

Marley Son Testifies For Buju Banton

One of the sons of late reggae legend Bob Marley on Wednesday took the stand as a character witness in the trial of Jamaican-born singer Buju Banton.

Stephen Marley told the court that he has known Banton for 20 years. He said the star, born Mark Myrie, is an acclaimed singer and "the voice of the people" who never talked about drugs.

Defense attorney David Markus asked Marley if he ever heard Banton discuss drugs.

"No, no," Marley said. "Never."

The Grammy-winning Marley also called Banton "the voice of Jamaica," noting that his music is ingrained in the nation's culture.

Prosecutors say they have video and audio of the musician discussing the ins and outs of drug smuggling with an informer, and asking the informer to help him in other illegal endeavors.

Banton, 37, faces charges of conspiring to distribute cocaine and aiding and abetting his co-defendants in possessing a firearm during the course of the cocaine distribution. According to the indictment, Banton and an associate negotiated with an informant to buy the cocaine. Along with a third man, they allegedly met with an undercover officer in Sarasota in early December to buy the drugs. The informant told Drug Enforcement Administration agents that he also saw the singer inspecting the cocaine.

Thomas, described by Banton's manager as an old friend of the singer who resurfaced shortly before the arrest, pleaded guilty last Wednesday to conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute five kilograms or more of cocaine. He now faces up to life in prison.

The third man, James Mack, has signed an affidavit stating that he never met Banton before his arrest, and that the singer did not know about the money or a gun that were in Mack's car during the drug deal. Mack plans to plead guilty to the drug conspiracy charge and a weapons charge, according to a plea agreement filed Wednesday. He also faces up to life in prison on each charge.

Both men agreed to testify for the prosecution as part of their plea agreements. Banton's attorney has requested Mack as a witness as well.

Banton's defense team will try to prove the singer was a victim of entrapment. Markus said Banton plans to testify.

Despite being imprisoned, Banton is set to release his tenth album titled `Before the Dawn,` next week. On the album, the singer addresses his arrest singing: `I've been accused, wrongly convicted. Jah knows I'm innocent. I've been badly singled out by beloved friends ... who sold me out.` Banton had begun recording the album's 10 songs last year in Kingston, Jamaica and worked in recent month with producers and engineers over the phone.