

BEENIE MAN & GAY RIGHTS



This article looks at a collision between an artist's right to free expression and a person's right to live without harassment. It asks how free we are to say what we like and how free we are to give offence; it wonders what special privileges writers might have and what the limits on those privileges might be.

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Reggae superstar Bob Marley sang of a world united by 'one love', a place of peace, justice and racial harmony. However, more recently Jamaican reggae and dancehall artists have been seen as the creative fringe of a drug-crazed criminal community a community that has often had a less tolerant message, one which is aggressively homophobic and glories in gun culture. Jamaican DJ, 'dancehall artist', performer and writer Beenie Man seems to have been one of the main offenders.

In the summer of 2004 a vigorous campaign led by the British gay rights group OutRage! Most of his scheduled 33 US concerts cancelled at a cost of over £10,000 per show. Also most of his appearances in the UK and Europe were cancelled. The campaign against Beenie Man was so effective that he was dropped from an MTV special in Miami and Virgin, his record label, was called upon to drop his contract. In the UK a file on Beenie Man was passed to the Crown Prosecution Service and the Director of Public Prosecutions, who were said to be taking a personal interest in the case and were reading Beenie Man's lyrics for a possible prosecution on the grounds of inciting violence. When Beenie Man arrived at Heathrow he was questioned by the police before being allowed to enter the country.

Peter Tatchell, once a Labour party parliamentary candidate, a spokesman for OutRage!, said he wanted Beenie Man prosecuted for writing lyrics which endorsed, encouraged and incited violence against gay men and women. He argued that such expressions of hatred contributed to a general atmosphere in which such violence – particularly towards the gay community - had an aura of acceptability, even respectability.

Other rap artists, Elephant Man, Bounty Killer, Shaba Ranks, Buju Banton and Vybz Kartel in particular, were said to be enduring similar campaigns. When Buju Banton arrived in Manchester in September 2004 police cancelled his concert because of concerns over possible public disorder and threats to local lesbians and gays by his fans.



Beenie Man (real name Anthony Moses Davis) has been described as 'One of Jamaica's most crucial DJs'. He has enjoyed a recording career that stretches back into the early 1980s. But he is not everyone's favourite artist. Journalist Andrew Mueller writing in *The Guardian* said:

Beenie Man is a pedestrian purveyor of bong-addled doggerel and, judging by available evidence, an oaf and a bigot.

Beenie Man has sung about his desire to see 'All batty man fi dead' and has produced a lot of unpleasant lyrics. 'Batty man' is slang for botty (bottom) man and 'chi chi' is derogatory term for a gay man or woman. For example:

I'm dreaming of a new Jamaica come to execute all the queers.
(From 'Damn')

Hang chi chi gal wid a long piece of rope.
(From 'Han Up Deh')

If yuh nuh chi chi man wave yuh right hand and No!!!
If yuh nuh lesbian wave yuh right hand and NO!!!
.... Yuh see im to run off stage like a clown, kill dem DJ.
(From 'Bad man, chi chi man')

In August 2004, on the eve of the release of his new album *Back to Basics*, and a new single *King of the Dancehall*, Beenie Man felt obliged to make what looked like a public apology. He is said to have written:

It has come to my attention that certain lyrics and recordings I have made in the past may have caused distress and outrage among people whose identities and lifestyles are different from my own. While my lyrics are very personal, I do not write them with the intent of purposefully hurting or maligning others, and I offer my sincerest apologies to those who might have been offended, threatened or hurt by my songs. As a human being, I renounce violence towards other human beings in every way, and pledge henceforth to uphold these values as I move forward in my career as an artist. The music reflects how Caribbean people see it... Everybody has their way of life. People have beliefs and that comes from who they are, the music comes from that.

However, Beenie Man's 'Head of Personal Relations' has denied that the apology came from Beenie Man and claims it was issued by his record label, Virgin, without authorisation. Beenie Man, he insisted, reserved the right to 'criticize the homosexual lifestyle' of which he disapproved.

In August 2004, as Beenie Man was admitted into the UK, his manager appeared on BBC TV news to say that the lyrics in question were 'metaphorical... Beenie Man has

made it clear he doesn't want to incite violence'. The Miami Gay Rights group SAVE Dade Heddy Pena said: 'We respectfully suggest that Beenie Man use other metaphors'. J-Flag, the Jamaican gay rights group, said:

When these artists say it is just a metaphor, I'm not sure the average Jamaican interprets it that way... the homophobic lyrics perpetuate a culture of hatred and violence against sexual minorities... The music sells; but it also kills... It does not matter what the intention of the artist was when writing the lyrics. Words simply confirm the popular belief that gays are evil, that evil must be eradicated, and that vigilante violence is an acceptable means of accomplishing this end.

Peter Tatchell was unimpressed by Beenie Man's attitude and said he would only consider Beenie Man to be sincere when he had withdrawn all the offending albums and bought up the existing stock from his record company. Of Beenie Man's apology he said:

This is not an acceptable apology. He doesn't say who he is apologising to, or what he is apologising for. This is not about making homophobic comments; it's about incitement to murder – which is a criminal offence. All his 'kill queers' songs are still in circulation. He is still profiteering from his murder music.

However, Beenie Man may be right about anti-homosexual attitudes in Jamaica. There homosexuality is still illegal and punishable with 10 years hard labour. In June 2004 Brian Williamson, a leading gay rights activist was murdered - stabbed and hacked 70 times - at his home in Kingston. Amnesty International has reported increasing numbers of attacks on same sex couples and the rape of gay men and lesbian women. Peter Tatchell's website claims that in Jamaica over the last few years more than 30 homosexuals have been 'stoned to death, chopped up with machetes, beaten unconscious with sticks, dowsed with petrol and set ablaze, blasted in the head with shotguns and chased into the sea until they drown from exhaustion'.¹

This attitude to homosexuality is reflected in dance hall music. One of Elephant Man's lyrics contains the lines:

Dance we a dance and a bun
Out of a freaky man.
Step pon him like a old cloth.

And one of Sizzla's lyrics reads:

Shoot batty bwoy, my big gun boom

Buju Banton, who has been investigated for the an assault on a gay man in Jamaica, has a song called *Boom Bye Bye* in which he describes his desire to shoot a 'batty

¹ Peter Tatchell, 'Bigots are buggers', www.ptatchell.net.

bwoy' in the head, pour acid on him and then set fire to him in order to 'burn him up bad like an old tyre wheel'. Bounty Killa has a song in which the lyric runs:

Bun a fire pon a puff and mister faggoty

Elephant Man has defended his lyrics and his attitude:

We Jamaicans know that this thing homosexuality is not right and we are not going to uphold it. The Jamaican heritage is deep, we love God and we are not involved in certain things. From the time I was growing up, I learned that chi chi man fi get bun... bun dem out'.

The nomination of Elephant Man, TOK and Capelton for MOBO (Music of Black Origin) awards in 2002 provoked considerable protest from the gay community. And in September 2004 Elephant Man and Vybz Kartel were both disqualified from receiving MOBO awards because they refused to apologise for their homophobic lyrics. Commenting on the success of the campaign against Beenie Man Peter Tatchell said:

This is just the beginning. We are now building a worldwide network of organisations committed to driving homophobic violence out of dancehall lyrics. These singer's careers are in serious jeopardy. Their ability to perform internationally is already experiencing major restriction.

Journalist Andrew Mueller was driven to write:

Beenie Man has certainly recorded ugly and mean spirited lyrics, but his records haven't beaten anybody up. People do that, and the cruelty and stupidity of those people is no more Beenie Man's fault than Columbine was Marilyn Manson's. It is fair enough that those who object to Beenie Man's lyrics should try and create a climate in which he becomes a commercial liability – that's how the market works. Beenie Man should be disputed, harassed, mocked, or ignored altogether. But he shouldn't be arrested.²

Peter Tatchell, who had previously been involved in a campaign to 'out' homosexual politicians in Britain, has asked some awkward questions about British middle-class behaviour in relation to the Jamaican dance hall artists.

Tatchell has asked whether we should accept violent homophobia as part of Jamaican culture, and if so whether we should not have accepted that racism was simply a part of the culture of South Africa. He has asked if we should accept that Jamaican dance hall artists can behave in this way and whether that is not similar to accepting that the Taliban in Afghanistan could repress individuality and sexuality and incite people to violence and murder. He has also asked why hatred directed towards homosexuals should be more acceptable than racism or anti-Semitism, saying that if a singer

² A. Mueller, 'Takes sides in a car park brawl', *The Guardian*, 4-10 September 2004, 23.

advocated gassing Jewish people or lynching black people they would not be allowed into this country: why, then, he has asked, should it be different for someone who advocates violence against homosexuals?

On his website Peter Tatchell outlined how difficult these questions are:

My own view is that freedom of speech is such a fundamental human right, and so crucial to the preservation of an open society, that in order to maintain this freedom we sometimes have to put up with opinions that many of us find insulting. One of the litmus tests of true democracy is the extent to which it is prepared to allow the expression of ideas that the majority find offensive... Don't get me wrong. Homophobia stinks. I nevertheless feel obliged to defend the right of people to oppose and criticise homosexuality. They may be misguided and bigoted, but tolerating (though not accepting) their prejudice is a price we pay for living in a multicultural democracy.

However, the response of the Jamaican music world to this exposure and criticism has not been to clean up its act. On the contrary, Tatchell has received more than 20 death threats. Scotland Yard suspects that a hit-man was sent from Jamaica to kill Tatchell and he had special police protection assigned to him. A message posted on a dancehall website by a man calling himself Killarock reads:

Where are the shottas over in England, I bet if the shottas dem kill a few a dem they will calm down, cause right now England batty-man dem ago start a world movement.³

'Shottas' is slang for shooters or gunmen.

British specialist gay travel companies complain of the 'predominantly homophobic sentiment' in Jamaica and no longer include Jamaica in their holiday brochures. But Aloun Assamba, Jamaican Minister for Tourism, commenting on the decision by the holiday company Sandals to open its resorts to same-sex couples, seemed inclined to see this as a campaign against Jamaica, saying:

This is something we are going to have to have discussions about. It has been happening with our entertainers, now it is clear that the lobbyists are going after the tourism sector. It is beginning to close in on us.⁴

Desmond Henry, ex-director of tourism in Jamaica, said he saw no reason why people who opposed homosexuality should be pressurised into the 'surrender of their principles and their morals'. It is possible however, that the campaign and criticism of the dance hall artists has had some effect. Subsequently it emerged that Buju Banton, in spite of his homophobic comments and reputation, had in fact set up an AIDs foundation called

³ M. Chittenden, 'Yardies threaten to shoot Tatchell', *The Sunday Times*, 26 Sept 2004, 19.

⁴ 'Jamaica Remains off the Gay Map', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2004, 14.

Operation Willy, connected to the charity Jamaica Aids Support, funded from sales of his album *Voice of Jamaica* and launched by his safe sex song 'Willy (Don't be Silly)'.

Follow Up Work

- How is this topic relevant to the theme of Responsibility?
- To what extent are creative artists free to say just what they like?
- Is homophobia acceptable if it is defined as 'traditional' or 'part of a different culture'?
- Is Peter Tatchell right: have dance hall artists remained unchallenged by liberal thinkers on these issues simply because they are black and from Jamaica?
- Is it possible that the moral panic generated by Peter Tatchell's campaign sought to demonise reggae stars because they were black and/or Jamaican?
- Do artists have the right to be racist or sexist?
- Does the status of an artist allow hate-speech?
- Do artists have any special right to say what others cannot?
- What are the limits to freedom of speech?
- In what ways are these events relevant to a discussion of writing and responsibility?
- What are the responsibilities of the writer when it comes to free speech and hate speech?