

Johnny Clarke

Dreader Dread 1976-1978

During the years 1975-1981, the period that Bob Marley and the Wailers gained their huge international audience, three singers ruled the Jamaican dancehall - Dennis Brown, Gregory Isaacs and Johnny Clarke. Both Dennis and Gregory went on to attract considerable recognition outside Jamaica; of the trio, Johnny Clarke is still the least known internationally. Yet he alone can truly be called the founder of the modern style of Jamaican dancehall singing. His work in the seventies for producer Bunny Lee is exemplary in this respect; during the period of their association, they literally changed the way that Jamaican music was to be recorded henceforth. After Johnny Clarke came all the modern dancehall singers, beginning with Sugar Minott and Linval Thompson, then continuing with such as Sammy Dread, Little John, Frankie Paul, Barrington Levy and many more up to the present.

Johnny Clarke was born in January 1955; he grew up in the Kingston ghetto of Whitfield Town, just south of Waltham Park Road opposite Delamere Avenue. He attended Jamaica College school; shortly after leaving at seventeen, he recorded his first song, "God Made The Sea & Sun" for producer Clancy Eccles, released on a blank label. As Johnny recalled: "It wasn't really a hit as such, but it was just like to let some of my good friends know that I can do the stuff, y'know?" He had also featured strongly on the talent shows run by promoter/producer/vocalist Tony Mack. Mack, whose real name is Anthony McClaren, was a good friend of Slim Smith - he sings backing vocals on "The Time Has Come" for example - and he was also the first to present the vocal trio the Diamonds on his regular talent shows around this time. An appearance in just such a show at Bull Bay, on the coast to the east of Kingston, had brought Johnny to the attention of producer /vocalist Rupie Edwards. As a result, early in 1973, he recorded a handful of tunes for the producer - "Don't Go", "Julie" and "Everyday Wondering" -, which enjoyed a measure of success in the UK reggae market. But Rupie Edwards was soon to have a huge crossover hit himself in the UK, via "Irie Feelings", using the rhythm of "Everyday Wondering". Rupie eventually relocated to London following his hit. Vexed at finding out that Rupie Edwards hadn't even put his name on the records he'd made, Johnny switched his allegiance to producer Bunny Lee; as he told writer Carl Gayle in 1975: "Rupie Edwards wasn't treating me so nice, and I just left and came to Bunny Lee".

Lee's fellow producer Niney had been running the dancehalls hot with a string of hits by Dennis Brown; Lee was looking for a sound to compete against that. He heard Johnny on a record he had made for an obscure label called Atom, run by Stamma, a friend of producer Keith Hudson: "He did a tune name 'Golden Snake' fi Stamma - 'Buru' we use to call 'im - and me like how 'im sing". Johnny also cut a tune ("Jump Back") for producer Glen Brown at this time. But only Lee had the means to do anything with Johnny; as the great vocalist Alton Ellis recalled: "Striker bruk 'im in, man - Bunny Lee 'ave 'im sing 'pon rapid after a while. A lickle more time from that, 'im go do a tune name "None Shall Escape The Judgement" and Johnny Clarke GONE..."

Bunny lost no time in getting Johnny into the studio, cutting him on a version of the Paragons' "Left With A Broken Heart" and a tune called "House Crashers" (on the "Mule Train" rhythm). Shortly after that, Bunny recorded the Greenwich Town singer Earl Zero (Earl Johnson) singing his composition "None Shall Escape The Judgement", with Johnny singing backing vocals on this first version of the tune.

In search of something that would give his productions an edge, Lee had Soul Syndicate drummer Carlton 'Santa' Davis change the beat. As Johnny told Carl Gayle in 1975: "Niney didn't have any flying cymbals in his things, but the same drumming. We created a new cymbal sound. When we went to do "None Shall Escape..." at Duke Reid's studio, Bunny came in and said he wanted something 'out of space', so Santa started playing like that and Bunny said yeah. And people get into it..."

According to Bunny, the engineer who recorded this first version at Treasure Isle was Sid Bucknor. However, when Bucknor transferred the tune to four-track, to be mixed at King Tubby's studio, he unaccountably left Earl Zero's original vocal track off. When Tubby called this to Bunny's attention, Johnny spoke up, saying that he knew the song and could sing it. One take, and it was done; some time afterwards, Tubby ran this version on dubplates, selling them to UK-based sounds that he had a strong link with, like Lloydie Coxson and Lord David. When Bunny heard the song playing in England, he knew he had a hit on his hands.

The flying cymbal sound dominated the dancehall scene during 1974-1975; singers like Cornell Campbell, Owen Grey and Delroy Wilson all benefitted from the new-style rhythms, at the same time as Johnny's first set of hits appeared. This run of hits included massively popular roots songs like "Enter Into His Gates With Praise" and "Move Out Of Babylon", pro-PNP anthems like "Joshua's Word" and "Jah Jah Bless Joshua", and a host of cover versions. These were drawn mainly from the rocksteady and r & b songbooks and were released on Lee imprints like 'Justice', 'Explosion', 'Attack', 'Gorgan' and 'Jackpot'. Johnny covered such as Barbara Lynn's "You'll Use A Good Thing", Gaylad Delano Stewart's "Rock With Me Baby" and Delroy Wilson's "True Believer In Love". Robbie Shakespeare, then the bassist on most of Lee's sessions, also released a memorable series of Clarke covers of classic Paragons songs on his 'Bar Bell' label, including such as "Fancy Make-up", "Stranger In Love", "Stealing" and "A Love I Can Feel". All were distributed from Striker's shop at 101 Orange Street.

Johnny's arrival on the scene had seriously dented Dennis Brown's popularity, as Striker recalls: "When Johnny Clarke start, him stop everybody - even Dennis had to record a tune with Johnny to start back..." Like the Bar Bell productions, that was also a Paragons song - "So Much Pain". His first album, "None Shall Escape The Judgement" was released on Total Sounds. Producer and singer kept up the pace during 1975, with another album on Total

Sounds ("Moving Out"), and sound system favourites like 'Hold On' carrying the swing at venues like Coolie Boy's dancehall on East Avenue down in Greenwich Farm. That same year the singer told Carl Gayle that he was looking for an international hit. The following year he came as close as he would get when he had Lee-produced albums released not only on Richard Branson's Virgin Front Line label ("Authorised Version" and "Rockers Time Now", but also on Vulcan, ("Put It On") distributed by Polydor. All these albums (and his Total Sounds set "No Woman No Cry", released in Jamaica the same year) mixed original Clarke compositions with classic songs from the likes of Bob Marley, Culture and the Abyssinians.

Striker was fulfilling his role as producer in what has since become time-honoured Jamaican fashion; the market became saturated with Johnny Clarke songs. It seemed that Johnny was always in the studio, acquiring a nickname in the process: "Is me did gi' 'im the name studio idler " said the producer in 1998. A studio idler, according to deejay Dennis Alcapone, is someone who would hang around every day "...not singin' a note, not singin' nutten, right? Dem jus' send 'im go a shop, send 'im go 'ere or dere, an' 'im go on, an' go on, until 'im get 'imself in..." Indeed, Johnny sees this as part of the process: "When you're just coming in the business, there's things you have to do. Maybe sometimes you have to go to the shop. Sometimes the man make you go buy some beer, and buy some food. Bring fe the man dem, y'know. And then after a while you can reach a stage where maybe you start make a next man do that. Just coming in the business and you really want to be a part of what is happening, and you know you can fill the gap... the name studio idler, I don't really check it as nothing... me don't mind it. 'Cause something happened from that. Because it was worthwhile and it was beneficial, 'cause I benefit from it."

The pattern that producer and singer had established was soon taken up by rivals like Joe Gibbs and Channel One. Moreover, they had the advantage of owning their own studios, and by 1977 had become dominant. Bunny lost further ground in the music when he began spending long periods in the UK during the late 1970s, seeking distribution for his extensive catalogue in the wake of the collapse of Vulcan/Grounation, and Virgin's withdrawal from the reggae market. He helped his friend Count Shelley expand his distribution, and encouraged Prince Jammy to enter the production side. With the fortunes of singer and producer as inextricably twinned as they were, these other projects also affected Johnny's prospects.

New ghetto-based producers - Junjo Lawes, Linval Thompson, Don Mais, Jah Thomas - were also coming on the scene, developing the practices of Lee further, and squeezing him out. And there was, as veteran vocalist Alton Ellis suggests, a sense of the partnership having run its course: "Bunny Lee run 'im hot, till it look like Bunny wine 'im out, yunno. Every day mek album fi Bunny, run 'im HOT. After, when 'im open 'im mouth, is like nothin' don't come out a it - Bunny Lee tek every t'ing, put it 'pon tape..."

Although Johnny spent some time in the UK during the early/mid-1980s - he cut titles for Fashion, Mad Professor and Jah Shaka - he soon returned to Jamaica, where he kept a low profile, only recording occasionally. He recorded an album - "Rasta Nuh Fear" - for producer/deejay Prince Jazzbo in 1992, and since then he has returned to live performance, making memorable appearances with the Abyssinians at London's Hackney Empire (1994), and at big festivals like the Steirische Herbst (Graz 1996), the Essential (Brighton 1997) and the Sierra Nevada World Music Festival (California 1998). His latest album "Rock With Me" was made with Niney in 1997. His live performances have revealed him to be just as good, even better than before; and his vast catalogue means he can portray a wide range of feelings and themes to a whole new audience. In the meantime, this compilation (mostly new to CD) brings back some of the original roots music of Johnny Clark; as the singer himself says: "That's why even this CD thing is very important to the music right now, because the records will never die, but just kind of get back 'pon top, y'know ? And them going to feel good to know that, bwoy, these songs has been out for so long, and still sound so crisp, as if it was done yesterday!"

Dreader dread indeed...

Steve Barrow September 1998