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### Is Dancehall Getting Soft?

-By Laura Gardner

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Dancehall music has always been a life manual of sorts. It provides instructions on how to sex ten girls in one night; how to suss out the informer; how to master the latest dance moves; and how to look sharp in the dancehall. Feeling angry? There's sure to be a gangster or gun tune that matches your mood. But a message? That's new.

I've noticed an interesting trend in dancehall recently. Perhaps it's a consequence that the music has been under a microscope by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations which has resulted in a lot of flack for dancehall lyrics, or maybe hardcore dancehall artists noticed that conscious tunes by Natty King, Gyptian, Richie Spice, Jah Cure, I-Wayne and others are actually popular these days.

But something's up when rudebwoy DJ Vybz Kartel laments "Society Nah Have Nuh Heart" and Assassin warns us how "God Nah Sleep" (so you better be good the rest of the week).



Elephant Man advises on the track "No Time Fi Dem" on the Tempo riddim, "Don't take up bad man role if yuh know say it nah fit you. Don't take up rudebwoy life if yuh know say it nah fit you." Okay, so he's not exactly advising against a thug life 100%, but he wants us to check in whether or not that lifestyle suits us. Interesting.



Wayne Marshall and Alaine provide some sex education on the Istanbul riddim in "True Story," where their protagonist contracts AIDS, "Slept around with many men, unprotected now and then. She did not intend for this to be the end. Now she's dying for a cure... Crying from the core..." The singers proceed to tell us that "The moral of the story is: make sure you're living right..." Wow, there's a moral?

In an interlude on his 2-CD release "Debut" [9 Sound Klik Records, 2006], Ini Kamoze says what makes an artist different from a singer is whether or not he's real. "An artist is real" and stands behind what he sings, according to Kamoze. This brings about an interesting point – whether or not these deejays take their own advice. Are they having safe sex? Are they concerned whether or not God sleeps? I

won't attempt to answer, but I pose the questions to elicit thought.

Elephant Man is on the Cry Baby riddim singing, "As far as my eyes can see, yuh nuh see Babylon nuh cater fi we. As we a walk like we a vigilante dem do di crime while we pay di penalty." Maybe I am mistaken, but I am hearing a conscience in these lyrics – an actual concern about how society is structured. This is from the one and only who brought you profound insights in "Signal di Plane," "Log On," "Pon di River, Pon di Bank" and classics entitled "Shizzle My Nizzle" and "Bring U Pussy Come."

T.O.K. pioneered this recent trend with their anti-violence ballad "Footprints," about a mother's pain over her son's murder. The song was in medium rotation on BET and MTV and in my estimation, was one of their best tunes up until then. Yes, the video was somewhat corny, but they pulled it off. They really did.

Don't get me wrong - I am not at all upset by this trend. I find it fascinating, and it's certainly a step away from the "battyman" and "nah bow" lyrics that are peppered into the fabric of dancehall life. The fact that 1,671 people were murdered in Jamaica in 2005 and that number is nearly matched halfway through 2006, might indicate a need for change that artistes are catching on.

As in all cycles, we can be sure that the roughneck, rudebwoy lyrics of yesteryear will be back, but in the meantime, we can acknowledge that this is a unique period in the music – one that will not go unnoticed.

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