

# Buju Banton

**Mark Anthony Myrie** (born 15 July 1973), professionally known by his stage name **Buju Banton**, is a Jamaican reggae dancehall recording artist. He is widely considered one of the most significant and well-regarded artists in Jamaican music. Banton has collaborated with many international artists, including those in the hip hop, Latin and punk rock genres, as well as the sons of Bob Marley.

Banton released a number of dancehall singles as early as 1987 but came to prominence in 1992 with two albums, *Stamina Daddy* and *Mr. Mention*, the latter becoming the best-selling album in Jamaican history upon its release. That year he also broke the record for No. 1 singles in Jamaica, previously held by Bob Marley and the Wailers. He signed with the major label Mercury Records and released *Voice of Jamaica* in 1993. By the mid-1990s, Banton's music became more influenced by his Rastafari faith, as heard on the seminal albums *'Til Shiloh* and *Inna Heights*.

In 2009, he was arrested on drug-related charges in the United States, his first trial resulting in a hung jury. His 2010 album *Before the Dawn* won a Grammy Award for Best Reggae Album at the 53rd Annual Grammy Awards. In 2011, he was convicted on the aforementioned criminal charge and was imprisoned in the U.S. until December 2018, whereupon he was deported home to

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Jamaica.

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## Biography

### Background


Buju Banton was born in Kingston, Jamaica in a poor neighbourhood known as Salt Lane. Buju is a nickname given to him by his mother as a child. Banton is a Jamaican word that refers to someone who is a respected storyteller, and it was adopted by Myrie in tribute to the deejay Burro Banton, whom he admired as a child. Buju emulated Burro's rough vocals and forceful delivery, developing his own distinctive style. Buju's mother was a higgler, or street vendor, while his father worked as a labourer at a tile factory. He was the youngest of fifteen children born into a family that was directly descended from the Maroons of Jamaica.

Banton has homes in Jamaica and Tamarac, Florida (United States). He also has 15 children.

### Early career

As a youngster, Buju would often watch his favourite artists perform at outdoor shows and local dancehalls in Denham Town. At the age of 12, he picked up the microphone for himself and

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began toasting under the moniker of Gargamel, working with the Sweet Love and Rambo Mango sound systems. In 1986, he was introduced to producer Robert Ffrench by fellow deejay Clement Irie, and his first single, "The Ruler" was released not long afterward in 1987. This led to recording sessions with producers such as Patrick Roberts, Bunny Lee, Winston Riley, and Digital B.

## 1990s

In 1991, Buju joined Donovan Germain's Penthouse Records label and began a fruitful partnership with producer Dave Kelly who later launched his own Madhouse Records label. Buju is one of the most popular musicians in Jamaican history, having major chart success in 1992, with "Bogle" and "Love me Browning", both massive hits in Jamaica. Controversy erupted over "Love Me Browning" which spoke of Banton's penchant for lighter-skinned black women: "Mi love my car mi love my bike mi love mi money and ting, but most of all mi love mi browning." Some accused Banton of denigrating the beauty of darker-skinned black women. In response, he released "Love Black Woman," which spoke of his love for dark-skinned beauties: "Mi nuh Stop cry, fi all black women, respect all the girls dem with dark complexion". 1992 was an explosive year for Buju as he broke Bob Marley's record for the greatest number of #1 singles in a year. Buju's gruff voice dominated the Jamaican airwaves for the duration of the year. Banton's debut album,


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Mr. Mention, includes many of his greatest hits from that year including "Bonafide Love" featuring Wayne Wonder, the singer who first brought Buju out as a guest star on the annual Jamaican stage show Sting. 1992 also saw the unsanctioned re-release of "Boom Bye Bye," a controversial song recorded several years earlier when the artist was 19 years old, which resulted in a backlash that threatened to destroy his career. several years later, the song would later become the subject of outrage in the United States and Europe, leading to Banton being dropped from the line-up of the WOMAD festival as well as numerous other scheduled performances. Banton subsequently issued a public apology.

Now on the major Mercury/PolyGram label, Banton released the hard-hitting Voice of Jamaica in 1993. The album included a number of conscious tracks. These tracks included "Deportees", a song which criticises those Jamaicans who went abroad but never sent money home; "Tribal War" a collaboration with Tony Rebel, Brian & Tony Gold, and Terry Ganzie, a sharp condemnation of political violence that interpolates Little Roy's classic reggae song of the same name; and "Willy, Don't Be Silly", which promotes safe sex and the use of contraceptives, particularly the condom, profits from which were donated to a charity supporting children with AIDS. Banton was invited to meet Jamaican Prime Minister P. J. Patterson, and won several awards that year at the Caribbean Music Awards and the Canadian Music Awards.


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Some of Banton's lyrics dealt with violent themes, which he explained as reflecting the images that young Jamaicans were presented with by the news media. The reality of Kingston's violence was brought home in 1993 by the murders in separate incidents of three of his friends and fellow recording artists, the deejays Pan Head and Dirtsman and singer Mickey Simpson. His response was the single "Murderer", which condemned gun violence, going against the flow of the prevailing lyrical content in dancehall. The song inspired several clubs to stop playing songs with the excessively violent subject matter. Late in 1994, Buju was also affected by the death of his friend Garnett Silk. Buju's transformation continued, as he embraced the Rastafari movement and began growing dreadlocks. His performances and musical releases took on a more spiritual tone. Banton toured Europe and Japan, playing sold-out shows.

'Til Shiloh (1995) was a very influential album, incorporating live instrumentation as well as digital rhythms, and incorporating the sounds of roots reggae along with the harder-edged dancehall sounds that first made Banton famous. The artist was embracing his Rastafari faith and his new album reflected these beliefs. 'Til Shiloh successfully blended conscious lyrics with a hard-hitting dancehall vibe. The album included earlier singles such as "Murderer" along with instant classics like "Wanna Be Loved" and "Untold Stories". "Untold Stories" revealed an entirely different side of Buju Banton

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from the one that had stormed to dancehall stardom. It is regarded by many as one of his best works and has become a staple in the Banton performance repertoire. Reminiscent in mood and delivery to “Redemption Song” by Bob Marley, “Untold Stories” won Buju Banton many favorable comparisons to the late singer. This album had a profound impact on dancehall music and proved that dancehall audiences had not forgotten the message that Roots Reggae expounded with the use of “conscious lyrics”. Dancehall artists did not abandon slack and violent lyrics altogether, but the album did pave the way for a greater spirituality within the music. In the wake of Buju’s transformation to Rastafari, many artists, such as Capleton, embraced the faith and began to denounce violence in their music.

In 1996, Buju contributed “Wanna Be Loved (Desea ser Amado)” along with Los Pericos to the Red Hot Organization’s album *Silencio=Muerte: Red Hot + Latin for the Red Hot Benefit Series*. This series raises money to increase AIDS awareness.

That same year Buju Banton took control of his business by establishing his own Gargamel Music label, releasing the popular single “Love Sponge” on vinyl in Jamaica and overseas. In years to come Gargamel would expand into an outlet for Buju’s own productions and providing an outlet for fresh new talent.

Inna Heights (1997) substantially increased Banton’s

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international audience as Buju explored his singing ability and recorded a number of roots-tinged tracks, including the hugely popular “Destiny” and “Hills and Valleys”. The album also included collaborations with artists such as Beres Hammond and the legendary Toots Hibbert. The album was well received by fans at the time and critics praised Buju’s soaring vocals. The album has aged well and remains a highly regarded work over 20 years after its release.


In 1998, Buju met the punk band Rancid and recorded three tracks with them: “No More Misty Days”, “Hooligans” and “Life Won’t Wait”. The latter became the title track of Rancid’s 1998 album Life Won’t Wait.

## 2000s

Buju signed with Anti- Records, a subsidiary of Brett Gurewitz’s Epitaph Records, and released Unchained Spirit in 2000. The album showcased diverse musical styles, and featured guest appearances by Luciano, Morgan Heritage, Stephen Marley, and Rancid. It carried little of the roots feel heard on Til Shiloh and virtually none of the hardcore dancehall sound which had brought him to public acclaim early in his career.

Several singles followed in the start of the new decade, which was perceived as more mellow and introspective, as opposed to the dancehall approach of his early career. In March 2003, Banton released Friends for Life, which featured more sharply

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political songs, including “Mr. Nine”, an anti-gun song that was a hit in Jamaica’s dancehalls as well as internationally. The album focused on political messages regarding the African diaspora, featuring excerpts from a speech made by Marcus Garvey. “Paid Not Played”, also featured on the album, displayed a gradual return to the themes more popular in dancehall. The album also featured some hip hop influence with the inclusion of rapper Fat Joe.

2006 saw the release of the Too Bad, an album that was more dancehall-oriented in style. One of the slower tracks from the album, “Driver A”, went on to become a major hit, while at the same time reviving Sly and Robbie’s “Taxi” riddim.

Banton performed at the 2007 Cricket World Cup Opening Ceremony with Third World and Beres Hammond.

The album Rasta Got Soul was released on 21 April 2009, a date which marked the 43rd anniversary of Emperor Haile Selassie’s visit to Jamaica in 1966. Produced by Banton, with contributions from longtime collaborators Donovan Germain, Stephen Marsden and Wyclef Jean, Rasta Got Soul was a 100% roots reggae album recorded over a seven-year period before its release. It went on to earn Banton his fourth Grammy nomination for Best Reggae Album in 2010.

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## 2010s


On 13 February 2011, one day before the scheduled start of his second court trial in Tampa, Florida, Buju Banton's *Before the Dawn* album was announced as the winner of Best Reggae Album at the 53rd Annual Grammy Awards.

Upon his release from prison in the United States in December 2018, Banton started The Long Walk To Freedom tour and performed his first concert at National Stadium in Kingston, Jamaica in March 2019, the concert attracted over 30.000 people. During his tour, he continued putting out new music and new singles including *Bagga Mouth*, *False Pretense*, and *Country for Sale*.

In May 2019, Banton released *Country For Sale*, the song topped the iTunes Reggae Chart within minutes after the announcement of its release. The song was recorded at the Gargamel Music Studio, Donovan Germain's own recording studio in the Corporate Area. On 12 November of the same year, he released his first official music video entitled "Trust". The video marked the first anniversary of Banton's release from prison and was produced in collaboration with Dave Kelly and directed by Kieran Khan. The track peaked at number 1 on the Billboard Reggae Digital Song Sales chart.

Banton announced his partnership with Jay-Z's Roc Nation in November of that year, becoming the second Jamaican reggae

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artist be represented by the agency, which coincided with the release of his music video Steppa. He also announced that Island Records will be the distributor of the collaboration's new music.

## 2020s

In January 2020, Buju was featured on the Bad Boys for Life (soundtrack) which was produced by DJ Khaled. His song titled "Murda She Wrote" was a nod to a 1992 dancehall classic called "Murder She Wrote" by Jamaican reggae duo Chaka Demus & Pliers.

On 29 February 2020, Buju produced the Steppaz Riddim under this own Gargamel Music label. The riddim, released under Roc Nation, featured 11 tracks and included contributions from Vershon, Delly Ranx, Agent Sasco, Bling Dawg and General B.


Banton released his 13th studio album and his first in a decade, Upside Down 2020 on 26 June 2020. The album includes guest appearances from John Legend, Pharrell, Stefflon Don and Stephen Marley.

## Controversies

### Anti-gay controversy

Banton has been criticised for the lyrical content of his song

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“Boom Bye Bye”, which was released when he was 19 years old in 1992. The song has been interpreted as supporting the murder of gay men although others have argued that the song’s lyrics should be read as metaphorical, following in a long tradition of exaggerated rhetorical violence in Jamaican dancehall music. In 2009 gay-rights groups appealed to venues around the United States not to host Buju Banton.

In 2007 Banton was allegedly among a number of reggae artists who signed a pledge, called the Reggae Compassionate Act, created by the Stop Murder Music campaign, to refrain from performing homophobic songs or making homophobic statements. The Act stated that the signers “do not encourage nor minister to HATE but rather uphold a philosophy of LOVE, RESPECT, and UNDERSTANDING towards all human beings as the cornerstone of reggae music” and promised that the artists involved no longer believed in sexism, homophobia, or violence and that they would not perform music that went against these beliefs on stage. Banton later denied that he had made any such commitment, although he did refrain from performing “Boom Bye Bye” and other offensive songs at the 2007 Reggae Carifest concert. He did, however, continue to play such songs afterwards.

On 20 March 2019, Buju Banton and his team officially removed “Boom Bye Bye” from his catalog. Banton’s team pulled the song from streaming platforms such as Apple Music and Spotify, and Banton announced his intention to never perform the song

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again. Banton issued a statement in which he clarified the importance of tolerance and love, saying, "In recent days there has been a great deal of press coverage about the song 'Boom Bye Bye' from my past which I long ago stopped performing and removed from any platform that I control or have influence over. I recognize that the song has caused much pain to listeners, as well as to my fans, my family and myself. After all the adversity we've been through I am determined to put this song in the past and continue moving forward as an artist and as a man. I affirm once and for all that everyone has the right to live as they so choose. In the words of the great Dennis Brown, 'Love and hate can never be friends.' I welcome everyone to my shows in a spirit of peace and love. Please come join me in that same spirit."

## U.S. drug charges

In December 2009 Drug Enforcement Administration agents remanded Banton to custody in Miami, where the U.S. Attorney charged him with conspiracy to distribute and possession of more than five kilograms of cocaine. Banton was then moved to the Pinellas County Jail where he remained until trial. A six-day trial in Tampa, Florida was declared a mistrial on 27 September 2010, after the jury was unable to reach a unanimous decision. During the trial, audio recordings were presented of Banton and a drug-dealer-turned-government-informant discussing drugs, drug prices and smuggling. Banton was also

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seen on a video recording meeting the informant in a police-controlled warehouse tasting cocaine from a kilogram bag. The informant was reportedly paid \$50,000 for his work on the case. The singer was released that November on bond.

He was allowed to perform one concert between trials, which was held on 16 January 2011 to a sold-out crowd in Miami. A few weeks after the performance he won the Grammy Award for Best Reggae Album but was not allowed to attend the ceremony.

On 22 February 2011, Banton was found guilty of conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute five or more kilograms of cocaine, possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug-trafficking offense and using communication wires to facilitate a drug-trafficking offense. He was found not guilty on the charge of attempted possession of five kilograms or more of cocaine. Four months later, he was sentenced to ten years and one month in a federal prison for the cocaine trafficking conviction. His sentencing on a related firearms conviction (despite the fact that Banton was never found with a gun) was scheduled for 30 October 2012, and then postponed on his lawyer's request for an investigation of possible juror misconduct. Despite the fact that a juror was found guilty of misconduct, Buju Banton waived his right to an appeal. On 14 May 2015 federal prosecutors agreed to drop the firearms charge.

Banton was released on 7 December 2018 from McRae Correctional

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Institution.

## Discography

- 1992: *Stamina Daddy* (later repackaged as *Quick*)
- 1992: *Mr. Mention*
- 1993: *Voice of Jamaica*
- 1995: *'Til Shiloh*
- 1997: *Inna Heights*
- 2000: *Unchained Spirit*
- 2003: *Friends for Life*
- 2006: *Too Bad*
- 2009: *Rasta Got Soul*
- 2010: *Before the Dawn*
- 2020: *Upside Down 2020*

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