with **Buju**'s visceral, supple sung vocals recounting the struggles of the poor in Jamaica, and all over the world: *"I'm living while I'm living to the Father I will pray/only He knows how we get through everyday/will all the hike in the price arm and leg we have to pay while our leaders play."* He goes on to instruct the youth to learn from his experiences, *"when mama spend her last and send you to class, never you ever play, it's a competitive world for low budget people, spending a dime while earning a nickel."*

Buju was just 22 when he wrote and recorded "**Untold Stories**" the song's heartfelt insights and his emotive delivery undoubtedly born of the hardships he and his family endured. *"That song was*

the beginning of a transition in my life where I was exploring my creativity and where the Father wanted me to go in terms of the messages I must carry to the masses," Buju explains. "It was just perfect, a heaven-sent song, I have to say."

"Give I Strength" feat. Ras Shiloh - Inna Heights (1997)

As the title suggests, the superb **"Give I Strength"** is an invocation for the resilience to get through life's obstacles, to *"live out the greater part of my days."* **Ras Shiloh**'s quivering, soulful tone is an ideal complement to **Buju**'s granular timbre as they trade verses over an exquisitely crafted reggae rhythm.

"Ras Shiloh was a young emerging talent, American born from Jamaican parents, and I fell in love with his dynamic voice the first time I heard it," Buju shares. "He's a youth that love Rastafari. Donovan Germain invited him to his Penthouse studios one day and he just came up with the perfect renditions to complement what I was saying. "Give I Strength" is so relevant in this time, before time and after time, because we all need the strength to be better individuals, so it was natural, pure," Banton says.

"Small Axe" feat. King Stitt - Inna Heights (1997)

One of the earliest practitioners of the Jamaican art of deejaying (also known as toasting), the late **Winston Sparkes, a.k.a. King Stitt**, was pivotal in elevating the role of a sound system deejay into an attraction in his own right. One of the first deejays to have a hit record (1969's **"Fire Corner"**) **Stitt** rarely recorded after the 1970s, but his inimitable toasting graces the rollicking ska track **"Small Axe"** featured on **Buju**'s 1998 GRAMMY-nominated album **Inna Heights**.

Buju's first European tour in 1991 circuitously led him to record with Stitt. *"I spent six weeks in Europe, I went to Germany, Austria and I knew nothing of making reggae music, I was making dancehall music," Buju reveals. "I came home with the intent to make reggae music. I booked time at Tuff Gong Studios with a group of musicians and said we are going to make live music and they said, 'are you serious?' I said 'yeah, I want to make ska, rocksteady and reggae music.'"*

That session netted **"Hills and Valleys"**, **"What A Mighty Dread"** and **"Small Axe"**. **Banton** continues, *"Making ska was more important than just the instrumental; it provided an opportunity to tap into the richness of our musical culture and to work with a great man like King Stitt. Maybe it was the divine instruction I had to follow as a servant and I did."*

"Pull It Up" feat. Beres Hammond - Unchained Spirit (2000)

Despite the very different lanes they occupy in Jamaican music, there's an undeniable vocal chemistry between **Buju Banton** and **Beres Hammond** that has yielded many great singles,

including their timeless celebration of the dancehall "Pull It Up". Over an irresistibly danceable reggae rhythm, **Beres**'s smoky sung descriptions of the dance, "Everywhere I look is pure skankin', I see no statue around" are punctuated by **Buju**'s irrepressible, raspy ponderings, "Without di dancehall, a wha we woulda do? When reggae music call, you must answer, too."

Buju detailed their initial encounter: "I first met **Beres** at a studio in 1992. I was the guy they sent out to buy Guinness, lunch, I was just coming up and I had to pay my dues. One day, I asked **Beres**, 'Why do you drink so much Guinness?' He said, 'After it passes the heart, that's when I really start to sing,'" **Buju** laughingly recalled. "He had a reservoir of knowledge that he was hungry to pass on to a young man like me who was hungry for knowledge where the music is concerned."

"I didn't get an opportunity to work with him until I proved that I understood the rudiments of music. Then he welcomed me and ever since, we have communicated musically. It's always a mystical communication with him: he sings, and I am able to feel what he's singing about and communicate it to the next generation in layman's terms."

