

New Trial For Buju Banton As Judge Declares Mistrial

A mistrial was yesterday afternoon declared in the case of Jamaican-born reggae star, Buju Banton, a decision which could force the singer to remain jailed until a new trial date.

U.S. District Judge James Moody made the decision Monday after jurors on the 12-member panel sent him a second note saying they couldn't reach a verdict. Earlier the jurors, who began deliberation in Banton's drug case last Thursday, said they were split down middle and could not reach a decision.

Banton, born Mark Myrie, is accused by U.S. federal prosecutors of conspiring to buy cocaine from an undercover police officer last year.

Banton's lawyer, David Markus, however, is seeking release of his client on bond even as the judge discussed setting a new trial for December 2010, which would mark a year since the singer's arrest. Attorney Markus has made an application for bail for Banton and was told that the court would receive the application today.

On Monday, Banton thanked about two dozen family, friends and fans seated in the federal courtroom in Tampa and told them he loved them before being led away in leg shackles.

On Wednesday, September 21st, the singer proclaimed his innocence of drug charges to jurors as he took the stand in his own defense. Banton told jurors that while he talked a lot about drugs with U.S. government informant, Alexander Johnson, he is not a drug dealer. He testified that he met the informant on a plane last summer and he initiated their conversations about drugs.

Banton told the court that he made up ambitions to deal cocaine to impress the informant, who he believed would introduce him to music industry contacts.

Addressing a video tape which U.S. federal prosecutors have presented as evidence that he is a drug dealer, Banton said he was surprised when the informant presented him with cocaine at a Sarasota warehouse in December, a meeting captured on video.

"I'm just a humble musician," he said.

Prosecutors, however, say Banton discussed the ins and outs of drug smuggling with an informer and asked the informer to help him in other illegal endeavors.

U.S. Assistant Attorney James Preston said Banton was a middle man in a drug transaction in which an associate of Banton would buy five kilos of cocaine from an undercover police officer.

According to the federal 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.

Ian Thomas, described by Banton`s manager as an old friend of the singer who resurfaced shortly before the arrest, has pleaded guilty to conspiracy to posses 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 pleaded guilty to the drug conspiracy charge and a weapons charge, according to a plea agreement. He also faces up to life in prison on each charge.

Banton`s new album, `Before the Dawn,` will be released today, September 28th. The album`s 10 songs, including one titled `Innocent,` were recorded in Kingston, Jamaica, last year before Banton`s arrest.