

A portrait of Donovan Germain, a Black man with a shaved head, smiling and standing with his arms crossed. He is wearing a short-sleeved button-down shirt with a blue and red geometric pattern. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

INTERVIEW

DONOVAN GERMAIN

30 YEARS OF PENTHOUSE

REMEMBERING JOSEPH 'CULTURE' HILL

BY ANGUS TAYLOR

PHOTOS BY STEVE JAMES

Donovan Germain's **Penthouse Records** celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. And the Jamaican producer will mark the occasion with a double album tribute to one of Roots Reggae's formative groups, **Joseph Hill** and **Culture**. Remembering **Joseph Hill** features clean, respectful rhythms by the island's top musicians and the usual **Penthouse** roll-call of multigenerational vocalists. These range from veterans of **Culture**'s time like **Marcia Griffiths**, **Trinity**, and **George Nooks** to newer **Penthouse** favourites **Etana**, **Tarrus**

Riley, **Shuga**, and **Exco Levi**. There's even a posthumous appearance by **Joseph** himself with soon-to-be-released-from-jail legend **Buju Banton**.

Angus Taylor spoke to **Donovan** by phone in Jamaica. As well as sharing his methods and motivations for the **Culture** project, the impresario announced he is working on a **Marcia Griffiths**-led homage to his biggest influence, **Studio One Records**. He's also writing his autobiography: documenting a life in Reggae and Dancehall music.

Congratulations on your Remembering Joseph Hill album. What's your personal history in terms of Culture and their music?

Joseph was one of my favourite artists so it is really a pleasure to have the younger generation interpret his work. I got introduced to **Culture** via [Culture's producer] **Miss Sonia Pottinger** because I used to distribute for her in New York. That's when I got to know **Joseph Hill**, **Albert Walker** and the other young man. It wasn't a major interaction personally with them. When they came to New York for a show I was with them for part of the day. But **Miss Pottinger** gave me the opportunity to really distribute a major label so I give praise for that. Later on I rented **Duke Reid**'s studio from her. And I used to rent [Culture's other main producer] **Joe Gibbs**' studio a couple of times from **Errol Thompson**.

Your main influence in production is Coxsone Dodd. He had a real ear for when it was time to do over a song. Why was the time right for these Culture songs?



I am a very spiritual person and I have got to a point where I think it's time to educate the younger generation about the artists that made a major contribution to the industry before us. **Joseph Hill** songs were not being played on the radio on a regular basis, as I think they should be played. I thought "*This is a good way to re-introduce Joseph's work to this generation - getting these younger artists to learn the songs and see where Joseph's head was when he was making them.*"



What is it that you really like about Culture songs?

I love that they were very simple but very radically great. It's like he takes you back to a time when these things were really happening. When you listen to **Joseph** you're visualising things he was singing about.

How did you select the songs and match them to the relevant artist

I just picked the songs that resonated with me. I thought *"This artist would sound much better on this song"* or *"This particular artist audience would react to this song by virtue of them singing it"*. Like I said, I'm trying to get **Joseph Hill**'s work into all these different artists' fan base. That was really my intention with the artists I picked. But **Marcia Griffiths**, she picked her song because she loved it. She does that song on stage in her sets. **Exco Levi** picked the song he wanted also.

Listening to the album, obviously Joseph Hill's voice was very captivating yet when you take him out of the equation you realise how well written the songs are.

Exactly. So true. Some of the artists singing were saying *"I didn't really listen to this gentleman's work!"* That was the kind of response I was getting. It was something new to them.

Some of the artists - particularly Dalton, Tarrus, Etana, Nicky, and Exco - have much cleaner voices than Joseph's but it really works. Whereas Buju, Gyptian, Sasco, Tony Rebel, are from that similarly grainy school as Joseph.

Yes. You see Angus, why it works is the lyrical quality, the context of the lyrics. It doesn't matter who is singing the songs, when you really listen to the words and the melody it captivates you.





It's extraordinary to hear Buju and Joseph's voices together on *Natty Never Get Weary* - you realise just how similar they are.

Yes exactly. That track was recorded and released a long time ago. I just added it from the standpoint of having a **Joseph Hill** song on the project. I remember I called **Joseph** out of the blue. I was doing a **Buju** album and I wanted him to do a track with **Buju**. He said "*Oh sure*" because he was saying him and **Buju** were family. He came in, did his track and **Buju** came in and put his words to **Joseph's** track. But they didn't spend any time in the studio together. It was two different sessions.

Joseph's son Kenyatta is on *Stop The Fussing and Fighting*....

When I had the idea I went to **Joseph's** wife **Arlene** and said to her "*I want to make this tribute album to Joseph's work*". I really wanted her blessing as his wife. And she in turn put

me in touch with her son **Kenyatta**. He was in Argentina at the time and he was so happy to come on board the project. He came through Jamaica, did his track and he left again.

You also have *Black Prophet* from Ghana which adds an African connection...

Joseph had a major following Africa. **Black Prophet** was here in Jamaica doing an album at the studio and I said "*It would be good to have an African sing a Joseph Hill song*". So that came about when the opportunity to presented itself.

I interviewed Etana and I asked her if she was going to be involved in this project and she said she didn't know yet "but if Donovan gives me a call I'll be there."

(Laughs) And I did give her a call! The thing is, when you're presenting this project to an artist they can't refuse the contribution of

this artist! It would be a pleasure for them to be a part of a project honouring an artist of the status of **Joseph Hill**. Nobody who I approached for this project said no!

The range of artists from veterans to new is very much part of the Penthouse tradition. And it's the same for the musicians. You've got the top players of today's generation like Kirk Bennett and Monty. And you've got people like the great Mikey Chung, Sly and Robbie, Glenn Browne, Lenky and so on.

There's no way I could do so many songs with the same musicians because there would be a certain sameness in terms of creativity. Because when you have a younger musician playing with an older musician it's also a learning process for them. To see how the previous generation do what they do. I also look out for quality musicians. They might be young but they are quality musicians. That's why we have the continuity of the music and

maintaining a level of freshness with the label. You have to be bringing new people and new ideas.

Through the years you have used engineers like Stephen Stanley, Dave Kelly, Tony Kelly, and on this project you use Shane Brown and Kevin Elliot. What do you look for in a good engineer?

I look for someone who is professional, committed and has a love of the music. Someone who wants to experiment because that's how we get things to be different. If there were no experiments we would all be doing the same things today. So I look for a person that is willing to say *"Let's try it - if it works great, and if it doesn't work we'll try something else."* Someone with the distinctiveness you need to make something sound good. If I'm mixing something, someone who say *"Let's do it over because it might be better if we did it this way"*. That's what I look for an engineer.

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People are very excited that Buju is going to be released from jail. I assume you have plans to work together.

I'm going to be integrally involved in the making of his new album. As far as I know, that's my involvement in making that album. But I'll wait for him to come out because you have to have the energy. I don't want to be making anything before he gets out.

Do you think that Buju will bring something back to the music scene that has been missing?

Look at it this way. It's been 10 years since **Buju** has gone and if you look at the music industry from a practical standpoint currently two artists have really stepped up since he has gone and those are **Chronixx** and **Junior Gong**. In the last 10 years it's really been **Junior Gong** and **Chronixx** that have come up in the same class as **Buju**.

You mentioned Marcia Griffiths earlier. She worked with both Miss Pottinger and Coxson. How did you first meet her back when Penthouse started?

There was this track [by **Fleetwood Mac**] Everywhere. I figured **Marcia Griffiths** is my all-time favourite female artist, hands down. I was saying to myself *"If I'm coming into the music industry I have to be recording certain artists to get people to look at my label. So I'm going to be reaching for the best-of-the-best musicians, the best artists available"*. Because if my **Penthouse** label came with all nobodies nobody would be looking at it. But if I had **Marcia Griffiths** people would at least look at the label.

So I came down [from New York], I didn't know **Marcia Griffiths**. **Sly Dunbar** was the one who really introduced me. We started recording and have not stopped from

that day until today. In fact I have a new album coming out with her called **Timel-ess** where we have 15 **Studio One** songs that she redid. No **Marcia Griffiths** songs - **Studio One** songs of different artists. I actually have a track with **Toots**. **Toots** did a combination track with her.

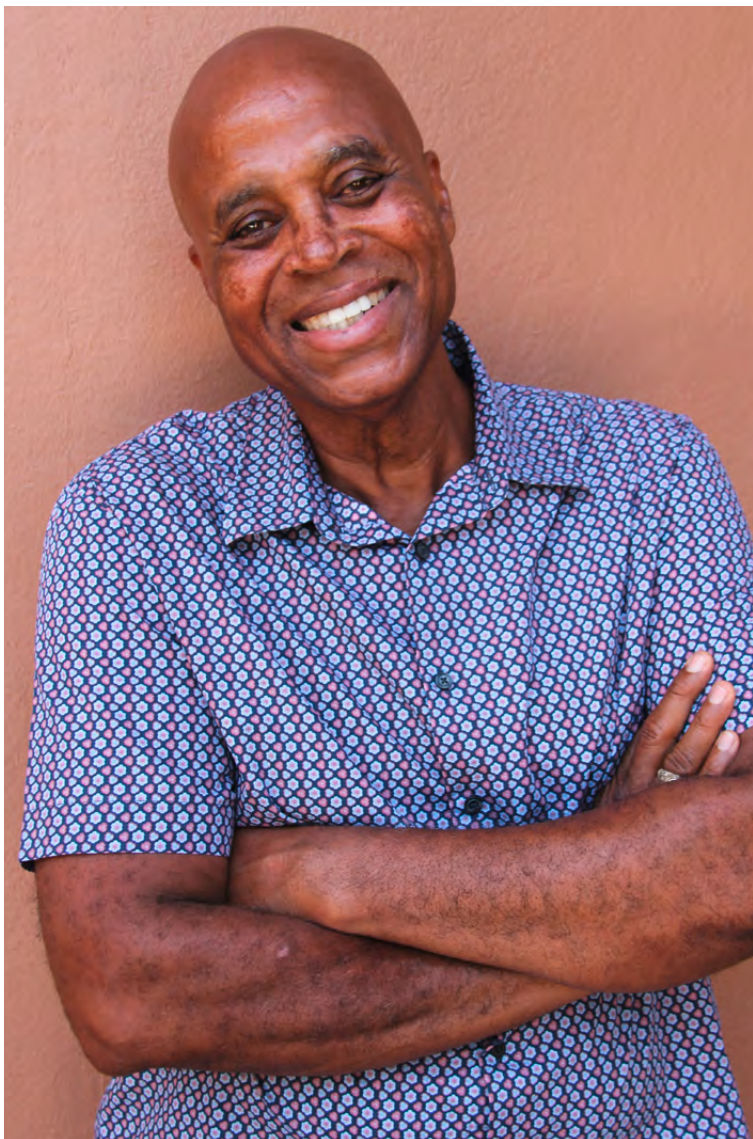
Tell me about how another foundation artist, Trinity, came to be on the album - because that is another link to Culture through Joe Gibbs.

Trinity is an artist who, when I first came to the music industry, he would usually help me to find musicians and to find artists. He introduced me to a lot of the artists in the early days. So when I was doing this project I figured that he is from that era of **Joseph Hill** and **Culture** so I called him and said *"Come and do a song on this project"*.

The album also features younger Penthouse favourites from over the last 10 years like Shuga, Dalton, Sherita and Exco Levi. Are there any hot young artists joining Penthouse we should watch out for who are going to be the next generation?

Actually I don't have any new artists Angus. Right now where I'm at is wanting to do projects that stimulate. This project I just did with **Marcia Griffiths** and this **Joseph Hill** project - they stimulate me. Because when you're doing something all these

years, after a time you want to do new things to really keep the fire burning. I have a love for this music and a fire burns within me because it has done so much for me and my family so I always want to be able to give it 100%. I don't want to be doing things just for doing it's sake. When I do something I want it to really resonate with people.



Finally, it's the 30th anniversary of Penthouse. Are you doing anything special to celebrate?

(Laughs) You know Angus, it's funny you should say that to me! I'm publishing a book and that's what I'm focusing on for the anniversary. I'm still dictating, that's where I am right now, collecting the aspects of the various high and low points of my career. I'm working

earnestly on that Angus. It's my journey from a kid coming up through all the eras of the music that I've been involved in and the people that I interacted with. The Penthouse journey, Germain music, my time in London, my time in New York, that's what the book is all about. Documenting my journey.



VARIOUS ARTISTS - REMEMBERING JOSEPH 'CULTURE' HILL

Penthouse Records - June 15, 2018

42 years of **Culture**, 24 musicians and engineers, 23 top-a-top singers, 20 millennial tracks, 1 breathtaking tribute - **Remembering Joseph Hill** is a major accomplishment. Of course, as boss of **Penthouse Records**, **Donovan Germain** has the contacts and infrastructure necessary to achieve such a feat, but still it must have taken a whole lot of time, resources and energy to put this album together. **Germain**, explaining that he wants to introduce **Hill's** work to a different generation, not only hand-picked the songs, but also approached the artists who in turn covered their **Culture** favourites.

First in line, **Hill's** son **Kenyatta**, who continued as lead singer in his father's stead when he passed away in Berlin during **Culture's** European Tour in 2006, contributes **Stop This Fussing And Fighting**, and the vocal similarity between the two is sure to invoke some goose-bumps.

He's not the only one to make me shiver, though. **Dalton Harris**, whose voice I fell in love with on the **Silly Walks Smile Jamaica** album, covers **Baldhead Bridge** which is included twice: once on his own and once in combination with **Trinity**. Room for two versions is made for the evocative **Revolution** as well, which **Duane Stephenson** and **Agent Sasco** grace. The star-studded list goes on with **Tarrus Riley** (**Still Rest On My Heart**), **George Nooks** (**Zion Gate**), **Tony Rebel** (**The International Herb**), **Exco Levi** (**Humble African**) and **Ed Robinson** (**Behold**). Giving newcomers a chance, **Natel** (**Too Long In Slavery**), **Slashe**



(**Down In Jamaica**) and **Black Prophet** (**Innocent Blood**) prove that they are worth keeping an ear out for.

A substantial number of female singers are present too: **Shuga**, **Etana**, **Nikki Burt** and **Sherieta** add their individual flavours, and a fantastic **Marcia Griffiths** interprets **Cap-**

ture Rasta, riding the underlying Slang Teng riddim as if she never did anything other than spitting rhymes. Finally **Queen Ifrica** has the honour to cover **Two Sevens Clash**, the track that propelled **Culture** to international attention in 1977.

All tracks except **Natty Never Get Weary**, which is the only one featuring the original **Joseph Hill** and **Buju Banton**, are re-recorded at Penthouse Studio by the crème de la crème of Jamaica's musicians. **Kirk Bennett** on drums, **Glen Brownie** and **Ae-ion Hoilett** on bass, **Mitchum Chin** and **Ranoy Gordon** on guitar, **Steven "Lenky" Marsden** on keys as well as **Dean Fraser**, **Dwight Richards**, **Nambo** and **Sting Wray** on horns, to name but a few, create a microcosm of sound that connects past to present and legacy to vision. On **Work On Natty**, even **Sly & Robbie** are to be heard!

With reverence, passion and emotion, all these artists manage to bring alive the magic of **Culture's** creations once more, and the album **Remembering Joseph Hill** will hopefully result in a resurgence of airplay for these and other treasures written by this memorable artist who passed away much too early. You will never be forgotten, **Joseph "Culture" Hill!**

by Gardy Stein