

The Musical War

One of the most intriguing episodes in early Jamaican popular music was, what came to be known as the musical war between Cecil Campbell better known as Prince Buster and Derrick Morgan, dubbed 'The Ska King'.

Both gentlemen came on the Jamaican music scene when the ska beat was in its embryonic stage and blazed a trail that others found difficult to follow.

Buster, named after national hero Sir Alexander Bustamante, was born in Kingston in 1938, grew up under tough conditions in the heart of downtown Kingston, gravitated towards 'Badmanism', and, accordingly, began his career as a boxer of some sorts. He soon found his pugilistic talents being put to use as a strongarm gateman and protector for Clement Dodd's Downbeat Sound System at dances, although Buster told me in an interview that he had never worked with Coxsone. He said he just relished defending the underdog, and Coxsone being young in the business at the time was ranked in that category. It was about this time in 1961 that Buster left Coxsone's stables and ventured into the establishment of his own sound system which he named The Voice Of The People.

He was on a mission to dethrone the three giants in the sound system business at the time - Coxsone's Down Beat, Duke Reid the Trojan, and King Edward the Giant, but was unceremoniously stopped by immigration in his quest to buy records abroad via the Farm Work programme to play on his sound. Buster told me in an interview that he was victimised, and didn't rule out sabotage. His competitors knew that he had an immense knowledge of the records and could pose a serious threat to them.

Buster, therefore, had to seek an alternative musically. That alternative was to get into music recording and production. This he successfully achieved in no small measure as evidenced by the successful recordings he produced for himself and others like Eric 'Monty' Morris, Owen Grey and his archrival Derrick Morgan.

Derrick Morgan, on the other hand, adapted a gentler approach to his entry. Born with a sight defect in Stewart Town, Clarendon in March 1940, he was brought to Kingston at the age of three to seek medical attention for his ailment, but was told by doctors that there was nothing that could be done. He, however, was not deterred by this, as he knew that he was inbred with music, and allowed that to be his central driving force in propelling him forward.

Famous opportunity talent shows

After attending elementary school, Kingston Senior, and Maddle High, he heard about the Vere Johns famous opportunity talent shows, entered in 1957, and won against such stalwarts like Eric Morris, Owen Grey and Wilfred Jackie Edwards. This triggered his aspirations to hear himself in recordings on the radio. His enquiries led him to the 'larger than life' sound system operator, and one of the top record producers of the day, Duke Reid the Trojan. There he successfully recorded two songs - Lover Boy and Oh My Love Is Gone in 1959.

The story unfolded, as Derrick related it to me, that he was on his way home from a recording session, when he was intercepted by the Prince who asked for assistance in setting up his business. Derrick complied, and seized the opportunity to record two songs for the Prince, Shake A Leg and Come On Over. After a short-lived stay with Prince Buster, Derrick decided to move to the aspiring Jamaican Chinese producer Leslie Kong, who was paying £20 per song, twice as much as the others. This move by Derrick infuriated Buster and led to an acrimonious affair between both entertainers. The situation was compounded when Derrick recorded for Kong a ska number titled Forward March, one of the seminal pieces about Jamaica's Independence. Buster accused Derrick of using in that song an instrumental solo, blown by alto-saxophonist Headley 'Deadly' Bennett, which he (Buster) claimed he composed and used in one of his previous recordings. This he termed "his belongings that was stolen from him and given to the Chinese man".

Buster, though not calling names, proceeded to brand Derrick a "blackhead chineyman", and voiced his dissent unequivocally in a recording of the same name - "you stole my belongings and give to your chineyman, God in heaven knows that you are wrong. Are you a chineyman or are you a blackman? It don't need no eyeglass to see that your skin is black. Do you prefer your chineyman to your fellow blackman, speak up, friend, it's plain to understand. It wont be very long they'll have a change of plan to use you and then refuse you."

Those remarks seemed to have stung Derrick like a scorpion, and he didn't waste time in responding vehemently with the recording Blazing Fire, which said in part "you said it, I am a blazing fire, you said it, I am a blackhead Chinese, but when I was with you, I was like a bull in a pen. Live and let others live and your days will be much longer".

A number of other verbal musical exchanges on the topic followed, including Buster's Praise Without Raise and Creation and Derrick's No Raise No Praise and Don't Call Me Daddy for Duke Reid. The latter recording, though not directed to Buster, he took issue with it, and threatened to respond to it with one he called Derreck Go Mind Yu Baby

aka Chinese Jacket.

It was here that events took a new twist as Derrick was somewhat peeved by the fact that his name was being called. It was the first time during the confrontation that names were called. Derrick, obviously upset, warned Buster that if he released the song, he (Derrick) would compose and release one with the words "Buster while you were at sea, I was along with B (Blossom - his wife) and all your children have the mark of this blackhead Chineyman". On hearing this, Buster relented. Both sides came to a settlement and the musical war ended.

Friendly musical war

In later years, it was learnt that this musical war was just a friendly one designed to generate interest in their recordings and boost record sales through the controversy that it triggered.

And we all know how Jamaicans love that sort of thing. Other social issues, however, emerged during the musical exchanges between both men. It took on alarming proportions when disputes developed between factions (fans) of both singers, and reports are that people were even fighting in the streets.

By the beginning of 1963, the disputes between rival fans had grown so serious that the newly formed Jamaican Government was forced to intervene to cease the rivalry. They arranged for both men to be pictured in a friendly way together for the press, and issued a statement saying that despite the rhetoric of the songs, the two were the best of friends. This brings into sharp focus and bears a stark resemblance to political factions fighting for political parties: While political factions are fighting in the streets, the leaders of the two main political parties are often seen knocking drinking glasses at cocktail parties.

There were a few other verbal exchanges between singers, or singers and producers in early Jamaican music, but none contained the intense drama and social consequences that the Buster-Morgan episode evoked. Neither is there any real resemblance between the musical confrontations of early Jamaican singers and those of the dancehall artistes of the present day.