

# BARRINGTON LEVY

Interview and photos  
by Roger Steffens

Barrington Levy!  
Here he comes - at 30,  
already one of the  
longest-lasting and  
consistent of Jamaica's  
veteran hit-makers,  
the inspiration for the Bogle  
dance, the inventor of the  
Blue Mountain yodel, and  
the holder of a major  
contract from America's  
MCA Records.



## BROADER THAN BROADWAY

**R**oger Steffens: We're in a big office building in Universal City in North Hollywood, CA. And it's a long way from the dance halls in Jamaica, but this is where dancehall is being respected most these days, by big labels in America. Does that strike you as strange?

**Barrington Levy:** No, not really. This is what we've been trying over the years to do. This is a changed part of the music from the original dancehall beat. This is the '90s style of dancehall and it's reaching places, which is great.

**Q:** I think of the song on your new album, which is one of your classics, "Strange"... "how the dances are changing." Let's talk about that. When you started out in the dancehalls, how old were you?

**A:** I was like 14. But I've been playing music since I was nine. Just a little sardine pan guitar really. Then I had a group with my cousin, Everton Dacres, called the Mighty Multitude and we cut two sides.

**Q:** And who would you sing with, what systems would allow you to take over their mics?

**A:** Burning Spear, Stereograph, and quite a few more sounds around the area in Kingston, sounds in the country. I didn't have any record on the street. Nobody knew Barrington Levy, so wherever the dance was, I was there. And when I sing, they tape it on cassette, and the cassette might go to England, might go to America, and it just go around, before I actually go to the studio and make my first record which was "A

Ya We Deh."

**Q:** In those early days was the material you performed your own?

**A:** Yes, definitely. "Shine Eye Girl," "Collie Weed." I never really sing "Collie Weed" in a dance, because the idea came one day when I was on the way to the studio.

**Q:** I don't often think of Burning Spear as running a sound system.

**A:** Not the singer. There is a little sound system in Jamaica called Burning Spear run by a guy called Brave Man. That sound doesn't exist no more.

**Q:** Let's jump from the age of 14 to your current age, and talk about just how different the dancehall scene is from when you first started out. What are the major differences you see.

**A:** The changes in the beat, and I see changes in the lyrics, which I'm not too into these type of lyrics that these guys are putting out on the record. To me, reggae music is getting big. Forget about the dancehall. Let's say reggae music. It's getting big at the moment, and we need to clean our act up because some of those messages that these people is saying over, is not really what we want to bring across to people: sex and guns and violence and things like that. What we need to bring over to people is songs like "Vice Versa Love" and "Work" and a song with a message, a song that can uplift people.

**Q:** Do you make a distinction between reggae and ragga? Reggae being message music, and ragga being something a little different from the Rastafarian kind of message music.

**A:** No, man. It's all in the beat really.

**Q:** So, two faces of the same beat.

**A:** Yes. These people just say, "Man, it's ragga." But ragga means—I don't think it's a good meaning really. I think ragga is rough and ragged. Reggae music—I'm here to push reggae music. Not no ragga or no dancehall, 'cause any music can play in the dancehall. Back home they play anyone, so lots of people is going to love it and say they want more. So, as I said, that's the only thing that we need to clear up now, is like these foul, wrong lyrics that these guys are bringing out. We need to teach the kids more message, and more of what's going on. They definitely need to know that.

**Q:** But you look at something like dancehall night at Sunsplash this year, where virtually every single artist sang gun songs and pum-pum songs, and probably the slackest performer of the entire night was a woman.

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** And yet you are still identified as a dancehall artist. Is it hard for you to work in the dancehall, because you are not doing what is mainstream right now?

**A:** No, it's not hard. I give them trouble when I go on stage. Because I'm the one that's going to be different. I'm the one that's going to say, like the kids and the people, if they put me on dancehall night, they're not going to be hearing me talking about no badboy business, and gun talk, and punanny business. No, no, no. So I would say, if they put me on the dancehall night, I would make a difference.

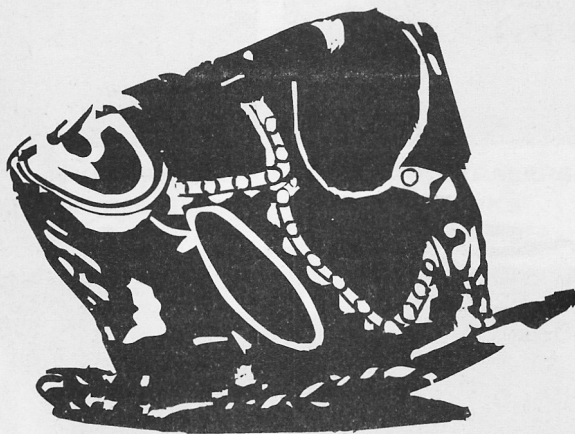
**Q:** Where do you draw your inspiration from?

**A:** Well, my inspiration comes on and on every day. Every day I wake up, I walk on the street, I observe what's going on around me, so I just get my inspiration from my every day walking up and down and observing people.

**Q:** I want to talk a little bit about your composing process. You observe someone, you hear something said, you see a situation, and you

might get a line of lyric in your head—

**A:** Like, for instance, I make a song called "It Was A Warm and Sunny Day." How I make that song is, I was standing at my gate and this guy was passing with two kids in his hand and somebody stay in a mango tree and shot him



with a gun and the two kids was crying and still down in the road. So I make a song off of that. Like:

*It was a warm and sunny day  
I was standing at my gate and viewing the place  
Saw the wicked man come down to shoot the poor people up  
They didn't have no ammunition, had to use their strength.*

**Q:** Do words tend to come for you before the melody?

**A:** Yes, definitely. I have a little tape recorder [to make notes].

**Q:** One of the most important songs in recent reggae history is "Under Mi Sleng Teng." That

was a revolutionary song. And yet, while Wayne Smith gets a lot of credit for that, it is you who created that rhythm and that song a few years before with "Under Mi Sensi."

**A:** Yes, definitely. Well, "Under Mi Sensi" gave him the inspiration to do that song, and I think they know. Jammy's know that, because when Jammy's come to England in 1983 "Under Mi Sensi" was on the charts at Number One for like 12 weeks—smash hit! I even ended up on British television singing about the weed. It was on a children's program, too. Thing called "Number 73." And Jammy's come to me and said, "Nice song, wicked song." And then after he went back to Jamaica, that was the first computerized rhythm that start off in Jamaica.

**Q:** But it's your song. Have you ever gotten a penny of royalties from any of the hundreds of versions of "Sleng Teng"?

**A:** No.

**Q:** How do you feel about that?

**A:** I don't really think about it.

**Q:** There's a new copyright law in Jamaica, so that if you had written "Under Mi Sensi" in 1993, anybody who covered that rhythm or that lyric from now on would have to pay you a royalty.

**A:** Yes, I know.

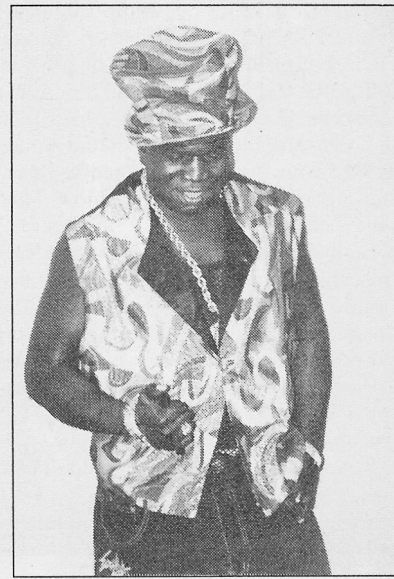
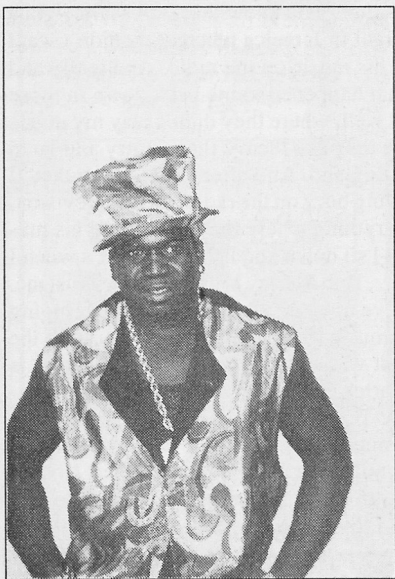
**Q:** But it's not retroactive.

**A:** Right.

**Q:** So is this new law going to be a good law for Jamaican artists, or do you think it's going to cause more problems?

**A:** I think it's going to cause both. It think it's going to be good, and going to cause problem as well, because most of the older artists, they're going to want to get paid for most of the jobs that they do and people like collect their money and they don't get it. I don't think they're going

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to go back to past time to recoup back the money, and that's what's going to cause the problem.

**Q:** You made a video for "Work" in the place called Black Rose corner. Explain what that is and its relationship to you.

**A:** Well, I give that corner the name. Black Rose is an area in the Kingston 13 area, and all these guys that hang out that live in the community, they keep the street clean, paint it up, plant up a lot of flowers, make some brick paths and this avenue is just really nice, and they give the name Black Rose from one of my songs. It's in Jungle.

**Q:** And who did the murals on the wall?

**A:** I don't definitely know the guy's name, but the guy who was responsible to get the paint was Bogle, the guy who invented the Bogle dance right there on Black Rose corner.

**Q:** There is a little riff that you do that whenever people hear it they know instantly that it's Barrington Levy. Where did that come from?

**A:** Some people say that it's yodeling, but I don't know about that.

**Q:** You never heard any Swiss yodeling on television or anywhere else?

**A:** No. Because, you see, I was born in Kingston but I spent a lot of time in the country in Clarendon and in them times television was hard to come by, so I wouldn't have no television. I think I heard different sounds when I was in the country. There was this place like you're down the hill and go up and if you say anything at all, it echoes back. And I used to love to go there and sit down, and I used to call that my studio.

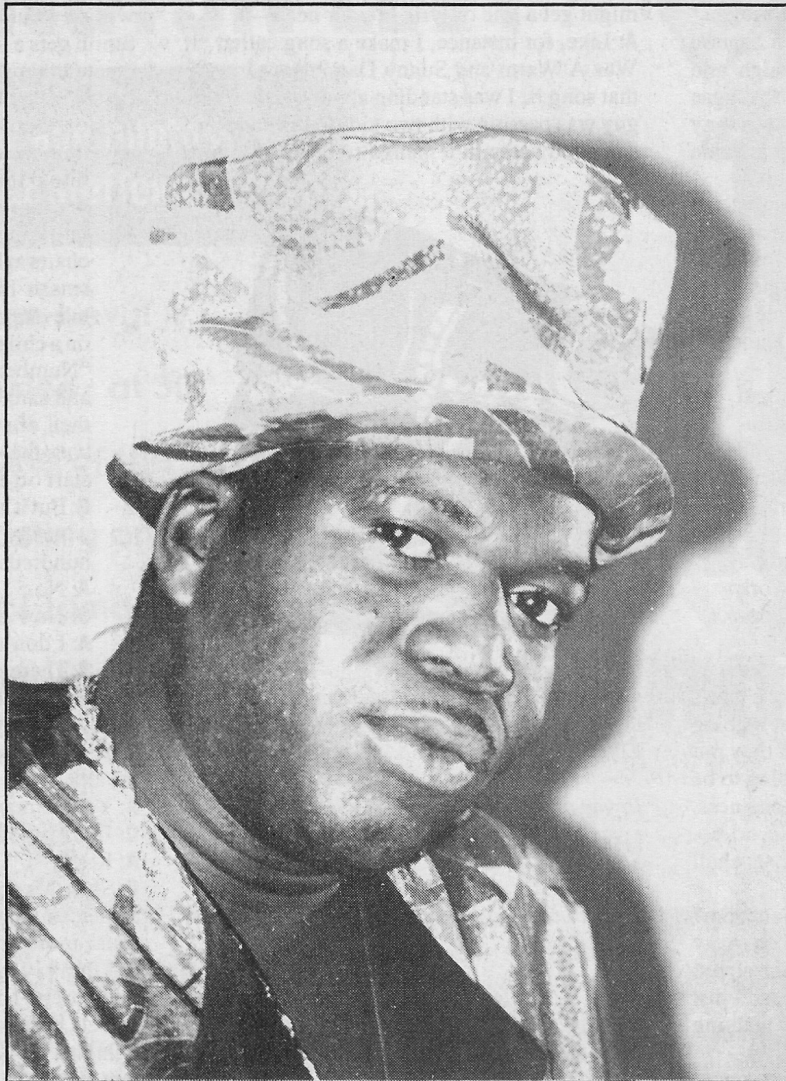
**Q:** Who were your early influences, who were the singers that you really admired when you were a child?

**A:** I only listened to one singer—Dennis Brown. Honestly. I'm much younger than Dennis. And I used to listen to a lot of foreign artists like Sam Cooke, 'cause he was like the most outstanding one really. Sam Cooke was a big hit in Jamaica.

**Q:** He played in Jamaica. Did you ever get to see any of those foreign artists when they came to Jamaica?

**A:** Never, [Laughs] 'cause I couldn't afford it, man.

**Q:** What was your first major success as a



**"Here I come: Shoodly-waddley-woodeley-whoah—oooh wee!"**

recording artist?

**A:** "Collie Weed" on Jah Guidance, produced by Junjo Laws, who was my first producer. The next big one was "Twenty-One Girls Salute," "Mind Your Mouth," "My Woman," and it goes on.

**Q:** "Here I Come," one of your great, great tracks of all time... "broader than Broadway." Tell me how that song came to you.

**A:** Well, that song happened in real life, where it didn't really happen to me, but I know a friend that I used to go to school with, and he used to check for one of his classmates, and one time she get pregnant and after she have the baby, she realized that life was really hard, because she can't go out like how she usually do. Can't go to a dance no more. She can't go out with her friends, 'cause she has to stay home and look after the baby. Then she start to get post-natal depression where she start to call him and have a fight with him and say, "You stay home with baby! You come and

give me baby to tie me down, man, and I can't take this." And she was crying, really crying. And at the time it was happening, I wasn't really thinking of it but after like a couple of days, I was saying, "Yeah, that would be a wicked song." I come up with "on the telephone, the mini-bus" then I say "on the intercom, tell me to come" and I linked it up: [Sings]

*On the intercom Rosie tell me to come  
Said she didn't have a job though she did have a son  
Said the lift doesn't work run up the stairs and come  
'Cause if you don't come quick you're not gonna see your son  
So I grab a bunch of roses and I started to run  
Here I come  
Two months later she said come and get your son  
'Cause I don't want your baby to come tie me down  
Because you are old and I am young  
Yes, while I'm young I want to have some fun.*

**Q:** Tell me how you came to write "Murderer."

**A:** There was a thing going on in Jamaica where these police officers used to go around and shoot innocent people, and that's how I come with that idea.

**Q:** I must ask you something about Bob Marley. I just take it for

granted that you're a Marley fan.

**A:** Yeah, I listen to Bob Marley after he died. Not till after. You know that Bob Marley got a lot of fight in Jamaica where they didn't want to play his music on the radio. And really and truly that happened to me back down in those days as well, where they didn't play my music because they say I leave the country and go to live in England. And after Bob Marley died, I see this big buzz on the radio, on the television, and everything where they're playing his music, and I sit down and listen and that's when I really... Bob Marley is great, great. Trust me.

**Q:** You've traveled all over the world bringing reggae music to people, in part because of the path that was blazed by Bob Marley. Who is Bob Marley to the world in 1993?

**A:** Bob? Bob is still the teacher. I mean the man's music still lives on, take it from me. People still love Bob Marley. When I heard "Iron Lion Zion," I said that was going to be a big hit. I love it. ★