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Fighting ‘Murder Music’: Activist Reflections

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Editor’s Note: Debates about the meanings of, and how to respond to, “murder music” have raged for as long as some forms of Jamaican dancehall have been afforded this tag for their promotion of violence against gays. British gay activist and OutRage! co-founder Peter Tatchell has been a driving force behind efforts to stop production and distribution of music by artists such as Beenie Man, Sizzla and Elephant Man through the “Stop Murder Music” (SMM) campaign, which has since been adopted or supported by over 60 organizations worldwide. SMM and similar campaigns have been championed by some advocates of social justice and denounced by others as “racist” for their representations of black cultures. For this edition of CRGS, I invited two activists who have been engaged in this work to share and explain their experiences with and points of view of Murder Music campaigns: Saint Lucian-born and now Canadian-resident Akim Ade Larcher, who founded the Canadian chapter of SMM, and Trinidad-based Colin Robinson.—*Andil Gosine*

Akim Ade Larcher

I am humbled to be associated with Stop Murder Music Canada (SMMC). This international campaign has had a far-reaching impact. It has echoed in the hallways of many political buildings, provided a shield for those persecuted for their sexual orientation in the Caribbean, and given rise to a global movement against violent homophobic lyrics.

Stop Murder Music has both addressed homophobia in dancehall music and called attention to the intersections of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, human rights, and popular culture at the forefront of Western LGBT organizations. At its heart, the campaign challenges governments to hold dancehall artists accountable for songs that call for the death and persecution of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans-identified (LGBT) people.

The SMMC campaign not only sheds light on “murder music” being produced in the Caribbean and the fact that it is readily available on the Canadian market, but it also enables many Canadians of different backgrounds to voice their concerns about human rights violations against the LGBT community in the Caribbean. Regardless of a song’s genre—rap, punk, rock, pop, or dancehall—if it calls for violence toward or the death of any member of the LGBT community, it undoubtedly affects all of us. The campaign has given the immigrant LGBT population of Canada a voice and a cause, and advances the work and conversations that had already been taking place among the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black Cap), the African and Caribbean Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario (ACCHO), and Gays Lesbians of African Descent (GLAD). Conversations about stigma, discrimination, homophobia, and sexual citizenship had been ongoing as we dealt with rising HIV/AIDS infection rates in African, Black, and Caribbean communities.

In the spring of 2007, I attended an ACCHO event that focused on the release of a study about how African and Caribbean communities in Toronto experience and respond to HIV stigma, denial, fear, and discrimination. One of the study’s findings was that HIV infection and homophobia are linked in African and Caribbean communities and this association has been fueled by homophobic lyrics in dancehall music. When I left the event, I was highly energized and certain that I needed to act. Later that summer, I formed a coalition of supporters both to bring attention to the violent homophobic lyrics available in Canada and to bring support to queers in Jamaica. After learning of Elephant Man’s intention to tour ten Canadian cities, I promptly got in touch with Gareth Henry, who was the Program Director for the Jamaica Forum for All-Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG) at that time, and also Peter Tatchell of Outrage!

Over the course of the following week, we had discussions in which I made it clear that I believed a chapter of Stop Murder Music must be formed in Canada because many artists who were having problems getting visas to enter Europe or the United States of America were looking at Canada as a lucrative market. After much faxing and many telephone calls, I was able to bring together over twenty-five organizations, which included Egale Canada, Canada’s LGBT human rights organization. Less than a week prior to Elephant

Man's arrival, I moved SMMC to Egale's office, where the Executive Director Helen Kennedy provided administrative support for the campaign.

When the numerous letters we sent to the government of Canada went unanswered, we held a press conference to alert the media and public about the fact that the government had failed in their duties to deny visas to both Elephant Man and Sizzla. Denying visas is a procedure that has been used in the past as a way of preventing those who are likely to contravene the Criminal Code of Canada by using hate speech, such as Holocaust-deniers and Anti-Semitic individuals, from entering Canada. We thought the government would have been responsive. However, the Minister of Citizenship has remained silent on the issue to this day. Regardless of the lack of government support, the campaign was very successful as a result of its public support. This achievement allowed us to accomplish many goals in a holistic fashion. We were able to shed light on the violent homophobia in Jamaica and educate the public on the widespread sale of such music in Canada.

The campaign has allowed us to educate the public about the emergent trend of violent homophobia in the Caribbean and address the flawed notion that the region has always been so violently homophobic. In addition, the campaign has allowed racialized queers to be visible and vocal within the predominantly white gay community in Canada because it helps us to say that we are queer, we are here, and our concerns need to be addressed.

The reach and success of the Canadian campaign have provided us with national media coverage, venue cancellations, the opportunity to host two panel discussions called the Sound of Hate, the successful removal of homophobic violent lyrics online by iTunes North America, the production of a "murder music" dictionary postcard during Pride, and most recently, the opportunity to partner with unions to distribute a postcard called "Queering Black History." This postcard recognizes the creative dedication and achievements of Black, African, and Caribbean queers in Canada.

The SMMC campaign has not been without controversy, however, as editors of *Xtra!* and *Xtra West!* (Canadian Queer Press) have been skeptical about this being a priority for Egale and question why Canada's national LGBT organization spends so much of its energy helping Jamaican gays and lesbians. Unbeknownst to many, *Xtra!* dispatched its chief editor, Matt Mills, to investigate whether or not Jamaica is indeed the most homophobic place on earth. After spending an entire three days there, Mills managed to gather enough information to produce two pages' worth of material in what could be considered a rather biased, eroticized, and racist editorial, which not only fails to mention issues affecting lesbians or trans-identified people in Jamaica, but also neglects to reference lesbians or transpeople at all.

Over the last year, the global Stop Murder Music campaign could be considered to be reaching the end of its life. It has had tremendous impact and much of its scope and outreach has been accomplished in the eyes of many Caribbean activists. Although, as with many other campaigns, the end of the road may be near, the fight will continue in the Canadian context. This might require some changes in the way we work, but as long as violent homophobic music remains for sale in Canada, artists sing violent homophobic

lyrics, and words like “battybwoy” and “battyman” can be heard in the hallways of our schools, the fight will go on here in Canada. Even if it is not done under the name of the Stop Murder Music (Canada) campaign, Egale will continue this fight. But, it may be time for all voices in this global movement to ask whether Stop Murder Music is doing more harm to the discourse on sexual citizenship in Jamaica and by extension the Caribbean.

Colin Robinson

I have never been clear that those of us in various locations in the international “murder music” movement have been all fighting for the same thing.

“Murder music” protest has undergone considerable critique, both knee-jerk and reasoned, cant and compelling, in scholarship, popular media and the political arena. This includes minimization of violence against GLBT people in Jamaica, whether it’s incidence, causation, or in comparison to the endemicity of violence; the construction of a mythic “international gay rights lobby” that has singled out Jamaica because of its convenience, economic vulnerability or national pride, or because of its interest in making same-sex sex tourism safer; or more nuanced challenges as to why “murder music” activism prioritizes certain kinds of visibly queer subjects over other Jamaican victims of state and economic violence and denial of citizenship. My own critique, based on telling a history of my roles and locations within this largely uncoordinated and decentralized movement over the past 17 years, reflects on how “murder music” protest shapes the politics and values of human rights advocacy for and by queer Caribbean subjects.

GLAAD & Boom Bye Bye, 1992

When it all began, the idea of protesting against violently homophobic music seemed pretty straightforward. New York City Mayor David Dinkins publicly called Buju Banton’s lyrics in “Boom Bye Bye” “absolutely, unequivocally reprehensible” (Parascandola 1992). The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), a newly emergent advocacy nonprofit in the US powered by gays and lesbians in the entertainment industry, which had initially focused its work on television representations, had now begun to take on the popular music industry. My Jamaican roommate, Fabian Thomas, provided them with a rendering into standard English of the patois lyrics to Buju’s tune, then enjoying a second wind in the North American music market. GLAAD’s media advocacy savvy produced a slew of coverage in mainstream newspapersⁱ and broadcast television. The approach was simple enough—prejudicial representations of GLBT people in popular culture could be fought through bad publicity, which meant not only shame, but also economic consequences. It was not a campaign targeted specifically at Jamaica or at dancehall. But historically, it was the birth of the international “murder music” protest movement.

GLAAD’s public affairs director, Donald Suggs, an African American, worried that the mainstream media would only too readily seize on the music as yet another illustration of the pathology of Blackness. For me there was another issue: why weren’t we having this

conversation not just in the mainstream news and entertainment media, but with New York’s Caribbean communities? Using GLAAD’s materials, I penned a letter to the City’s three Caribbean weeklies. “No leader in the West Indian community said a word” as “radio stations and dancehalls in New York were playing a reggae hit that encouraged its listeners to blow away battymen,” it read. In response, *Caribbean Daylight’s* editor said she was sorry, they just didn’t “take sides”ⁱⁱⁱ on these things. But *Caribbean Life* published the letter (Robinson 1992); and then in its following edition a scathing article in response titled “Open Letter to Colin Robinson on Boom Bye Bye” (Gordon 1992). The paper’s rejoinder followed on a phone call I received at home from the leading Caribbean-American elected official, to tell me I would never be worked with again, and that nothing I was involved with would ever be supported. For both the councillor and the Jamaicans who made up the majority of the publication’s small newsroom, my letter was a treacherous breaking of ranks.

No More Murder Music, 2004

A decade later, I became involved in shared leadership of a New York City intervention calling itself No More Murder Music. NMMM emerged from a meeting at Human Rights Watch with visiting GLBT Jamaicans from J-FLAG in 2004, shortly after Stop Murder Music had achieved the first concert cancellations in the UK, which had triggered a seeming backlash of violence in Jamaica (Younge 2004). After we had solicited the Jamaicans about the desirability of continued protest, an Irish American Lesbian from ACT-UP asked the room with some measure of urgency why concert protests similar to those in the UK weren’t also happening in New York. As I remember it—because it made me cringe politically—she ended by saying she would lead such action if others wouldn’t. But the statement had its intended effect of mobilizing Caribbean leadership, including mine; and Emmaia Gelman brought to the campaign not just drive and organizing savvy, but a sophisticated political understanding of identity and representation. She accepted the leadership of Jamaican and other Caribbean GLBT folks in creating a vision for what “murder music” protest should look like, a vision she also shared in crafting and owning:

- that our protests should highlight the impact of the music on Jamaica and Jamaicans
- that advocacy should foreground Jamaican and Caribbean voices, even when they are in the minority of protestors
- that protests should aim to win some outcome to the benefit of GLBT Jamaicans
- that protests should favor changing fans’, presenters’ and promoters’ hearts and minds and spurring them to voluntary action—over censoring fans from hearing music that imagines violence
- that racism and stereotyping of Caribbean culture should have no place in the movement.

We applied these not only to our own work (Gelman 2004), but dreamed they would become the principles that an international “murder music” movement should embody, in no small measure to address our growing concern that, as the dominant voice of “murder music” advocacy, with ready access to mainstream media, representations of the

Caribbean by Stop Murder Music's Peter Tatchell (2004)ⁱⁱⁱ were hurting and polarizing the work of the campaign.

NMMM was short lived, completing just one decent protest of a big radio station's concert in a central part of the city (Boston 2004, Gelman 2004, Sanneh 2004), and stimulating some additional discussion in the media in response to other appearances by offending artists in the New York region.

We were challenged by how to position our efforts in relation to an entrenched "First Amendment" tradition among US progressives of fierce commitment to free speech, which rejects censorship and asserts a principle that offensive speech should be responded to with more speech, not less. This was a notably different approach from the European protests, which relied on an accepted European tradition of legal prohibition of hate speech. Despite our efforts, and no matter how much we articulated that their bodies were doing something else—whether embarrassing corporate interests in the entertainment industry and media for profiting off of bigotry and violence; seeking to counter dancehall DJs' speech with robust speech from marginalized minorities; educating music fans and concert patrons about the harm that homophobia does and the violent form it often assumes in Jamaica; or humanizing GLBT Caribbean people—the average NMMM protestor was in fact using his own body to call for homophobic music to be censored, artists banned, and concerts cancelled.

I was often troubled that among a number of people with whom I was making common cause, the "murder music" protests were not so much a campaign about Jamaica or GLBT people over there, but one to keep hateful foreign music and its singers out of the metropole, or at the very least to punish their homophobia. Their energies seemed fuelled by a vision of Jamaican/Caribbean homophobia, the people and culture producing it as primitive and backward. This kind of response laid bare the cosmology that underlies a "murder music" iconography that has employed the most unkempt pictures of Buju to mock him as a monkey, and persistently used superlatives and sensation to flatten all nuance in Jamaican homophobia; that enables Larry Kramer (2007) to imagine thugs lurking at the end of the jetways of Jamaican airports to attack gay travellers. For me, the "murder music" picket line in New York was a place of a profoundly ambivalent alliance with racists and people who despised Caribbean culture. And across the US in the following months, as I witnessed SMM-inspired "murder music" protests catch fire on campuses and in cities, I heard the same limited theme: stop the music; stop these artists. And I saw the derision for Jamaica not too far beneath the surface.

Lifebeat, 2006

African American leadership of "murder music" protest has been even more fraught—and painful—framed as it is by complicated relationships of disrespect and resentment between Caribbean immigrants and US-rooted blacks, and the particular ways in which these dynamics play themselves out in intimate relationships between gay men or lesbians who are already struggling for affirmation. What has been quite striking in comments among gay African Americans about "murder music" in popular online fora^{iv} is how deeply disdain for Caribbean culture runs, and how entrenched is the notion of Caribbean homophobia as superlative, even within a group that continues to be held up

themselves as “more homophobic” than other US ethnic groups. What is also noteworthy in African American leadership on “murder music” is how, not unlike the 1991 Crown Heights riots, the Caribbeanness of key stakeholders gets elided and deemed inessential, as gay African American leaders engage with dancehall as black people entitled to engage with *black* music.

Gay African American bloggers mobilized in 2006 to shut down a major AIDS fundraising and awareness concert targeting Caribbean communities organized by Lifebeat, because the New York City event was scheduled to feature both Beenie Man and TOK (Bagby 2006a, 2006b). The rapid, must-win, Internet-driven campaign saw no initial need to include or consult Caribbean American leadership, or to craft advocacy goals related to Jamaica; and the concert’s cancellation was seen as a celebration of the power of Black gay organizing. “Black Gay Bloggers Win Victory...after a 48 hour protest,” their press release read. But this approach would enable concert organizers to play wedge politics in response, blaming the African Americans’ protest for creating a risk of violence to concertgoers and the resulting cancellation for depriving Caribbean communities of HIV funding and education. Caribbean Americans’ insertion of our voices into leadership and messaging mid-campaign helped defuse this, and refocused attention on the harm that “murder music” does in Jamaica and other Caribbean communities (McShane 2006).

I have been deeply troubled by how Caribbean GLBT people (in both the North and the South) who have played roles in “murder music” campaigns have seemed to display gratitude that others with media access and institutional capacity would choose to use these to our benefit. What has maddened me most is the way I have seen lone Jamaicans in the diaspora play the indispensable role of translator for campaigns that do not see them as strategists and whose leaders do not see themselves as accountable to them. Once the music’s lyrics have been decoded to unmask their intent, those who have little understanding, not merely of their context but of the words themselves, feel entitled to have their own, enabled outrage become the centre of focus. Words that have violent significance in Jamaica and in wider Caribbean communities (both home and abroad) become the subject of protests focused not on the spheres where they have powerful meaning but on others where they might easily pass without meaning. And it is this very sense of the words’ occult nature that helps buttress the cosmology that “murder music” is this scarily primitive thing.

My consistent focus on these sorts of representational politics in “murder music” activism, and my blunt critique of what seemed similarly troubling race politics and questionable accountability in Peter Tatchell’s UK branch of the international campaign, have strained my relationships with many of my brilliant friends in Jamaica—who were clear that in the violent realities of their lives such nuances were North American luxuries Jamaicans could ill-afford to parse—a viewpoint I still tried to frame faithfully in my own media work (Younge 2006). Nonetheless, I have ended up being seen by leading Jamaican organizers as “obsessed with racism which comes from spending too much time in the US,” as one of their most recent rejoinders in an Internet forum discussion with White “murder music” activists put it. With boots on their necks and mobs at their backs,

my Jamaican friends preferred to turn to a masculinist use of economic muscle by those in the North as a much more straightforward defence against their musical attackers. And my inability to overlook the representational and power politics of “murder music” or the longer-term consequences of those alliances has felt like yet another painful breaking of ranks, resonant of the reprimand of the 1992 headline.

I became engaged with “murder music” activism because I care deeply about the safety and dignity and agency of Caribbean GLBT people; and because I fell in a jealous love with the inspirational resistance to homophobia I continue to witness in Jamaica. On my very first visit to Kingston in 2000, I expected a place of the unrelenting homophobia that is at the core of “murder music’s” deliberate symbology. Instead, I was awed to discover a “brighter side of black”^v: men, women and transgenders carving out spaces for community and love and celebration amidst oppression in breathtakingly creative ways (Robinson 2006). In contrast, in many places in the protest of “murder music” I have seen a frightening energy that would seek to destroy Jamaica. And I firmly believe, as I told Gary Younge (2006) at the *Hated to Death* forum, that you have to love Jamaica in order to change it.

The Trinidad & Tobago Anti-Violence Project, 2007

I left New York for Trinidad and Tobago in 2007.

Shortly after my return, a handful of Christian pastors would make the country an international laughing stock by protesting the participation of Elton John as a headliner for a multi-million-dollar jazz festival, on the basis of their offense at his “self-confessed” homosexuality and gay marriage (Ramnarine 2007). Then one evening in the Friends for Life “chatroom,” a gay men’s discussion group in Port of Spain, someone shared that the media was advertising appearances over the coming Easter weekend by artists such as Buju, Beenie Man, Elephant Man, Sizzla and Vybz Kartel in Tobago and Trinidad—as had happened on countless other occasions before. Now, however, thanks to the European and North American actions, protesting “murder music” concerts had become “the gay thing” to do. A group of us, including Joel Simpson, a Guyanese CSME worker who has organized similar protests at home, struggled, disagreed but landed on a simple response: raise the issue in the media by writing the Elton John pastors publicly and urging them to protest “murder music.” Our letter would invite them to unite with us, regardless of our differences, on matters of manifest principle, and to protest those who offend Christ’s teaching by singing death and violence against individuals as if they were not God’s children—especially their choice to do so on the holiest weekend of Easter, when Christ’s violent crucifixion and triumph over death are commemorated. The exercise quickly also became one of capacity-building, with the local GLBT community practicing new lessons about collaborative organizing and media advocacy—managing race and identity to make space for darker, less educated voices not to be crowded out in group dynamics by those at the apex of the pintocracy who “know it all”; and prioritizing in media representations indigenous, less experienced voices over those like mine.

No demonstrations happened, no concerts were cancelled; but each of the three dailies published an opinion piece, an article or our letter; (Mohammed 2007, Allard 2007, Trinidad & Tobago Anti-Violence Project 2007, Trinidad & Tobago *Newsday* 2007a); radio stations called; a TV station did a magazine show and an evening news segment;

and coverage was picked up in the Jamaican media (Radio Jamaica 2007). The Trinidad & Tobago AntiViolence Project, as we called ourselves, in a clear effort to encompass dancehall's violence against women, claimed success.

Months later, a news report of the buggery of two young boys in Gasparillo would break through the national election newscycle (Charan 2007). Birthed for a “murder music” protest, TTAVP would now provide not just a framework for addressing musical violence, but a strategic platform to achieve social inclusion (Robinson et al. 2008) and to reshape a public imagination of homosexuality as predatory. Gay men would tell the media we were seizing leadership in mobilizing others to strengthen protections for boys from sexual abuse and its stigma (Trinidad and Tobago *Newsday* 2007b, 2007c). A year after that, following a pattern of rapes and robberies of gay men seeking sex through a very popular Internet site, efforts would get underway to build a multi-stakeholder coalition under the same umbrella to include the University of the West Indies, the YMCA, the Family Planning Association and the Rape Crisis Society. A draft mission statement would read: “TTAVP is guided by the vision of a child’s right to healthy sexual development, free of sexual and spiritual violence, into an adult free to express and practice gender and sexual identity in ways of his/her choosing. We are a framework to bring together diverse stakeholders to: mobilize gender-sensitive approaches to sexual violence against children and adults; sharpen understanding of the gender-based nature of homophobic violence; support survivors of violence and their families, partners and friends in individual and collective healing, mobilization and restitutive justice; encourage gay communities to take leadership in protecting minors from sexual exploitation; and work on other intersectional issues related to sexual, gender-based and social violence.”

An undeniable product of the past 17 years of “murder music” protest has been new imagination and practices of affiliation and advocacy with regard to sexuality and sexual rights in the Caribbean. An open-minded critique of Jamaica and the wider Caribbean diaspora’s complicated relationships to the “murder music” movement—and an honest political analysis of both the achievements and damage that the protests have produced—afford the opportunity to prospectively build more thoughtful and values-based approaches to transnational human rights advocacy and alliance building with regard to sexuality and gender in the region. I hope that my reflections here help advance that goal. My own vision is that those lessons generate a movement that effectively mobilizes power and technology, but is also grounded in values such as empowerment, autonomy and self-definition of Caribbean GLBT people, a shared love for the amazing place this region is, and a celebration and cultivation of the brilliant ways in which Caribbean GLBT people continue to claim citizenship. Hopefully, too, just as the Jamaican councillor who called my home on Thanksgiving weekend 17 years ago and I are back on speaking, joking terms, I will find myself in new partnerships with others with whom I have struggled and broken ranks over “murder music”.

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NOTES

- i The *New York Post* tabloid made it into one of its signature three-inch front-page headlines: “HATE MUSIC”, accompanied by the tag “New reggae hit urges violence against gays” and an image, captioned with some of the tune’s lyrics, of a record cover featuring a grinning, 17-year-old Buju. Inside, a ¾-page story included a sidebar with the tune’s full lyrics (Pierson 1992).
- ii A phrase I would hear again 12 years later when I asked the Jamaican group hosting a Brooklyn forum on *Hated to Death* (the explosive 2004 Human Rights Watch report on Jamaican homophobia) whether my nonprofit could use the event to distribute a job announcement for a capacity-building initiative focused on Caribbean GLBT people that was funded by the New York City Council
- iii In an op-ed piece that appeared in the UK at the height of the New York City activity, Tatchell described Jamaica’s Christians as suffering from “massive guilt and self-hatred” and its Prime Minister as a “servile defender” of anti-gay laws because his mind remained “colonised by the...values of 19th century British imperialism”.
- iv A review of ongoing exchanges about Jamaica by posters on keithboykin.com and jasmyneconnick.com, blogs of two lead organizers of the 2006 concert (among the most popular sites of their kind at that time) will reveal clear, though by no means uniform, examples of this imagination of Jamaica and the Caribbean.
- v A reference to Issac Julien’s 2003 film, *The Darker Side of Black*, which so troubled me for its erasure of all that I had seen in Jamaica.

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