

2013 Year in Review: The best songs, artists and stories in Jamaican music

After a 2012 which saw Jamaica return to the roots of its music during its 50th anniversary year, the majority of 2013 proved to be a major letdown and appeared to be heading for irrelevancy within the pantheon on memorable Jamaican periods.

That is, until a certain sparkly 28-year-old singer reminded everyone that our music still has a very long shelf-life, if attention is focused on the right channels. Tessanne Chin added a much needed boost to what was a mostly ordinary year within Jamaican music and entertainment. From a downsizing of hit songs, to increasingly poor album sales in the United States, to undying scrutiny regarding lyrical content and party regulations, these were trying times for artists and music lovers alike in 2013. Nevertheless, we try to look on the brighter side of things in our music. With that said, check out this very detailed review looking at the songs, artists and news makers that made Jamaican music interesting in 2013. Feel free to comment below if you agree or disagree with these picks. Best New Artist ‐ Jah Bouks Honorable Mentions ‐ Keznamdi, Kelissa, Alkaline, Samantha J This year was a strong year for debutantes on the local scene. Keznamdi has music lovers re-thinking how they would spend each Weekend, Alkaline inked his eye and his name on the Dancehall scene, Kelissa continued a recent run of impressive, upcoming female singers coming out, while teenage sensation, Samantha J bragged about being the girl in the Tight Up Skirt. But, in this writer's opinion, there is only one winner. There is a strong amount of good, featured music by artists with potential, but little to no mainstream assurance. One such artist was a St. Thomas native by the name of Jah Bouks whose vocals and concepts were unique and smooth. After hearing songs like Angola and Don't Cry play so many times on radio, there was no doubt in this writer's mind 2013 would be Jah Bouks would be a breakout act, if he got the right push. Sai push came in the form of competing on season six of Magnum Kings and Queens of Dancehall, where his singing ability and stage presence instantly made him a hit with music lovers. He failed to emerge with the million-dollar grand prize, but his star had shone too brightly for him to fade in the limelight soon thereafter. Angola has been a big hit in mainstream media and on Jamaican streets, landing him several shows locally and overseas in the last six months. Going Home, Vital and others proved that this was not just any ordinary, fly-by-night tinker in his music, but someone whose vision is more wide-ranging than some veteran acts in today's business, if you listen to his content. 2014 will be a year in which music lovers will look on him Highly! As he would say. Male DeeJay of the Year ‐ I-Octane Honorable Mentions ‐ Aidonia, Vybz Kartel There was a huge struggle with this pick, nearly a temptation to leave this award vacant in all honesty, as no Dancehall artist really made his mark on the scene all year-round, struggling for a string of hits. Konshens, who asserted his authority in Dancehall throughout 2012 with a slew of number ones, was mostly an afterthought this year, with Pull Up To Mi Bumper (feat. J Capri) really being his only standout song, with well over six million YouTube views. Vybz Kartel, still awaiting word on his freedom from a long-standing murder charge, produced his share of noteworthy songs such as School, Business and Georgina. But, as often the case with the 'World's Boss' in recent years, he follows up one big song with five low quality ones.

Aidonia certainly looked like the frontrunner in the first half of the year, driving female audiences mad with songs like Fi Di Jockey, Bruki and Tip Pon Yuh Toe, but his work released since the summer drastically failed to replicate that early success. So, in the end, this honour goes to I-Octane. His hit at the start of the year, Gyal A Gimme Bun was a hit with music lovers, adding a mix of old-school vibes with new school humor, as evidenced by the accompanying video. Happy Time and Wine and Jiggle have also been strong on local charts and, despite some skepticism going in, Octane validated the faith shown in him by Reggae Sumfest organizers to close their Dancehall Night with one of his better performances. Mind you, this was not as solid a year for him as 2010 was, but in a year where many Dancehall acts flattered to deceive, he managed to topple them all. Female DeeJay of the Year ‐ Lady Saw Honorable Mentions ‐ Macka Diamond, Spice Unlike the male version of this category, the female one took much less thought, because frankly, content from female deejays was very limited. Macka Diamond certainly had the biggest song amongst her compatriots with the chart-topping single, Dye Dye, but could not duplicate that form with her follow-up efforts, no matter how raunchy or edgy her promotional or lyrical content got. Spice also had a pair of modest hits, Twerk and Dun Wife which were catchy and thought-provoking, but she was mostly anonymous otherwise, with her beefs with Macka Diamond and the winner of this category mainly keeping her talked about in the press. For all intent and purposes, Lady Saw was supposed to be done with Dancehall ‐ moving on to a calmer, more spiritual lifestyle after growing tired of the stress and obstacles within a genre she dominated for decades. But the inner 'bad gyal' in her just could not resist staying away for good. Her video for Heels On, and the remix (featuring Flo-Rida) put her back on the international map again. Her solo set at STING 2013, and, moments later, lyrical decapitation of the aforementioned Macka Diamond during their heated clash at the show really summed up how much Dancehall still needs its queen. She still has the edge and lyrical quality left to be a force in the business, as Heels On proved. Time will tell if she follows up on her decision on walk away for good, but her fans will certainly try their best to keep her around. Reggae Artist of the Year ‐ Chronixx Honorable Mentions ‐ Sizzla, Beres Hammond, Etana After a year which saw him rise to instant super stardom with one international hit after the next, one could forgive Chronixx if he relented and moseyed along 2013 while trying to find firm footing within this new-found status. Nope, he is a Warrior, and he continues to fight his way to the top with alarming ease. Conceptually, he is well beyond his years, showcased

through his chart-topping hit, Smile Jamaica, a song reminiscent of Bob Marley's classic, with a spin on it comparing Jamaica to a beautiful woman. After dropping one of the best songs of 2013, he could again be forgiven for taking his foot off the gas pedal. Of course, again, he refused. Access Granted, Rain Music, Most I and Here Comes Trouble went over with Jamaicans far and wide, earning rotation in markets such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Billboard has already identified him as potentially Reggae music's next big superstar, and who would blame them for jumping to that conclusion this early, given his catalogue. In fairness, Sizzla, Beres Hammond and Etana put out solid hits which did not received nearly the same airplay or approval, but were solid throughout the year, both in studio and on stage. The former two received nods for the 2014 Best Reggae Album Grammy, while Etana, in this writer's opinion, should have earned a similar nod. Given the trajectory Chronixx is on, such recognition will be coming his way much sooner than later, and deservedly so. Song of the Year – Bumaye (Major Lazer feat. Busy Signal) Honorable Mentions – Smile Jamaica (Chronixx), Gyal a Gimme Bun (I-Octane), Nuh Compatible (Bugle) There were a few gems that sparkled song-wise within the seemingly rusting jewel that was Jamaican music in 2013; all of them dominating for a long stretch of time. Gyal a Gimme Bun was Dancehall's biggest, most noteworthy hit between January and March, racking up number ones and giving pop culture a new term to exhaust with 'Mi chest plate a bun mi.' Nuh Compatible was one of the spring's most talked about songs, composed by journeyman artist, Bugle, who finally earned his first real mainstream hit since his debut single, What We Gonna Do five years earlier. The acclaim it received was deserved and gave those going through untenable relationships a song to hang their hat on. As mentioned in the previous slide, Smile Jamaica was a stroke of genius by Chronixx, and was easily the best Reggae song for 2013. But, the winner of this category had his song play in the background of a Pepsi commercial featuring world footballing great, Lionel Messi. Enough said. Busy Signal, seeking that next, big mainstream hit since being released from prison in November of last year, teamed with Major Lazer for the single, Bumaye, which in English, means kill them (a phrase shouted during Muhammad Ali's legendary fight with George Foreman). This top-of-the-line, collaboration was, to use another boxing reference, an instant knockout, earning over 40 million YouTube hits, platinum status in Denmark and that aforementioned commercial with Messi. It was a throwback-themed song – using old-time Dancehall sounds and terms – that morphed into a commercial success and made Busy a major international player once again. Story of the Year – Tessanne is 'The Voice' There could only be one winner or nominee for this honor; a no-brainer really. Some four or five months ago, Tessanne Chin was a relative afterthought struggling to find a major breakthrough that would launch a once promising career that mostly stalled since making her mainstream debut as a teenager in 2004. Thanks to smart advice from Shaggy and one-chair-turning audition in Los Angeles, she went from Hideaway to being one of the most sought after musicians in the world right now. Chin long possessed the vocal range, clarity and stage presence necessary to become a superstar, and after successfully auditioning for season five of NBC's The Voice, those qualities were finally there for a much bigger audience than ours to witness. Song by song, she hit every high note with ease, and round-by-round, more American viewers were warming up to a woman whose personality and talent were too irresistible a combination to overlook. Her last two solo performances – of Simon and Garfunkel's Bridge Over Troubled Water and Whitney Houston's I Have Nothing – were two of the most memorable performances ever displayed by a Jamaican artist, or on any talent show worldwide for that matter. With every well-sung word, she had her own coach, Adam Levine, and really everyone else speechless, leaving one to wonder how high her ceiling really is. Winning The Voice and an American recording contract were mere formalities really. It was the way she galvanized her entire country to the point bars and Half-Way-Tree square were filled to Bolt-like proportions that was the real story. Jamaican music, and Jamaica in general, now had something to smile broadly about in a year filled with economic and social mishaps and drug controversy surrounding the island's main source of unbridled joy in recent years, its track and field team. Chin brought a badly-needed light on the island in dark times and has given every local musician to believe that a break is coming, with just a little persistence and attention to detail required. She now has the opportunity to become the island's next musical icon and open doors for Jamaican in an American market which has not been kind to them since the days of Damian 'Jr. Gong' Marley, Shaggy and Sean Paul. Here is to hoping in 2014, she lays the foundation for Jamaica building a much stronger home musically. Source: Dancehall USA