



Dennis Brown Born to Sing

A beautiful painted mural now appropriately marks the place where Dennis Emmanuel Brown was born on Feb. 1, 1957. The area is called Chocomo Lawn, and in 1957 it was just north of downtown Kingston's soon-to-be-booming music industry. This rich musical environment led naturally to a young boy's aspiration to be a singer. "I was born . . . right at the corner of Orange Street and North Street, you have a big tenement yard, that was where I grew up, really...Slim Smith and the Techniques used to come in my yard and rehearse..."

Entertainment was a family trade. Brown's father was an actor and mime and his uncle was a comedian. Brown later recalled that his parents encouraged him in other areas, but he "was too much inclined musically that nothing else interested [him]." His interest in music gravitated towards popular American artists like Lou Rawls, the Temptations, the Delfonics and Nat "King" Cole.

Dennis Brown was an early example of a Jamaican child star. While the youthful ska sensation Delroy Wilson came first, Brown's success by the time of his teenage years was otherwise unprecedented. Undoubtedly, the popularity in America and Jamaica of Little Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson provided the prototypes for these new youthful icons.

Brown grew up in a Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) constituency of Member of Parliament Edward Seaga (later Prime Minister of Jamaica), who was involved in promotion of Jamaican music during the early '60s under the Alexander Bustamante administration. Seaga recalled how Dennis came to his attention: "Dennis Brown was a very young member of the political organization in the constituency that I represent. And at that time I gave the opportunity to the young people in that constituency to form their own musical band. They developed their own singers and so on. . . And Dennis Brown was one of

these. I knew him from he was a very young boy, [he] came up in that system, got his first opportunities there."

Brown explained the circumstances similarly. "There used to be . . . a youth club in Jamaica - Seaga used to [be] affiliated with this club—so they were having a conference at the [National] Arena. Each year when they have these conferences, they have an entertainment segment. It so happen that in [one] particular year I happen to be on that show. When they encore me, they were stoning me with money. That's how I bought my first suit!"

This ascension brought Brown to the attention of middle-class bandleader Byron Lee, who took on Brown as a "boy wonder" to sing on shows around the island. Singer/songwriter Ken Lazarus, who was Lee's chief of musicians, recalled their association. "[Dennis] was . . . always kind of clean cut. He didn't come and get into trouble. He was an artist you could depend on. Byron was paying him peanuts. He had a responsibility for Dennis, because Dennis was a youngster, and he couldn't afford to be soaking in a very bad influence, however, he paid Dennis like a youngster."

By Carter Van Pelt

Brown actually recorded his first track for Derrick Harriott, but it was at Studio One that Brown really launched his recording career. Brown said a show at the famous Tit For Tat club on Red Hills Road led him to the gate of Coxson Dodd. "Coxson Dodd, Downbeat, he was passing through [one] Saturday night. He knew the managers of the club, so he set something up so we could go to Downbeat and record. So, we went down [the following] Monday. We didn't bother to go through anything like somebody listening before [an audition]. We just went straight in. We did a song called 'Love Grows.' We did a few tunes like 'Are You Gonna Break Your Promise' and another Delfonics tune. 'Love Grows' was the first song we recorded

but the second song we did was 'No Man Is an Island' and that was the first one released."

The connection to Byron Lee and Studio One brought Brown into contact with rock steady star Alton Ellis, who would play an important role in Brown's musical development. "The first time I saw Dennis, he was about 13 and a half, and he came on a stage show on Christmas morning. It [was] a show produced by Byron Lee. And Dennis was singing one of my songs, 'Ain't That Loving You.' He begin the song by [singing] the instrumental part . . . The theater was floored before he even started singing [the lyrics]. It was a lucky ting I didn't do that song that morning, because it would be dangerous for me . . . About six months after that he came to the studio, Studio One.

"He was like a son. I taught him to play the guitar and how to move his voice, phrasing and tings like that. And I wrote his second hit song 'If I Follow My Heart.' I was actually recording the song myself at Studio One and Dennis stood in the studio for about an hour and listened to me doing it over and over. He learned the song by just listening. He said 'all right, let me try that song.' And I said 'Okay, let's give him a try.' And I love what I heard, that tickle voice."

As a part of his Studio One residency, Brown provided harmony vocals with and for the Heptones, Alton Ellis, Larry Marshall, Horace Andy and others while learning the trade. He recalled being quickly accepted into Dodd's camp. "I had a lot of confidence for the main reason that I was established as a 'boy wonder' then, at that time, and I used to have a lot of people who loved to hear me sing . . . the engineer, and myself, and the musicians would get on well.

"Working with Downbeat now was like going to a college. Because you had all the people that was happening then at the time . . . people like Alton Ellis, the Heptones, John Holt. Coxson was the ace producer at the time. So if you were coming through Downbeat's school, things would really happen then."

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As with every artist who has ever worked with Dodd, Brown reached a point where he knew it was time to move and in 1971, after two albums, he began freelancing. "I thought I wasn't getting the exposure I needed. So I said maybe it would be better for me to go off and freelance. During that time I worked for people like Prince Buster, Randy's, Derrick Harriott, Winston [Ninety] Holness, Lloyd Matador, Herman Chin-Loy." Brown also cut sides for Sidney Crooks, Phil Pratt, Randy's and Alvin "GG" Ranglin.

The post-Coxsone period was followed by significant work with Derrick Harriott, resulting in the essential album *Super Reggae and Soul Hits*. Some of his most enduring masterpieces came from this relationship, including "Sihouettes," "Concentration," "Changing Times" and "The Half." These cuts were skillfully backed by the polished sound of the Now Generation band (Val Douglas, Mikey Richards, Wya Lindo, Geoffrey and Mikey Chung, and Robbie Lyn). The sessions foreshadowed some of the cultural themes that would dominate Brown's work through the rest of the decade.

Throughout his career, Dennis loved to record classic songs. One of the best examples of this was done with Harriott—a stirring version of Jimmy Webb's "Wichita Lineman," then popularized by Glen Campbell. "I ended up singing the song 'Wichita Lineman,' because it was a song I used to do live on stage, and I used to get a good response from the audience. So Derrick thought it would be a good idea to do it in the same format, and it worked. In Jamaica, people are very soul-oriented. They like a lot of American records, when they are good."

In his final interview, Brown again emphasized how much cover songs meant to him. "One thing I enjoyed doing though was to [re]-make songs from even before my time—standard songs, like 'Pretend you're happy when you're blue.' Or 'Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps' . . . 'Hooked on A Feeling' and all them tune yah. You have to study these songs. So I have that knowledge now. We do the songs in reggae. We try and do it in a way wherein it is not a joke ting. It is for real! Songs that lives on forever, mon . . . songs like 'Unforgettable.' Those songs are standard songs, live on through my time, my children's time. Because they are real songs."

In 1972, while Dennis was working with various producers, he recorded the original version of "Money in My Pocket" for Joe Gibbs. "Joe Gibbs wanted me to do an album for him," said Brown. "But I used to stay away from him cause at the time I thought [he] wasn't a nice guy." It would be several more years before that fruitful relationship developed further, but it was a strong beginning, and it led Brown to work with "Ninety the Observer" Holness, then a resident producer with Gibbs.

"While I was freelancing in the business," recalled Brown, "I met up with Ninety, because it's a small business in Jamaica—it's only a handful of people. Ninety had some good ideas, and we sit down one day and try to write a song. We did 'Westbound Train,' 'Cassandra,' 'Wolf and Leopards,' 'Here I Come,' it was good vibes. And Lee Perry had something to do with it as well, because he and Ninety was working on some other tracks, and when we were working on *Wolf and*

Leopards, he was there putting in bits and pieces."

Reggae authorities often cite Brown's mid-'70s work with Ninety as his strongest. The sessions expanded the brooding elements of his previous recordings, with an emphasis on cultural lyrics. The songs took the direction of "Tribulation," "Africa," and the title cut to what is often considered his strongest album, *Wolf and Leopards*. At the same time, Brown hit with "Cassandra" and "Westbound Train," two of his most enduring love songs. These songs showed how Brown's lyrical insight belied his mere 16 years of life experience. "I sing a lot about love. Love represents Jah, Jah is love, or God, whichever way you might accept it. . . but I find within myself that there comes a time when you have to move away from that and sing more about awareness, consciousness. Liberating music, like black liberation. I love black still, not that I am prejudiced. Who I fight against is all the racism, prejudice, Pride and arrogance, cause Jah say to fear him. We must hate evil pride and arrogance and evil ways."

The anthem "Love and Hate" (often known as "Here I Come") was recorded during this period and would become one of Brown's live standards throughout his career. The lyrics include part of the 23rd Psalm of David, which would be recited at his burial 25 years later: "My head is anointed and my cup runneth over. Goodness and mercy shall surely follow I, all the days of my life . . ."

The musical side of the Ninety sessions was identified by sound of the Waterhouse backing band Soul Syndicate (Santa Davis, Fully Fullwood, Tony Chin, Keith Sterling, Chinnna Smith). Drummer Santa Davis was making waves with a trademark sound called "flying cymbal"—heard on many of the Dennis Brown hits. Ninety recalled the chemistry as extraordinary. "From when Chinnna and those guys got around Dennis, it was hit after hit because he hypnotized them. When he opened his mouth they would get inspiration and feel a vibe with him. When they would see Dennis, everybody would be happy, laughing and running jokes."

The other key to the success of this period was the engineering work of a young Errol Thompson. Ninety called him the "greatest engineer a man could ever see in the reggae business." Errol T provided the technical expertise and production sense that created the vintage Dennis Brown sound.

Brown's most prolific period probably came while he was working for the infamous Joe Gibbs. Gibbs also employed Errol Thompson as an engineer and Gibbs' move from eight- to 16-track recording in 1977 amounted to a qualitative advance for the sound of Jamaican music. Dennis Brown was a direct beneficiary. Albums such as *Visions*, *Words of Wisdom*, *Best of Dennis Brown Vol. 2*, as well as *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* and *Spellbound* represent Brown's golden age with Gibbs. Bassist Lloyd Parks, who recorded on most of Dennis' work with Gibbs, notes the quality of the period. "Right now today, those songs that were recorded at Joe Gibbs' studio, anywhere you go, they are still being played, in Jamaica and all over. It's like reggae classics." The Gibbs/Brown relationship lasted roughly from 1975 to 1983, when Gibbs' U.S. operation was shut down due to tax evasion.

Brown often recalled the importance of the song "Should I," recorded for Gibbs in 1978. "I didn't know or think that people would come and appreciate that song so much. I was a bit scared too, wondering

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that song so much. I was a bit scared too, wondering if it was the right lyric I was using or people would love the lyrics. How could I ever go on living this way, acting like a child so young and gay...? But in those days, I try fe be a big man you know? But I was still a child. I was wondering if it was the right lyrics I sing or not. I was taking chances as well. Cause I wanted to be different."

While in the Joe Gibbs camp, Brown and his cousin Castro launched a label, DEB Music. DEB music recorded Junior Delgado, Black Uhuru, Ranking Joe, the Tamlins, Gregory Isaacs and others. "It was mainly friends I relied on in trying to build this company," said Brown. "It was hard work. Some of these artists don't get enough work. And sometimes artists get frustrated too. So, we try and look out for the better ones."

The business was broken up in the late '70s and the DEB Music material has not been reissued to date. Brown's masterful *Joseph's Coat of Many Colors* is one of the main fruits of the DEB venture, although the album came out through Laser in the U.K. Brown's next label, Yvonne's Special, started operating in the early '80s and has continued to issue his work in Jamaica.

The Joe Gibbs years are usually noted for the international success of Brown's remake of "Money in My Pocket" from *Words of Wisdom*. The track charted well in England and Europe and helped Brown earn a showcase spot in the 1979 edition of the prestigious Montreux Jazz Festival, where Brown stole the show by every account. Lloyd Parks recalls the chemistry and atmosphere of the event: "That was exceptional. That was something everyone was looking forward to. Knowing that we were playing among all these other greats internationally. The record company worked very hard to get us on that gig... Laser out of England."

Brown recalled later that "the jazz festival was due to the success of the 'Money in My Pocket'... a nice little tune, people them love it." Interestingly, Brown's fondness for the song faded, and he refused to perform it in later years. "First me love them songs, but me no love them songs deh no more. It come like a joke song to me. Yet it is the first song that make me get internationally established... Is like it synthetic."

On the wave of success generated in Europe, Joe Gibbs arranged a three-album deal with A&M Records in the U.S. in 1981, resulting in *Fool Play*, *Love Has Found Its Way*, and *The Prophet Rides Again*. None of the albums sold particularly well, and some reggae purists were alienated by attempts to crossover Brown's sound to the soul market. Others have suggested that *Love Has Found Its Way* ranks among Brown's greatest work. Brown spoke infrequently about anything having to do with Joe Gibbs, but he clearly expressed disappointment with the A&M arrangement. "Joe Gibbs started doing business in Miami, and he met a guy who said he could get us a deal from a record company... Gibbs thought he knew the market, but A&M wanted me to get extra commercial. I didn't know how the public [would] accept this album."

"[It came about] through a third-party thing. It slow down tickle, cause... some of these so-called producers started getting greedy. So they try to keep you down and make it look like nothing a gwan."

Dennis Brown had a briefly fruitful relationship with Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare in the early '80s. Sly and Robbie's "cutting edge" sound seemed to adapt itself well to Dennis Brown and vice versa. With the rhythm twins, Brown recorded the material collected as *Revolution* (Yvonne's Special), *Spellbound* (Joe Gibbs Music), and *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Joe Gibbs Music). "Sly and Robbie were getting their Taxi label together so we decided to jam and see what we come up with. And the first thing we best come up with was 'Sitting and Watching.'"

"Revolution" was probably the best-known tune from this relationship, and it provided another immovable classic for the Dennis Brown stage show. Brown only recently gave insight into the inspiration for the landmark song. "It was while reading about [Malcolm X] that I get certain impressions, gained certain understanding within his delivery of his speeches, and it was inspiring. I had the idea about the song," cause myself and Junior Delgado, we used to hang out together. So everytime I sing that song, Gado always love this tune and say, 'Bloodclot, this one yah wicked!'"

Sly Dunbar drew the song to mind when asked about Dennis after his death. "I remember one Reggae Sunsplash when he did 'Revolution,' and it was like the entire crowd wanted to rush the stage. The tune is that powerful."

Some have suggested that the Sly and Robbie-era work should have been released through Island Records for international exposure after Brown's relationship ended with A&M. Brown expressed some indirect resentment towards either Gibbs or Sly and Robbie for the material's lack of broader exposure. "In those days now, we were not exposed to certain people in the business, because we were kept in the dark many a times... although the album was good, we didn't get the right introduction to many of these people who could have helped the music get exposed and be big."

During the early '80s, Brown did several tracks with producer Gussie Clarke, including the stunning "To the Foundation" and "Down in the Ghetto." Despite the clearly brilliant chemistry and potential for further work, a full Clarke-produced album from this period didn't materialize. Gussie Clarke later explained that Dennis was becoming difficult to work with. "If you want to work with Dennis, you haffe corner Dennis, go fi Dennis, hold Dennis, don't leave him. When he comes to this place [Anchor Studio], it's like he's in prison—about 2,000 beggars come out and him haffe dodge, hide and sleep somewhere else, if him sleep. Him wake, people deh a him door a wait fi him. I wouldn't like fi him life—too much people deh pon him. From Bob Marley dead it was like him is the next man fi feed certain people."

As were many of his generation, Dennis Brown was deeply affected by Africentrist philosophy, and it made a lasting mark on his music ("Africa," "Repatriation," "Promised Land"). When asked about Africa by a British journalist in the late '70s, Brown became passionate. "Africa? Africa?! Just the mention of it is like you call me name. Well, you know Africa is the motherland and Africa is where we rightfully belong. That is where I want to be..."

In 1983, Dennis Brown made a life-changing pilgrimage to Ethiopia. His brother, Leroy Clarke, remembers the effect it had on the singer. "That trip was very important. That was his first visit to the continent. He gained a lot of knowledge of life itself on the other side. Him say him feel blessed. It changed him in the sense that it's one thing to talk about something, but actually experiencing it's a different thing. When he went, he got a spiritual fulfillment. We were actually planning to go back."

The end of Joe Gibbs' operation in combination with the changing face of dancehall effectively marked the end of the vintage era of Dennis Brown. It was far from the end of his recording career, and the new wave of digital technology ushered in by King Jammy's provided a faster, cheaper way of making records. Many of these records were not made with the care, patience and long-term vision of those made during the vintage years, but from time to time Brown's work would hearken to his former standards of quality. His work with guitarist/producer Willie Lindo on *Inseparable* in 1988 is usually considered his last great album, and his albums *Over Proof* for Mikey Bennett and *Unchallenged* for Gussie Clarke are considered among the better albums of his later career.

Some years saw as many as seven Dennis Brown albums released. At least four were released in 1999 before his death and some estimate dozens of albums-worth of material remain unreleased. Flabba Holt, who is still holding two unreleased Brown albums, offered his explanation of how the singer handled his recording. "Maybe he needed the money, [but] him a deal with too much lp. I don't know if he really had a concept on his career. Him no stop sing. Him just love sing. Most of the songs, I just call him, he hear a rhythm and just sit down and write lyrics." Dennis justified his spontaneous creative process by stating that "sometimes the premeditated stuff is not as good as on-the-spot thing."

Lloyd Parks observed that quality was being sacrificed for quantity in latter years. "One thing I can say, for the past two and a half to three years, he's been acting strange, like he don't really care about his career. As a singer, you say, 'I have to take pride in my work.' That wasn't there no more. Lately, much substance wasn't in it, like the quality Dennis Brown."

Leroy Clarke explained that the quick pace of recording was due to Dennis' prolific writing style and his willingness to record for the people he knew. "Dennis' philosophy was 'bwa, Jah give me the blessing and the talent fe sing, so hear me now I'm going to sing.' Cause more time I say 'Dennis, you're going too much' and him say, 'breddah, better to have too much than too little or nothing.' He just couldn't stop. It something that him love. If a guy don't have no money or a bre-dren of him broke, [Dennis] would just record an album for him. Sometimes him get a little money, sometimes him don't. That was Dennis for you."

Final Words from the Crown Prince

On May 10 I had the opportunity to conduct what would be Dennis Brown's final in-depth interview. It came on the heels of a stirring performance at the Cameo Theater in Miami Beach, where Dennis, Gregory Isaacs, John Holt, Freddie McGregor and Michael Rose performed to celebrate the launch of Karl Pitterson and Rico Laing's *Meditation Records* and Dennis' Generosity album. Brown gave a performance worthy of its historical significance. He offered, in retrospect, that the show was like "a plate of well-cooked food." The interview has been excerpted in various places in these articles, but the full transcript can be found on the Internet at <http://incolor.inetnetr.com/cvampet/deb.html>. Give thanks to Karl, Rico and Jeanette for their help.

Many of the above quotes were taken from interviews by Dave and Beth Kingston, Ian McCann (More Axe), and Roger Steffens, Ranking Jeffrey (Slash), and Chris Wilson (Heartbeat Records). Thanks also to Ray Hurford (Small Axe/More Axe) and Steve Barrow (Blood and Fire) for their assistance. Several quotes were also drawn from the documentary *Money in My Pocket*, part of the *Deeper Roots* series of reggae documentaries. *