

Playing with Fire: Dancehall, Gospel Reggae and the Performance of Conversion in Jamaica

‘I am a traditionalist and the Jamaican feel comes out of [my music] naturally. I wasn't trying to change the beat; it was God's intention. God created the music for his pleasure and all of it belongs to him’. —Lester Lewis (Jebbinson 2006)

‘Reggae music is our indigenous music given to us by God Almighty. ... You will never convert those youth on the street by going there and singing "Rock of Ages Cleft For Me." Because they don't know it. You have to meet them with the music that they know’. —Judy Mowatt (Dawes 2003b)

‘I don't desire to sing anything else but Gospel and anything I sing must be Bible based. I am not going to compromise Christ in that I am going to sing love songs, my songs must be Bible based or nothing at all. They must show some signal to Jesus Christ’. —Papa San (Thompson 2001: 18)

Guitarist and singer-songwriter Lester Lewis is a well-respected pioneer of the genre of music known as ‘gospel reggae’. Although Lewis is now a practicing Christian, he smoked marijuana and embraced Rastafarianism in his youth. Singer Judy Mowatt achieved fame in the 1970s as a member of Bob Marley's background vocal trio, the I-Threes, and she was committed to Rastafarian beliefs for twenty-two years before converting to Christianity in 1994. Mowatt uses reggae music as the backdrop for lyrics that present a biblical message of social and spiritual empowerment. Former dancehall DJ Papa San converted from Rastafarianism to Christianity in the late 1990s. His 1999 recording, *Victory*, is among the first gospel recordings to employ a hardcore dancehall style.¹

The musical styles and conversion narratives of these three gospel reggae artists shed important light on issues that have long characterised Jamaica's social and musical spheres. By employing sounds from the dancehall, Lester Lewis, Judy Mowatt, and Papa San perform gospel music that cuts across sacred and secular categories.² This creative decision garners disapproval

¹ I conducted ethnomusicological fieldwork in Jamaica from February to December 2002. This work was supported by a grant from the Fulbright Institute of International Education.

² The Center for Black Music Research defines gospel music as ‘African-American Protestant vocal music that celebrates Christian doctrine in emotive, often dramatic ways’ (<http://www.colum.edu/cbmr/Resources/style-genre-definitions.html> accessed 10 September 2015). In the Caribbean, however, the meaning of the genre is less stable

from conservative Christians who doubt the sincerity and authenticity of these artists' religious conversions. Their embrace of local genres has, however, won them the admiration of those who see them as innovative Christian cultural ambassadors. Presenting the gospel through musical styles that reflect a Jamaican cultural identity, gospel reggae performers 'converse' with a wide set of listeners. The latter include a variety of Christian congregants and dancehall participants, for whom gospel reggae and dancehall music are vehicles for the narration and dramatisation of flow across religious and social boundaries. These genres allow participants to toy with notions of appropriateness and make explicit their struggles for cultural and spiritual legitimacy.

In the pages that follow, I highlight these musical exchanges as they pertain to interrelated processes of conversion and conversation. Conversion is a concept central to Pentecostal Christianity in Jamaica and around the world. It rests upon the notion that personal transformation is the most significant process of one's social and spiritual life. In many instances, Pentecostal conversion occurs through the experience of being filled or baptised with 'the Holy Spirit and fire' (Matthew 3:11), which is believed to initiate transformation from the natural to the spiritual mode of being and understanding. Conversion of this type is evidenced by the ecstatic experience of glossolalia or 'speaking in tongues', as described in the Acts of the Apostles (e.g., Acts 2:4). But as a marker of conversion and a mode of 'spiritual conversation', tongue-speaking is not without controversy.⁴

(Best 2004: 55). The transmission of gospel music from the United States certainly shapes the ways in which Jamaicans characterise the genre. When I asked Jamaican Pentecostals to define it, some responded by naming traditional African American gospel singers such as Mahalia Jackson, Shirley Caesar, and James Cleveland. Those more familiar with contemporary styles mentioned artists such as John P. Kee, Yolanda Adams, Mary Mary, and Kirk Franklin. Other churchgoers distinguish gospel music as either 'African American' or 'Jamaican', using the latter to specify any of the sacred genres deemed the product of island soil—from country-and-western influenced 'Christian music' to harder-edged gospel reggae.

⁴ Not all Pentecostals view speaking in tongues, fire baptism, or Holy Spirit infilling as an essential practice or evidence of conversion. Some Pentecostals describe it merely as a post-conversion experience signaling 'sanctification' from the power of sin. Furthermore, while many embrace the teaching that speaking in tongues is one of several spiritual gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12, there are disagreements about the extent to which

Music makers enact conversion processes as they flow between ritual spaces of the church and dancehall and render strategic performances of cultural and spiritual identity. This concept of conversion works for me in at least two ways. On one level, it involves musical and spiritual transformation—the ‘renewing of minds’ that, for believers, calls to mind New Testament scripture (e.g., Romans 12). Conversion to Christianity, along with the experience of being ‘fire baptised’, is said to accompany a renouncing of the ways of ‘the world’.⁵ This experience is what dancehall artists such as those cited above describe as the catalyst for their rebirth as gospel reggae artists. These artists have conformed their lyrics to a biblical message, while their instrumental accompaniment retains its dancehall flavor. On another level, I expand the notion of conversion to encompass the practice of ‘conversing’ with a diverse set of musical and social interlocutors. The sung and spoken convers(at)ions among church members, gospel reggae artists, and secular dancehall DJs are tied to the cultural politics of converting ‘unrighteous’ Jamaican citizens in whichever social and ritual space they frequent. The observations I draw resonate with Martin Stokes’s keen observations on music’s social significance. Music, he argues, ‘provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them’ (1997: 5). Musical performances also reveal the elasticity of ritual actions, the complexity of musical experiences, and the porousness of sacred-secular boundaries.⁶

tongue-speaking as it occurred on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) should occur in the modern-day Church. Felicitas Goodman (1972) and William Samarin (1972) offered influential sociolinguistic and psychological ‘explanations’ of glossolalia; but this research disregards the phenomenology of religious experience and attempts to invalidate believers’ faith-based perspectives. Anthropologist Glenn Hinson provides a more sensitive ethnographic account, but cautions that ‘one cannot assess divine involvement by the mere presence or absence of dramatic conduct like...speaking in tongues’ (2000: 38). See Hogue (2010) and Warrington (2008) for in-depth theological analyses.

⁵ ‘Fire’ is a common metaphor for the Holy Spirit (e.g., Hinson 2000). I have also heard it used to symbolize purification and judgment.

⁶ I also draw from Diane Austin-Broos’s research on this topic, in which she describes conversion as ‘a type of passage that negotiates a place in the world’. She adds that conversions are often ‘remarkably diverse’. Some comprise ‘immediate and intense somatic experiences’, while others are more like ‘long conversation[s]’ (2003: 2).

To ground my discussion, I begin with a brief case study of Pentecostal Christians who pledge allegiance to a strict moral code and ascetic lifestyle. A hallmark of their church music is its liveliness and ritual efficacy, but they regard the energetic music produced in secular dancehall spaces as ‘worldly’ and sinful because of its thematic associations with violence and sexual wantonness. They hear dancehall songs, with their driving syncopated rhythms and rough vocal timbres, as audible symbols of unrighteousness and describe them as a scourge on the island’s soundscape. In the remainder of the article, I put Christianity and gospel reggae in conversation with the work of secular dancehall artists who have injected biblical themes into their music and sparked debate. Churchgoers are on the receiving end of musical chastisement, as artists challenge conventional meanings of authentic holiness through song lyrics and visual representations. As I show, dancehall performers appropriate critical narratives and redirect them against Christian believers who claim to be ‘in the world, but not of the world’. Through dancehall performance, they embody competing notions of righteousness and call out churchgoers for hypocrisy. Amid these arguments, gospel reggae, also known as ‘dancehall gospel’, has emerged as an alluring and provocative form precisely because it blends the sounds and textures of dancehall music with a Christian message.⁷ Gospel reggae is, in many ways, a connective sonic tissue. It facilitates conversation between Christian and non-Christian actors and provides a means of redefining what it means to be ‘holy’ and ‘worldly’ in Jamaican society. In each of the musical situations I describe, narratives of conversion are crucial to the ways in which performers situate themselves within Jamaica’s theological and musical landscape.

⁷ Karen Cyrus makes a helpful distinction between the ‘reggae’ used to accompany congregational singing and the ‘dancehall gospel’ that typically features a soloist singing or rapping over a beat (Henry 2008). However, some church leaders may avoid using the term ‘dancehall’ in reference to those who sing Christian lyrics simply because of the ‘worldly’ baggage this term carries with it. ‘Reggae’ is felt to be a much safer alternative, even perhaps when the accompanying rhythms and timbres are indistinguishable from those of secular dancehall performers.

Pentecostal Holiness and Dancehall Danger

As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy. —1 Peter 1:14-16 (King James Version)

I believe if there was some dancehall going on [here] tonight, you could not find any room. So we have to know the devil is busy. —Pastor Wilmore, Montego Bay, Jamaica

Dancehall is a local and global phenomenon that has been a major force in the Caribbean's musical and social landscapes for decades, spreading from Jamaica to countries around the world. The term 'dancehall music' has been widely used only since the late 1980s, but Jamaicans have been 'creating cultural counterworlds through secular music and dance performances in the 'cultural spaces' known as dancehalls for more than two centuries' (Stolzoff 2000: 3–4; cf. Erlmann 1991: 18). For some Christians, dancehall music lacks divine approval. It registers as a dangerous and untamed form of 'noise' whether it is performed over sacred or secular lyrics.⁸ Gospel reggae is, however, less 'noisy' than other genres. It carries a Christian message, albeit one that is often lost on those who cannot hear beyond the 'black noise' of hip-hop culture (Rose 1994).⁹ Those who favor gospel reggae within a festival or concert frame often justify it on the grounds that it helps to attract young people and keep them in the church. Still, Johnson and Henry (2007) note that because dancehall styles are considered 'less than holy in content, beat, culture and expression', gospel artists who use them are 'seen to be treading a thin line between the faith and the secular music industry'.¹⁰

⁸ I gesture here to the work of Jacques Attali (1985), for whom noise constitutes 'a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission' (26). Dancehall music's repetitive bass and drum rhythms mark it as a contemporary, mass-produced commodity. While this music often appeals to young Pentecostal Christians, it incurs the scorn of those who prefer congregational hymn singing without the perceived 'pollution' of modern technology.

⁹ The passage of the 1997 Noise Abatement Act brought a crackdown of excessively loud music of all types, including gospel concerts. But some have insisted that this Act is unfairly enforced, providing greater leeway for secular events supported mostly by the rich, including the annual Jamaican Carnival (Evans 2004a).

¹⁰ A *Gleaner* article describes the 'holy lyrical war' waged by gospel reggae performers striving to spread the Christian message 'outside of the hallowed precincts of the church' (Henry 2008). The article also features the

Pentecostal Christians in Jamaica learn many guidelines concerning the kinds of music acceptable for worship services and private listening. Those who are obedient strive to adhere to the holy, consecrated standard of living advocated by church leaders. To embrace a holy lifestyle is to abide by biblical teachings and to reject the ways of ‘the world’, which include drug and alcohol consumption, profanity, extramarital sex, and immodest apparel. This all-encompassing standard of holiness also mandates that faithful believers eschew commercial popular musics such as dancehall and reggae, which are often seen as emblematic of the Jamaican nation-state. The term ‘conversation’ in the book of 1 Peter (cited above), is used to denote not only one’s style of communicating, but also one’s complete way of living. Preachers and teachers quote this passage of scripture to instill in congregants, especially new converts, a desire to renounce ‘former lusts’ and to embrace their spiritual rebirth.

The ‘rules’ of musical consumption are passed down through mid-week Bible classes, as well as before the main morning worship service each Sunday morning. Church teachers use lessons on ‘holy conversation’ to stress the comprehensive requirements of Christian discipleship. To be a Christian means to embrace one’s identity as a ‘new creature’, one who has been ‘born again’ to lead a life distinct from the ways of the ‘old man’. As 2 Corinthians 5:17 states, ‘If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new’.¹¹ The process of conversion involves a letting go of worldly pleasures, including musical ones, and an attempt to acquire new tastes that accord with those sanctioned by God.

During a ‘testimony’ segment of the worship service, Pentecostal Christians are given the opportunity to share conversion experiences, and this becomes another means through which

comments of ethnomusicologist Karen Cyrus, who notes that ‘since the 1990s...reggae is used to accompany singing in many Pentecostal, Pentecostal-like, evangelical, and charismatic churches in Jamaica’.

¹¹ Likewise, another Pauline epistle instructs believers to ‘put off the old man with his deeds’ (Colossians 3:9).

believers learn guidelines for what musics are appropriate. As a church member ‘testifies’, she often presents to the congregation a ‘before-and-after’ description of herself. ‘Before I got saved, I *used to* listen to all kinds of worldly music; I *used to* go to the dancehall; I *used to* do all sorta ungodly things. But I thank God for saving me. The things I *used to* do, I do no more!’ Fueled by congregational responses of ‘Amen!’ and ‘Praise God!’ from the congregation, such narratives of conversion are a critical type of ritual conversation. They marshal group support for narratives that cast dancehall musics as characteristic of a less desirable past life, situating dancehall in the category of bygone pleasures that are ‘passed away’ and replaced by the joys of salvation. Yet former musical pleasures are understood to retain their influence on converts who yield to temptation and allow the ‘old man’ to return.

It is not uncommon for Jamaican church leaders to attribute the sparse attendance at a prayer meeting to worldly influences. Remarks such as those by Pastor Wilmore (above) portray the world as Satan’s playground and speak to the deep concern many pastors express about the allure of dancehall spaces and sounds. During evening services I attended throughout Jamaica, I would often hear the pounding of a bass drum emanating from a not-too-distant sound system—a ubiquitous reminder of the expressive power and influence of secular dancehall culture. Pastor Wilmore, who heads Narrow Way Church in Montego Bay, feels that the proximity of these dancehall sounds creates a dangerous temptation for his teen and young adult members, whom he challenges to adhere to acceptable forms of musical expression in the midst of what is described to them as a hostile sonic environment. ‘We’re fasting for revival in Jamaica’, he once announced. ‘Every dancehall must be shut down!’ This extreme level of disdain for dancehalls is often expressed among the laity themselves, especially those who frequented them before converting to Christianity. I have spoken to many men and women who describe the dancehall as

an ever-present threat capable of wooing them back into a lifestyle they have renounced. This perceived dancehall threat, underscored in the sermons of a predominantly male leadership, contributes to the stricter dress guidelines pertaining to women's dress. The female form is masked to reinforce the aesthetic boundary between the church, where tight clothing, makeup, and jewelry are often forbidden, and dancehall spaces, in which such items are the norm and the female form is accentuated.

Along with the special concern pastors express for maintain the 'virtue' of women, there is also a marked emphasis on protecting youth from dancehall dangers. By monitoring the ritual use of music, older church members at Narrow Way set the boundaries of musical holiness and hope to prevent their teens from backsliding into 'the world' and falling out of God's favor. In services I attended, I took note of two songs, 'Jesus' Name So Sweet' and 'Gospel Time', which posed particular challenges. Near the conclusion of one service, a group of teen congregants began singing the chorus, 'Jesus' Name So Sweet', as others stood at the altar praying. The teens began with a traditional rendition of the lyrics but then, feeling less inhibited since the service was almost over, they switched into a patois version re-popularised in Jamaica through a reggae styled recording of the piece by African American gospel singer Donnie McClurkin. This chorus is normally performed with a rhythmic feel less identified with 1970s-style reggae or with the contemporary dancehall. In this case, however, the instrumentalists picked up on the teens' linguistic shift and adjusted their rhythmic groove to resemble McClurkin's dancehall reggae accompaniment. Pastor Wilmore, who already had been trying for the past ten minutes to calm things down and stop the musicians from playing so he could dismiss service with prayer, gestured more urgently for the musicians to stop. His efforts suggest that the boundary of appropriate church music needed to be policed with special vigilance. This is especially true in

situations where believers are ‘rejoicing in the Lord’ and, consequently, becoming increasingly demonstrative in their bodily movements. For many pastors, a shift into worldly sounds accompanies entry into a realm of sexual suggestiveness made visible through embodied musical praise. While dancehall participants embrace overt displays of sensuality and sexuality, Pentecostal practitioners either refuse to acknowledge them as such or deem them offensive.

Within Pastor Wilmore’s congregation, an even bigger storm swirled around ‘Gospel Time’, the opening song on Beenie Man’s 1999 recording, *The Doctor*. Among Beenie Man’s recordings, ‘Gospel Time’ is unique in that it juxtaposes traditional church choruses against a hip-hop groove and a dancehall vocal style, deliberately creating a striking dissonance between the sacred and the profane, the church and the dance club. Christian critiques of Beenie Man’s song are also constructed with awareness of religious sentiments deemed representative of a ‘truer’ and more authentic divine experience. Eric, the church’s musical director elaborated, ‘The lyrics don’t really say anything of substance. A lot of the new songs are like that. Young people like to sing them, but they don’t really speak of a true experience’. However, the lyrics are perhaps less flawed than the messenger, whose oeuvre is notoriously tinged with a ‘slackness’ viewed as anathema within Christian circles.¹² ‘Gospel Time’ starts with a gentle vocal performance of a well-known church chorus in three-part harmony, after which there is a surprising shift to the following refrain:

Move to the left in the name of Jesus.
Move to the left in the name of the Lord.
Shake that booty that Jesus gave you.
Shake that booty in the name of the Lord.

¹² The term ‘slackness’ refers to a sexually explicit subgenre of dancehall music, the performers of which ‘are fully committed to the hedonistic path of individualism, sexual desire, and material consumption. In turn, the audience sees these artists as the very embodiment of these qualities’ (Stolzoff 163).

These lyrics are juxtaposed with classic gospel choruses, such as ‘Down by the Riverside’ and ‘Everybody Has to Know’. Whereas such choruses are a staple of Jamaican Christian churches, the refrain is uncommon and highly provocative. But given that believers place a premium on bodily praise, which involves a fair amount of ‘booty’ shaking, what's the problem with enjoining listeners to do so? Churchgoers with whom I spoke find Beenie Man's use of the term ‘booty’ jarring. Some are offended by what comes across as a deliberately irreverent attempt to ‘create some fuss’, make money, and get a laugh at the expense of true Christians. Although the lyrics are gender neutral, I believe the ‘booty’ to which Beenie Man refers registers as that of a woman; and the performer exploits notions of the irresistible, seductive, and dangerous female body. I believe notions of dancehall ‘corruption’ and ‘contagion’ stem as much from a fear of sexual temptation than the musical sound itself. Yet there are certain musical traits, such as the rough vocal timbre employed by dancehall artists like Beenie Man and Buju Banton, and the syncopated bass rhythm of many dancehall tracks, have become iconic representations of sexuality. I would argue that to many conservative Pentecostals, dancehall music sounds like sex. This is due to the layering of meanings the music has acquired over time, along with its associations with nightlife and the taboo pleasures of bodily encounter.

Notwithstanding these concerns, some churchgoers take no offense at secular artists who dabble in Christian thematic material. Rather, they are delighted by what they perceive to be the church's influence in a secular realm. Still, it is the gospel reggae of less satirical artists such as Papa San, Judy Mowatt, and Lester Lewis that occupies the most acceptable middle ground for Christians desirous of what was described to me as a ‘true Jamaican’ musical experience. Some critics of gospel reggae question the sincerity of these performers' conversions to Christianity.

Many suspect that conversion claims constitute nothing more than ‘a savvy marketing ploy to capture the untapped demand for dancehall music among Christian teenagers whose parents forbid them to listen to mainstream dancehall music’ (Stolzoff 2000: 268, n.4). Beenie Man's parodic rendition of ‘Gospel Time’, conspicuously positioned as the CD's first track, no doubt represents both a marketing strategy and also a tongue-in-cheek response to dancehall artists who, unlike him, claim to have converted. But almost any artist singing gospel lyrics over a presumed ‘secular’ beat can face criticism.

Appropriating Christianity: Ninjaman and Shaggy

In the early 1990s, dancehall DJs such as Ninjaman (born Desmond Ballentine) became popular in both the United States and Jamaica, establishing ‘rude boy’ reputations by recording songs about gun violence and street life. Ninjaman exemplifies the witty West Indian conversationalist—what Roger Abrahams famously referred to as a ‘man-of-words’ who is ‘capable of garnering a great deal of power, respect, and in many cases admiration through his artful speaking’ (1983: 21). Stolzoff notes that in Jamaica, ‘nearly all young entertainers modeled themselves after the DJ Ninjaman’. Many listeners and performers considered him ‘the only man who could rival Shabba Ranks, “Mr. Loverman”, for king of the dancehall’ (108). Ninjaman was best known as a master improviser—a ‘lyrical gangster’ who could performatively ‘murder’ his musical rivals in spur-of-the-moment duels in the dancehall. (163). But at age 31, this notorious gunman DJ converted briefly to Christianity (Stolzoff 268; Dawes 2003a, 1). He was baptised in a Spanish Town tent meeting, and as ‘Brother Desmond’, he set out on a new musical path, to the delight, and perhaps shock, of many in the Christian community. He made the decision to convert while listening to a sermon in which a Pentecostal

preacher from the United States called out, ‘Is there someone here tonight by the name of Ninja Man?’ The DJ recounts his conversion experience to a reporter from the *Jamaica Gleaner*: ‘You see when him say “Ninja Man”, the people dem look around and is like pure Holy Ghost vibes in the church. Everybody who can speak in tongues start speak in tongues—And me want to walk out, but me just had to go up to the rostrum’. Regarding his baptism, Ninjaman recalls, ‘I became a changed person in the water. For believe me, me is a violent youth and me not fraid to tell anybody. You see since me go in that water—it bring Ninja Man back right now where me can sit down and if a man even shove a knife through me, me will look on him and say, “You a idiot. I don't have any time for you.” That water made me know there is someone else to live for, to please more than my own ignorancy [sic]. Me just different from that day’ (Dawes 2003a).

Ninjaman had been exposed to Pentecostal Christianity early in life, but his return to the faith of his upbringing, along with his tenure as Brother Desmond, was short-lived, lasting only three months. Several run-ins with the law followed, as did rumors that he had once proclaimed, ‘Me baptise, but me gun nuh baptise!’ [‘I'm baptised, but my gun isn't baptised!'] as justification for alleged criminal activities. Ninjaman denied saying this, and he grew disenchanted with the reactions of Christians who were quick to denounce him and re-label him an outcast’. What you (the Christians) fi do if you hear say me say 'Me baptise but me gun nuh baptise', and you know sey me a old gunman? You not suppose to condemn me. You suppose to cuddle me and give me the help and the strength and the courage I need. But they (the Christians) were not there for me. But me glad. Me go on my own and me learn. And step out from church. It is now far from church and close to God’ (ibid). A local review of his performance at the Reggae Sumfest Heavyweight Countdown in 2000 seemed to confirm his ‘backslidden’ condition: ‘Ninja left no doubt that he...no longer has the Brother Desmond image adopted after his publicised baptism in

1997. ... With the fans urging him on, he, spouted expletives with impunity as he recounted his stint in prison and announced his future plans for the dancehall'.¹³ Those most familiar with Ninjaman's musical career were not surprised that he backslid, and some cast doubt on the notion that his conversion experience was sincere. Having renounced his church membership, Ninjaman continued to perform shows with R-rated themes. He nevertheless claimed to have found a more authentic connection with God.

In his *Gleaner* interview, Ninjaman expressed his belief that his mission is 'to lead the people to the Promised Land and to the Almighty God'. He also critiqued Christians for complacency, calling on them to 'go by the wayside and the hedges and stop sitting down in the church keeping secret with God. Because God's business is not a fridge. It is fridge alone you open to know what is in there before you can move. You fi just come out of your church and go to dances too - and tell them 'mi want to bus the show' and take the microphone and give them some Jesus lyrics - then people will start coming to dance to hear the Christian lyrics'. It is perhaps his cameo role in Shaggy's video 'Church Heathen', that sheds the most light on his and other dancehall artists' critical views of institutionalised Christianity.

Dancehall artist Shaggy wrote and recorded 'Church Heathen' in 2006. The video performance is striking in that it conflates Pentecostal and Catholic ritual, depicting handclapping-accompanied praise and worship, a lively and colorfully robed gospel choir, alongside images of a Catholic priest with rosary beads. In the opening scene, the sound of birds chirping evokes a peaceful, unspoiled country atmosphere, as the camera pans down to a church building made of stone. An attractive woman is shown approaching the church accompanied by her clearly annoyed husband. As the couple enters a church, she instructs him, 'Please don't

¹³ 'Ninja's Big Plan '...Me come fe tek over...' August 2, 2000. <http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20000802/star/star1.html> (accessed 19 February 2009).

embarrass me. Fix up yourself. Come. Fix up your shirt!’ The first musical sound we hear is that of congregants playing tambourines and singing ‘When the Saints Go Marching In’. The male protagonist, played by Shaggy, is noticeably underdressed, sporting sunglasses and a shirt halfway unbuttoned. His female escort is dressed in her Sunday best and has a choir robe draped across her arm, signaling to the viewer that she is an active church member. A quick fade out is then preceded by the sounds of unaccompanied medieval chant, which evoke a solemnity that is soon to be disrupted. A bell tolls three times, a dancehall groove commences, and then Shaggy steps out of character to make a spoken pronouncement. ‘Aha! If you take this too serious, then you really need some church!’ Shaggy thus portrays a double role: While his character is an unwilling invitee who becomes privy to shenanigans within the church, Shaggy also plays himself. He seems to suggest that those who would take offense at the video are blinded by sanctimony and thus unable or unwilling to acknowledge moral pretense. By stating that these same viewers ‘really need some church’, he offers critical commentary about the church while ironically re-legitimising it as a potential moral agent. However, by the video's end, it is uncertain whether Shaggy means that ‘some church’ would inculcate greater honesty about church hypocrisies, corroborate the video's claims in the minds of certain viewers, or clarify his performance as a blatantly irreverent and comedic satire.

After Shaggy's opening comment, two white women, one of whom has dyed hair, enter the sanctuary wearing miniskirts. Dressed in more formal church attire, about fifteen others follow. A chant-like refrain critiques those who engage in ‘careless living’, thinking that their sins are acceptable. Then three monk-like figures begin walking down the sanctuary's center aisle while swinging an incense holder. A provocatively dressed woman in a red dress also enters. A shirt-skirted woman enters and sits at the end of the pew right next to Shaggy's character. A

drum fill signals a transition, and the camera shows him sitting in a confessional chamber, where he begins his truth telling, revealing to the priest all that he has learned from ‘Sister Pam’. The camera flashes images of prayer with rosary beads juxtaposed with scantily clad dancing women and a cast of characters whose actions and clothing stand in tension with the sacred space in which they are situated: The priest is portrayed by dancehall artist, Ninjaman, whose hand features a long pink fingernail. Sister Pam is dressed more conservatively than the other characters, but is depicted as a chronic gossiper. An usher with folded bills between his fingers tries to get money from those present. Sister Paulette has a lip ring. Sister Gwen is wearing a hat and large, hooped earrings. She is first seen praising God with her hand uplifted; then the scene shifts and Sister Gwen appears in a dancehall context, flinging her previously concealed hair as she does a sexually provocative dance in a Stone Love session. The choir is shown singing and dancing, but their voices are muted as the anempathetic dancehall track continues. This deliberate dissonance between sight and sound reinforces the notion that things in the church are often not what as they appear. This tension is also evident visually as the monks continue strangely and somberly down the aisle with their incense, apparently either oblivious to the apparent gaiety of the church service or saddened by the hypocrisy of it all. The robed figures also seem to embody the contradictions around them. What really lies underneath the religious attire they don?

Next, a sharply dressed deacon emerges from a black car that has just pulled up to the front door. At this point, the song lyrics discuss how every Sunday is a competition.¹⁴ Shaggy declares that some men only go to church to look at the women. But the DJ realises that he too is guilty of this, noting that he cannot complain ‘cause I know me a one!’ (i.e., ‘because I know I’m

¹⁴ Some Pentecostals maintain that, for this reason, the leaders of some Pentecostal organisations such as Shiloh Apostolic Church have historically enforced an all-white dress code among female members.

one of them!') A secondary refrain loops, 'Next Sunday nah miss mi!' Shaggy thus expresses his strong desire to return next week. Expressing his appreciation for the entertainment value this church provides, he adds that even soap operas are not as 'sweet' as the drama that he has discovered within the church. A deacon is shown requesting more money, and then we are presented with an interlude, during which the dancehall track is temporarily suspended as the congregation then sings a short chorus: 'Real, real, real, Jesus is real to me. I love him. He gives me the victory. So many people doubt him; I can't live without him. That is why I love him so. He's so real to me'. The pastor preaches a sermon, recounting parts of the confession he has heard from Shaggy's character, who has tattled on some of the members. The congregation reacts noticeably to the pastor's chastisement of Sister Gwen, whom the pastor describes as 'a special sister doing dutty wine'. The 'dutty wine' is a sexually suggestive dance involving pelvic gyrations, and it is popular in dancehall spaces. The music resumes, and the congregation is dismissed. Once the track fades out, the congregation is then heard singing, 'I want to know if you love my Jesus', accompanied by handclapping characteristic of Pentecostal assemblies. The video ends with the couple's final brief exchange: 'See honey, it wasn't that bad'. Shaggy replies, 'Mek mi tell you something. Next Sunday nah miss mi!' ('Let me tell you something. I won't miss next Sunday!').

One of the most intriguing aspects of 'Church Heathen' is that it portrays a narrative of conversion while also casting doubt on the conversion narratives of those in the church. It suggests that a major challenge for any visitor lies in distinguishing authentic conversions from those that are false. The character portrayed by Shaggy fits the stereotype of the reluctant husband who is dragged to church by his wife. The fastidious wife, with her obsession with outward appearances (e.g., 'Fix up your shirt!'), is also a character type audiences recognise. Her

presence in the video complicates simplistic dichotomies of good and evil, righteous and unrighteous, and godly and ungodly. One takeaway from 'Church Heathen' is the neither the church nor the dancehall are monolithic spaces. Within each, individuals occupy multiple points on a moral compass. This also suggests that to 'convert' from, say, the dancehall to the church is not necessarily equivalent to moving away from a sinful 'world'. Rather, conversion can be understood as a contradiction-laden performative process by which individuals who choose to participate in 'church' spaces may continue to think and act in 'worldly' ways. Some, like Shaggy, see this as hypocritical, but one might also understand the behaviors of Sister Pam and Sister Gwen as emblematic of the Christian journey through life. Indeed, neither 'new converts' nor more experienced practitioners are considered capable of living perfect lifestyles. The conversion process is, in this sense, always partial and incomplete, as attitudes, tendencies, and habits are perpetually being brought into conformity with a Christian ideal that will not be achieved until death. As dancehall artists use Christian imagery and discourse in their performances, they too perform acts of conversion. Using satirical and critical performance, they dramatise attempts to 'come to Christ'. Moreover, they call out wrongdoing and challenge those who profess Christianity to practice what they preach. These performative acts may be humorous, but they also attempt to speak truth to religious power and effect change in the ways in which morality and authenticity are conceived in the broader social imagination.

Elephant Man and Marvia Providence

In contrast to the direct subversiveness of Shaggy's song and video, which presents a casual outsider who is suddenly made aware of hypocrisy, Elephant Man launches his musical critique from the perspective of a clergy member and on behalf of churchgoers determined to rid their sanctuary, and perhaps their society, of those who have 'bad mind' or evil thoughts. The video

rendition of 'Bun Bad Mind' conveys mixed messages: While the words Elephant Man sings appear unambiguous in their profession of Christian allegiance, his visual image seems intentionally irreverent. As the video begins, Elephant Man appears with a conspicuously labeled 'Holy Bible' in hand. He is dressed in black, with his trademark bright yellow hair, earrings, and with a long metal chain around his neck. As he descends an outdoor stairway, he kisses the Bible, makes the sign of the cross across his chest with it, and cries 'Hallelujah!' before beginning the first verse to a lively soca groove. 'We a bun bad mind. Round we hypocrites can't stay. So we draw our line and tell Satan, "Scoobay!"' ('We are burning out bad thoughts. Hypocrites can't stay around us. So we draw the line and tell Satan, "Get away!"') Elephant Man is depicted prancing through the streets, first passing a somber-looking family as they watch from the doorway of their home. Quickly, the mood shifts, as onlookers, including this family, become full participants, dancing along with Elephant Man toward what turns out to be a church building. En route, some of the churchgoers carry a banner that reads, 'Yuh too bad mind', ('You have too many bad thoughts'.) mirroring the repeated phrase echoed in between the words of the chorus. As the song progresses, the crowd following Elephant Man has grown into a holy army that seems to wage war against unseen evil thinkers while musically celebrating victory in advance. They dance and march forward as the DJ delivers his defiant lyrics on a single pitch, 'Rebuke them, rebuke them. Them no like we and we no like them. Trample them, trample them. We no care if a the devil sent them'. ('Rebuke them, rebuke them. They don't like us, and we don't like them. Trample them, trample them. We don't care if the devil sent them'.) Once Elephant Man arrives at the church entrance, his followers pass by him into the sanctuary, where the DJ then continues his performance in the center aisle as the congregants bounce and clap along. As Elephant Man quotes scripture and draws analogies to Bible characters, the mood in

the sanctuary becomes increasingly joyous until the song concludes with Elephant Man in the role of preacher, pastor, and song leader.

Songs such as 'Bun Bad Mind' are most fascinating when read in relation to Elephant Man's broader body of work, which features a wide variety of themes on gun violence, gay bashing, and slackness.¹⁵ In contrast to this work, the artist has recorded songs with Christian themes, such as 'What a Mighty God' with gospel reggae artist Stitchie in 2008, and 'Alli Luya' the following year. After the release of 'What a Mighty God', rumors spread that Elephant Man had in fact turned over a new leaf and was even attending prayer sessions to solidify his Christian faith. He clarified his spiritual status during a 2008 interview.

If God is ready for me to become a Christian there is nothing I can do, but right now I am not baptised, I am not a Christian, but I am a God fearing person. This is my way of giving God thanks for all that he have done for me and if it was supposed to took me and Brother Stitchie hours of voicing that song it wouldn't be a problem. If more dancehall artistes took the time to voice a song like this every now and then the music would be much stronger and maybe we wouldn't have so many people fighting against the music. (Kon-Vick 2008)

Thus, Elephant Man opts to self-identify as 'God-fearing', rather than 'Christian', leaving himself the creative space to continue drawing from a wide repertory of lyrical themes without pressure to conform to Christian expectations. While some Christians applaud Elephant Man's recordings as 'a step in the right direction', others disapprove of his lyrical multiplicity and are skeptical of what they take to be his half-hearted conversion. As one Pentecostal brother cautioned me via email, 'He can be quite a comedian, and he knows how to make dancehall fun. He brought back dancing into dancehall. But he is not really into Christian/gospel lyrics as much as the entertainment dollar. Please bear these thoughts in your mind as you consider the song'.¹⁶ These remarks speak to the unease with which many Christians view the crossing of boundaries

¹⁵ Numerous reviews of Elephant Man's recordings are available online. See, for example, <http://www.reggae-reviews.com/elephantman.html> (accessed 26 February 2009).

¹⁶ Email communication, February 24, 2009.

between sacred and secular realms, particularly as well known performers are seen to embody the sounds and spaces of the music that propelled them to fame.

Controversies regarding secular and sacred dancehall artists stem from the fact that these performers sometimes use the same underlying instrumental tracks in recordings and live performances. Employing what Dick Hebdige refers to as a ‘cut-n-mix’ technique (1987), dancehall producers sometimes extract the instrumental parts known as the ‘riddim’ from the vocal part. These riddim tracks then become foundational sonic material over which lyrics are sung or rapped by any number of performers (Stolzoff 91).¹⁷ With regard to Elephant Man, Pentecostals' strongest source of discomfort derives from the fact that he recorded ‘Bun Bad Mind’ atop the riddim used on the previously released ‘Hear My Cry, O Lord’ by gospel artist Marvia Providence. During the March 2005 Supreme Ventures Carnival Blowout, an event a writer for the *Gleaner* referred to as ‘a carnival of contradictions’, a band played Providence's recording during a dance competition. The writer describes a scene of bawdiness in which skimpy clothing, in the form of ‘little shorts and, in some cases, panties, fought desperately to retain ample rumps’. During the competition,

Two women did as expected, backs bent, legs wide, rumps high and gyrating. The other, who at first appeared demure, dressed in a jeans pants and a red blouse, went down on her head, hoisted her legs in the air and twisted her body in various positions. She won, but not before a Rastaman, dressed in sequined vest and pants, joined her on stage and took his position atop, wining and jamming and doing his own brand of contortionism. The crowd, surprised at first by this turn of events, shouted their approval. The band followed this display with Marvia Providence's Hear My Cry O Lord. The crowd responded as crowds do, singing and waving, trampling 'dem' as Elephant Man's version demanded, oblivious to the apparent contradiction of what just took place. (Roache 2005)

When Elephant Man joined forces with Christian artist Stitchie on ‘What a Mighty God’, it drew criticism from those who saw it as a threat to the sanctity of gospel reggae. Dr. Donald Stewart, pastor of Portmore Lane Covenant Community Church in St. Catherine bears this out in a *Gleaner* editorial in which he writes, ‘What then is the conscious reader (whether Christian or

¹⁷ According to ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall (2003), ‘riddim’ is akin to hip-hop's use of the term ‘beat’.

not) to make of these disclosures? Are we supposed to congratulate Stitchie for his strategic move in making a big tune with the “great” Elephant Man, or are we to commend “Ele” for his recognition that “we need some Jesus Christ inna di dancehall”?’ The pastor adds that collaborations between Christian and secular dancehall performers ‘represent yet another ungodly alliance between the holy and the profane (Ezekiel 22:26, 44:23) and an attempt (whether consciously or not) to drink from both ‘the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils’ (1 Corinthians 10: 21–2)’ (Stewart 2008). These remarks typify those of Christians who see the lewd dancing that occurred during Elephant Man's performance over the riddim to Marvia Providence's ‘Hear My Cry, Oh Lord’ as proof that the profane too often prevails when secular and sacred sounds and spaces intertwine. Gospel artists such as Stitchie and Marvia Providence are criticised as naïve or money hungry for sharing stages with artists such as Elephant Man.

Born in Clarendon, Jamaica but residing in Canada, Marvia Providence joined a Pentecostal New Testament Church of God in 1985, sang with the Toronto Mass Choir in 1992, and became an ordained minister in 2001 (Evans 2004b). She released ‘Hear My Cry’ as part of a medley on her 2002 CD, *Shabach: International Praise and Worship*. In contrast to Elephant Man's ‘Bun Bad Mind’, the lyrics to ‘Hear My Cry’ are rooted firmly in the Christian canon of scripture. The song's opening chorus corresponds almost exactly to the first two verses of Psalms 61, which states, ‘Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I’. After Elephant Man's use of the song's soca riddim for ‘Bun Bad Mind’, Providence's recording increased in popularity, even crossing over into the secular arena as dancehall selectors began including it in their rotations. The success of the song, and subsequently the album of which it is a part, came as a surprise to Providence, who admitted to one interviewer, ‘I was worried about

the album and I thought that it wouldn't do well, because it wasn't mainstream gospel. I think that's the secret formula for that song sustaining all this time, is God himself". Providence commented further, 'The concept of the album was given to me by the Holy Spirit, it's a very church album (Huie, n.d.). Her evocation of divine inspiration, along with her description of Shabach as 'a very church album', reveals one of the ironies of gospel reggae and similar genres such as gospelypso. They lyrically convey a disavowal of the profane, while appropriating its timbres and textures to captivate the unsaved. Perhaps the authentic 'churchiness' of Providence's recording, corroborated in part by scriptural references, lends it a subversiveness that makes it attractive to dancehall participants. 'Hear My Cry' becomes the vehicle for dancers either in churches or dancehall to indulge in the guilty pleasure of sacred-secular mixing of sound and space. In the Pentecostal sanctuary, it is the rhythm (or riddim) that feels naughty, as it goes against traditional notions of Christian appropriateness. In secular dancehalls, biblical lyrics imply a condemnation of nightclub life, and dancehall participants are seemingly made complicit in their own disapprobation. Yet I believe both saved and unsaved derive pleasure through boundary crossing as their bodies and minds engage with sounds and maintain keen awareness of how they relate to the specific spaces in which they are performed.

Many gospel performers express no qualms about extending their ministry and delivering their message within traditionally taboo secular festivals. Marvia Providence shares evangelical zeal with a number of more recently converted Jamaican gospel artists who have revamped their images since the mid-1990s. Artists such as Stitchie, Papa San, Judy Mowatt, Mr. Goddy Goddy, Bless (formerly known as Prodigal Son), and others draw both criticism and high praise for recording gospel songs that feature dancehall rhythms. Although Providence has been saved longer and is considered by many of her fans to be relatively conservative in her outlook, she

expresses a progressive view of ministering at secular events. In reference to criticisms about 'Hear My Cry' being played in dancehalls, she responded, 'I am told that some Christians have a problem with my song being in the dancehall, but I think the power of God is so powerful that it can captivate you at any time and in any place or situation. So I think we should just stop all this foolishness about church versus dancehall and come together' (Evans 2004b). For most Pentecostals, however, coming together has proven easier said than done.

In terms of rhythmic structure, Providence's soca medley works comfortably in dancehall settings in part because of the song's implied 3+3+2 accent pattern.¹⁸ However, as a soca tune, 'Hear My Cry' is probably considered 'safer' by most Pentecostals by virtue of its affiliation with Trinidad, a locale farther from home. Rommen describes this exercise as 'the negotiation of proximity', in which 'the near is made far and the far becomes immanent and useful' (2007: 89). Thus, gospel artists whose riddims are 'rougher', 'harder', or closer to the dancehall norm, have a more difficult time achieving the kind of unity Providence advocates. Marvia Providence's recording opens up a discussion about sound and space that I think is useful to understanding gospel reggae and dancehall as 'convers(at)ion partners'. Let me turn next to another dancehall performer who has dabbled with Christian themes, in this case not ostensibly for comedic or parodic purposes, but rather, to show her expressive versatility and position herself as a spiritual believer and practitioner who is conversant with Christian themes.

Lady Saw: Defying Categorisation

Although the gospel lyrics of Beenie Man, Ninjaman, Shaggy, and Elephant Man are intended to evoke laughter while expressing criticism toward what the artists perceive as self-righteousness

¹⁸ Ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall (2003) identifies the 3+3+2 rhythm as an unmistakable element of the dancehall sound. In soca, however, only the latter two of these three accents are played on the snare drum (Manuel 2006: 228).

and hypocrisy, Lady Saw has brought up Christian faith primarily as a something she relies on to carry her through tough times. Yet she exemplifies the slackness dancehall performer as much as any other dancehall artist in this male-dominated arena. She emerged on the scene in the early 1990s and quickly made waves with sexually explicit songs such as ‘Stab out the Meat’. Rather than shifting styles to accommodate those who desired socially conscious and Rasta-influenced lyrics, Lady Saw ‘gave the people what they wanted’, maintaining her image as an X-rated dancehall queen (Stolzoff 238). This caused quite a bit of uproar, as many Jamaicans have found her performances lewd and outrageous. In 1994, there was even an attempt by one parish council to permanently ban her from singing in Montego Bay. But such moves to bowdlerise Lady Saw have been countered by accusations of sexism and classism. As Stolzoff reports, many observers complained ‘that a double standard was being employed in the treatment of Lady Saw [and] that people were letting male dancehall artists and the soca music of middle-class Jamaican carnival off the hook’ (240).

In any event, it is not uncommon even for slackness performers to have grown up as active participants in church music. Lady Saw is no exception. She cites the church as a foundational element in her musical development, and often resists the notion that her musical tastes and proclivities can be pigeonholed. Carolyn Cooper (2004) agrees, citing the ‘wicked reversal of roles’ (115) evidenced by the lyrics to Lady Saw's ‘Glory Be to God’:

When I remember where I'm coming from
Through all the trials and tribulation
Yes, the hardship and the sufferation
I have to go on my knees and give praises to God
Glory be to God!
Praises to his name!
Thanks for taking me
out of the bondage and chains.
I life up mine eyes, and oh yes, my hands
I know there is no other God.

Songs such as this show that Lady Saw's expressive range extends beyond the slackness category into which the public tends to place her. As Cooper elaborates,

She can be as pious as pious can be. And, in any case, she knows that the man from Galilee had a way with all kinds of ladies. ... The vast majority of songs in Lady Saw's repertoire are decidedly raunchy. There's no denying it. That is why she's so popular. She is a woman running neck and neck with the men, giving as good, or even better than, she gets. But exclusive focus on those X-rated lyrics diminishes the range of her contribution. (116–17)

Lady Saw herself has stated, 'I listen to everything and have a love for all genres of music', she notes, adding, 'I like Alicia Keys and mostly R & B'. Lady Saw also boasts a performance style that 'ranges from raw and hardcore dancehall to gospel, so it has a range that can't be summed up into one' (Fear 2008). I find it helpful to view Lady Saw as a musical 'conversation partner', one who is fluent in multiple genres of musical expression. She uses her craft to speak across the boundaries of musical categories, addressing both human and divine listeners to convey feelings of fearlessness and frustration.

Her single entitled 'Lord, Lord, Lord' features a striking alternation between an English language chorus and patois verses that are performed with a more strident vocal timbre. As the song progresses, the English sections become harsher, featuring heavy breathing sounds and greater lyrical urgency. Lady Saw expresses her frustration to God, crying, 'I feel like slappin' somebody!' Interestingly, the patois sections become milder as the song nears its end. It is as though Lady Saw intends to minimise the differences by tearing down a wall of division between the dancehall and the church. Perhaps this boundary has contributed to the anger and pain she now feels, and the song is for her a vehicle through which she expresses her dissatisfaction over this and other divisions within Jamaica's social landscape. I believe 'Lord, Lord, Lord' is emblematic of the contrast between church and dancehall spaces. Lady Saw deliberately brings the sonic differences into relief. However, as these differences become less discernible over time, the expressive boundary between Lady Saw's performance styles becomes harder to distinguish.

The song thus represents the artist's strivings for liberation from the strictures imposed on her identity by her listeners. The lyrics to the first chorus 'Lord, Lord, Lord' convey the singer's feeling of dependency on God in the face of unnamed adversaries.

Lord I need you today to show me the way.
 You see I'm down on my knees.
 I'm calling your name as I pray.
 You see my enemies; they won't let me be.
 And I am trying my best, Lord, Lord.

When the chorus returns, Lady Saw replaces the second line with the phrase, 'So I fall on knees and cry to you as I pray'; and the third time she pleads with God to 'take ahold of my hand'. Compelled to lash out due to her anger, she warns, 'I feel like slapping somebody! Oh, can you understand? You see the rage in me; it won't let me be'.

In the first patois verse, Lady Saw critiques 'the obeah workers and backbiters' who want harm to befall her because of her material success. This verse ends with a loud 'Oobacabba, oobacabba!' Some Pentecostals to whom I spoke claim that this phrase represents the 'fake tongues' spoken by Obeah practitioners who presumably strive to mimic Holy Spirit infilling'.¹⁹ The second verse celebrates the superiority of 'Almighty God' over the power of 'the obeah man'. Lady saw also asserts that she is not afraid of those who wish her harm because her God is 'badder than [and] madder than any gun man'. The obeah theme is repeated in verse three, as the singer mocks the futility of spiritual practices that are intended to kill or injure her. Evil workers who come to her shows are simply 'wast[ing] their time'. The final verse is followed by a brief interlude, in which the singer asks God to humble her so that will not retaliate out of anger.

¹⁹ As I mentioned earlier, Pentecostals consider the phenomenon of speaking in tongues (or glossolalia) to be the initial evidence that a person has been filled, or 'baptised', with the Holy Spirit. The term 'fake tongues' or 'false tongues' is applied to ecstatic utterances of an unknown language that a spiritual overseer determines to be derived from any source other than the biblical Holy Spirit. Pastors sometimes rebuke speaking in tongues which they believe are a satanic counterfeit rather than a legitimate manifestation. In the former instance, the person speaking in tongues may be displaying offensive, mocking, or otherwise disruptive behavior that others discern to be tied to a harmful agenda.

Humble me
Humble Me
Yes Lord
Hold me back
I don't want to hurt anybody
I don't want to slap anybody
So I am going to ask you to hold me
And don't allow them to bother me.

'Lord, Lord, Lord' represents an inspirational reprieve from the bawdier and better known material demanded by Lady Saw's fans. The song is eye-opening in that it reveals Lady Saw's 'surprising' willingness to pray, that is, to engage her 'Lord' in the kind of conversation with which many devout Christians can empathize. Having suffered through and overcome the poverty of her childhood, two miscarriages, and negative reviews of her shows by conservative writers, the song also provides Lady Saw with a subtle means of responding to her opponents. I submit that by publicly asking God for help and expressing humility, she 'talks back' to her critics and refutes the notion that she is spiritually irredeemable. As I will explain below, these kinds of commentaries are no less controversial when musical practices are subsumed under the 'Christian' or 'gospel' label.

DJ Moses and Stitchie: Fire and Spiritual Warfare

Before his death in 2009, DJ Moses was one of several gospel reggae artists who gained popularity through 'conscious' lyrics with a Christian message. DJ Moses's recording of 'The Big Man' is an interesting example of the verbal dueling that occurs through musical performance. Secular artist Beenie Man had already recorded a tune called 'The Big Man' in 1994, and DJ Moses's tune of the same name uses bravado to engage indirectly with the rhetoric and the persona of the secular 'big man' referenced in the previous recording. Moses also

mentions some seven secular artists by name, clearly intending his lyrics to be a response to those who would claim to be superior, as the following excerpt demonstrates.

My youth, I see the whole of your argument. Everything is wrong. You want to know why? I'm not the big man. And I'm very sure it's not Beenie Man. It's not Bounty Killer. It's not Lexxus or Baby Cham, 'cause I know the real big man. The real big man is a righteous man. Me naa disrespect anyone. Listen to the song and understand. ... I'm not the big man, and I'm very sure it's not Ninjaman. It's not merciless Elephant or the one named Capleton.

But dancehall artists are not Moses' sole targets. He also juxtaposes religious and political leaders with 'the real big man' whose name he has not yet spoken; and he chides those who assume that riches and fame bring with them 'big man' status.

I'm not the big man. It's not Selassie and the Rasta man. It's not the US president or the queen from over [in] England. I know the real big man. The real big man is a righteous man. ... Seems like you don't understand. You could have ten million grand or have ten billion fan[s]. That still doesn't make you the real big man.

He also rebukes politicians who exploit the masses by using their constituents' money for luxurious expenses while increasing taxes 'so the poor can't even get enough money to buy a piece of yam'. Moses's critique is also directed toward the fire theme prevalent in dancehall.

So you think that you're the big man? Just because you talk about fire, and everybody in the culture dem start talk 'bout fire? ... There's nothing wrong with fire, but it's when you speak about fire wrong cause. God never gave anyone the authority to burn anyone.

The reference to 'everybody in the culture' is a reference to 'conscious' dancehall artists who use fire as a metaphor to convey the need to burn out corruption and violence from 'Babylon' or the dominant sectors of society.²⁰ As DJ Moses concludes his song, he quotes from the Gospel of St. John and finally reveals the name of 'the real big man' as Jesus Christ.

²⁰ Most Jamaican Pentecostals are familiar with several 'fire choruses' such as 'Fire, Fall On Me', which references the biblical Day of Pentecost, during which believers were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Fire choruses such as this one are sung frequently during attempts to evoke manifestations of the Spirit and encourage demonstrative vocal and bodily expressions during services. Other well-known fire choruses include 'Blessed Holy Ghost Come Down', 'I Feel like the Fire Shut Up in my Bones', and 'When the Soul Caught Fire'. Holy Spirit fire is believed to 'burn out carnal nature', purifying those who seek to please God.

Stitchie's song 'Fast and Pray' is similar to Moses's 'The Big Man' in that it names some specific secular artists and entreats them to convert to Christianity. But Stitchie's lyrics reveal a warmer attitude toward his secular counterparts, whom he considers his 'dancehall friends':

Mi fully saved under the blood inna di churchhall
 Can't forget about mi friends in di dancehall
 Joy and love mi have, and great peace of mind
 And a dis mi want mi dancehall friends dem to find.
 [I am fully saved under the blood in the church.
 I can't forget about my friends in the dancehall.
 I have joy, love, and great peace of mind
 And this is what I want my dancehall friends to find.]

In the song's chorus, Stitchie vows to fast and pray until all of his friends accept Jesus Christ and 'the devil' surrenders control. He then begins calling out the names of several dancehall artists, commenting on a distinct attribute of each and requesting salvation for them all.²¹ 'Save, protect, and bless Bounty Killer', he states, 'Cause you bless him the voice of a warrior'. Stitchie then prays that God's blessing be extended to Capleton 'because you bless him as a talented young man and mi want him burn the fire 'pon Satan'. Stitchie's reference to 'fire' is not surprising. Like DJ Moses, he possesses first hand knowledge of the secular realm he once frequented; and he is no doubt aware of Capleton's tendency to use fire as a metaphor in his recordings such as *More Fire* (2000), *Still Blazin'* (2002), and *Reign of Fire* (2004). Moses-I featured Capleton on his recording of 'Fire is Burning'.

Stitchie's also mentions Mr. Lexxus, and Beenie Man, referring to the latter as a 'talented excellent entertainer'; and he asks for mercy to be extended to 'Brother Desmond, Ninja Man'. In reference to Ninjaman's brief foray into Christianity, Stitchie asks, 'Let him return in your divine time. Use the rod or correction to get him back in line'. More than two dozen additional

²¹ In similar fashion, Prodigal Son's recording, 'I Wish', makes mention of secular DJs Beenie Man, Bounty Killer, and Elephant Man. Curwen Best provides a useful analysis of this phenomenon (2004: 85).

dancehall artists are mentioned in the song, and Stitchie ends by asking God's blessings on behalf on 'many more please', acknowledging those whose names he did not have time to call.

I believe it is most helpful to read songs such as 'Fast and Pray' as part of an intertextual fabric of sacred and secular conversations that unfold not only on recordings but also in live venues. A performance of 'Fast and Pray' at Reggae Sumfest 2001 generated positive responses from the audience. It was viewed as a sincere, bold attempt to spread the gospel in a non-condemnatory tone. However, one dancehall artist, Mr. Vegas, used the occasion to mock what the reviewer refers to as 'Stitchie's altar call'. In a blatant display of sacrilege, Mr. Vegas 'proceeded on stage with a Bible in hand and expletives on his lips', subverting social norms of respectability in a way reminiscent of Beenie Man's 'Gospel Time'.

Many gospel reggae songs underscore the superiority of Jesus Christ over others and draw on themes of spiritual warfare commonly emphasised in Pentecostal circles. Notwithstanding the emphasis that some gospel artists place on their critics and secular counterparts, Rommen shows that gospel reggae allows practitioners to shift aggression from human and institutional enemies to spiritual powers of Satan and his demonic forces (2007: 102). This by no means suggests that gospel reggae artists advocate silence on real-world issues; rather, they hold that unseen forces are the root cause of society's ills. Gospel reggae artists fight a high-stakes war 'against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places' (Ephesians 6:12). Stitchie's prayer for performers such as Ninjaman, Beenie Man, and others, constitutes a lyrically delivered spiritual attack on evil forces attempting to keep the souls of secular dancehall artists among the lost.

Conclusion

Narratives of conversion acknowledge that ‘a Christian cosmos is...the major lens through which [believers] perceive the events that shape their lives’ (Austin Broos 1997: 17). However, I have also sought to demonstrate that conversion is a performative act that takes place throughout church and dancehall spaces. It is, as Lewis Rambo reminds us, ‘a process involving a complex interweave of personal, social, cultural, and religious forces’ (1992: 159). As performers and listeners question what it means to make acceptable Jamaican music, they grapple with the meaning of conversion and assess the relation between their ‘culture’ and their faith. Tensions arise when dancehall is viewed as antithetical to Christian identity. Frustrated by the apparent ubiquity of dancehall culture, some pastors set strict guidelines on the kinds of music congregants are permitted to consume. But this kind of dilemma is by no means unique to Jamaicans, and many do not see it as a major ‘problem’ that will necessarily be resolved or reconciled. On the contrary, Pentecostals often embrace the dissonance between holiness and worldliness as part of the theological rationale for upholding both the sanctity and flexibility of their religious practices, and praying for divine help to navigate an earthly existence understood to be difficult by design. The temptations and pleasures of the ‘world’, including dancehalls, are necessary, if only to enable some Christians to construct identities that stand in contradistinction to those of the unconverted. In this sense, Christianity’s adversary is also its friend, and the apparent incompatibility of holiness and worldliness becomes more mythical than real at the level of music making. But in the end, it is the perceptions of musical holiness that matter most to Pentecostal practitioners who carve out their own spaces for demonstrative expression. Worship services and concerts provides spaces for the negotiation of Jamaican identity within the framework of a Christian aesthetic. Through gospel reggae and dancehall music, performers and religious practitioners tap into sonic resources that are experienced as both culturally and

spiritually powerful. They invoke ‘fire’ from heaven to experience the Holy Spirit, while steering clear of the hellfire rhetorically tied to the sins of the world in which they live.

I suggest that both gospel reggae and gospel-inflected dancehall may be interpreted as intermediary cultural practices through which both Christian and non-Christian performers renegotiate notions of holiness and worldliness. These musical forms open up contested and contradictory cultural spaces in which a variety of Jamaican artists and consumers work out what it means to express Jamaican cultural pride while striving for human and divine favor. This resonates well with anthropological notions of conversion, as explained by Diane Austin-Broos, who cautions against viewing conversion as ‘a simple and absolute break with a previous social life’. It is more important to understand that ‘the language of converts expresses new forms of relatedness. The public aspect of this belonging is perhaps a new identity, a newly inscribed communal self defined through the gaze of others’ (2003: 2).

Although some regard the gospel reggae of artists such as Lester Lewis, Judy Mowatt, Papa San, and many others as an acceptable Christian alternative to secular dancehall music, members of conservative congregations complain that gospel reggae lacks seriousness and is too stylistically distant from traditional hymns and choruses to be used in worship services. Some insist that dancehall artists such as Beenie Man, Shaggy, Ninjaman, and Lady Saw, who use biblical themes in their music while refusing to convert fully to a Christian lifestyle are ‘playing with fire’. In fact, a Jamaican proverb I often heard repeated warns, ‘If you play with fire, you must get burned’. As I have shown, Pentecostal critiques of dancehall as unholy and dangerous to spiritual life do not go unanswered. One way to read the musically embedded conversations that take place among these artists is as a kind of ‘Signifyin(g)’ practice common throughout the African diaspora (Gates 1988). Applied to music, Signifyin(g) describes the multiple types of

indirect referencing that musicians and listeners experience in a variety of contexts.²² Beenie Man ‘creates some fuss’ by Signifyin(g) on Christian themes and upsetting conventions of gospel performance through the use of explicit lyrics. His performance of conversion is as a trickster who plays with gospel music conventions and delights in subverting Christian norms. Lady Saw, Ninjaman, Shaggy, and Elephant Man offer more direct chastisements of those in the church who look down on the ‘unconverted’. All of the conversions, conversations, and intertextual dialogues I have discussed travel across the sacred-secular divide in both directions. Just as secular DJs critique Christianity, gospel reggae artists sometimes call out secular DJs on recordings and in live performances.

In many cases, artists' conversion experiences result in a commitment to ‘cleaner’ lyrics that focus on critical social commentary rather than the pleasures of promiscuity or the dangers of gun warfare. By the middle of the decade, talk of a ‘Rasta renaissance’ had spread such that ‘DJ after DJ began growing dreadlocks and writing lyrics about King Selassie and the virtues of Rasta philosophy’ (113). For most Pentecostals, the work of dancehall artists falls outside the realm of acceptable musical practice insofar as they are allied with ‘the world’ of the unconverted or with incompatible belief systems. However, believers sometimes recognise that dancehall artists may occupy a middle ground, of sorts, by virtue of their rejection of slackness and gun violence. The dancehall remains, in any case, characterised by ‘pragmatic neutrality’ (113). As Stolzoff explains, ‘even after Buju Banton's turn to Rasta, he continued to occasionally perform slack lyrics in order to retain his popularity with that portion of the dancehall audience’

²² Discussing the West African trickster figure, Esu-Elegbara and his ‘Afro-American relative, the Signifying Monkey’ (44), Henry Louis Gates posits that ‘[t]he black [literary] tradition has inscribed within it the very principles by which it can be read’ (1988: xxiii-xxiv). Samuel Floyd, one of the first music scholars to expound on Gates's influential work, argues that ‘it has been through the repetition and revision of texts, through the interplay of black language and black music in a long chain of Signifyin(g) tropes, that African-American peasants...continue to be poets in a land that initially denied them the right to be called artists of any stripe’ (1995: 225).

(113). Given Pentecostal concerns about social and musical eclecticism, it is not surprising that Rasta-oriented dancehall is something Christians eschew. Pentecostals, in particular, have little tolerance for the lyrical multiplicity of DJs (i.e., dancehall singers) such as Beenie Man who would feign naïveté by asking, ‘What's the big deal?’ Such individuals are often seen as devil's advocates, acting in a very real sense on behalf of a worldly paradigm that opposes the will of God.

The practice of secular artists performing Christian lyrics often elicits strong reactions from many listeners, even when the artist's lyrics are less obviously satirical. This particular type of boundary crossing also registers in African American contexts with which I'm familiar. For example, critiques of Beenie Man bear some resemblance those launched against African American rapper Kanye West. This artist's Grammy Award-winning single, ‘Jesus Walks’, stands in sharp contrast to his broader body of work, including most of the other songs on his 2004 CD, *The College Drop Out*. A major dispute erupted among gospel music enthusiasts in the United States when ‘Jesus Walks’ was included on the Stellar Awards ballot as a nominee for Rap/Hip-Hop Gospel CD of the Year. Many feared that West's inclusion would taint the reputation of the Stellar Awards as geared toward authentically Christian artists. ‘It just seems that it shouldn't have gotten through’, one gospel industry spokesperson complained. ‘For this to be the Stellar Awards they should have known Kanye West, Roc-A-Fella records, that's not (a) gospel album’. The Stellar Awards Senior Management and Nominating Committee subsequently decided that West's CD did not meet the award criteria and removed his song from the ballot. In September 2004, they issued a press release explaining their rationale:

The Stellar Awards certainly encourage the many facets of gospel music; however, after being made aware of the explicit lyrics in the other songs from the CD, the Stellar Awards nominating committee felt the CD lyrical selections were not in the best interest and spirit of gospel music. Therefore, the Kanye West CD was immediately removed from the Hip Hop CD of the Year category and the entire ballot.

The Committee's statement included an apology for their 'glaring oversight', along with a reassurance to gospel fans that they had 'implemented corrective actions to make sure that such an error never happens in the future'.

Just as gospel artists in the United States may experience criticism when they perform secular material, dancehall musicians are often viewed scornfully for their forays into gospel. Beenie Man and other dancehall artists who employ Christian themes are always held in suspicion as potential wolves in sheep's clothing—performers who at any given moment may hop back to the other side of an us-them dichotomy. From the perspective of secular dancehall artists, such as Ninjaman and Shaggy, the influence of the church is not always seen as positive. These artists use musical performance to critique hypocrisy and lambast what they perceive to be self-righteousness among those who insist on separating themselves from those who do not appear to be authentic Christians. While Pentecostals attack dancehall as an immoral space and sound, secular dancehall artists thus find creative ways to speak back by injecting playful critiques into their recordings and engaging Christianity on its own moral-ethical terms.

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