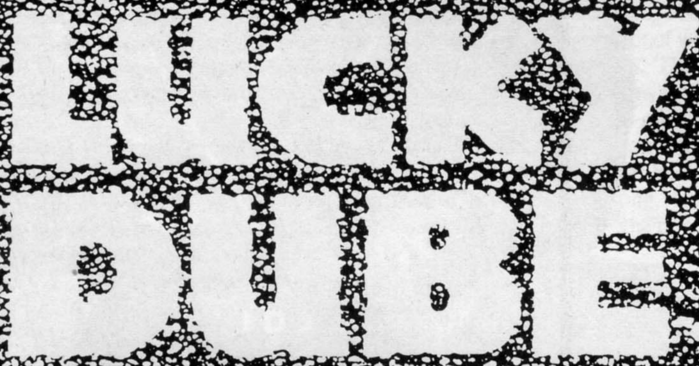
LUCKY
DUBE

LUCKY DUBE: READY for REGGAE
Gardner, Jim
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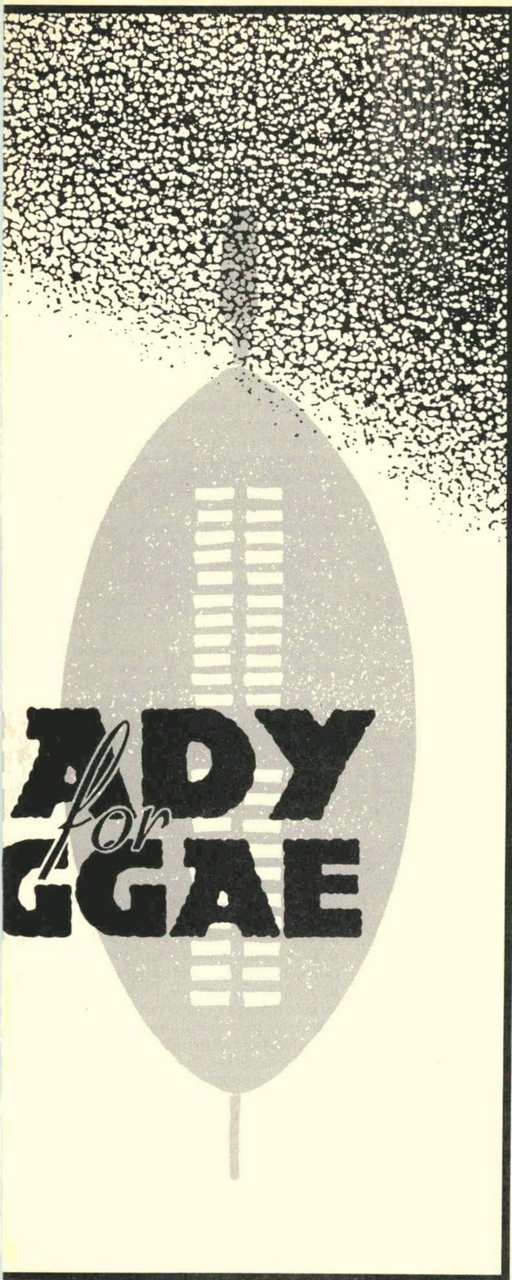

INTERVIEW BY JIM GARDNER

PHOTOS BY PEGGY GARDNER

Lucky Dube loves horror films. *"Nightmare on Elm Street* or anything that makes me scared, really, I like," says the South African reggae singer, who last summer completed his second U.S. tour. On his latest Shanachie album, *Prisoner*, Dube sings, over a bloodthirsty guitar riff, about Dracula; on stage, he acts out the song with some crucial monster-mash steps.

Though his music unites rather than frights, there's something inherently dramatic about Dube (pronounced DOO-bay), who, in addition to recording South Africa's all-time best-selling album (*Slave* has sold more than 300,000 copies, breaking the previous record set by the *mbaqanga*-styled Soul Brothers), has starred in two concert movies (*Getting Lucky* and *Lucky Strikes Back*) and a South African horror film. With a voice that exudes soulful feeling, from shimmering falsetto to yearning tenor, he possesses the kind of neon charisma that distinguishes superstars.

His impact on reggae music has been dramatic as well. Before his arrival on U.S. shores in 1989, the word from the critics was that Dube, the first major South African artist to sing reggae, sounded a lot like Peter Tosh. While there was some truth to that appraisal, it quickly became apparent on hearing him live that comparisons are irrelevant: Dube's is a singular talent.

As wonderful as his first U.S. shows were, Dube's second set of concerts were the stuff of legend. Framed by three female singers replete in red, gold and green dresses and by three male horn players in army fatigues, Dube danced constantly while his rhythm section laid down honey-sweet, roots-deep grooves. Dube dipped his voice down as if drawing from a well, then raised it in falsetto as if to drink the pure water.

During "Together As One," keyboardist Thuthukani Cele stepped out front with Dube. The rest of the band vamped dubwise as the two athletically mirrored each other's playful kicks and arm thrusts. Like Anthony Quinn bridging arms with Alan Bates at the end of *Zorba the Greek*, the dance told a story of friendship, triumph and joy.

Dube's concerts were noticeably devoid of political cheerleading and sloganeering; he let his songs carry the messages. One of the show's highlights was "Inkululeku," a Zulu choral song of freedom and God's forgiveness. Wrapped in stunning a cappella harmony by Dube and band – their arms raised and fists clenched – the song scaled emotional peaks beyond the reach of any political chant.

"I don't know anything about politics," he told the audience. "I just sing about the things that happen to me and to the people around me."

Dube often wears a camouflage cap that has an arch of red, gold and green stripes on the front (see the cover of *Slave*). Beyond its rich symbolism that combines rebel toughness with Jah's love, there's also a suggestion of a rainbow in the arrangement of colors. That rainbow, I like to think, stands for the promise that Dube holds for reggae in the 1990s and for the togetherness that this messenger of love and unity spreads.

I interviewed Dube at a Day's Inn in Lawrence, KS, a couple of hours before the sound check for his gig at the Bottleneck club. As we sat at a poolside table, Dube spoke slowly and thoughtfully, his voice carrying a rich, melodic warmth.

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LUCKY DUBE *Continued from page 29*

Jim Gardner: On *Prisoner*, you sing, "Nobody can stop reggae/'Cause reggae strong." Can you tell me, why is reggae strong? What is the strength of reggae?

Lucky Dube: Well, I think reggae is strong because it's one kind of music that you don't grow out of. You find young-aged, middle-aged and very old-aged people listening to reggae, because it's not just the dancing that is important—reggae has always got a message for the people. The strength behind it is the message really. It's not music like, say, rock'n'roll, where you go to a certain stage where you can't listen to it anymore, 'cause maybe you've grown old and all that. Reggae goes a long way.

Q: You're often compared to Peter Tosh. Who were the reggae artists that influenced you most?

A: I can say Peter Tosh and Bob Marley, because those are the people whose music we had the chance to listen to. Tosh, Marley, Eric Donaldson, you know, those guys.

Q: Living in South Africa, has it been difficult for you to learn about Rastafarianism? Were there elders to whom you could go to learn more about the culture?

A: Well, I might not say at this point of time that I am a fully grown-up Rastafarian or that sort of thing, because in South Africa we have this problem: We don't get to learn more about Rastafarianism because it's something that they are trying to keep down most of the time. And so we don't have books and things telling us about Rastafarianism and all that. And even people who are Rastafarians don't have, should I say, the guts or the will of sharing their knowledge with everybody. But I got friends in Jamaica that I am learning through. They send me books and stuff. And even here in America, there are people who send me things to read about Rastafarianism. I am practicing this whole thing, you know, and I think it's coming together nicely, because I got really good friends.

But now I don't believe, though, that you've got to be a Rastafarian to be able to send the message to the people or that you've got to be a Rastafarian to play reggae. I don't believe in that.

Q: In "Don't Cry," you say you're "going around the world spreading the message." It comes through clearly in your music, but would you mind reiterating that message here? What do you perceive to be your main message?

A: The message I say I am spreading around is the coming together of the people, because I think that's what I stand for. I think my duty is to get the people united. Black, white, whatever. We belong together.

Q: "Together As One" delivers that message perhaps as forcefully as any of your songs. The title signifies the love and unity that is the opposite of apartheid.

A: Yeah, because in that song I speak of the whites, I speak of blacks, I speak of Indians, of Coloureds, and all that. We were created by God. We are His children. We belong together. And so that's the message behind it, that we should not be separated by this apartheid system.

Q: Your audiences in South Africa transcend racial boundaries.

A: Yeah, well that started when I released this song. Because back home in South Africa when they see you being a Rasta, they think you are some kind of a politician or racist or criminal or something like that. That's what they thought of me when I started. A lot of them thought that I'm against whites, that I hate whites. But I have no reason to hate whites as such. The only person I can hate is the person who's done something wrong to me. It's not to say by being white that person is my enemy.

Like if you listen to this song "War and Crime," where I say: "When it started, you and I were not there/So why don't we bury down apartheid, fight down war and crime." It's not necessarily to say because that one is white, then he is my enemy because his ancestors or fathers did this to my people at that time. I was not there. I don't know the truth, like that song says: "Your mother didn't tell you the truth 'cause my father didn't tell me the truth." You read history books and they tell you different things about the whole thing. So you don't know what is right and what is wrong.

I like to talk about things that I've seen, things that I've experienced. Not to talk about something I don't know. And so a lot of my brothers don't like it, because they call me a sellout or whatever. But really it is very difficult to fight not knowing who your enemy is, just fighting any person.

It's like what is happening in the townships in South Africa, this black-against-black thing. It all started in the name of freedom, in the name of the struggle. That's when it started. So now they don't know who their enemies are, they're just fighting against each other, which is not right. I believe you can only fight for your rights when you know who you're fighting, and when you know what your rights are. You can't fight for something that you don't know. And so that way I've tried, through my shows and things just to make it clear what I stand for. Not like "Amandla!" and things like that, like provoking people and all that.

And so the whites back home in South Africa, they came to understand me and what I stand for. This record "Together As One" was the first to be played on the white radio stations and even go into the charts of white radio stations.

Q: You've been closing your shows with a song called "No Truth in the World." Can you tell me about that song?

A: Yeah, well, this is a song that talks about preacher men and things like that. You go to church, you find these guys. Some of them—not all of them—preach until tears run down their face, and you get to believe that these people are God's messengers, these people know what they're talking about. These people are for real. But only to find that when you go deeper into their private lives, they are not really what they claim to be.

Q: Christians?

A: Christians, even ordinary people. People can be friends, can sound or behave like your friends, but only to find that they are not your friends most of the time. Even in court, you find there are people who get behind the bars for nothing, while the people who did the wrong are going free in the streets. And only to find there's just no truth. The word "truth" was turned upside down so that things that are right must look wrong, and things that are wrong must look right.

Q: Many of your songs, such as "My Son I'm Sorry" and "Think About the Children," deal with the struggles that families go through, such as the pain of being separated from loved ones. In "Remember Me," you sing, "Daddy remember me, wherever you are." These songs convey powerful emotions.

A: Yeah, especially because that is part of my experience. In this song "Remember Me," it speaks about my father, 'cause I turned 28 years old on the third of August, but I don't know my father. I haven't seen him ever since I was born. I don't know him. And so I know that I might not be the only one that's got this problem. There is somebody somewhere that is undergoing the same thing as I am. And so I said, let me put it down in a song. Let people know about it. Because some of the things people just ignore only to find that those are important things to know in life. Like to have a father is important, even if he's an irresponsible father. But to know that this is my father makes you feel all right in life. Even if he's not doing anything for you, you know that you've got a father.

Q: I've read that you are from Ermelo, southeast of Johannesburg. Did you grow up there?

A: Yeah, I grew up there. I was born there, actually, staying with my grandma. And then I moved to a place called Standerton, about 88 kilometers from Johannesburg. I never had a proper home. I never had a place to call home, you know. I grew up with my grandma and then I stayed with my uncle, and then with my aunt and so on, until I had a house of my own. But I never had a place to call home.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

A: Yeah. And so it was the same thing with them. We didn't have a home of our own.

Q: Do you remember becoming aware of apartheid as you grew up? Was there a particular incident that stands out in your memory?

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A: In South Africa during the times when we grew up, it wasn't something to worry about, because it was kind of our *life*, you know. We grew up in a situation where you don't really notice as to say this is apartheid or what. As a young boy you knew that, OK, when they say whites here, it's whites, and when they say blacks, it's black. You didn't have to bother yourself asking why this and why that. We took it as life. This is what it's meant to be.

So as I grew up, and after going to other countries, I got to find out that, look, why is this not happening in my country? And then you start asking yourself, hey, what's all this? Why is this? And then in that way it builds up and up and up until you become really aware of what is happening. But as a young kid, you just take it. I mean, you don't even know it's there. You don't feel it, because it's part of your life. It's like trying to say, "Why do I have a nose *here* [points to face] instead of *here*?"

Q: Where did you travel growing up?

A: Places like Zimbabwe, Botswana, Transkei, Swaziland, which are the places that are a bit free. Though I don't quite understand the meaning of the word "free" or "freedom" as such. Like the blacks fighting in South Africa – they are doing that in the name of freedom, in the name of the struggle, in the name of fighting for their rights and all that. OK, as far as I know, the only people that are holding back the rights of the black people are the white rulers. Not the black rulers, because even the black rulers themselves are also falling under the same situation as the ordinary person in the street. And so you find them fighting with each other saying they are fighting for their rights. I find it very confusing.

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Q: When did you start singing?

A: I started when I was about eight, if I remember well, singing in local bands where I lived and singing in church and at school and things like that. But professionally as a recording artist, I started in 1979.

Q: Were there singers you emulated when you started?

A: Yeah. There was a guy back home in South Africa, Steve Kekana.

Q: Did you listen to American music – Marvin Gaye, Al Green, people like that?

A: Yeah. The only song of Marvin Gaye's I know well was the very famous one – "Let's Get It On." That's one song of his I liked. But I didn't like him in a way that I could try to sound like him. But Steve Kekana, I liked him very much, very much.

Q: Tell me about your first group, the Skyway Band.

A: We were four guys at school, three of my friends and then myself. And we had this singing thing going on as kids, so we decided, hey, why don't we form a band of our own. Now the problem was, to be a band we needed instruments. I said: "Look, we can try something. We can go to the rich people in the township to ask them if they could buy us some instruments." Ah, we went to quite a few, and all of them were saying: "Hey, get out of here. You're joking. I ain't got money to waste." Actually, I don't blame them. Putting myself now in their position, I wouldn't do it myself, even.

And so I said, "Why don't we try to raise some money somehow?" And now the "somehow" part of it was I wrote a stage play. We got students at school and said: "Hey, look, this is a stage play. We want actors, and all that." People went for it, and then we went around to

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small halls around the township and neighboring townships as well. So we collected just a little. We then bought a guitar and through that guitar we thought we were a band. I said: "Now that we've got this guitar, the sky is the limit. So this band is going to be called the 'Skyway.'" And, well, with just a guitar, we couldn't do much. We didn't record or anything, but it was quite nice. We had that band for about two years, then everybody went to different places. Some went to college, and so on. That is where the band ended.

Q: You played mbaqanga after that?

A: Yeah, yeah. But with the Skyway Band, we're not playing mbaqanga, you see. We're kind of playing rock music. I don't know if it was rock, but we called it rock, whatever it was. And after that year, it's then that I met Richard [Siluma, Dube's manager and former mbaqanga singer]. He had a band called the Love Brothers, and they were playing mbaqanga music. And we kind of started together nicely, because they were also not well-established by then.

Q: You later went solo, and after singing mbaqanga you switched to reggae. Was it difficult to make the transition?

A: It wasn't difficult, because I was doing rock or whatever we did with the Skyway Band, and I was doing mbaqanga with the Love Brothers, and even when I went solo, I was doing mbaqanga. But somewhere at the back of my mind there was reggae music. It's only that I think the time wasn't right. Whatever kept me, God knows, 'cause at the corners of my mind I had reggae. But I couldn't start off as a reggae artist because South Africa was not ready for that, if I may say. The recording companies, the people themselves, were not ready for reggae. People in South Africa thought that reggae is music for people who smoke ganja, people who do this and that, politicians and all.

And so it just wouldn't work if, say, I started doing reggae then. So I had to start somewhere just to get people to know me and to get this recording contract, and things like that.

Q: In your concerts, you play organ on "Think About the Children." Do you play other instruments also?

A: Yeah, I actually play a little bit of everything that I have in the band.

Q: So you arrange the music.

A: Oh yeah, yeah. Because, you see, with me it would be very difficult, say, to put the band together for a guy like myself, 'cause I didn't learn music. I cannot read or write music. Music is not something that I went to school for, but it just comes naturally. And so I have to be able to play a little bit of this and a little bit of that.

Q: Your live shows are powerful displays of music and dance. You constantly move on stage, and your dance with [keyboardist Cele] Thuthukani during "Together As One" is an explosion of joy.

A: The stage is the only place that makes me happy. I'm more happy when I'm on stage than any other place. It makes me forget about a lot of things. Like, say, maybe I'm sitting down here and I'm thinking of my father, my wife, my country, but it gives me headache. But on stage all I think about is the music and the people that I'm singing to. To see them dancing, I ultimately become part of them. Sometimes I wish I could be in the audience and watch myself!

Q: From the viewpoint of the audience, that happiness comes across very strongly.

A: Oh, I'm glad if it does. Because I really like to be with the people.

Q: What would you be doing if you were not a singer?

A: I can't think of anything. Sometimes I think maybe I was born a musician. When God created me, He just created a musician. My mother actually wanted me to be a lawyer. And so when

During "Together As One," keyboardist Thuthukani Cele stepped out front with Dube. The rest of the band vamped dubwise as the two athletically mirrored each other's playful kicks and arm thrusts . . . . The dance told a story of friendship, triumph and joy.

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I came out of school after my matric [matriculation exam], I was supposed to go to the university. I said, "No, I'm not going there." Because it wasn't in me.

Q: You knew at that point you wanted to sing.

A: Yeah. I just couldn't think of myself with a suit and tie, a briefcase, going to court, and things like that. But my mom was preparing to get me to the university. She started telling me: "You ain't got a father. You got to make things happen for you by going to the university. You become a lawyer or a doctor, you're gonna have a job. But in music, you'll be just nothing. You'll end up stealing and doing all that." And I said: "OK, if that happens, it shall have happened. But this is what I'm gonna do." And she never wanted to see me for about a year. I didn't know her.

Q: That must have been hard to go through.

A: For me, it never was hard, because I never stayed with her in the first place. I was with my grandma, or my uncle, or my aunt. So my mom is not somebody that I was very close to.

And so when I began recording, she heard my songs on the radio. But she just said, "What's he doing?" Until I wrote a song called "Dear Mother" that was telling her about all this. That "I know you had dreams about me. I know you had wishes, which were all for my own good. But look, dear Mother, I'm sorry." And she heard that song—it had a very strong message to the parents. A lot of parents and a lot of children would have liked to say the same things. And so through this song, they all heard the message. So she kind of calmed down. She didn't speak to me, though.

But God works in many ways that we don't understand. And that song became gold. We had the first gold disc, and I didn't even know what a gold disc was. The day of the presentation on tv, my mother wouldn't come. She thought it was just craziness. But when she saw this thing on tv, oh boy, she kind of got touched.

Q: Was that a reggae record?

A: No, it was one of my Zulus. And it's then that I made a little money through that record, and I bought her a few things, like tv sets and VCRs and things like that. And she kind of changed her mind, because she had thought I was going to be totally nonsense. Because that's what most of the people think about musicians. They think musicians are people who don't care about life, who are irresponsible. That's what she thought I'd be, maybe. But now after having tried to show her, "Look, that's not what I am," she kind of calmed down. I bought her a house and everything, and it's OK now.

But I don't blame my mother for having done what she did to me, because when I sit down and think about it now, I think I would also do the same if I were in her place. Thinking in terms of I don't have a father and she is also just a domestic worker. Having taken all the trouble to grow me up, get me to school and hoping that I'll be educated and maybe I can in turn take care of her when she's old, when she can't work anymore. And then what if I turn to nonsense? That was a very hard time for her. I could also think the same way, and every parent could think the same way, because it's very difficult. But God helped me. This is where I am today.

Q: There are many music lovers glad of that. How did you get the name "Lucky"?

A: Well, that's my name. I understand my mother didn't have children for a long time, and so she badly wanted children. And she got me, so she considered herself to be very lucky. That's why she called me Lucky. It's actually my real name. Some people think it's maybe a stage name or something, but, no, it's my real name.★

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