



## Dozens Rally Peacefully at Reggae Fest

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Several dozen LGBT activists, passionate and boisterous despite their relatively small numbers, turned out on August 25 at the Reggae Carifest held on Randalls Island to draw attention to two headliners whose repertoires include direct appeals for the murder of gay men.

In response to performances by Buju Banton and Bounty Killa, both hugely popular Jamaican dancehall artists, the activists held up picket signs and chanted, "Gay is good, gay is great, yes to music, no to hate" and "hey, hey, ho, ho, homophobia's got to go," among other slogans. Prior to arriving at Randall's Island, at a pre-protest gathering at the East 125th Street offices of Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), Staceyann Chin, a Jamaican-born lesbian performer and activist who had worked hard to broaden the focus of the demonstration beyond just reggae and hip hop to include all hate-based music, warned her fellow activists, "Don't incite these mother-fuckers. Don't be provocative."

Her admonition proved unnecessary. Although thousands of concert-goers were in attendance and the protest began at 5 p.m., just prior to performances by the biggest stars, the fact that the festival started earlier in the afternoon meant the stream of attendees passing by, even close to the ticket tent, was modest. No dramatic tensions between protesters and audience members ensued.

Some passersby looked puzzled and others shared sarcastic comments with their companions, but usually at no greater volume than a decent stage whisper. The only startling response was one man who rattled off the words "Bullet, bullet, bullet" in quick succession.

The Buju Banton song activists cite as promoting anti-gay violence is "Boom Bye Bye," which features sounds of gunfire "in a batty-boy's head" - "batty-boy" meaning "faggot" in Jamaica - and says of any "batty-boy," "burn him up bad like an old tire wheel." Bounty Killa has a song with the lyrics, "Bun a fire pon a puff and mister fagoty" ("Burn a fire on puffs and faggots") and "Poop man fi drown an dat a yawd man philosophy" ("Shit men [gay men] must be drowned and that's a yardy man [Jamaican] philosophy").

The artists have steadfastly refused to cooperate with the Reggae Compassionate Act (RCA), a manifesto developed by the international Stop Murder Music campaign by which other leading artists have pledged not to perform songs urging the killing of gay men and to refrain from re-releasing any such songs previously recorded.

For weeks, activists led by Mark Milano of the Queer Justice League had pressed promoter Alfonso Brooks of the Brooklyn-based Team Legendary to bounce Buju Banton and Bounty Killa from the concert roster, to no avail. Brooks initially voiced sympathy with the aims of the RCA, telling Gay City News, "I think all artists should sign it," but also said the two performers had signed contracts with him and had already been paid. Brooks pledged the two would abide by his guidelines to refrain from performing any hate music at Saturday's event.

In short order, the Queer Justice League was joined by a diverse coalition of community groups, including GMAD, the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, the Gay and Lesbian

Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and **the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)**.

And for reasons articulated most urgently by Chin, the activists widened their discussion to include more than just reggae music and to target concert promoters, recording labels, and distribution companies as well as the performers themselves.

Last week, she told Gay City News, "It incenses me how we can take an old Irish song about killing a man and it can be a lovely ballad, while a young black boy singing about it is horrible." At Saturday's rally, Chin said, "Why are these artists attacked but not the corporations that profit from them," specifically mentioning iTunes and Clear Channel, the parent company of Power 105.1 Radio, originally a sponsor of the concert.

After pressure from GLAAD, Clear Channel on August 23 told Newsday that it was pulling its sponsorship of the event, though the company refused to elaborate on the reason.

GLAAD's Rashad Robinson, the group's senior director of media programs, faulted the company for not having taken a more principled stand earlier in the controversy.

"Clear Channel could have really stepped in and done something here." Robinson also cast doubt on the claims made by Team Legendary's Brooks that he acted to press the artists to sign the RCA once he learned of the activists' concerns.

"Concert promoters have to be the savviest people to pull this kind of event off," he said. "He knew what was in their music."

The activists continued to disagree amongst themselves Saturday about whether the city, which owns the land on which the concert was staged, should have pulled the plug on Buju Banton and Bounty

Killa, though that question in no way proved divisive. GLAAD's Robinson noted his group's concerns about freedom of speech and also suggested that moving to stifle an event so popular in the Caribbean community would prove counter-productive. Queer Justice League's Milano echoed that view.

But, Chin was joined by poet and spoken word performer Emanuel Xavier and longtime gay activist Andy Velez, also from QJL, in arguing that free speech rights end when the safety of others, such as gay men and lesbians, is explicitly threatened.

**Chin, Robinson, Milano, and Zaheer Mustafa from NGLTF all emphasized that an important step forward in their efforts against murder music will be to target recording companies as well as major distributors, such as iTunes, Amazon, and Virgin Megastores. Mustafa said that effort would likely take weeks, perhaps months to kick into full gear as the coalition considers how to make "organized asks" of such corporate giants.**

In their goal of shining light on the larger corporate music and media role in broadcasting the murder music they oppose, activists got plenty of help Saturday from local television stations. Stories about the protest and controversy were aired on Channels 1, 4, 5, and 9 and opened the news on Channel 11. Those reports conveyed a unified message from the activists-that a few among the many artists on hand at Reggae Carifest have long made their names and their money with lyrics that glorify violence and murder aimed at the LGBT community.

The activists' immediate focus is on two additional reggae events in the coming week. On Friday, August 31, they will assemble outside the Hammerstein Ballroom, 311 West 34th Street, at 7 p.m., to protest appearances by Buju Banton and Elephant Man at "On Da Reggae Tip." On Sunday, September 2 at 5 p.m., protesters will picket a Beenie Man performance at the Irie

Jamboree at Roy Wilkins Park between Baisley and Merrick Boulevards at 115th Avenue in South Jamaica, Queens.

Activists are also spotlighting attention on sponsors of one or another of the events, including HOT 97 Radio, WVIP 93.5 FM, Western Union, and Air Jamaica.