

How Buju Banton's "Murderer" Changed Jamaican Music

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Twenty three years ago today, **Buju Banton** changed the sound of Jamaican music with the release of his fourth studio album, *Til Shiloh*.

Like **Shabba Ranks**, **Buju Banton** is a legendary lyricist who helped popularize Jamaican dancehall music around the world. Today's reggae fans may be more familiar with artists like **Chronixx**, **Protoje** and **Kabaka Pyramid**, but all of them are still riding the wave **Buju** kicked off with *Til Shiloh*. Simply put, things like the Reggae Revival movement would probably wouldn't have splashed across the pages of *Vogue* magazine had **Buju** not bridged the gap between hardcore dancehall and Jamaica's more "cultural" sounds.



It's been a long time since we've any heard new music from **Buju**, who was arrested in December 2009 at his home in Florida after being set up by a paid federal informant. He'll be coming home this December 8 after spending most of the past decade behind bars, and anticipation is running high for his return. His official website has a countdown clock on its homepage.

"The business misses Buju, there's no two ways about that" says **Donovan Germain** of Jamaica's renowned Penthouse Records label, who executive produced **Buju's** classic 1992 debut *Mr. Mention*. That album set the streets of Kingston on fire, but it was **Buju's** 1995 project that proved he was truly a talent for the ages. *Til Shiloh*, after all, means "forever"—or at least until the judgment day.

"He really made the transition from Mr. Mention to Til Shiloh" recalls **Germain**. *"That's how you knew he was a special artist: To have a foothold in the dancehall and a foothold in the cultural aspect of the industry, and merging both of them together—both fans coming together and appreciating each side of the artist"*.

At the time of its release, **Buju** described *Til Shiloh* as *"a total compilation of my concept of the music, and how I feel about this music in depth"*. Pressed to classify the album by genre, **Buju** left no room for debate.

"This whole thing is reggae, you know, despite whatever fusion" he said. *"Too much fusion bring about too much confusion and everyone want to carry the music into a different channel. Hence people will either determine that this is dancehall or reggae or calypso or whatever. But as far as I am concern, this is reggae music. Don't abuse it"*.

Although it's generally remembered as **Buju's** "cultural" album, *Til Shiloh*—released on **Loose Cannon**, a division of **Island Records**—contains some of **Buju's** hardest dancehall selections, including songs like *"Champion"* and *"Only Man"* on **Dave Kelly's** classic *Arab Attack riddim*. Never before had any artist combined such hard-edged digital bangers with gentle acoustic ballads like *"Untold Stories"* (often compared to **Bob Marley's** *"Redemption Song"*) and the traditional Niyabinghi drumming heard on *"Till I'm Laid To Rest"*. From the melodic pop stylings of *"Wanna Be Loved"* to **QDIII's** remix of *"Champion"* set to a funky **Ice Cube** loop, *Til Shiloh* is a remarkably diverse project.

None of the album's 17 tracks proved to be more earthshaking than *"Murderer,"* first released as a 7-inch single in 1993. Inspired by the senseless (and still unsolved) killing of rising dancehall star **Panhead**, *"Murderer"* touched a chord within the Jamaican music fraternity. **Panhead** was a promising artist with a few strong hits under his belt who was shot in the head while leaving a dancehall session in Maverly.

"When I wrote that song I was in Japan—just finish a concert and call Jamaica to get an international linkage and I heard that Panhead was dead" **Buju** recalled back in 1995. *"The musical inspiration just came from above, and vibes flow through the pen"*. He worked the song out in Japan with his sparring partner **Wayne Wonder** and recorded it upon his return to Jamaica the following week. *"The sentiments and the vibes were just so spiritual"* **Buju** added. *"The message and the whole content, that song was relevant at that time. Jah used us as His vessel"*.

Before *"Murderer"* it was not uncommon to hear flagrantly violent gun lyrics, reflecting and even, some would argue, reinforcing the harsh realities of life in Kingston's garrison constituencies. The early '90s was a particularly

war-obsessed time in the music, with many artists influenced by the rise of future superstar **Bounty Killer**, not to mention the Death Row era holding sway in the U.S.

The 1991 compilation album, *Badness Business*, features 100% gunman tunes, including several by artists who would fall victim to gunshots themselves, as well as one currently serving time for murder. Ironically **Bounty Killer**'s 1992 song "*Copper Shot*" was meant to be a cautionary tale, as the youth born **Rodney Price** had been the victim of a stray shot himself. However, the "gangsta" wave was so strong that the lyrical gunplay continued to escalate. It was only **Buju**'s song "*Murderer*" that turned the tide.

The song was recorded on an appropriately auspicious riddim track, the classic *Far East riddim*, originally recorded in the early 1980s by **Barry Brown**, who asked "how many youths have been killed in tribal war?" On the song, which appeared on the soundtrack to the classic Jamaican gangsta flick *Shottas*, he pleaded for people to fight for their rights. **Shabba Ranks** would later revisit the riddim on a 1989 **Bobby Digital** production titled "*Just Reality*" on which the often X-rated DJ kicked knowledge, talking about Malcolm X and stating "black people must stop live like swine".

Four years later, **Penthouse** dropped its own lick of the *Far East riddim*, played by ace musicians **Clive Hunt**, **Danny Bassie**, **Handel Tucker** and **Sly Dunbar**. "You ever think about your skull getting bore?" **Buju** asked on the track, driving home the point that gun violence was not cool.

Shortly before the song's release, another promising career was cut short when **Dirtsman** the artist best known for his international hit "*Hot This Year*" was also killed by the gun. **Buju** performed the song in December 1993 at **Sting**, once the island's most important annual dancehall show, the same year **Beenie** and **Bounty** clashed. Although **Bounty** and **Beenie**'s epic lyrical conflicts are the stuff of legend, **Buju**'s song was a game changer.



In fact, **Beenie** and **Bounty** wasted no time recording their own responses to "*Murderer*" over the *Far East riddim*, along with bonafide dancehall dons **Capleton** and **Pinchers**. Selectors would often juggle these tracks back to back, creating a *Far East riddim* segment that pushed a message of nonviolence into the minds of dancehall fans around the world. Of course music alone cannot cure the root causes of crime and violence in a society where economic and racial oppression are constant realities. But music can inspire people to confront the truth and work for positive change.

In the wake of *Til Shiloh*, a new consciousness spread through Jamaican music as artists like **Garnet Silk**, **Sizzla**, **Anthony B**, and **Luciano** rose to prominence. That era was followed by a wave of party music characterized by **Sean Paul**, **Mr. Vegas**, and **Elephant Man**. This was followed by the **Gaza vs. Gully** wars as gun lyrics returned to the forefront and beef among artists and their fans took hold. Today's reggae revival is often seen as a response to the side effects of that conflict, although rivalry and division have continued to hold sway on the Jamaican scene. Time will tell how **Buju**'s return this December affects the balance of power.

Ironically many people still associate **Buju**'s name with gun lyrics (including the controversial hit "*Boom Bye Bye*") which he abandoned early in his career. But it is no exaggeration to say that the song "*Murderer*" turned the tide against violence within dancehall music—at least for a short while. "*Make love not war*" **Buju** advised 23 years ago, shortly before *Til Shiloh*'s release. "*I just wanna reach out and touch everyone heart—not with mi hand or with a gun, you understand, despite the thoughts of some. We just wanna show you that music alone is the medicine*".