Things Jamaicans are Afraid of

The legendary Ernie Smith recorded a song called “Duppy or a gunman” in the early 1970’s. It was about a romantic, late-night walk between two young lovers, which is brought to an abrupt end when something/someone sneaks up behind them and says in scary tones: “Don’t move!”

The response of the frightened young casanova, who assumes the voice is that of a ghost or thief, is to instantly forget his sweetheart and immediately take flight. Apart from just being funny, however, the song tells us a little bit about the things that strike terror into the hearts of ordinary Jamaicans. But what else terrifies Jamaicans? This article takes a closer look at a few of the things that frighten a nation of people who take pride in the fact that they don’t scare easily.

Duppy: Surely at the beginning of the 21st century your average Jamaican has no particular fear of duppies? (i.e. ghosts and other supernatural beings). Surely persons accustomed to really terrifying things (like rampant crime, category 5 hurricanes and the IMF) must laugh at duppies? Not quite. This belief can perhaps be traced back to an African notion that a man has two spirits, or souls. When that man dies, one soul goes to his reward in heaven while the other remains behind temporarily – or for eternity. Apart from spirits roaming the earth there are other well known supernatural beings such as Rolling Calf, Three Foot Horse and Ol Hige. There’s plenty of evidence that ordinary Jamaicans still fear duppies. Have you ever seen someone turn around three times before entering a house? This is supposed to be a technique for getting rid of any ghosts that may have followed the person home. And have you seen people who have just bought a house sprinkle white rum at the four corners of the yard? This is a way of appeasing spirits who may be otherwise inclined to give trouble. Naturally any rum left over after appeasing the spirits is put to good use “comforting” thirsty guests at the house-warming. Gunman: The term “Gunman” is such a common part of Jamaican dialect that it seems almost silly to define it. But for those who don’t know, a “gunman” is any armed criminal; whether thief, murderer or rapist. That the term is so common itself tells a story. Sadly, to say that any Jamaican reading this has had a friend or family member who has been robbed or who has been murdered by gunmen. Given the option between Rolling Calf and Gunman, I’ll take Rolling Calf. At least Rolling Calf doesn’t carry an uzi. Police: I would gamble a guess that Jamaicans are probably just as fearful of the Police as they are of gunmen. Both policemen and gunmen carry firearms, but the policeman has the legal authority to carry it. He also has the authority to search your house, your car and your person. He can pull you over on a lonely road at 3am in the morning, search you and your girlfriend, call you “bwoy” to your face, and then “reluctantly” accept a monetary “contribution” to let you go without a ticket for having one missing brakelight. Shame: How can a people who are world-renowned for their confidence, even cockiness, be said to be terrified of being embarrassed? Well, let’s look at the facts. The majority of Jamaicans will never make a speech in front of a large audience in their lives. Why? Fear of making a mistake, forgetting a word and being laughed at. Having trouble silencing a class of noisy Jamaican school children? Just ask for a volunteer to come up and read a poem/short story/essay. The room will instantly fall silent. Why? Fear of being laughed at by classmates (and the teacher). Let’s take another kind of example - It’s actually rumoured that Jamaican appliance/furniture stores that offer hire-purchase terms have rates of default so low they would make the best-run commercial banks green with envy. Why? Because your average Jamaican would rather cut their own throats than face the embarrassment of having the moving van pull up at their gate, in full view of their bad-mind, chatty-chatty neighbours to repossess the new flat-screen TV! Obeah: Obeah or “Science” is the common Jamaican term for “Black Magic”. For a fee, your local Obeah man can solve most of your problems or, if your enemies have employed him, he can also wreak havoc in your life. He can help your child pass GSAT and get into a good school. Or, if your child doesn’t pass GSAT, he can also make sure your neighbour’s child doesn’t pass either. (After all, yuh can’t allow them to have anything over you.) He can make a particular person fall in love with you or, if needs be, make someone who’s been stalking you fall out of love with you. A good obeahman can even make your rival develop a groin injury just a few weeks before the World Championships. (I’m not saying that’s what happened Tyson. I’m just letting you know who not to mess with.) These examples will give you an idea of the terrifying power of a good obeahman. Our advice is to make sure that, like a good lawyer and a good doctor, you always have one on call. Hurricanes: One word explains the fear the average Jamaican has of hurricanes: Gilbert. In September 1988 Hurricane Gilbert tore through Jamaica like a rampaging bull and left a path of savage destruction its wake. Plenty people died, hundreds were left homeless and almost everyone was left without water or electricity for weeks and even months on end. But even then I’m not sure it fully accounts for the enduring fear of hurricanes in Jamaicans that almost borders on the irrational. Some twenty years after Gilbert all some people have to hear is the vaguest mention of a “system” or “depression” forming somewhere off the coast of West Africa and thousands of panicked homeowners will descend on supermarkets and hardware stores like locusts, stripping the shelves of corned beef, candles and bottled water. Having cleared the shelves of all the “staples”, desperate shoppers will even start buying things they wouldn’t ordinarily eat: “Since we cyaan get no bully beef, the tinned olives will just have to do”. Having secured a full three months worth of food, terrified Jamaicans will next turn to the hardware store where they will buy enough nails, plywood and masking tape to re-build Noah’s ark. Others will buy generators large enough to light up the National Stadium... even though they live in a two bedroom apartment. Having locked, nailed, taped, tied and battened down everything in sight they hunker down like people awaiting the second coming of Christ… or at least World War 3. They sit glued to their transistor radios and listen to every scrap of news even remotely related to the coming storm. New information is instantly relayed in hushed tones from one “hurricane expert” to another. My assessment is that the warm water from the Atlantic and

the cool air from El Nino are combining to increase its intensity. I’m predicting landfall in three hours or less!” Three hours later the “hurricane” arrives. Sure enough, it’s been downgraded to a “depression” and the result is a light drizzle and a gentle breeze. Croaking lizards: If you want to see something funny and also see how fast you can empty a room full of Jamaican women, just mention that you hear a big croaking lizard!” My advice, however, would be to first make sure your back is against a wall so you don’t get trampled by the stampede of screaming, hysterical women as they flee the room. What would be even funnier, however, is to make a similar comment in a room full of Jamaican men and watch the crowd of hard-core Jamaican men disappear like a cloud of smoke. Getting “Bun”: Want to reduce a Jamaican man to a quivering mass of spineless jelly? Advise him that you have a strong, but unconfirmed, suspicion that his woman has been cheating on him. It doesn’t matter how loudly he has proclaimed in the past that “Nuh gyal cyan give me bun!” and “If she waan leave, mek she leave den! Rrrr!”, news of his woman’s infidelity will cause his nerve to shatter like Red Stripe bottles thrown on stage at Sting. Jamaican men are secretly terrified of being cuckolded and it’s not hard to understand why. A huge part of our self esteem rests on our supposed mastery of the fairer sex. When the fairer sex asserts its will by choosing another man over us it amounts to a nullification of our “mastery” which generally destroys our confidence and leaves us a snivelling mess. Credit Bureaus: This one should properly be filed under “Things Jamaicans will soon be afraid of”. The Jamaican Parliament has been discussing the passage of laws that will allow for the creation of credit bureaus in Jamaica. These credit bureaus will collect data on your credit history and will facilitate the sharing of that data between qualified institutions who will use this data to decide whether or not to extend credit to you and, if so, on what terms. The money you still owe Courts for the sofa you bought in 97? It will be on a file down at the credit bureau. The JPS bill you haven’t paid in 6 months? On file. The flat-screen tv that Singer repossessed last year? Also on file. In fact, it’s just a matter of time before they make a record of the $3,700 you still owe Fatty for 3 lap dances and a massage down at Palais Royale Club. Every overdue bill, missed payment and unpaid expense will be permanently recorded, stored on a computer and readily available for sharing amongst your creditors. Be afraid. Be very afraid. Rain: Maybe the fear of rain is not that perplexing. In Jamaica, what starts out as a light drizzle no heavier than morning dew can turn into three days of landslide-causing, crop-destroying, car-washing-away downpours. That said, I still think our fear of rain is a little overdone. Let the sky look even slightly overcast and Jamaicans will postpone their own weddings, much less a bar-b-q, football match or trip to the movies. The real truth of the matter is that we are a “dry-wedda” people. The English are completely different. Short of a category 5 hurricane, an Englishman will pull on his galoshes and raincoat, grab his brolly, calmly step out into the downpour and get on with his life. Not us. At the first sight of rain, traffic will grind to a halt and parents will consider whether to keep their kids out of school for the rest of the week. Others will call in sick an’ lock up inside the house for the whole day wid a cup of Milo and yesterday’s Gleaner. Being Unable to Perform Sexually: How else do you explain the thousands of performance enhancers, stamina boosters and pleasure arousers available in the Jamaican marketplace? From home-made creations like Irish Moss, Stone and Raw Moon sold on street-corners to modern mass-produced concoctions like Jagra, Mandingo and Power Wine to doctor-prescribed Cialis and Viagra Jamaicans have almost unlimited options when it comes to ensuring sexual satisfaction. Jamaican men love to brag about being bedroom bullies and what not, but I think we realise a fundamental and very sobering truth: If you talk the talk you sure as hell better be able to walk the walk! Soap: When was the last time you took a crowded NTCS bus from Downtown Kinston to Three Miles on a hot Friday afternoon in the middle of August? The smell is enough to make your eyes water. I don’t want to generalise but obviously there are some folks who are terrified by soap. Having Your United States Visa Revoked: Let’s be honest, the only reason some of us continue to live in Jamaica is because we have the option of running away at any minute. At the first sign of the revolution we’ll be jumping on a flight to Fort Lauderdale where our second home, our US$ bank accounts and Grandma Thelma are already waiting for us. So can you imagine the terror that must have gripped the hearts of many Jamaicans in upper St. Andrew when it was reported recently in the media that the United States Government was revoking the visas of a number of prominent Jamaicans? Perish the thought! If you have anymore for us to add, just email us at chatboutjamaica@gmail.com