

# LITTLE ROY

Anthony Thomas talks to the  
Ital Roots Reggae veteran

Photography by Thabo Jaiyesimi

Little Roy (nee Earl Lowe) spent his teenage years amongst the Roots Reggae greats of the 20th century. He was Jamaica's first singer to have an overtly Rastafarian inspired number one with 'Bongo Nyah' in 1969 at the tender age of 16. The writer of the much covered anthem 'Tribal War', an early member of the Twelve Tribes of Israel in Jamaica, he was once described by Bob Marley as one of his favourite artists and shared a street with Reggae icons Prince Buster and Lee Scratch Perry. Now after many years, Little Roy is back to reclaim his place in the annals of Reggae history. Having recently had his music covered by Irish singer Sinead O'Connor and receiving an invitation to perform at Jamaica's Heineken Star Time Festival, I touched base with him to talk Roots Reggae and Rasta.

**You grew up in a Catholic school but when did you embrace Rastafari?**

"Well, from about the age of 14 becam my first number one 'Bongo Nyah' was at 16. That was one of the first Rasta song in Jamaica to really mek it in de charts in 1969. In those days, artists and musicians would not represent themselves as Rasta; Little Roy was one of the first at the forefront, yeah. So no matter how you see some of them have dreadlocks, is Little Roy who is one of those at the front of the battlefield".

**Who were the singers who inspired you as a youngster?**

"Mighty Sparrow, The Impressions, Otis Redding and Sam Cooke; all those guys. As a yout, I did love Ken Boothe and like Alton Ellis. In de latter days, I get to see dat Bob Marley was de best of de lot. Becah de feeling an de groove an originality is what mek music. Some artists 'ave de feeling and de groove but never 'ave Bob originality".

provided for us. My parents moved to Pembroke Hall and from there most of my teenage years were spent in Washington Gardens".

**When did you decide you wanted to become a vocalist?**

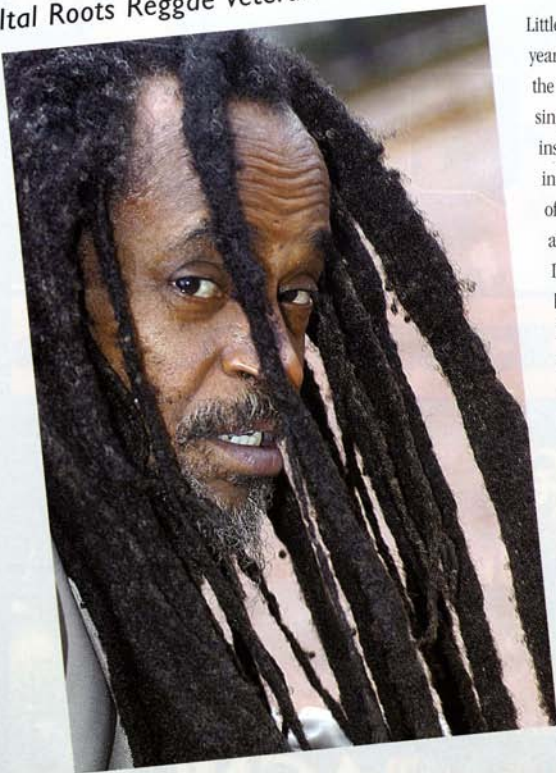
"Well, singing was always around me thru my brother and my cousin; they were usually always singing. I went to a Catholic school where every morning we had to pray and then sing so, it was always around".

**Little Roy, where were you born?**

"I was born in Kingston, Jamaica at Galloway Road right of Walton Park Road".

**What was it like growing up in rough and tough Kingston?**

"Well, I would say as a yout growing up in Kingston, I was not really one of the struggling yout. I did have a set of parents who



**What was the Rastafari movement like in those days and how did you become involved with it?**

"It start first with love between bredrin and bredrin, y'know. There was a bredrin called Phil who lived in Trench Town. When I came to live in Washington Gardens, Phil was amongst us and he was a Rasta, the first I really associated with. Then I find myself reading bible y'know. As you', we could not turn to de church becah de church was hypocrites. We grew up in de church but did realise say something was missing, is like Rasta come and did revolutionise de you' becah de church could not help us".

**How did the media respond to 'Bongo Nyah' in 1969?**

"The media did not mek much criticism about it becah you see some songs are so real and full of fun that even though it say 'none for the pork eater as he shall burn in fire', a man would still be sitting eating pork and laugh same time. It was dat kinda tune. From the first time me sing it to de musicians, dem jus' laugh. Y'know de humour of a ting can change the perspective of people looking on".

**Who was your producer?**

"I worked with Lloyd Daley, y'know Matador. His songs were de songs dat establish me as Little Roy. I gave 'im his biggest hit with 'Bongo Nyah'. They say 'Bongo Nyah' is de biggest song on de island of Jamaica; no other song sell de quantity of dat tune".

**You were an early member of Twelve Tribes of Israel, a Rastafarian organisation whose members included Bob Marley and Dennis Brown...**

"I was part of the organisation since 1970; I was still going school then. As a you' in my young teens, me grow 'mongst de organisation but it was not called Twelve Tribes of Israel it was the Ethiopian World Federation, Charter 15 and then after a time the name change to Twelve Tribes in the early '70s".

**So did you witness Gad man and the birth of Twelve Tribes?**

"Yes! I could say dat my number [because they normally deal in numbers] would be in the teens or early twenties so I was a very early member".

**Where did the name Little Roy come from?**

"Prince Buster actually gave me dat name; he was my next door neighbour when I was growing up in Washington Gardens".

**What inspired you to write the now classic 'Tribal War'?**

"Tribal War was a ting dat was going on in the South [of Jamaica]. Bredrin fighting bredrin and killing each other and dat really inspired me to write de song. But dat was a song dat I was writing for over a year and could not finish it until one day there was a newspaper article showing dat de bredrins, de different gangs came



together and they was sitting up and licking chalice so it gave me de other part of de song 'gangsters sitting up and eating cup, one by one they tek a liddle sup".

**Who were the musicians?**

"Leroy 'Horsemouth' from 'Rockers' play de drum, Dennis Brown pon de bass, Pablo Gad on keyboards and Roy Hamilton play de guitar. It was recorded at Upsetter studio, de Black Ark and Lee Scratch Perry was de engineer".

**Why do you think 'Tribal War' became such an anthem?**

"Well, I want to tell you dat de feeling me get when I was singing 'Tribal War' me never get with any other song. And Tribal War is not going to stop. It is a song dat jus as important now as it was back then".



**How does it feel to be the writer of a Jamaican anthem?**

"It feel really good to know I wrote sumting so powerful

but, if I don't stand up, you will hear de tune an not know is me write it"

**Irish singer, Sinéad O'Connor wanted you to record a duet and a cover of your song 'Jah Can Count On I'...**

"One day, me get a call from Sinéad to write a song. I went up to de studio which was Dave Stewart from the Eurythmics studio. She met me at de studio and we go and do de works. Me and her had a good vibes in de studio and we even appeared on a Irish Chat Show together!"

**I saw you recently on a live recorded show in Belgium, why do you think Roots Reggae music is experiencing such popularity amongst European youth?**

"Well, I don't know; maybe dem 'ave more intelligence than the ones over here. De Roots music teach people, y'know teach de

people wat is really happening until de Ragga ting come corrupt de people and change dem ways. So, maybe dem jus waan live a better life and dat is why dem hold on pon de Roots music. De you inna England maybe dem jus screw up dem face. Right now, there is more support in Europe for de Roots than one can imagine so, de Roots artist still have a chance". [Laughter]

**With the relationship between European youth and Roots Reggae, has the music's demographic changed?**

"Yes, drastically. You see de best of de music come from dat era y'know, those songs play for many years. You see the songs now can only play one and two times but dem tune can still play now. Those musicians used to play wid feeling; de feeling is still there on de records up til now and will not be erased".

**So what do you think about the now generation of Bobo Shanti artists?**

"Well, I wouldn't knock it; I am not sure how to describe it but I would say dat it is still the same backing track dat they are using and it has not changed".