



Etana: Reggae's Feminine Infusion

Reggae's legacy has been predominantly male – the ghetto boys on the corner, coming up with tunes as a viable way to unleash anger and disappointment. We've had the reality lyrics of Bob Marley and Peter Tosh; the trios like Culture, Black Uhuru, the Abyssinians, and Israel Vibration; the roots singers like Luciano, Tony Rebel, Yami Bolo, and Garnett Silk. More recently we've had a younger generation of reggae males with Lutan Fyah, Jah Cure, Richie Spice, and Gentleman. Of course, the male lovers' rock genre with Beres Hammond, Sanchez, Freddie McGregor and Gregory Isaacs has proved popular in the West Indian Diaspora. Then there's reggae's younger step-child, dancehall, which is a genre founded on male bravado that includes violence (either real or metaphorical), and explicit sex and includes artists like Beenie Man, Bounty Killer, Ninjaman, Mavado, Busy Signal, Cutty Ranks, T.O.K., Shabba Ranks, Vybz Kartel, and more.

But where are the women? In reggae, there's about a handful that make the cut from each generation – Marcia Griffiths, Judy Mowatt, Rita Marley, then there was Sister Nancy, Patra, and Pam Hall. In the nineties we had the explicit women like Lady Saw, Lady G, and Tanya Stephens. More recently in the millennium, Makka Diamond, Queen Ifrica, and Queen Omega came up, and there are a few that are just getting international notoriety like Cherine

by | [laura gardner](#)



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Etana

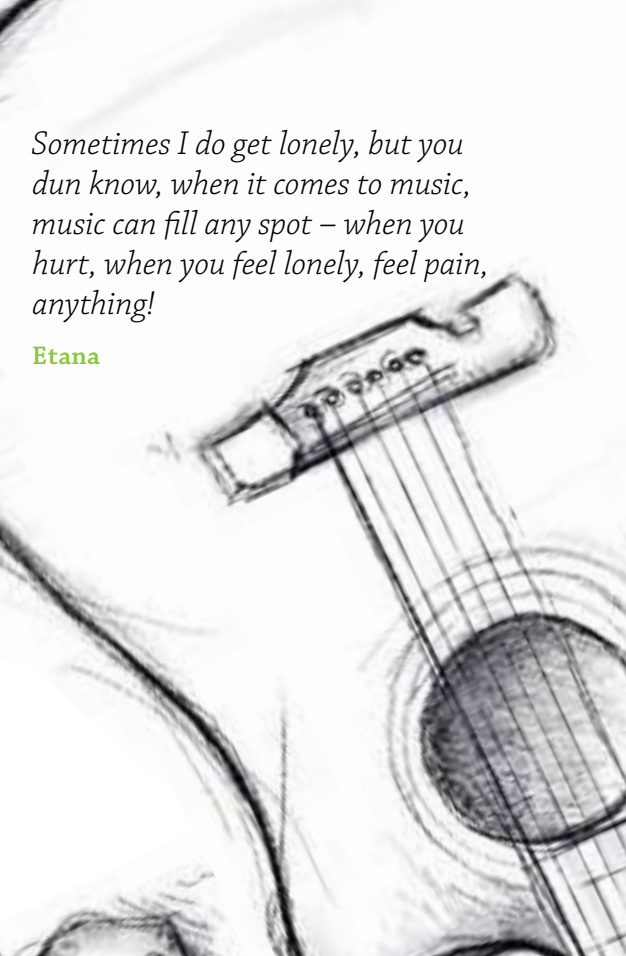
Etana is one such reggae singer/songwriter that came onto the scene about three years ago, and released her debut album, “The Strong One” on VP Records in 2008. She is definitely a pioneer of a new generation of women reggae artists that combine the spiritual message of Rastafari and reggae with the struggles of everyday reality. Her biggest tunes don’t just have catchy choruses, they have substantial meaning. “Roots” is an anthem for children’s rights (Give dem cartoons to turn dem fool. You poison their foods and u think that you’ve won, but dem ah hold a meditation out inna i-ration. Dem a follow Rastafari and a live, ah live out right...) Another of her songs, “Wrong Address,” is about a woman who couldn’t get a job because she lived in the wrong part of town (Tried to get a job today but when dem see the application dem say, ‘if this is really where you reside, please step outside.’ She asked them why and they replied, ‘We don’t want no trouble, we don’t want no trouble, no day. Cause lady where you come from, people die there every day. For our safety, that’s where you should stay.’) Her other popular tracks, “Warrior Love” and “I Am Not Afraid” both offer messages of female empowerment and yet fall short of the I-hate-men lyrics that can be off-putting to a diverse audience.

Etana was born and raised in August Town, Jamaica (near Kingston) until she was nine years old, when her family migrated to Miami, Florida. While in Florida, she was a member of an all-girl pop band called Gift, which never really got off the ground. In 2006, she moved back to Jamaica to open up an internet café in Kingston and swore off music. But as life had it, she auditioned and became Richie Spice’s back-up singer and spent 15 months on the road where she was able to get

some worldwide exposure. When tensions grew between Etana and Spice’s management, Etana broke off to start her own label, FreeMind Music and she has been looking forward ever since. She now has a female manager, Sharon Burke of Solid Agency, and says of the union, “Certain things female to female, [Sharon] can more understand, unlike having a male manager that feels like ‘mi nah fatten cockroach fi fowl’ if another man come near me.”

One of the reasons you don’t see more women in the industry is because they are traditionally the ones to take care of the home and the children. Unless there is a great support system, it’s challenging for mothers and wives to tour, be in the studio at all hours of the day and night, go to interviews, and live the day-to-day life of a singer. Etana says she is very lucky in this regard because she has a really strong support network for her 7-year-old son. “When it comes to my son now, he lives in Miami with his father and my mother. I go over to him on the weekends, or... sometimes he calls and says, ‘Mommy, I need you to come home now - I’m missing you,’ then I’ll just clear my whole week... and I’ll go straight to Miami. Or I’ll fly him in and we spend time together that way.”

Another reason there aren’t more women in the industry is because there is often sexual pressure and harassment attached to moving forward in a career. Etana explains, “When you talk to most of the older females in the business like Tanya Stephens or even Marcia Griffiths, all a dem can tell you the treatment that a woman get if you nah sleep with a producer or nah sleep with a manager, you nah get too far. When it comes to stage... you can’t get to perform the time you’re



SPREAD: Where is Chris Leacock happened spontaneously. Smales photographed a friend in a comical situation, so they continued by researching various social events taking place.



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CENTER: Where is Chris Leacock happened spontaneously. continued by researching.

RIGHT: Where is Chris Leacock happened spontaneously. continued by researching various social events taking place.

switch or don't perform at all." She says that she experienced that negative treatment while in the Miami band, Gift, but not in Jamaica, where the Fifth Element Records camp (Richie Spice's label) treated her with a surprising amount of respect. She remembers, "When me come in 2006 having Fifth Element – I must give it to them, I think they set a real standard – they completely turned around the thing and showed much more respect than, I think, than anyone I've ever seen before."

What has become a challenge for Etana during her few years of success is maintaining a stable relationship, "an ongoing relationship is like one of the hardest things – it's like you spend your life just doing music." She says she's putting a relationship on hold right now, "Right now, I kinda put the whole relationship thing to the side cause that is one of the hardest things – to be always gone, or to be always tired when I come home from the day's work and being in the office and writing and producing and everything. It's stressful, so by the time I come home every day, mi tired! I have no time to be on the phone or to

be lovey-dovey. Sometimes I do get lonely, but you dun know, when it comes to music, music can fill any spot – when you hurt, when you feel lonely, feel pain, anything!"

Her music does carry an uplifting message, mostly about self-empowerment. She explains, "For me, it's just about knowing who you are, accepting who you are, building on your strengths, and using your power in a positive way." She noted that before she linked up with Richie Spice, she used to write songs that were explicit, and one day, she overheard a little 5-year-old girl singing her song. "At that time in 2006, I realized, you know what? I can't write songs like this no more... I had to change my given name from Shawna which means 'pretty' to 'the strong one,' Etana."

She also noticed what was happening in the Jamaican ghettos in regards to relationships and wanted to address it, "If you spend any time in the garrison in Jamaica, you'll realize that [the girls] go around the corner, have sex with somebody 'pon the wall or even 'pon a grave or something and go back

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home – that's a relationship, you know what I mean?! You have some [women] that do hold up dem head and dem live together with dem man and they gwaan a work and school, but for the most part when the war start, all of the work and school cut off so you dun know, you roll right back to square one again."

Her message is clear – to overcome. She explains the title of her debut album, "A strong woman is able to overcome. Them always say that the woman come fi bear di pain. What they mean by that is that a woman can take a lot more emotionally; even physically when it comes to childbirth, loving and everything, more than a man can." She says that women need to realize the power that they have, "A woman has the power to build a whole nation and break it down. Everything what a man do, whether that is to get the hottest ride, to get the most money, or to be a don inna the area is just so that... at the end of the day, him can provide for him woman and him family, or him can have more than one woman and say, 'Yo, me lock di town' or whatever, but it's all about the

woman... The woman has a power to build or break a whole nation... So a woman is not just about sex. A woman is much deeper than that – we have much more power than they make it seem."

Etana does not take her position for granted – it took a lot of other women to pave the way. She adds, "I look at the I-Threes a lot – their journey and what they've been through... People like Marcia Griffiths, Queen Ifrica, the I-Threes – dem people dey – paved the way. For all the struggles that they've been through have opened up my eyes and kicked down a whole heap of doors. We're all doing it for each other cause after this generation comes a next generation. We're still building it. We've come a long way but we have a much longer way to go."

So Etana is blazing her own path, mobilizing to change the course of gender relations and female identity in Jamaica and across the globe. With her insightful lyrics and beautiful voice, she has a great platform to do it, and it requires her to be Etana, The Strong One, unapologetically.