

Year in Review: The Best of Dancehall and Reggae in 2012

It seems like just yesterday the year started, but 2012 is already coming to a close; marking a year within Dancehall and Reggae music that showcased its share of pacesetters during Jamaica's 50th year of Independence.

Fitting that in a year where Usain Bolt and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce re-defined the realms of speed in London, there were a number of fast-rising stars who proved consistently that no finish line is in sight regarding their promising careers. This year proved that there may be a future for our core genres after despite two of their proverbial kings, Buju Banton and Vybz Kartel serving different forms of penance behind bars. With that said, here are my picks for the Best of 2012 in Dancehall & Reggae music.

Best Reggae Artiste – Romain Virgo: Firstly, let me say it's quite pleasing to know the presence of Reggae, the musical art form that made Jamaica a household name, has finally re-stamped its authority on the local scene. A borage of all-Reggae projects like Busy Signal's Reggae Music Again and Delly Ranx's The Next Chapter help Jamaica to regain some of its true identity during our most crucial year as an independent island. However, one artiste and album conquered all. Virgo became an instant sensation when he conquered Digicel Rising Stars in 2007. Five years later, his star has shone amongst the brightest in the industry, primarily through his latest compilation, The System. Giving us hits like I Know Better, Rich in Love and The System, the album embodied the true essence of Reggae. His performance savvy and range have vastly improved year by year, proving why he is Reggae music's next international superstar.

Comeback Artiste(s) of the Year – Cham/Da'Ville: After scoring a major hit with Stronger (feat. Bounty Killer and Mykal Rose), Cham seemingly disappeared into the abyss for a little while. However, 2012 proved that Cham has not only refused to desert from the scene, he has an oasis of hits left in the tank. Wine, Back Way and Tun Up were just three of the hits Cham scored in a remarkable year for the highly acclaimed superstar. His lyrical ingenuity reached new levels and while ascending up the musical stratosphere, he brought his wife and upcoming singer, Ophelia 'O' Beckett along for the ride. Da'Ville endured a rollercoaster ride off-stage as he attempted to re-charge his batteries musically. Those batteries were fully charged as the Reggae fusion singer returned with a bang this year through his critically-endorsed album, Krazy Love. Hits like Woman, This Love and You Got Di Ting once again made Da'Ville a force to be reckoned within the industry and offered a more savvy side to this wise veteran of the industry.

Best New Artiste – Masicka: Unfortunately, 2012 didn't quite produce the bundle of promising young talent to give us hope for years to come. On the contrary, up-and-comers like Spechinal, Deep Jahi, Saine, Chronixx and Nature showed flashes of brilliance throughout 2012 while gaining some of the mainstream attention they crave. In the case of Masicka, that attention came constantly as songs like Talk and Introduction proved plausible efforts. Never shying away from the freestyle circuit, or confrontation, Masicka showed he has no fear of what's ahead. Not only was this maestro of wordplay featured on Best of Summer, his biggest hit to date, Guh Haad and Done was remixed as an official theme song for the Jamaican Olympic team. Let's hope Masicka continues to 'Guh Haad' and won't be 'Done' anytime soon.

Best Riddim: Overtime (JA Productions): There were a few Riddims that piqued my interest from start to finish, primarily the Poolside Riddim (Washroom Entertainment), Real Reggae Riddim (Payday Music) and Coolie Gal Riddim (UIM Records). But when it comes to making hypnotizing beats, Justus Arison and Patrick 'Roach' Samuels apparently possess the winning formula. In 2011, they dominated the charts with one of the greatest Dancehall compilations to date, the Overproof Riddim. This year, JA Productions added to their credentials with Overtime, producing tracks like Clean Heart (Beenie Man), Na Na Na (Christopher Martin) and Caribbean Girls (Mavado). Undoubtedly, the soothing instrumentals, powerful bass line, amongst other features makes the Overtime Riddim a must listen for years to come.

Best Collaboration: Specialist feat. Ishawna (Do For Love): Though Dem a Pree (Bounty Killer and I-Octane) as well as Why Yuh Mad (Tifa and Spice) deserve honorable mentions, Specialist and Ishawna take the cake with their Dancehall-themed rendition of the class track, Do For Love. Remaking Bobby Caldwell's What You Won't Do For Love, Downsound Records played on the beats made for the original version of the song as well as the rap remix done by late rap legend, Tupac Shakur, pushing Ishawna's vocal limits while allowing Specialist to throw his weight around with an edgier deejaying style. Do For Love did the original song some justice and particularly gave Ishawna her greatest contribution to date.

Best Dancehall Song: Mr. Vegas (Bruk It Dung): Perhaps the longest analysis of a category was this one as I literally had to play eeny, meeny, miny, moe between a number of chart-toppers; primarily Gyal a Bubble (Konshens), Jump (RDX), Back To Life (Vybz Kartel) and Bruk It Dung (Mr. Vegas). In the end, I gambled on Vegas. Bruk It Dung topped every local chart known to Jamaicans while earning strong acclaim in North America, Europe and Africa. What makes it stand out, however, is the catchy beat with an up-tempo feel. Bruk It Dung sounds like the perfect exercise song to get the ladies warmed up before work, and from what I saw while back home over the summer, they get very heated when sound systems play it. It's a keepsake for Dancehall fans to enjoy for generations to come, and if the curvaceous Trinidadian rap sensation, Nicki Minaj says she loves to Bruk It Dung, how could you not give your full endorsement.

Best Reggae Song - (Affairs of the Heart – Damian Marley): Damian 'Jr. Gong' Marley appeared seldom under the spotlight this year. But he surely shone bright when he did so, especially through his chart-topping smash, Affairs of

The Heart. Combining elements of Reggae and pop, Affairs of the Heart proved that the art of making pure love songs is not a lost one. It's a track every generation of music lovers can enjoy as Marley's track creates an aura of paradise that lures us into a deep trance. That, coupled with an electrifying performance at Reggae Sumfest 2012 present strong evidence why Junior Gong bares the greatest resemblance musically to his late, iconic father, Bob Marley.

Female Deejay of the Year ‐ Tifa: 2012 has been a campaign for highly-revered Dancehall diva, Tifa to command the due respect and accolades her talent has warranted for quite some time. Though she still faces her share of burdens, Tifa definitely accomplished her mission this year. Songs like Wife Mi Up and Why You Mad (featuring Spice) helped Tifa to assert her dominance within the local scene. But her crowning achievement came by earning top spot on the MTV Base Africa chart, her second number one single outside of Jamaica. Like Tiana in 2011, Tifa became widely outspoken against the continued marginalization of female entertainers within Dancehall music, particularly after a backstage incident at Reggae Sumfest 2012. Though the Queen of Dancehall, Lady Saw may frown upon her these days, Tifa can happily call herself the crown jewel of Dancehall for 2012.

Male Deejay of The Year ‐ Konshens: With Dancehall's most controversial and popular superstar languishing inside the Horizon Remand Centre, fans and industry players cried out for the next best thing within the genre. Those cries were heard, quickly turning to cheers because of one man. Konshens is the runaway Deejay of the Year winner for my money; delivering consistency with a long list of hits like Gyal a Bubble, Stop Sign, So Mi Tan, Gyal Sidung (feat. Darrio), amongst a litany of others. Showing an edgier, hardcore image, Konshens revealed himself to be more than the conscious-sounding pretty boy he appeared to be in his early days, as proof through his X-rated music video alongside Leftside (Clap It Up.) His debut album, Mental Maintenance was the best project by a Jamaican artiste in 2012, topping digital charts across three continents. Unlike Shaggy and Sean Paul, Konshens has been trying to cross over with his sound internationally without having to change it drastically in order to woo the foreign market. Whether it will translate to Billboard success like his predecessors remains to be seen, but with the talent and improvisation Konshens possesses, you can't help but think he can triumph.

Artiste(s) to Watch in 2013 - Tommy Lee Sparta/O: Though big spurts of success oozed for these two entertainers, 2013 will set the stage for Tommy Lee and O to put up or shut up within Dancehall circles. Tommy Lee Sparta has become the new 'Gaza' poster child in Vybz Kartel's absence, delivering notable efforts like P**** Mechanic, Psycho and Some Bwoy. However, there's quite an amount of fine tuning for Uncle Demon to make before he can consistently terrorize the airwaves. Tommy Lee Sparta has to prove he has more weapons in his lyrical arsenal than singing about evil spirits and badness. Also, if Kartel were to somehow secure freedom in the New Year, will Tommy Lee Sparta's name still hold the same clout he claims as it has attained his mentor awaits trial on murder charges?

On the female side, O has shown her potential as the next big Dancehall diva while teaming with her husband on several hit songs. But while she's offered strong efforts while part of Dancehall's new power couple, the question remains whether or not O can deliver that reputable solo effort that can help push her to greater heights. Lady Saw put her full endorsement behind O during an Entertainment Report interview earlier this year, making it more critical that she delivers the goods that her infectious sound and sex appeal seem to possess. Will O capitalize on this new found fame? Only time will tell. Source: Examiner