

Murder Music

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Jamaica's dancehall music is being blamed for the country's violent attacks on gays. But there are many who don't see the music as homophobic, only the battle cry of a changing nation.

On a breezy evening in mid-April a committee boasting some of Jamaica's most venerable citizens convened an open-air meeting under the auspices of the department of government at the University of the West Indies. After almost a year and a half of sifting through charts and listening to old vinyl recordings, the committee co-chairmen, which included the president of Jamaica's National Gallery and a former finance minister, presented to several hundred members of the public their list of the top one hundred Jamaican songs. Pandemonium ensued. Audience members objected to the choice for number one song, "One Love," Bob Marley's sweet paean to togetherness, as being too saccharine. People jammed the open microphone to point out the under-representation of female artists. Others testily questioned why so few of the chosen top songs reflected reggae's subversive, anti-establishment politics. Several people demanded a more transparent process. But the most passionate complaint from the crowd—which included members of the media, faculty in the university's department of reggae studies, music industry figures, and ordinary music fans—was voiced over and over again from younger members of the audience: Where on this top one hundred list were the dancehall songs? Dancehall is a beat-heavy, lyrically-dense, energetic, and synthesizer-driven music that has much in common with American hip-hop. It evolved in the early nineteen nineties out of the classic reggae of Bob Marley and Jimmy Cliff—the often feel-good, reefer-party music championing the Rastafarian visions of social justice and pan-African celebration, which had powered Jamaica to worldwide recognition in the nineteen seventies and had catapulted Jamaican musicians into the far reaches of global iconography. Surging in popularity worldwide, dancehall acts routinely fill venues like Madison Square Garden. The biggest dancehall performers sell out their U.S. concert dates within minutes. In Japan some forty thousand fans roar to the beat of dancehall acts in a sold-out stadium concert staged every September. Dance moves pioneered by dancehall fans frequently turn up in the videos of American hip hop stars.

But dancehall is hugely controversial—inside and outside Jamaica. Detractors echo many of the same complaints voiced against American hip-hop, including that the music promotes misogyny and violence. But the brief against dancehall far exceeds criticism leveled against any other genre of popular music. Dancehall is a crucible for Jamaica's irreconcilable notions of class and masculinity and identity. Most of all, dancehall is accused of fomenting vicious anti-gay violence. But none of the judges explained the paucity of dancehall in the list by citing the social upheaval, foreign disapprobation, or controversy surrounding dancehall. To explain dancehall's under-representation on their top one hundred, judges instead invoked their own personal tastes and the need for recent music to endure the test of time. During the audience Q&A, one man in his twenties leaned forward into the microphone as if he were about to break into song himself, his hands wrapped around the lapel of his linen sports coat. "You cannot ignore dancehall," he lectured the judges. "It is the soul of the Jamaican street. We respect our roots but it is not what is alive right now. You cannot wish us away."

Homegrown music in Jamaica fulfills a cultural role far larger than popular music in the US or indeed in most other countries. As an export it is a major factor in Jamaica's economy—and helps fuel Jamaica's massive tourism industry, the country's largest economic sector, with about 1.6 billion dollars in annual revenue and the source of employment for more than 10 percent of the Jamaican population. Music is a vital component of Jamaican national identity—in much of the world, after all, it is what puts Jamaica on the map—and it acts as social glue in a nation of extreme disparity, where the middle classes are bundled inside gated housing developments while the majority of the population sprawls across crowded urban garrisons. Jamaican music is a sort of lingua franca for a country with two halves literally speaking different languages (English in the hilly subdivisions; Jamaican patois in the ghetto). Only the hated gas tax seems to rival music as a common conversation topic from Kingston's manicured uptown to the city's ravaged downtown. Jamaica only achieved its independence from Great Britain in 1962, and for many years after, the country remained largely rural and relatively isolated from the larger world. But Jamaican society has become a lot more complicated in the past twenty years. The country has seen new immigrant groups—mainly Chinese and Indians attracted to small-bore business opportunities—a huge number of Jamaicans working overseas, the rise of vexing criminal networks, the influx of global media, vast divisions in wealth, and new educational opportunities that challenge the former British colony's old class divisions. Where once tasked with creating a nation from the historical firmament of an especially brutalizing slavery system—tinder for frequent violent plantation uprisings—Jamaican society is now devastated by one of the highest homicide rates in the world (in 2010 coming in third behind Columbia and South Africa).

Dancehall, with its incorporation of global music trends and appetite for foreign audiences, has become a vibrant expression of Jamaica's changing society. But the music is also a rebuke against important aspects of the country's sense of national identity. For a start, the genre's aesthetics pose a challenge to Jamaica's delicate balancing act on race—Jamaican leaders like to trumpet both the country's multiracial harmony and Jamaica's historical support of a strong identity among pan-African diasporas. But a popular dancehall affectation among men is to bleach white their faces, necks, and arms, leaving many Jamaicans to wonder how many of the nation's youth really feels about their black skin. Like with much else about dancehall, there is little agreement about significance: a large number of Jamaica's punditry insist race has nothing to do with it; others, more convincingly, argue that it's a little absurd to fail to see racial implications when Jamaican men undergo expensive bleaching treatments. Dancehall-inspired body alterations don't stop with bleaching. At concerts and street festivals, the same young men who will aggressively showcase their dance moves with women—including "daggering," a style of dance invented in dancehall clubs that involves a graphic, frenetic, and very public simulation of sex (one form of daggering is when a man jumps from an elevated platform, usually a stack of speakers, dropping ten or twelve feet directly into the spread legs of a woman writhing on the dance floor)—will also show up with shaved eyebrows and dress in a riot of gender-bending jewelry and accessories. The result is a look that borders on post-apocalyptic. But in no arena is dancehall—and Jamaican society overall—more troubled than in grappling with sexual orientation. Blaring on most street corners and from car radios, dancehall's virulent homophobia, a curdled hatred for homosexuals explicitly and pervasively articulated in the music's lyrics and deeply entrenched in dancehall culture, foments a quotidian reign of terror against Jamaican gay people. Jamaican gays call it murder music.

Dancehall's anti-homosexuality often is camouflaged in Jamaican patois, a dialect of English difficult for non-Jamaicans to understand. But in translation, the emotions aren't hard to decode. A song by Capleton called "Give Har" includes the lyrics: Shoulda know seh Capleton bun battyman/Dem same fire apply to all di lesbian/Seh mi bun everything from mi know seh dem gay/All boogaman and sodomites fi get killed. "Batty" means backside in patois and "battymen" is a ubiquitous pejorative for homosexuals in Jamaica. This translates from the patois into, "You should know that Capleton burns homosexuals/The same fire applies to lesbians/Say I burn everything as long as I know that they're homosexual/All homosexuals and sodomites should be killed." Beenie Man, one of the top dancehall musicians, sings "Han Up Deh" with the lyrics Hang chi chi gal wid a long piece of rope, which means "Hang lesbians with a long piece of rope." He is also the author of one of the first anti-gay dancehall anthems, "Batty Man Fi Dead," which translates into "Homosexuals should be killed." A top dancehall performer named Bounty Killer sings lyrics, among many other examples, that include, "Burn gay men until they wince in agony/gay men should drown." A dancehall singer named Elephant Man, one of Jamaica's top dancehall musicians, a charismatic performer with multicolored hair braids who headlined a Fourth of July concert in Rochester, NY, has a hit song with the words "When you hear a lesbian getting raped/it's not our fault/it's wrong/two women in bed/that's two sodomites who should be dead."

In a country where gay people are routine targets for violence, where the homes of suspected gay people are burned down at night and lesbians frequently confront the threat of rape, where police habitually refuse to intervene in crimes against gay victims and where men do not sit next to each other on a public bus in fear they will accidentally brush up against another man and consequently expose themselves to violent attack, dancehall implacably channels the country's anti-gay animus. As much as dancehall's professional promoters strain to sideline the issue and Jamaica's boosters look to avoid the topic, dancehall's homophobia has become nearly unavoidable—one Jamaican compared it to the way the issue of race metastasized everywhere in the Jim Crow South. Walking a busy Jamaican street one afternoon, I listened for patois anti-gay epithets; I heard it tumbling out of a majority of conversations at a frequency that seemed entirely implausible if I had not already been told by Jamaicans of the country's gay fixation. At dancehall events, like Kingston's all-night street dance parties, a deadly hostility toward homosexuality co-mingles with an obvious gay aesthetic. The question is why. "You go to Passa Passa"—an all-night dance party held every Wednesday in one of Kingston's roughest neighborhoods—"and you see men dancing in pink pastels, dancing as effeminately as they possibly can," said Donna P. Hope, a professor of reggae studies at the University of the West Indies, tapping her nails against her desk. "These guys are supposed to be gangsters. What is going on here?" The contradiction goes well beyond a curious taste in sartorial expression. It is more like a call to arms. Jamaica's legions of young dancehall fans, the majority from relentlessly poor urban neighborhoods, have embraced a persona that is calculated to offend, even if by all rights it should also offend their own prejudices. It is also, it seemed to me, a preemptive strike: in a society where sexuality is under constant surveillance, where the smallest clue that a person is homosexual is a pretext for violence, dancehall provides the ultimate protective uniform. When everyone on the dance floor is flouting heterosexual conventions, it suddenly becomes impossible to single out anybody. "We have this fraught sense of sexuality—it is an irony—where we go to extremes in expressing sexuality but at the same time we have this horrible shame and violence about it," said Thomas Glave in a telephone interview. Glave, a professor of English at MIT, was born in the Bronx but mostly grew up in Jamaica and sets his fiction inside the country.

Jamaica is hardly the only country in its region to persecute gay people. Cuba especially has a history of repressing sexual minorities. Through the nineteen eighties men accused of homosexuality were sent without trial to internment camps to undergo forced hard labor there. But countries across the Caribbean, including Cuba, have in recent years quietly allowed a more visible if discreet public space for gays. Since the nineteen nineties predominately gay beaches have been allowed to flourish in several Caribbean islands. Sympathetic gay characters have started to appear on Cuban soap operas. With same-sex marriage laws stacking up territorial wins in the U.S. by the month, an openly lesbian president of Iceland, and protections for gay people being enshrined across the world, it's not even news to notice gay people are enjoying a sweeping global acceptance. Not in Jamaica. A member of Jamaica's parliament recently drafted a proposal to change the current sentence for breaking Jamaica's "gross indecency" law, which generally applies to any gay sexual conduct public or private, from a 10-year prison sentence to life. In May, 2008, in an interview on the BBC program *Hard Talk*, Jamaica's newly elected prime minister, Bruce Golding, declared that he would exclude homosexuals from his cabinet. "Jamaicans require a very clear anti-homosexual statement or most Jamaicans will actually think the prime minister himself is gay, as absurd as this sounds," said Deann Fontaine, a Jamaican film maker. Rampant homophobia cohabitates with the pervasive belief that some extravagantly large percentage of the island population is, in fact, gay. In dozens of interviews with both gay and straight Jamaicans, I was repeatedly assured that at least half the men in Jamaica are gay. In this decade "the discussion about gays has just exploded," said Thomas Glave, the MIT professor. At the same time, it is a discussion that "has sparked a national anxiety, an anxiety that hasn't really been eased or resolved. This travels in different ways in different social networks but the result is you don't have to be gay to be considered gay," continued Glave. "Which is why people honestly believe in numbers like 70 percent and 80 percent for the gay community." Yet again and again Jamaicans told me that the country is not exceptional, that it is being singled out unfairly in order to limit dancehall's commercial viability abroad, and in any case the country has a right to its traditions and religious values. "It's our culture to be honest," said a smartly dressed producer for a popular Jamaican reggae show who often interviews Jamaican musicians about politics. Despite her job as a professional interviewer, she refused to give me her name after I broached dancehall's controversies. "We're a very spiritual country," she said, a fierce note in her voice. "The overseas market has made us pay for our views but we're still going to sing about it."

Indeed, the canyon separating Jamaican attitudes on homosexuality with its neighbors is especially steep when it comes to dancehall artists' global aspirations. The entertainment world is, by and large, hyper-sensitive to allegations of promoting intolerance against any group. Rank, publicly expressed homophobia has become the worst kind of poison on the factory floor of pop culture manufacturing: it has become dangerously uncool. Yet, while many in the dancehall world defend Jamaican performers as simple vessels for the prejudices manifest in Jamaican society at large, it's more likely that dancehall was what ignited the fuse in the first place. Until about twenty years ago, Jamaicans with whom I spoke uniformly recalled that men didn't worry about accidentally brushing up against another man on a city bus. Homosexuality was hidden, but not radioactive. That changed beginning the early nineteen nineties, precisely the time when dancehall emerged, with its musicians exhorting fans to spill out of clubs and attack gay people. Dancehall's culpability is "clear—it's really the one big difference between other Caribbean countries and Jamaica. Other countries have a cult of masculinity and powerful churches but what they don't have is dancehall," said Baz Dreisinger, a professor at John Jay College in New York and a prominent popular music critic who has published widely on Jamaican music. The dichotomy between Jamaica's democracy and its treatment of sexual minorities "is particularly striking," said Rebecca Schlieffer, a researcher at Human Rights Watch. "That in a country with such a vibrant democracy and history of championing human rights protections for vulnerable groups, it would have a complete disregard for international law and a total failure to protect people." Still, Dreisinger cautioned me that "if you don't inherently love dancehall—like so many cultural products—it is easy to check off what's wrong and distressing in it, if you don't appreciate its creativity and beauty and power. At the same time, the criticisms are all true," said Dreisinger. "I don't think there's one uber-explanation. The homophobia has definitely become worse in the last five years. Which is why I subscribe to the snowball effect, that it is hype-generated."

Moreover, some critics pointed out, dancehall musicians are caught in a difficult Catch-22. An aggressively anti-gay posture is needed to sell music in Jamaica, essential in establishing their credibility as bona fide dancehall product; but doing so jeopardizes their commercial appeal abroad, the source of the real money in the business. Jamaica's minister of culture, Olivia "Babsy" Grange, a staunch defender of dancehall who once worked in the industry as a personal manager, appeared almost apoplectic when I brought up the subject of anti-gay lyrics (while her press liaison, who sternly lectured me after the interview for bringing up the issue at all, looked like he wanted to hit me). "We do not support gay bashing. We don't support violence against anybody. But the problem is taking care of itself," the minister recited, and pointed out that her ministry has produced workshops for musicians, helping them to formulate positive messages in their songs and prepare for the export market. "These artists have to understand that they are in a global marketplace, and they do understand this." When the minister told me that dancehall is primarily about "arrival" and "good emotions," I reported to her my experience the night before at a dancehall club where the deejay had relentlessly aroused the crowd with hectoring references to homosexuality, calling out "battyman" and "chi chi man" and "fish," all incendiary patois pejoratives. Grange protested that focusing on anti-gay speech in dancehall "is unfair. We're not preoccupied with it. I don't think it is part of the national conversation right now."

Even by Jamaican standards, N has been vigilant in shielding his sexuality. He is closeted from his affluent parents, both professionals living in a city on the southern coast. While a student several years ago at Howard University in Washington DC, he introduced his boyfriend to only his closest friends. Back in Kingston, he never walked on streets more than a few minutes at a stretch and he rarely allowed another man, gay or straight, to enter his apartment. A few months ago, in a parking lot adjacent to a posh Kingston shopping district called the Sovereign Center, N and another man kissed their two stylish women companions on the cheeks and turned to open their car doors. The four office colleagues had just enjoyed an after-work dinner at an upscale restaurant. Over his shoulder, N heard a man's voice: "You all are battymen." "I wasn't sure who they were talking about so I turned around," recounted N. "Someone stabbed me with some sort of instrument in my eye, then punched me in the face." For N, the next ten or so minutes became a blur. Witnesses told police that fourteen assailants—including the owner of the restaurant they had just exited—punched, kicked, and body-slammed the two men over and over again. Despite three operations, N lost all sight in his left eye. He refused to leave his apartment for two months. After the attack, the friend who was also beaten filed a police report against their assailants, listing his home address. Two weeks later, he was shot outside his front gate.

"Homophobia is the wrong term for what's going on in Jamaica because there's no fear of gays here. The fear is all the other way," N told me inside an HIV prevention center, one of the few places in Kingston where we could talk without fear of retribution from someone overhearing our conversation. Leaving an upscale Kingston restaurant a few months before, fourteen men had ambushed N and a male colleague in the restaurant's parking lot. Shouting anti-gay epithets and in clear view of witnesses, the assailants ripped a hole in N's eye, punched and body-slammed both men, and left them to bleed out on the pavement. "I'm afraid to drive in my own vehicle with another man in the front seat," said N. "I can pull up to a red light and something can happen. I'm afraid to have any man in my apartment. I'm afraid someone will call me out as gay for using too many hand gestures. Yes, that happens here. Anything can be used to call a man gay, on the street or in the neighborhood." This fear of being identified as gay may have even contributed to Jamaica's rising incidence of colon cancer. Jamaican men often refuse digital rectal examinations out of fear the procedure will result in an allegation of homosexuality, health officials have complained to local media. Until a few years ago, private apartment parties in Kingston were common places for gay Jamaicans to meet, but after mobs attacked several gay parties they are now considered too dangerous. Today, occasional street dance parties with a high security presence and, for those who can afford to travel, chance encounters at gay events abroad comprise the few venues where gay Jamaicans can openly socialize. At a clandestine, invite-only gay warehouse party I attended deep in the mountains behind Kingston, a half dozen guards blocked the front door to search for weapons, a definition that includes cell phones with cameras. The party ended in a panicked run to the parking lot when a rumor that the police had discovered the party swept through the dance floor. Gay people feel hunted. Anti-gay predators, Jamaicans looking to harm gay people, "meet us in chat rooms and arrange to meet face-to-face; they do it like a game," said J, a pixie-sized, thirty-three-year-old gay woman living with her siblings in Kingston. "I had a couple of friends who were killed by people that way."

J's father, whom she lived with, protected her when she was younger. "I was attacked a few times on the street but my father never had any problems about me," she said. But her father died two years ago, and because no employer would consider her for employment—she has an androgynous appearance—her brothers and sisters reluctantly permitted her to move between their houses. One of her sisters once tried to rid the family of J by calling the police to report her as lesbian, which could have led to imprisonment, beatings, or rape. (J now resides in Canada, where she is under consideration for asylum based on sexual orientation. Full disclosure: I helped purchase J's airline ticket to Toronto.) J-FLAG, Jamaica's only gay rights group, which maintains a secret location, has confirmed sixty-one anti-gay attacks over the last two years, resulting in at least three deaths. But the vast majority of anti-gay violence goes unreported and Jamaican police almost never acknowledge an anti-gay motive in the violent crimes they investigate. During one two-week period last April alone, J-FLAG learned of two lesbian couples in Kingston who were brutally gang-raped in separate incidents. "Dancehall artists say they don't mean people should go out and kill gay people but people do take it literally, and why wouldn't they?" said Karlene, who is one of the leaders at J-FLAG, but like every gay person living in Jamaica cited in this article, said revealing her full name would amount to a death sentence. Dancehall "speaks to a Jamaican core belief: We have no right to live." In June 2004, a jeering crowd celebrated outside the home where one of J-FLAG's founders, Brian Williamson, had been discovered murdered, his body mutilated. I got a glimpse of what it might be like to be gay in Kingston when I spent a day walking the city's streets with Antirum and Bracy-Ann, the middle names of two Jamaican women who had been living together in Kingston. Each has the other's initials framed with a heart tattooed on their arms. Several months ago, Antirum's nephew, a gang leader, or shotta, was deported to Jamaica from England where he had been living. Finding the two women living in the house that Antirum legally owns, the nephew forcibly evicted the couple. So far, police have refused to intervene. With their lives threatened in Kingston, the women abandoned their jobs and network of friends and relatives, and are renting an apartment in St. Catherine, a rural parish more than an hour's drive away from the capital.

I met up with Antirum and Bracy-Ann on a street corner in New Kingston, an upscale section of the city with embassies and expensive business hotels. Within seconds came a barrage of catcalls and anti-gay insults from men standing on curbs or in doorways. A car slowed ominously, hostile young faces staring from the front seats. "My biggest fear of all, to be honest, is getting raped," Bracy-Ann told me as we walked ahead of the slowly prowling car. She had been attacked by a gang of men just prior to moving out of town. One of the men stabbed her chin with a knife, leaving a reddened gash that she worried still may be at risk for infection. But as we turned to walk around a corner on a winding thoroughfare called Half Way Tree Road, we ran into four or five mixed-gender couples, including a woman who knew Antirum through a shared acquaintance. Some of the men in the group hovered at the periphery, but the rest chatted enthusiastically with us, apparently unconcerned by what had inflamed so many others just minutes ago. For many middle-class Jamaicans with whom I spoke, the controlling realities in Jamaica's public space are Antirum and Bracy-Ann's pleasant encounters, not the stream of ugly epithets and threats, or that stalking car. Wealthy and professionally-successful Jamaicans who are gay say they are often used as examples of Jamaican tolerance because their status protects them most of the time. "There are gays across the board and, yes man, we are stigmatized, but because of our parents or what we have attained for ourselves we are not interfered with," said Carl, a high-ranking civil servant who has lived for more than a decade with his three sons and his boyfriend while his wife lives in New Jersey, where she works as a doctor. "My neighbors mind their own business, but they know what's going on. My wife knows not to ask questions either. It's worked out well this way." But Carl said his safety is far from guaranteed. "There is always danger lurking, you don't know who you will tick off." The same people who told me Jamaica is obsessed with homosexuality also denied the country's metastasizing homophobia.

At the launch party for a "dancehall hairstyle" magazine, the single-name R&B singer and radio show host Empress, a balletic conversationalist with a high-wattage smile and graceful bearing, told me she is flummoxed at Jamaica's "pathology about homosexuality," yet insisted, like so many middle class Jamaicans, that the country's homophobia is minimal. "I can take you to a mall right now and point out three guys who I know are gay and no one will be bothering them." Almost 100 percent of gay violence comes from other gays, she told me. She patted my shirt and flashed me a satisfied look. Case closed. Or as Barry Chevannes, a leading sociologist at the University of the West Indies, said to me during a poolside meeting at my Kingston hotel. "The aggression against homosexuals is really symbolic—violent words, sometimes accompanied by a show of revulsion or sense of contamination." But bodily harm came swift outside a dancehall club for S. "Last year I was shot in me tummy and me bottom after I was called a lesbian," said S, a twenty-six-year-old barber who speaks in a heavy patois. The mother of a seven-year-old girl and with soft features and a warm, unmistakably feminine countenance, S nevertheless describes herself as at risk for public identification as "butch" because of her preference for jeans, boots, and t-shirts. "That was when a gunman shot me outside a club. Yes man, now I try to dress natural and I don't go to dancehall now—I'm too much worried." An anti-gay anthem by the dancehall star Vybz Kartel had been playing moments before S was shot outside the dancehall club. The song's refrain: "Man to man is wrong; woman to woman is wrong"—then an emphatic interjection by a female dancehall singer named Spice: "Skan them!" (Skan is a patois word meaning to ostracize). "My fear starts with dancehall," said N, the man who lost an eye to random anti-gay violence. "That's where the lyrics are being sung calling for our bodily harm. People say that we have it twisted—dancehall is about masculinity or their own status. But somehow it's not lyrics pertaining to their womanizing or their ability to have amazing sex. It's about killing gay people."

Jamaican media—radio stations, newspapers, and television stations—devote big resources to music coverage, and many in the faculty of the reggae studies department, housed in a long two-story building on the perimeter of the verdant campus of the University of the West Indies, frequently contribute articles on Jamaican music. They have become some of Jamaica's most recognizable public intellectuals. "Dancehall is coming out of the belly of Jamaican society," said Donna Hope, a youthful-looking professor in the department and one of the leading voices on the music in Jamaican media. "Dagging, because of its visuals, has opened up a huge discussion about dancehall with a lot of people dismissing it as crass and corrupt. The generational dialogue is there. I see inherent and very visible class biases." Hope chafed at criticism of contemporary Jamaican music, seeing dancehall as a scapegoat for larger social problems. "Dancehall is not just about gun violence but about poverty. The music is about anti-poverty, social justice. Of course the way it is expressed can sound a little strange and harsh. But we live in harsh times." "Something is going on," said Barry Chevannes, the University of the West Indies sociologist. Chevannes speaks in softly measured tones, and he emphasized an explanation rooted in Jamaica's gun-outrun, hyper-competitive downtown neighborhoods to explain dancehall's homosexuality fixation, where manhood is an earned status, and a difficult one at that. Jamaican men, said Chevannes, must demonstrate their masculinity to survive in their neighborhoods. "There is a contest for values and dancehall represents a sort of new frontier that frightens some people. What was private has been made public. Boundaries have been transgressed. Jamaica is at a cultural crossroads and the dust hasn't settled." Glave, the writer at MIT, points to the 2005 divorce of the author Terry McMillan whose novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, was hugely popular in Jamaica, as was the subsequent movie based on the book. About a May-December romance between an American woman and a younger Jamaican man, the plot was based on McMillan's own marriage to a much younger Jamaican man, who eventually had disclosed his homosexuality on an episode of Oprah. "You can't underestimate how big a trauma this was for Jamaicans," Glave said. The Jamaican media thrives on the country's obsession with homosexuality. "GAYS PULL STUNT" read a mega-type front-page headline in an issue of *Chat!*, a music industry-focused tabloid in Kingston. But the actual four-paragraph story revealed the only "stunt" was the accidental discovery of two partially-clothed men in a women's bathroom at a street festival. The entertainment editor at *Chat!*, Yasmine Peru, defended the piece as a decent story. A tall, slender woman in a conservative skirt who stiffened when I asked about hate speech in dancehall, she told me the real problem with the "lyrical cultural war" in dancehall is that "this actually gives battymen visibility they don't truly deserve." But that in any case "these kind of lyrics are getting to be less and less part of the repertoire."

In fact, the miraculous disappearance of references to homosexuality has become a standard line among dancehall defenders. When I met the dancehall artist Elephant Man at his studio, where he was hanging out with a small group of friends, he insisted that anti-gay lyrics are a thing of the past. "The fraternity has come together and dropped it. Now dancehall should be left alone." But when I spoke to one star dancehall singer notorious for his anti-gay lyrics, he told me that "gays have a right to live like anybody else—they're human beings too," only to announce a few seconds later, having lurched into an extended riff on the subject, his willingness to "chop up battymen" if they try to reverse the sodomy laws or reveal themselves in public. The prime minister "was right to say what he did on TV about those faggots," he said. I met Annie Paul, a well-known social critic in Jamaica and an editor of an academic publication at the university, at an upscale restaurant in Kingston specializing in Mediterranean food. Paul married into Jamaica—she was originally from India and met her Jamaican husband while doing graduate work in the United States. Our restaurant shared space with an Indian restaurant, and our meal was almost immediately interrupted by a man at the adjacent table who recognized Paul from the university and wanted advice on what to order. Balkanized by neighborhood and class, Kingston's size can feel much smaller than its population of three-quarters of a million people. Paul took a different tact than the others from the university, suggesting to me that Jamaican culture is squeezed from both ends: the disfiguring history of slavery and colonialism and the vicious emasculation of enslaved men; and a contemporary discomfort with globalization, especially the current influx of American media that began in the early nineteen nineties. This newly arrived media imported a more complicated view of sexuality just at the moment when Jamaican men were asserting a more muscular masculinity, a toxic cocktail that many Jamaicans could not swallow. Even if each explanation contained a good measure of truth, there was something unsatisfying about all these theories. They seemed strained, a bit reductionist, unburdened by the prima facie facts on the ground; the professors seemed to be telling me, Dancehall doesn't kill people, people kill people. From his perch as the combative host of Jamaica's longest-running televised talk show, a prominent venue that tackles everything from Christian theological issues to politics, Ian Boyne is waging a one-man war against the reggae studies faculty. Furious with what he sees as an intellectual cover-up, he has declared the country's reggae commentariat a bunch of quislings and dupes. "Intellectuals in Jamaica have been engaged in a kind of psychological compensation for the biases of their class," Boyne told me in a conference room at the political party office where he consults. "It clouds their view of what I call negative dancehall." Or, coming to a similar point from a different angle, Annie Paul told me: "There's a fundamental clash between the ghetto and middle class Jamaicans but they can unite around the issue of homosexuals. In one sense it holds the country together." Boyne locates a hypocrisy in dancehall commentary borne out of discomfort with Jamaica's retention of social divisions ingrained from when it was a colony: uptown versus downtown in Kingston, city versus countryside across the island.

If American and British universities are bastions of class anxiety, said Boyne, Jamaica's academies reflect the same tendency, but more nakedly. Boyne is a powerfully-built man in his fifties who sprinkles his conversation with quotes from philosophers like Rousseau, and can lose himself in a long conversational detour explaining how Jamaica could benefit from more exposure to the mid-century philosophy of American Pragmatism. Calling himself a Voltarian—and clearly enjoying his own repeated proclamations that he is a captive to human reason alone—Boyne has hatched a startling talk show persona, a kind of Jamaican Charlie Rose, only with a lot of prosecutorial zeal. Starting his battle in early 2008 when he published an article entitled "Dancehall's Betrayal of Reggae" in the *Jamaica Gleaner*, the nation's largest-circulation newspaper, Boyne criticizes professors by name for trivializing violence, inventing a political vision in dancehall where none exists, and trying to confer street authenticity on themselves by defending the indefensible. The way Boyne sees it, this is not just an intramural dispute between solipsist intellectual camps. Jamaica is a small country that takes its cues from a tiny number of public voices, he argues, and the reggae studies department does real damage by refusing to engage with dancehall as it exists rather than dancehall as they would like it to be. "These uncritical defenders of dancehall have not moved from observation to critique. It is one thing to try to understand it, another thing to sanction it," he told me. "They say people like me ignore the social conditions from which dancehall comes out of. I say the vast majority of Jamaicans living in those social conditions disagree with what dancehall is preaching. In any case I reject this deterministic view."

And the cost to Jamaica, seethes Boyne, goes way beyond just an honest discussion about music. The intellectual dishonesty that begins with dancehall and infiltrates discussion about Jamaica's crippling social problems has hobbled Jamaica's ability to contribute to a global conversation about poverty, human rights, and social development, especially during this time of global economic crisis. "The critique we should be making about power and class and world politics is not being made here," said Boyne. "Here is the most potent revolutionary force being co-opted by reactionary thinking." He pointed to Jamaica's historical leadership in opposing apartheid in South Africa and to incubating in the nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties a clutch of interesting economic and political ideas that invigorated policy makers across the developing world. Boyne said the same reggae scholars who dismiss malignant anti-gay sentiment in Jamaican churches as "Christian fundamentalism," defend the violence urged in Jamaican music, an inconsistency that the Jamaican public is slowly rejecting. "The things I've been talking about are starting to be accepted—the awareness of the negative aspects of dancehall is on the increase," said Boyne. "Even those opposed to homosexuals say we have to draw the line. Homophobia, misogyny: I think we're making some progress. One thing that has been helpful is our strong exposure to North America culture." And no one is more sensitive to North American culture than those in the entertainment business, or in Boyne's formulation: "What gives dancehall the right to insist on its own space and its own sacrosanct values and also demand Grammy awards?" It's a confusion, Boyne predicted, that will not last.

In the last two decades, Jamaica has become one of the most violent countries on earth. Entire neighborhoods are no-go areas for police, who often are not in the crime-busting business anyway. There have been countless witness accounts recorded of police engaging in summary executions on the street. Omar Davies, a member of the Jamaican parliament and the former finance minister who was part of the top one hundred reggae song list unveiled at the university, spoke to me in front of his over-sized wooden desk in his warehouse office in Trench Town, an embattled Kingston neighborhood where Bob Marley and many reggae stars of his generation grew up. "Crime is our major problem because fundamentally we haven't had the commitment to the public good. Instead, the target is private gain." Across from Davies's office parking lot, shirtless and barefoot children wandered idly around a junk-strewn yard. A kitchen, visible from the parking lot, had a dirt floor. "When you have a big street dance going to eight or nine in the morning every day of the week, what kind of society is that?" Davies threw his arms wide. There is among Jamaica's middle classes a sense that the rate of violent crime has transgressed a line, exceeded an invisible Rubicon where a policy remedy is no longer within anyone's grasp. And this, more than one Jamaican told me, can inform how Jamaicans view human rights campaigns to protect gay people. "When five people a day are being killed for being poor in this country why should homosexuals get special attention for their problems," as one Jamaican put it. When I put the complaint to Rebecca Schleifer at Human Rights Watch I got a sharply worded response. "That's exactly wrong. Violence and police impunity are problems for many people in Jamaica and we recognize that. But gay people are targeted for who they are—they are not victims of random violence."

International pressure is mounting. Activists and some concert promoters abroad in 2007 demanded Jamaican musicians sign, in public and in Jamaica, something called the Reggae Compassionate Act, a pact that calls for musicians to repudiate their anti-gay material. To date, few performers have publicly acknowledged signing the document. Vybz Kartel, the dancehall mega-star, reportedly signed the document this fall. Activists have successfully stopped scheduled concerts in North America, Europe, and the Caribbean. Kartel has had concerts canceled by governments like Grenada, citing the musician's particularly fierce incitement to violence against women and gays and his propensity to encourage "dagging." Last spring at the start of the Carnival season, the Jamaican government broadcasting agency banned the televising of street festivals in anticipation of scenes of public dagging, citing the daytime hour and the likelihood children would watch the broadcast. More recently, an organization called Stop Murder Music Canada has successfully lobbied the Canadian government to invoke its hate crime laws to cancel shows by dancehall musicians who won't sign the document. And the Canadian government barred a Toronto concert last May by a top-draw dancehall musician named Sizzla, and concerts by others, such as headlining musicians Capleton and Beenie Man, have been canceled over the past couple of years. Dancehall lyrics have sparked an organized boycott, so far to little effect, in the United States and Europe against Jamaica's economic bedrock of tourism, a crucial sector of the economy already shaken by the possibility of a further warming between Cuba and the U.S. and a diversion of American tourist dollars to Havana. The boycott is also making a target of Jamaican-made products like the national beer, Red Stripe. Policy makers in the European Union have threatened to make at least some foreign aid contingent on fostering better government protection for sexual minorities. The boycott against Red Stripe hasn't necessarily taken off but it is a good case study in the contradictions that rule the debate about homophobia in Jamaica. J-FLAG, the gay advocacy group in Kingston, has come out against the boycott. "There will be a backlash, like there is every time gay groups abroad do this sort of thing, and they're not offering to give us the resources to deal with it," warned Karlene, the J-FLAG official. "This will only make things worse for us." Red Stripe has banned hate language from venues it sponsors. The multinational corporation that owns Red Stripe sent me this statement: "Red Stripe and its majority shareholder, Diageo, do not tolerate any form of discrimination or violence against any group, in any circumstance. Diageo has a very clear global record of supporting LGBT [which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] issues, and Red Stripe has already taken a strong position against anti-gay violence in Jamaica, as it will do against violence towards any group." But Bevan Dufty, a San Francisco city supervisor and one of the organizers of the boycott, has a reply. "I'm not seeing what a leading institution like Red Stripe is doing to stem the tide. People have a right to make choices in the products they buy, and when you read about Jamaican police beating up gays in public and then vigilantes descend on the scene and offer to finish the job, I don't see how it can get much worse. This type of violence thrives in an environment of intimidation and silence."

Meanwhile, the brewer appears to be paying a price in Jamaica. When I spent an evening with Vybz Kartel's pistol-toting entourage, they told me that they are also boycotting Red Stripe, though the artist continues to promote the beer. To protest Red Stripe's hate speech policy, the dancehall crowd has switched to Heineken. The entourage, six or seven young men who operate Kartel's home recording studio and do the singer's general bidding, took me on a high-speed errand-run around downtown Jamaica for blank CDs, marijuana, and an endless string of mysterious meetings with other entourages. Communication was surprisingly difficult: English and patois are mostly mutually incomprehensible. Guns were flashed at every stop. "Hold the Glock," I was told at the first stop. Later in the evening, as we pulled up to a crowd of revelers at a street dance party, everyone suddenly brandished guns made by Smith & Wesson. For all the slippery positioning surrounding how people analyze sexuality in Jamaica, there seemed to be one disagreement where the lines were clearly drawn. Gay Jamaicans with whom I spoke said the country's violent homophobia is getting worse; while almost everyone else said the problem is disappearing from Jamaican soil, like the sugar cane Jamaica is no longer able to sell profitably abroad. "Not until a black gay Jamaican" who lives in the country "comes out will Jamaicans really wrap around the issue," predicted Glave, the writer teaching at MIT. "Anyone who would do that would be very brave and maybe even a little crazy. He would be risking an enormous amount including his life, but there you have it. I really think that's one of the answers to the question, when will people really have to contend with their beliefs?" Government officials have chosen a more defiant message. "It does not discredit the entire music; it does not discredit the entire country," said Olivia "Babsy" Grange, the culture minister, of foreign criticism of Jamaican homophobia. "The younger generation, they are not as focused on color or class or beliefs. This is manifesting itself in society overall." As we sat in the lobby of the plush business hotel in Kingston where the minister had just addressed a conference on track and field officials—Jamaica was still euphoric over the country's new national sprinting hero, Usain Bolt—the minister leaned forward in her chair, encircling my wrist with her manicured fingers. "Brand Jamaica is center stage and it is strong. We gave the world a new religion in Rastafari. We gave the world an icon in Bob Marley. This is a small country with a music that is all-embracing, that is global." Tightening her grip, the minister continued: "And the Jamaican message is peace and love every time."

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WRITER'S RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Book of Night Women by Marlon James. A story of slavery and rebellion, haunting and lyrical, by an emerging master in Jamaican fiction. Another one: The Reggae Scrapbook by Roger Steffens and Peter Simon. An exuberant mishmash of photos and miscellany from Jamaican musical history. A kaleidoscope portrait of Jamaica's vibrant, potent, contested music culture.

EDITORS RECOMMEND:

An Unfortunate Discharge: When he was young and looking for a little direction, our writer turned to the Navy. There, he found many more questions than answers.
Calypso Awakenings: What a pirate festival, and dancing alone to Calypso, can teach us about the here and now.