

DENNIS BROWN: The Passing of the Prince

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PHOTO BY DAVID CORIO

DENNIS BROWN

The Passing of the Prince

By Carter Van Pelt

"7/17/99... We love you... silhouettes... rest in peace... Black starliner... love from precious... puppy dog was here... solgie... from bandito... no man is an island... journalist Carl Roach... good bye... inseparable... GG... ababba janai..."

Under a row of ponciana trees and surrounded by dead grass, pebbles and dirt, next to the graves of Kapo, Mas Ran, Aggie Bernard and Ranny Williams, lies the grave of reggae superstar Dennis Emmanuel Brown. While the concrete cover of the burial pit was still soft, hundreds of farewell messages including the above were crudely scrawled with fingers and sticks. This heartfelt, populist tribute from friends and fans stood in contrast to the massive, modernist sculptures across the fence that honor Jamaican national heroes Alexander Bustamante, Norman Manley, Paul Bogle, George William Gordon and Marcus Garvey.

The spontaneous tribute makes one thing more obvious: Jamaica dearly loved Dennis Brown, and his death on July 1, 1999 was a reality check for a generation.

In the weeks before Brown's passing, Jamaica lost three great artist/producers in Augustus Pablo, Henry "Junjo" Lawes, and Pat "Jah Lloyd" Francis. But with Dennis, it was different. He was a reggae figurehead, never having faded from the Jamaican consciousness in his 30-year career. To a certain extent, Jamaica had taken him for granted. After 60 albums and a place in the heart of so many, he had never been given the Order of Distinction presented to many of his musical fraternity (Tommy McCook and Roland Alphonso were so honored while they were alive. Ernest Ranglin, Lloyd Parks, Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare have also been given the recognition). Add the fact of his relative youth (he was 42) and the mysterious circumstances of a widely rumored addiction to drugs and the specter of AIDS, and Dennis has become a tragic hero for the reggae island.

Superlatives seem appropriate in gauging Brown's popularity, as only Bob Marley, Gregory Isaacs, and possibly Jimmy Cliff have had comparably high profiles in reggae. Dozens of singers have imitated Brown's style from the '70s to the modern era. Roots singer "Earl 16" Daley once recalled that "in the good old days, everybody was into singing like Dennis Brown. [He] at that time was like one of the most influential artists, he was really progressive . . . All the school boys and kids who liked music, we used to like always try to pack on Dennis Brown, because he's like a role model for us."

Jamaican broadcast journalist Dermott Hussey did three tribute programs to Brown on his RJR radio program "The Global Beat." "He was in my view, the definitive male voice. All the singers of any stature were definitely influenced by him. Everybody saw him as the touchstone when it came to how a reggae song was sung effectively. He approached a song with a deep understanding and feel for the melody and lyrics. He really defined the territory."

The weeks between Dennis Brown's death and his burial in Kingston's National Heroes Park saw an outpouring of grief and emotion from those who knew him, worked with him, and those who were mesmerized by his silky baritone voice. Ten thousand people reportedly came to see his body when it lay in state at the Ward Theater in downtown Kingston in the days before the funeral.

His funeral was held at the National Arena on July 17 and was reported internationally by the Associated Press. The event, organized by his colleague and friend Freddie McGregor, became a three-and-a-half hour musical celebration of Brown's life. His music was performed by McGregor, John Holt, Richie Stephens, George Nooks, Maxi Priest, Shaggy, Gregory Isaacs, Ken Boothe, Carlene Davis, Marcia Griffiths, Nadine Sutherland, Heather Cum-

mings, Pam Hall and J.C. Lodge, all backed by Brown's long-time associate Lloyd Parks and his We the People band.

While the funeral was conducted by Christian ministers and had a notably Christian content (Carlene Davis sang "Someday I'll Go Where Jesus Is"), Brown's brother Leroy Clarke says the singer did not undergo any conversion before his death. "Dennis had acknowledged Jesus Christ in the person of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I," Clarke explained the family could not find a licensed Twelve Tribes minister to officiate the ceremony.

Coverage internationally documented Brown's influence on a generation of Jamaicans, many of whom considered Brown their favorite singer. Stella Orakwue, writing for *New Nation* in London, poignantly explained the importance of the departed star: "When we lost Dennis, we realized we'd also lost our youth. We'd grown up together with him. His music had been the punctuation to the stories of our own lives. . . . We played out our youth and young adulthood to his music, a fact that punched me in the face when I heard that he'd gone. . . . To have been young, black and to love reggae music in the '70s was to belong to a very special, political mass of black people. . . . Dennis and Marley provided the brew. It was very special, and when you sipped from it, with any luck, the sustenance stayed in your veins, inspiring you, driving you on."

Recording artist and folk spokesperson Mutabaruka, who recorded with Brown on three occasions, commented on the significance of his passing: "It's really a loss. . . . Dennis Brown was one of the pioneers of the music, and he carried the

The fame wouldn't bother him, cause he was just easy-going, and he was the easiest person as an artist that one could really meet. He was always welcoming people and [would] always show up with him face in a smile. You never really see him in an angry angry mood."

A CAREER UNFULFILLED?

Producer Bunny "Striker" Lee had a blunt assessment of Dennis Brown's life in the days following his death: "The world has held him as the Crown Prince for too long. When a sovereign person dies, the heir takes the throne. There have been many reasons why society refused to accept Dennis as the new King."

News of Brown's passing spread worldwide on the morning of July 1 via the Internet. While some were quick to deify the Crown Prince, the first commentary to appear after the singer's death came from Cambridge, MA dj Joshua B, who described a career that fell short of its full potential. "Although the Internet reggae community seems shocked, some of us aren't," he wrote in an opinion posted on the *Jammin' Reggae Archives*. "The early cause of death buzzing around on the Internet is lung failure. Actually, Dennis Brown died of AIDS-related pneumonia. In fact, two former girlfriends of Dennis had recently passed away from AIDS-related complications, so it was generally assumed by those 'in the know' that Dennis had AIDS, and his health was failing. Add in a longstanding crack-cocaine addiction, and the picture looked even worse. . . . The saddest thing about this situation is that Dennis Brown's career potential was never fulfilled. If health had been a priority, who can say what heights his career could have reached?"

JAMAICA DEARLY LOVED DENNIS BROWN, AND HIS DEATH ON JULY 1, 1999 WAS A REALITY CHECK FOR A GENERATION.

music so far . . . after 60-odd albums. We really give honor fe know that through technology his words will continue in the hearts of men. . . . The bredren do a lot, and the struggle continues."

Singer Gregory Isaacs expressed profound grief at the loss of his colleague: "He meant a lot to me. . . . I held him up like a brother. He's probably the closest person to me, the only real friend I had. His death hurts me, you know. It's reality. Life is a gift from God, so it must be taken as such. It's a gift that we have no control of. Only thing is I never expected him to lose that gift so early. I will really, really miss him." Praises of Brown were issued with endless superlatives by colleagues, friends and fans. DJ "Ranking Joe" Jackson recalled the humble demeanor Brown maintained despite his star status: "He wasn't a person who is big-headed.

Dermott Hussey articulated a similar perspective. "His life was a tragedy in a sense. The potential that he displayed, he was never able to fulfill it in a true artistic way. He came close in 1983 when he signed to A&M, [but] he never approached that standard again. It is true that in his voluminous output, a lot of it was not of a high quality, largely because he had an ongoing drug problem, and had begun this problem of singing for all these producers. It's one thing to saturate the market, and it's another thing to saturate the market with the same type of songs."

Joshua B's harsh assessment of Brown's life and death was generally in contrast to the hero's treatment Brown was receiving posthumously in Jamaica and elsewhere. News articles focused on the greatness of his musical legacy. Some suggested that

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the singer's death gave the country a needed distraction from a spate of gun killings that had left nearly 500 people dead from the beginning of the year. The move to bury Brown in National Heroes Park was orchestrated by Freddie McGregor with the acquiescence of the PNP (People's National Party) administration of P.J. Patterson. Individuals who have existing distinctions from the Jamaican government for outstanding cultural contributions are eligible for burial in Heroes Park. Brown did not have such distinction at the time of his death. A *Daily Gleaner* editorial of July 14 ("Heroic Criteria") questioned whether this was appropriate.

Brown's reputation for canceling shows also cast question over his legacy. Some argue that the damage done to reggae internationally by cancellation of concerts is immeasurable, although Brown was far from being the only reggae artist who has had this problem. He commented to the *Jamaica Observer* on this reputation as he prepared for the 1996 Reggae Sunsplash tour: "The no-shows were years ago. What people are going to see now is a new D. Brown," he said. "I am making the flights to catch the shows, so that's a thing of the past." Brown canceled a show in Los Angeles as recently as May of 1999. He canceled the headline slot at the Kansas City Reggae Festival in 1997 and attributed it to a misunderstanding with the promoters.

Almost entirely absent from the media coverage was any mention of Brown's presumed battle with AIDS and drug addiction, although talk on the street fanned the flames on these issues. Brown was allegedly seen backstage at concerts in the United States in recent years with his drug paraphernalia in open view, according to a regular contributor to *The Beat*. Brown publicly denied a drug problem when questioned by the *Jamaica Star* in 1996. He said, "If I was on drugs I would be persona non grata. I don't not still be doing my work. Remember old-time people said 'show me your company, I'll tell you who you are.' I'll admit that I've been around people associated with drugs and that perhaps was not good because people get branded. Drugs have played no significant factor in my life."

Dermott Hussey explained that the media "skirted" the drug issue. "There is a tendency here, not only at the level of the press but at all levels, where everything is in denial. I don't know if it was out of respect or not wanting to deal with real issues. It was just kind of avoided. The drug addiction seemed to have been considerable and was never dealt with properly. Dennis never seemed to have had the support system around him to try to seriously help him. After a time, he just sought the companionship of people who approved rather than people who disapproved. Wanting to look the other way while the truth is staring you in the face is the overriding consideration. You don't end up doing any kind of justice to the man's cause."

Basist Flabba Holt, who worked with Dennis frequently in his final years and produced one of his last albums, *Bless Me Jah*, said despite the rumors, he never witnessed any drug abuse. "When he came to the studio, all he smoke is just pure herb. I don't know if he knows that if I see him smoke the drugs, I going to complain. Me never see him smoke them yet."

Lloyd Parks, who toured with Brown for the past 25 years, also said he personally never saw the singer use cocaine. "He always isolate himself. It's like a mystery, this whole thing. Certain people, he's not going to allow them to see it," he said. "The man ruin himself, just bad influences, bad habit. You do something that you can't come out of. It's amazing, cause you still have [other] guys 40, 50 [years old] going into that. Drugs are a curse or a plague on the nation. I think some people will just look at Dennis Brown as a music hero, forget about his private life. You still have to really honor him for his musical contribution."

DI "Ranking Joe" Jackson, known for his work with Ray Symbolic sound system in Kingston in the '70s and his many dj albums, knew Dennis from the mid-'70s when he played Brown's work at dances. Brown later produced Joe's third album, *Round the World*, for his DEB label. Ranking Joe kept in contact with Brown over the years and was aware of the singer's alleged substance abuse. "Drugs is not right. I think Dennis do more good than a different side of people could think about. Over the years, he contribute a lot to the music business. When one tends to do a lot of good, people don't remember what else they do wrong . . . or one thing that they don't agree with. He come to do a work and write his music and his book and left something for one to cherish and respect and learn from as a guideline. Sometimes the Father show you two different sides of a person. Listening to his music can guide you along, and whatever he do behind the scenes is still a guideline for us too, to make us recognize that it's not right. And we must try to stay away from that. . . . But I always tend to be more positive . . . and always remember him of the right."

Dennis Brown's brother Leroy Clarke was probably as close to Dennis as anyone. Clarke was almost always with his brother on tour and by all accounts was deeply involved in Dennis' life. "Personally, I haven't seen him doing [drugs]," he said in an interview at the Brown residence in August. "Again, the rumors are there, but there are certain things he wouldn't do in front of me. So for me to say I've seen it with my two eyes, no I haven't, cause he had that much respect for me. If he had a problem, he kept it to himself. He was a very private person. I never really discussed it with him."

"People will always talk still, you can't stop people from forming their own opinions. Even when you're not doing something, people say you're doing it. Dennis was in the limelight. He always gets knocks. Being a public figure, you have to know how to conduct yourself as well as your affairs. Being around him, I've tried to make sure things stay on a level, whereas your private life is your private life. What you do behind closed doors is your own business."

As for the official cause of death, Brown died in the University of the West Indies Hospital and no autopsy was performed. He apparently became ill in late June, sometime after a return trip to Miami from Brazil, where he spent nearly a month. While Brown never contracted anything in Brazil, several people who traveled there caught a virus, including Lloyd Parks, Parks' son, and Leroy Clarke. According to Clarke, Brown complained of chills on the flight from Miami to Kingston and checked into the hospital several days later on June 30. He died the following morning. The media reported lung failure related to pneumonia and heart failure as causes of death. Regarding whether or not his brother had AIDS, Leroy Clarke said, "not as far as I know personally. He was never diagnosed." According to Dermott Hussey and others, a former employee of RJR who died of AIDS maintained that she got the disease from Brown.

If, as Dennis' brother believes, he did not have AIDS and did not have a drug problem, then the entire reggae industry and public has done him and his family an incalculable disservice. If the allegations are true, then the magnitude of the tragedy increases, because no one will learn, no one will benefit, and no one will avoid the destructive lifestyle Dennis Brown was thought by many to have lived. Clarke rationally stated that "if I knew my brother died of AIDS, and it could save one person, it would be my duty to say 'look, that's what killed my brother.' AIDS doesn't discriminate and people need to come to terms with it."

Clarke maintains that his brother was maligned because of his fame; rumors were out of control for years, and there was nothing that could be done. "There are times he would think about certain things people would say, and it would hurt him. In every man's chest there beats a heart, and a man have feelings. No matter how hard you might be, there are certain things going to get to you. He was a human being too." Dennis Brown once stated that the drug rumours were a constant detraction to his career. "It is very belittling and hurts sometimes, but once you know you're not guilty, who cares?"

Clarke clearly feels the issues of his brother's personal life should be kept private and hopes his brother's musical legacy will be remembered above all else. "I just give Jah thanks and praise for Dennis' life and what he has contributed to the world through the root of music, regardless of the rumors out there about him, he has done a lot. He has paid his dues. You want to know the true Dennis? Listen to his lyrics. He was singing from the heart."

In the end, Dennis Brown seemed to know the magnitude of personal tribulation. The lyrics to the title track of his album *Bless Me Jah* may provide the most insight:

Bless me Jah

Cleanse me and purify my structure

Keep me on the right track, don't want to look back

Help me to overcome my stumbling block.

Lord I'm begging you to see me through

I know it isn't easy, but I'm willing to try my best

Oh Lord, as long as you're there to strengthen me, I can pass any test

I'm only a vessel, but I know the vessel must be clean

in order to fulfill your work, you know what I mean

Lord I'm begging you to see me through

No one is perfect, no is without sin

So he who is without fault, let the first stone begin

I'm fighting a battle, a battle I know I must win

And although I get weak sometimes, I refuse to give in. *