

## Donovan Germain

After the efforts of the various pretenders to the throne, the man who finally took Jammy's place as Jamaica's leading record producer was **Donovan Germain**. Like the producer who initiated digital reggae, his involvement in music dates back to the 1970s, when he ran a record shop in New York and began producing. By the beginning of the 1980s he had a label called Revolutionary Sounds, which was run from New York, though all the recording sessions took place in Kingston. Outstanding among the productions on his own label were **Sugar Minott's** UK hit, "Good Thing Going", and the heavyweight steppers' anthem, "Mr Boss Man", from the appropriately named Cultural Roots. More success came to Germain half a decade later: first, with a second British pop hit, Audrey Hall's "One Dance Won't Do" (answering Beres Hammond's "What One Dance Can Do"), and then in more sustained fashion with the setting-up in Kingston of his own Penthouse studio in 1987.

Digital reggae in the mid-1980s was very much a youth music – it was all about excitement, immediacy and newness. But the Penthouse studio at 56 Slipe Pen Road – like its neighbour, Gussie Clarke's Music Works – was a source of a more considered ragga. Clarke and Germain were Kingston's two most sophisticated contemporary producers, with long careers

in the business and a very similar professionalism. But while Gussie gives the impression of wanting to leave the dancehall behind, Germain has been more interested in consolidating this base and building outwards from there. He sought to improve the quality of the music being played in the dancehall, and succeeded in re-establishing superb vocalists like **Marcia Griffiths** and **Beres Hammond** in that context, while working just as successfully with most of the major new deejays, including Buju Banton, Tony Rebel, Cobra and **Cutty Ranks**.

The only area where Germain's achievements fail to match Jammy's is in his lack of first-rate and completely original rhythms. He has yet to produce his own "Sleng Teng" or "Punaany". Rather, his talent lies in his selection of the right vintage rhythms for the time, and in what he has **Steely & Cleve**, **Mafia & Fluxy** or the **Firehouse Crew** do with them. He was also one of the first Jamaican producers to build rhythm tracks around samples, beginning with one taken from the Channel One cut of Leroy Sibbles' "Love Me Girl", the first of several occasions on which he has chosen the streamlined late-1970s Maxfield Avenue version over the Brentford Road original.

### DONOVAN GERMAIN PRODUCTIONS

#### **Dancehall Hits Volumes 1-6** Penthouse, JA

Almost anyone who has meant anything in the ragga era is represented on these six hit-packed compilation albums, which means singers of the calibre of Beres Hammond, Tenor Saw and Wayne Wonder, alongside deejays such as Buju Banton, General Degree, and the still underrated Terry Ganzie.

#### **Fire Burning** Penthouse, JA

Having Marcia Griffiths sing Bob Andy's "Fire Burning" over the same singer's "Feeling Soul" rhythm was an inspired move. This version album adds Cutty Ranks' superb combination with Marcia Griffiths, "Half Idiot", another combination featuring Beres Hammond and UK-based deejay Cinderella, plus seven cuts of comparable quality.

#### **Frontliners** Penthouse, UK/US

Versions of Marcia Griffiths & Cutty Ranks' "Really Together" on one side, and Cobra's "Gundolero" on the other. Other reliable names to make an appearance: Sanchez, Carlene Davis, Beres Hammond and Johnny P for the former excursion; Tony Rebel, Sugar Black and Wayne Wonder for the latter.

#### **Good Fellas** Penthouse, JA

The first side has cuts of Beres Hammond's "Tempted To Touch", including the Cutty Ranks and Tony Rebel hits. These are backed with the Penthouse version of Jammy's "Run Down the World" rhythm, with Sanchez's "Soon As I Get Home" and Tony Rebel's "The Herb" of particular note.

#### **Penthouse Celebration Part 2** Penthouse, JA

An attempt to re-create the dancehall vibe in the studio, with the 'juggling' style, is brought off with élan, utilizing the full range of sound effects, introductions and dedications. It benefits from the presence of stars like Cutty Ranks, Beres Hammond, Tony Rebel, Cobra and Sanchez, all of whom ride the successful recut of "Love I Can Feel". Part 1 had more participating stars, but lacked the focus given by the killer rhythm.

#### **Penthouse Dancehall Hits Volume 7** Penthouse, JA

Ten cuts of the updated "Swing Easy" rhythm, all of which were strong enough to be released as 45s. Buju Banton's cutting "Sensimilla Persecution" and Beres Hammond's "Kid's Play" were particular favourites at the time, but tracks from Terror Fabulous, Cobra and Buccaneer are hardly put in the shade, and there is a healthy balance between top deejays and singers.

## Deejays at Penthouse

The Penthouse records of the late 1980s were distinguished by their clean and bright sound, even if the early hits only hinted at the sophisticated approach of the next decade. The future became clearer in 1990. To begin with, Germain began producing one of the deejays about to seriously challenge Shabba, the rock-stone-voiced **Cutty Ranks** (b. Philip Thomas, 1965, Kingston), a deejay who had been a mainstay on sound systems since the early 1980s. There was no denying the authority of the ex-butcher's attack on 45s like "Dominate" and "Russia & America", the latter a fine illustration of Germain's approach to rhythm-building, which has tended to favour new cuts of rhythms that have yet to be overexposed. In this case, the rhythm went back only to 1987, when it had supported two major Jamaican hits on the Miami-based Skengdon label, Chaka Demus's "Young Gal Business" and Super Cat's "Mud Up".

The deejay with whom Cutty shared his first Penthouse album, *Die Hard*, was **Tony Rebel** (b. Patrick Barrett, Manchester, Jamaica), who had already established his style with the Germain-produced 45s, "Mandela Story", "The Armour" and "Instant Death". More than any other deejay in this period, Rebel consistently tackled cultural themes on record, providing a focus for similarly inclined younger artists, like his friend the singer **Garnett Silk**. Both the Cutter and the Rebel were to continue as part of the regular Penthouse stable (Germain commands an uncommon loyalty

from his artists), sometimes joining forces with singers such as Beres Hammond, Marcia Griffiths, Wayne Wonder and Twiggy.

A third very gifted deejay who was to make his mark at Penthouse was (**Mad**) **Cobra** (b. Ewart Everton Brown, 1968, Kingston), who rose to the top very quickly in 1991, with uncompromising rude-boy hits like "Yush", "Bad Boy" and "Gundolero", as well as the appropriately titled debut album, *Bad Boy Talk*.

As Penthouse became more established, there were further top-drawer deejay records from new and established names, including Capleton,

**Lieutenant Stitchie**, Terry Ganzie, Beenie Man, Lady Saw, Spragga Benz, Terror Fabulous and Buccaneer. None, though, were quite to equal the success of Buju Banton. In common with most popular Jamaican performers, Buju has worked for several producers, while most often recording – and having the best brought out of him – at Penthouse. His ascent to the status of Jamaica's most acclaimed mic man was obviously helped by Germain's hottest rhythms – his cuts were often released alongside as many as nine other versions, and inevitably came out on top.

## Everyone falls in love with Tanto Metro & Devonte

Perhaps the most surprising crossover success – largely through the auspices of Penthouse – was that of Shocking Vibes stalwarts teamed together – **Tanto Metro & Devonte**. Like fellow deejay Chaka Demus prior to his linking up with Pliers, Tanto Metro had spent several years turning out tunes that were perfectly

acceptable in the dancehall, but not exceptional enough to be heard far beyond that arena. Metro's shrewd career move was to start recording duets with a singer, Devonte, who had also worked with Patrick Roberts, and shared his position on the reggae ladder of social mobility. "Say Woeee" for producer Tony Kelly was a moderate reggae hit for the pair in the winter of 1998, and they followed it with such tracks as "Talk Up Girl" on the Grimes label, "Good Body Gal" for Winston Riley and "I Can't Get No Sleep" for Stone Love. Most popular of all, though, was the Penthouse release, "Everyone Falls In Love". The formula was much the same as for dozens of singer/deejay 'combination' tunes over the years: the young crooner sings the sort of sentimental love song that has always been well-

received in Jamaica, while the deejay interjects with his own gruff commentary – in this case one that included phrases pinched from Beenie Man and the Spice Girls (!). A killer dancehall rhythm completed the recipe, and the disc was not only a best-seller in the reggae market worldwide, but crossed over to register on urban radio stations in US cities like New York and Miami. The question of why Tanto Metro & Devonte should be the most popular deejay/singer act since Chaka Demus and Pliers isn't easily answered. Perhaps it's just down to reggae audiences loving the 'combination' formula in the first place, and this particular pair having the sense to stay together for more than a couple of outings. And, of course, "Everyone Falls in Love" was infuriatingly catchy.

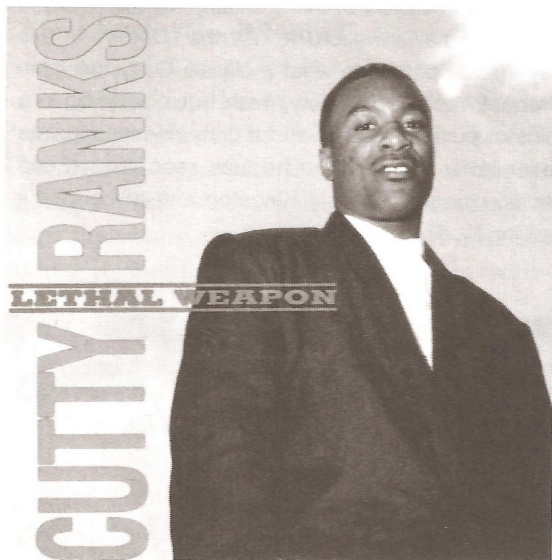
## COBRA

### **Badboy Talk** Penthouse, JA

This Donovan Germain-produced set, from 1992, includes the major hits “Bad Boy” and “Gundolero” (both titles meaning much the same, with the latter adding some Wild West glamour), as well as the extraordinarily popular “Yush”, whose title celebrates the slang form of greeting then prevalent among the rudeboys.

### **Lethal Weapon** Penthouse, UK; VP Records, US

The other unreservedly recommended Cutty Ranks set features all Penthouse rhythms, and includes the hits “Lambada” (with Wayne Wonder), “Half Idiot” and “Really Together” (both with Marcia Griffiths) and “Love Mi Hafi Get” (with Beres Hammond). As good a place as any to discover either the deejay or producer Donovan Germain.



## CUTTY RANKS & TONY REBEL

### **Die Hard** Penthouse, JA/UK

A side apiece for two of the most regular visitors to Penthouse, and an interesting contrast of styles. While Cutty attacks the stinging rhythms with his usual intensity, Tony Rebel ‘singjays’ along with them in fairly melodic fashion. Both were heading for the top of the reggae pile when they cut these tracks, and this set helped them on their way.

## TANTO METRO & DEVONTE

### **Everyone Falls In Love** VP Records, US

Their debut album gathers together quite a few reggae hits besides the incredibly popular title track – including “Say Woeee”. Drawing from quite a few leading production camps, this hangs together nicely. As usual with these sort of partnerships, the rougher deejay has the last word on most topics.

## TONY REBEL

### **Rebel With A Cause** Penthouse, US

The first album that the conscious ragga had to himself, and one he still has to surpass – not least because of the ratchet-sharp Penthouse rhythms. Guest appearances from Marcia Griffiths, Wayne Wonder, and the UK’s Macka B. Early hits like “War & Crime” and “Fresh Vegetable” are included.

## SHOCKING VIBES & ROOKIE PRODUCTIONS

### **Johncrow By the Fire-Side** Penthouse, US

An exceptional ‘version’ album, with “Johncrow” built by Leroy Mafra and Lloyd Charmers’ son, Andre Tyrell, and “Fire-side” by Andre on his own. Name-brand performers include Beenie Man, Buccaneer, Tanya Stephens, General Degree (his popular “Body Guard”) and the late Tenor Saw. Calculated to appeal to a wider audience than many of these sets – mostly through the consistency of the performances and some interesting mixing.

## The singers

Proving that he was equally at ease working with quality singers, Germain’s bestseller in 1990 was **Beres Hammond**’s “Tempted To Touch”. The reworking of John Holt’s “A Love I Can Feel” rhythm that supported Hammond’s soulful vocal provided further hits the following year, with Cutty Ranks’ assertive commentary, “Love Mi Hafi Get”, and Tony Rebel’s lyrically original “Fresh Vegetable”. The major importance of the Hammond hit, however, was that it began a string of wonderful Germain-produced Hammond records that represented the high ground for Jamaican vocal music in the 1990s – titles like “Falling In Love”, “My Wish” and “Is It A Sign” sold heavily in the reggae market, albeit without coming to the attention of the outside world.

Wayne Wonder’s “Hold On” was another impressive vocal favourite of 1990, part of another ongoing series of 45s by a singer who can do no wrong as far as the dancehall audience is concerned, while remaining totally unknown to most of the world beyond it. Other superb vocals on Penthouse have come from **Garnett Silk**, Sanchez, Richie Stephens, Jack Radics, Thriller U and Junior Tucker, all on their very best form.