

REGGAE REBEL GAL

Rebellion: *A Movement Of Truth Without Denial Or Regret* may sound like the latest political soundbite, but it's actually the title of the most foundation-shaking Jamaican dancehall album in the last decade. The fact the CD addresses touchy topics never explored within the genre warrants acknowledgement alone, but the fact a woman dares do it in such a notoriously sexist culture suggests a revolution indeed.

Tanya Stephens, a patois-spitting, husky-voiced, dancehall star, gave the first hint of her transformative talents with 2004's stunning *Gangsta Blues* (VP). Before its release, Stephens was known primarily as a slacklyric DJ who challenged Lady Saw's title of dancehall queen and for her sexual frankness. But *Gangsta Blues* switched her direction. The critically acclaimed CD showcased Stephens' supple vocals as well as her songwriting skills. Leaving the sex songs to just a few of the album's 17 tracks, she tackled the pain and frustration of failed relationships, as well as the crime and corruption that plague Jamaica. *Gangsta Blues* paved the way for Stephens emerging image as an empowered reggae singer-songwriter but it did little to prepare fans for the shock of *Rebellion*.

Rebellion is a two-disc extravaganza, complete with 20 songs, a DVD of acoustic performances, and a cover pose of the singer wearing fatigues, a red communist beret, and a don't-fuck-with-me expression. It all sounds a bit much and it would be for a less-talented artist. At 33-years old, half of them spent in the music business, Stephens has developed her musical skill and self image well enough so there is never an inkling of doubt or hesitation hovering around her performance.

With verses like "Save me from this musical slavery/when non-believers try to nail my hands/to the mic stand . . . fake leaders claim thrones/without building kingdoms/same as the music business in Kingston," you had better be able to stand behind every word. Stephens manages to deliver that and more, stirring up an unlikely brew of political/social commentary, spiritual allusions, and of course, sex. The singer refuses to abandon her raw sexual overtones completely so she combines it with her machete-sharp wit, emotional vulnerability, and political awareness for an unapologetic portrayal of a modern woman taking control of who she is.

The opener and title track announces her mission plainly, with echoes of marching and a crowd yelling: "You're not a statistic/no matter how many or few/in reality all I need to change this shit is you/came to pass in the days of glorifying/everything wrong/that the standard for girls became a bra and thong."

Clearly aware of dancehall's requirement for throbbing riddim's and sexy toasting, Stephens makes sure the initial few songs follow this prescription. "Put It On You" relates a steamy tale of a one-night stand and "To The Rescue" elicits emergency tactics with the lyrics "Well if yuh sex life is dead boss/we a the first pon the scene/like the Red Cross." A masterful chatter, she performs with power and clever metaphor, but these aren't the tunes that stand out. By the seventh song she moves to tracks that reflect her emotional

range and richly evocative vocals. "Damn You" recounts the pain of a rejected lover attending the wedding of her former partner over a rockin' drum and bass, and "The Truth" flows over a hip-swaying rhythm with lyrics conjuring the regret of an affair that still lingers long after it's over.

The catchy pop groove of "Spilt Milk" eloquently combines Stephens' toasting and cocoa-butter-smooth crooning. The melancholy ballad "Cherry Brandy" showcases the singer's ability to seamlessly translate suffering and emotional longing in one clever verse: "Well if me drinking a yuh problem/FU then/me best friend a Mr. Wray and him nephew dem/and if some Heineken a freeze/me haffi rescue them/when it comes to passing the bar/I'm not the best student no."



Tanya Stephens

"Cherry Brandy" serves as a sort of turning point. After that, the album's tone glides into unflinching spiritual/political/social analysis. "Sunday Morning," another spoken-word track, takes on Jamaica's strident Christianity: "It might come as a shock to you but not everyone worships the God of Moses," she says. She goes on to assail the King James Bible for not having one verse from a woman. This is serious stuff in a society that clings to Christianity as closely as it does its class system, but she goes further. The breezy "You Keep Looking Up" proclaims God is everywhere, not just above, and charges of sin and imperfections are false.

"Come A Long Way" throws political grenades worthy of the best pundits. "So we've come a long way from picking cotton/many never thought they'd live to see the day when Bush pick Rice/but if all you've become is another house nigga/baby tell me was it worth all the sacrifice." The searing commentary continues with "Do You Still Care," a detailed examination of racism and homophobia. In a country where being gay is against the law, blatantly dismissing homophobia can be deadly.

Like America, Jamaica's recording system is extremely sexist; only a few women ever make it beyond background singer and sex pin-up. Stephens has managed to leap that obstacle as well as turn a keen eye toward political and social progress. It sounds trite but no reggae artist has accomplished this in the last decade. Even Damian Marley's 2005 hit, *Welcome to Jamrock*, simply retread the path his father laid out 30 years before. In a true rebel mold, Stephens has broken new ground and guided dancehall toward a potentially enlightened future.