

Junior Byles & Friends

129 Beat Street

Ja-Man Special 75-78

Like Bourbon Street in New Orleans, Beale Street in Memphis, 42nd Street in New York or Music Row in Nashville, Orange Street in Kingston, Jamaica is the prototypical 'Music Street'. As indicated by its unofficial name, Beat Street, the area around Orange Street in central Kingston had been a centre for sound system activity since the 1950s. By the 1960s Orange Street itself was the subject of numerous songs - the great Prince Buster's "Shaking Up Orange Street" being merely the most famous [and versioned]. Many producers rented shops in and around Orange Street, including Bunny Lee at number 101, Sir JJ Johnson at number 133, and perhaps most celebrated, Prince Buster's legendary Record Shack at number 127. Sonia Pottinger's pressing plant was also in Orange Street, at the bottom; just around the corner was Randy's Studio, above the shop on North Parade. The area continued as a centre for music into the seventies and beyond, although on a much smaller scale. Prince Buster still operates his shop there, as does Augustus Pablo. Producer Trevor 'Leggo' Douglas was one who came to Music Street in the late seventies, opening Cash & Carry Records at 125 Orange Street, just down the street from Prince Buster; like Buster, he's still there today, running his own studio. Right next door to the Prince was the address that gives title to this compilation; Dudley 'Manzie' Swaby and his then-partner in music the late Leroy 'Bunny' Hollett moved into premises on the music street late in 1975, having previously operated from Manzie's family home in Love Lane nearby. From the House of Music at 129 Beat Street they issued a series of recordings - both in roots style and love songs - that have easily stood the test of time. Most of this music has never been issued outside of Jamaica; this compilation is hopefully the first of several to chronicle Manzie Swaby's underground roots legacy.

Manzie was born in Alston, Clarendon on the 7th August 1953. He moved to Kingston as a young child, attending St Martin's School in Ivy Road, just behind the world-famous Studio One on Brentford Road. The school actually backed on to the yard at the back of the studio, so Manzie was able to witness such stars as Ken Boothe, Alton Ellis, the Cables and the late Jackie Mittoo as they rehearsed or relaxed in time-honoured Jamaican fashion. This early inspiration led to a love of music - "me always love music" says the producer today - that eventually led him to give up his full-time job in favour of record production. Even before that, Manzie used to hang out at the gully-bank in Craig Town; it was there that he met and reasoned with such as the Abyssinians, and more importantly, Keith 'Junior' Byles, who also used to go there to sing. For Manzie it was a time of "music, revolutionary feelin', an' give t'anks! It was always like an expression, yunno? "

Although not politically active, he was broadly in sympathy with the programme of PNP leader Michael Manley who became Jamaica's Prime Minister following the 1972 election. By the end of 1974 Manzie had decided to leave his secure government job for the precarious world of record production. At home in his yard, singers like Junior Byles and Rupert Reid would gather; with Manzie strumming his acoustic guitar, they all worked on songs together. One of the songs they all used to sing became the first Ja-Man release, Rupert Reid's "See The Dread Deh". The first session at Randy's was soon followed by another, which yielded two singles by deejay Jah Woosh [Neville Beckford] - "She Tek A Set" and "Free Up Mi Ganja".

Although "She Tek A Set" was a minor hit, it wasn't until Manzie began recording Junior Byles that he started to get attention outside Jamaica, particularly on the UK sound system scene of the time. The four tunes were recorded at Randy's with the band Skin Flesh & Bones. Byles had long been recognised for his Upsetter-produced music, including tracks like "Beat Down Babylon", "Da Da" from 1971 and more recent music cut at Black Ark in early 1974, - "The Long Way" and the massively popular "Curly Locks" being two classic titles. His Ja-Man titles were all solid UK sound system favourites, and over two decades later they still fetch high prices on the revival/collector market.

"Remember Me" and "Chant Down Babylon" were distributed in the UK from Lasco's Music Den on Lower Clapton Road in London's East End. The records only carried the title on the label, not the name of the artists, but they sold well for Lasco's. The shop was for a time the leading importer in the UK of Jamaican 'pre-release' 45s; shop owner Bubba was also the exclusive distributor for the first Ja-Man album, by deejay Jah Woosh. During the period on Orange Street, Manzie and Bunny recorded a wide range of vocalists - including Leroy Smart, Ronnie Davis, The Itals, Errol Holt, Freddie McKay, and Hortense Ellis, as well those on this compilation - along with deejays - I Roy, Trinity, his brother Clint Eastwood, Doctor Alimantado and Errol Scorcher all made titles for him. Augustus Pablo cut a melodica instrumental for the label, called "Liberation", which was released in 1976. A solitary dub set was released in 1977, untitled as an album, but with every track bearing a herb-related title. In 1978 Manzie & Bunny decided to go their separate ways. Bunny started his 'Field Marshall' imprint, releasing music by the Survivors, Brigadier Jerry and Still Cool amongst others. Manzie started his own 'Manzie's' label, issuing singles and the only Jamaican-released album by the late General Echo, from premises in Slipe Pen Road. He also recorded Rod Taylor and Clint Eastwood, and in 1980 released another dub album ["Kings Dub"]. When the politics changed in Jamaica after the JLP won the 1981 election, Manzie decided to visit the USA. He then made a decision shortly after to emigrate to Bronx, New York, where he still lives today, running a thriving taxi company.

The music he produced in the latter half of the seventies is, for the most part, conscious roots music of the first rank; it was made not primarily for financial gain, but because Manzie felt that these powerful messages had to be heard. It was fortunate indeed that his tenure in the geographical and emotional centre of the Jamaican music business coincided with the time when a whole new generation of roots artists was ready to sing and chant down Babylon. Such was the strength of the Ja-man vision that they still sound as vital today, two decades and more since they were recorded.

Steve Barrow August 1998

Track Commentary;

Chant Down Babylon Junior Byles & Rupert Reid [extended]

Know Where You're Going Junior Byles

Pitchy-Patchy Junior Byles

Remember Me Junior Byles & Rupert Reid [extended]

See The Dread Deh Rupert Reid [extended]

These tracks come between the music Byles made with Lee Perry, and the period that brought the hits like "Fade Away" for Earl 'Chinna' Smith at Channel One, the Pete Weston-produced album, and the handful of tracks made for Joe Gibbs, Niney, Lloyd 'Spiderman' Campbell and others. The Ja-Man songs are Byles at his most spiritual, particularly on the tracks in duet with Rupert Reid. Never repressed since their first issue - although three were also released, dubbed from disc, by Black Wax in the UK during 1975/6.

They are performances of stark purity and utter sincerity, further demonstrating that Byles on his day is an artist of the first order. Of Rupert Reid, little is known, except that his solo song here is as uplifting as any of the Byles tracks, and beautifully sung. After this, Reid went on to record "South Africa Will Be Free" on the "Remember Me" rhythm for Spanish Town producer [and now UK-based writer/columnist] Martin 'Mandingo' Williams. The dub portion of "See The Dread Deh" previously appeared as the b-side of Jah Woosh's "Ism Scism" [Ja-Man 45, 1975], where it was titled "Cup & Saucer".

One People Pablo Moses

Pablo Moses had cut the excellent "Revolutionary Dream" album, and the UK reggae hit "We Should Be in Angola" before he voiced this brooding anthem, one of his finest moments on record. Although never considered as a mainstream reggae artist, he is nevertheless one of the more conscious artists of the period. His subsequent work has been similarly committed, available or forthcoming on a series of self-produced albums from French-based reggae label Tabou.1. Pablo Moses [aka Paul Henry] still tours regularly, particularly in Europe. He was a friend of Bunny Hollet, and the song came about when Pablo, Bunny and Manzie were talking one day about the political situation in the mid-seventies: Manzie remembers the reasoning ran thus: "This political war a gwan, an' the whol' a we one people, so we decide fi cut it at Channel One"

Mighty Ruler Bim Sherman

A beautifully-wrought Rasta adaptation of Leroy Sibbles' immortal "Tripe Girl", the tune was a sound system favourite in the UK, first heard on the UK champion set Sir Coxson's Outernational during the winter of 1976/77. Sherman, from East Kingston, had met up with Manzie at Idler's Rest on Chancery Lane: "Im 'ave a angelic voice, an' 'im ask me fi record 'im." Earlier, Sherman had been one of the first roots singers to release his own productions - on his own Scorpio and Sun Dew labels - as well as via Pete Weston's Micron label. Sherman went on to make "Ever Firm" for producer Gussie Clark in 1977; after that he toured the UK, eventually settling there. His association with UK-based producer Adrian Sherwood has ensured that his music has continued to progress. This is exemplified brilliantly on his 1997 release "Miracle", a haunting blend of 'acoustic' reggae with an Indian string orchestra and percussioin.

My Homeland Dave Robinson extended

Firmly in the school of Dennis Brown, Dave Robinson made two titles for Ja-Man; this forceful repatriation plaint - riding a rhythm also popularised by Ossie Hibbert - was issued in 1976, with a dub side called "Soweto" included here, and "Jah Know" came out the year after. From West Kingston, Robinson was an effective youth singer in the mid-seventies; he gained a popular dancehall hit with "Chaga Chaga Warrior" for the Mighty Diamonds' Bad Gong label in 1977. As well as other releases on Bad Gong, Dave made noteworthy records for labels like Jigsaw ["Everyone Is Crying"], Tit For Tat club owner Dickie Wong's Merritone Music ["I Bet You Don't Know"], deejay Lizzy's Ultrasonic ["Prophecy"], deejay Trinity's Flag Man [a cover of D.Brown's "Song My Mother Used To Sing"] and for D.Brown and Al Small's D'Augular's Sounds ["It's All Your Fault"]. After recording for Junjo Lawes in the early eighties ["Ruby & Diamonds"], he relocated to New York maintaining a low profile until a recent return to recording.

Wild Goose Race Brigadier Jerry

Recorded in the first year of Briggy's recording career, this cut shows his roots in the school of deejay godfather U-Roy. He went on to release music on Leroy Hollett's Field Marshall label, including "Kingston City" and his version of Pablo Moses' "One People", called "What's Going On". Manzie and Bunny, although not 12 Tribes members, were followers of the sound sytem on which Briggy chanted, Jah Love Hi-Fi.

See A Man's Face Neville Tate extended

Another Western Kingston youth, the little-known Neville Tate cut one other side for the label, the apocalyptic "Lightning Clap". Here he versions Horace Andy's original composition, over a propulsive steppers update of the

original lick, laid at Channel One. Neville currently resides in New York, though no longer active in the music business.

So Long U Brown

A version of the "Ooh Wee Baby" rhythm, recut for vocalist Leroy Smart, over which deejay daddy U-Brown -then at the peak of his Jamaican success - offers his reprise of the traditional Rasta lyric recorded earlier by Count Ossie, Dennis Brown and others. He, Ranking Joe and a handful of others showed the way in which U-Roy's pioneering style could be refreshed, thus fitting the rockers and steppers updates of rock steady classics then being recycled in the dancehall. It provides a fitting closer - strictly roots and culture - to this programme.