

The Long Way:

JUNIOR BYLES

by Mark Gorney

For a person who once said, "I am a person who scorn and scoff at suffering – I don't like to see it," the quirky and godly singer Kerrie "Junior" Byles has had direct experiences with suffering in ways few of us can imagine. Having endured more genuine tribulation than the strongest of reggae songs, Junior has no parallel in Jamaican music. He has made music as uplifting as his life is difficult, even downright hairy.

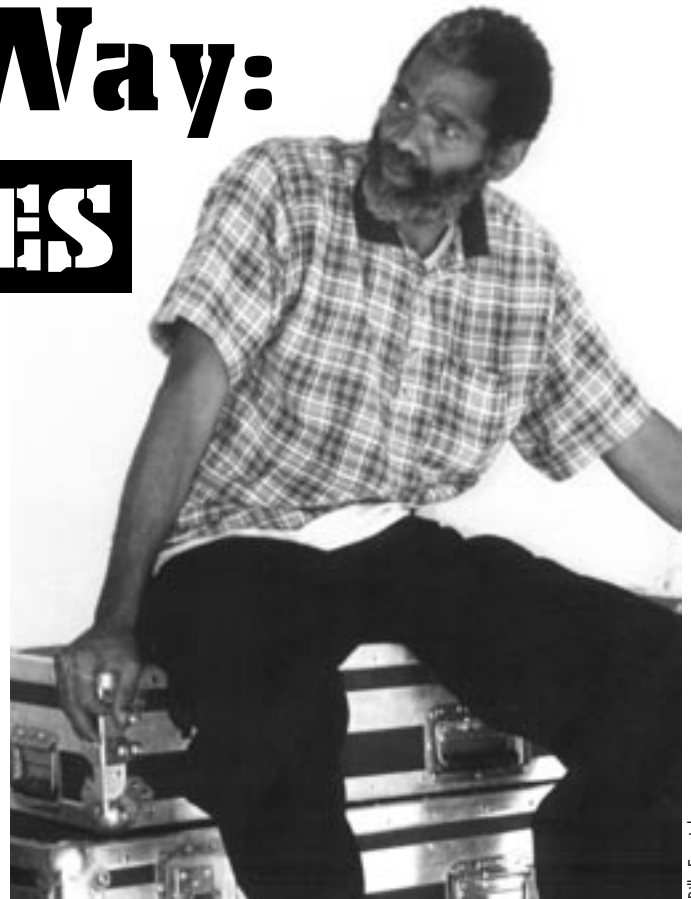
Junior Byles made inimitable records from the 1960s to the 1980s – light, optimistic rocksteady and early reggae through to innocent, plaintive, heavy message roots, some of which are anthems in reggae music. Probably his best known work, "Beat Down Babylon," is a song that holds deep meaning for many – a classic example of eternal protest reggae at its root essence: righteous determination to fight – hell – whip the forces of oppression.

"Junior Byles is a good singer, a humble guy, irie, very humble." Lee Perry

When Junior showed up at Channel One studio to record "Fade Away" in the mid-1970s, he came with bones in his hands, threw them down on the ground and stared up at the sky. When Haile Selassie died, Junior wanted to die with him. As blues guitarist and reggae aficionado Leroy Pierson noted, Junior Byles' character is "equal parts fierce and defiant Rastafarian fundamentalism and a personality described by his contemporaries as profoundly humble."

Born in 1948 in the tough Jonestown ghetto of Kingston, Byles' father worked as a mechanic and his mother taught school. They were strict, deeply religious Christians who made sure he went to church. This would prove to be the seed corn of his brilliant, erratic career. When not singing in church though, Junior was listening to the secular vocals of local stars like the Maytals, the Wailers and the Techniques as well as American artists such as Ray Charles, Nat King Cole and Johnny Cash. As a youth in Jonestown, Junior was called "Chubby" in the neighborhood, and later used this name on recordings.

Circa 1967, Junior formed a group, the Versatiles, to break into music as a career. Junior sang lead while harmony backing was provided by childhood friend Louis Davis along with an East Indian youth named Dudley Earl. Junior and the Versatiles met ace eccentric producer Lee "Scratch" Perry, who at the time was auditioning and recording artists for TV technician Joel "Joe Gibbs" Gibson's fledgling Amalgamated label. Scratch had the Versatiles record the rocksteady numbers "Trust the Book" and



Billy Espejel

"Just Can't Win" with Lyn Taitt and the Jets as backing band, and later "The Time Has Come," which made a gleeful but unsuccessful entry into the 1968 Festival Song competition.

The Versatiles continued to cut surging early reggae for Gibson ("Push It In") as well as Esther Barnett ("Children Get Ready"). These tunes were released in the U.K. and were popular amongst skinheads fond of the new reggae beat.

"I personally desire to see righteousness cover the earth as the way it should be. So then, most of my writing is just based in that channel, you know – to see these things come to a reality. That is my purpose." Junior Byles

Lee Perry and the Wailers started their genius collaboration in 1969 and the next year Scratch brought more genius to the fold when he added Junior to his roster. The super-able Perry rightfully regarded Byles as one of Jamaica's greatest vocalists and the first Upsetter (Lee Perry) productions on Junior were 1970's "Live As One" and "Demonstration & Protest," the latter a version of the Violinaires' "I Don't Know." Possibly because of the name of the original American recording artist, "Demonstration" was given a string arrangement when it was released on Pama records in the U.K.

In 1971, a musical chastisement was cut with Scratch, complete with whip-crack: Byles' potent hit "Beat Down Babylon" figured in the successful efforts of Michael Manley and the People's National Party (PNP) to defeat the conservative, anti-

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Rasta Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in 1971-72. Written in collaboration with childhood friend Harold Meikle, the tune was not only enormously popular in Jamaica but would prove the title of Junior's first album, released abroad as well as in JA, featuring a color photo of a rootsily dapper Junior on the cover.

More distinct, unusual gems from the beginning of the fertile Upsetter/Byles collaboration include the political jab "Pharaoh Hiding," which accused then Prime Minister Hugh Shearer of doing just that, and the sublime "A Place Called Africa," an aching cultural lament about which an essay could be written in which Junior's almost trembling voice seems to rise above the shackles of west Kingston and the collective bad memory of Jamaica's slave-plantation past, like the spirit of an ascetic West Indian saint trying to find God:

**There's a place called Africa, far far away
There's a place called Africa, many miles away
Mama says that's where I'm from
and I know she can't be wrong
Take me back to Africa
Mama how did I get here? How did I stray?
She said once upon a time my son, they stole us on a ship
We had to work and slave each day, the boss he took our pay
But a brighter sun has dawned today
They can't stop us come what may
A time shall come for you and I
She bowed her head and cried
Mama please don't cry**



Most artists can be said to have a year, and for Junior it was arguably 1972, with the *Beat Down Babylon* LP and his own mysterious label Love Power, where he produced himself with the possible assistance of Lee Perry, releasing the fine "Our Mistakes" and the masterful "Black Crisis."

1973's "Cutting Razor" is a heart-rending but beautiful Scratch-produced, Black Ark studio version of Peter Tosh's "Stepping Razor" (written originally either by Joe Higgs, or according to Byles, "a barefooted person"), and 1974's almost breezy "Curly Locks" finds Junior complaining to his girlfriend, "Your father is a pork chop...and he don't want you dealing with me..."

"Curly Locks" sold well (reputedly 60,000 copies), and the other recordings Byles made for Perry ("Auntie Lulu," "Rasta No Pickpocket," "The Long Way") were all of a consistently high caliber but by 1975 Junior stopped recording with Scratch and was onto new producers – and new hardships.

Throughout the latter half of the 1970s, Junior saw spells in mental hospitals but Pete Weston and Micron records released the *Jordan* LP in 1976, and Junior continued to make great records such as "Fade Away" for the Hookims and Channel One (1975), "Know Where You're Going" (1974), "Chant Down Babylon" (1975) and "Pitchy Patchy" (1976) for Dudley Swaby, "Weeping" and "Can You Feel It" (1977) for Lloyd F. Campbell.

"Can You Feel It" is a haunting autobiographical account of his tribulations set to the "Pick Up the Pieces" rhythm, rendered even more poignant by a sense of outrage that few to none were assisting him at the time:

**Yeah he was oppressed and he was afflicted
Yet he opened not his mouth
He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter
And Jah shall knock them out**

**Woe time and time I travel this road
My knees getting weak from the heavy heavy load**



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And I feel it
Sufferation every day
Yeah sufferation every day

Though people stare and criticize
Assertions made up in their own eyes
And I feel it
Yes I feel it every day
Yeah yeah yeah
Yes I feel it every day

Yeah some say this and some say that
Like the Tower of Babel
they don't know where it's at
And I feel it
Yes I feel it every day

Ooh thunder and lightning,
brimstone and fire
Earthquake, yeah
In desolate places
Every day
In desolate places

The road is rocky but my mind is strong
Every day it's getting hotter
in the boiling sun
Can't you feel it?
Can you feel it coming on
On and on
Yes you feel it coming on



It was clear that Junior was feeling it, and his already wobbly mental state was further aggravated by the 1975 death of Haile Selassie. Junior attempted suicide, which prompted a stay in Kingston's Bellevue Mental Hospital: "It was all based on the fact that I wanted to die with His Imperial Majesty. They was tellin' me that he could die, and I was sayin' that he couldn't die. So at that moment I told them it would be best if they could take my life then, because I would be in a better position. They couldn't understand it. So, I got caught up with tablets by the score, pills that you take."

**"I have traveled far and wide - t'rough hills, hedges,
highways and byways where a lot of people is
afraid to go. And I don't believe I've stopped. I'm
still doin' it. That is just part of my duty from day to
day. I already foresee the day when I am not going
to want. I see it. I know it is just around the corner.
Everyday in my life, everyday is just a workin' day.
Don't care how mystic it might look. I just appreciate
beca' I know that as long as I am living clean and
tryin' my best to do what is right,
my reward is endless - priceless."**

Junior continued recording into the late 1970s, and the 1980s saw another international album, this time on the U.S. Nighthawk label, but the '80s and '90s recording opportunities were infrequent and Junior slipped into profound poverty as he tried to keep his mind while in the hell of Kingston and convince producers to do something with him.

Fortunately Junior did not die a tragic death on the streets, as could so easily have happened. With the help of his father and that of guitarist and "Fade Away" composer Earl "Chinna" Smith, in 1998 Junior left Jamaica for the very first time, making his international stage debut at the Sierra Nevada World Music Festival. Despite being unsure of the unfamiliar surroundings, he was enthusiastically and warmly welcomed and gave a good performance, even reaching into his pockets during "Demonstration" and pulling out the empty lining as he sang "...your pockets inna holes."

In 2004 Junior appeared at the Natty Dread We Want concert in the U.K. along with a justice lineup of Horace Andy, Cornel Campbell, Johnny Clarke and Linval Thompson. However Junior's erratic performance, which at one point saw him being pulled off stage, led many in the audience to feel his having been booked for the show was ill-advised – but for others he was the greatest part of it.



***In younger days,
while recording LP with
Nighthawk***

***"Yes, I've been fightin' terrible struggles through creation.
At times, I walk barefoot. At times, you only see me with a
rod and a bundle of fire beside me. Sometimes I live in the hills.
Sometimes, I go away. Sometimes the only t'ing that I have to satisfy
my soul is lightning and thunder and the sun that shine to remind me
that there is still hope for humanity."***

It remains to be seen whether Junior, with assistance from current manager Herbert "Sprinter" Morrison, can stay on course with his medication (the copious ganja interferes), and possibly perform again in the future. Regardless, Junior presently has some people looking after him, and given Jamaica's propensity to neglect the treasure-trove of its vintage artists, this is something we can all be thankful for.

Like Lee Perry, Junior has a merry prankster sense of humor. Producer Lloyd "The Matador" Daley and his wife Deanna once tried to do something with Junior at Randy's studio, but Junior preferred to smoke the chalice and sing, "Mr. and Mrs. Matador have a lot of money to spend..." In the obscure Lee Perry production "Are You Leading Me On," Junior turns Ken Boothe's "Puppet on a String" on its side by practically mumbling, "One day I'll be flat on the ground, the next day I'll look in your ear."

Here's to looking in your ear, Junior. Live it out.

DISCOGRAPHY – Albums:

Beat Down Babylon (Dynamic/Trojan) 1972

Jordan (Micron) 1976

Rasta No Pickpocket (Nighthawk) 1986

Beat Down Babylon: The Upsetter Years (Trojan) 1987

Jordan (Heartbeat) 1988

When Will Better Come 1972-76 (Trojan) 1988

Curly Locks: Best of Junior Byles and the Upsetters 1970-76 (Heartbeat) 1997

Junior Byles and Friends – 129 Beat Street: Ja-Man Special 1975-1978

(Blood & Fire) 1998

For singles, please consult Roots Knotty Roots. ♡

Mark Gorney has written about Jamaican music for The Beat, Wax Poetics, Global Rhythm and Full Watts. The director of the short documentary film Before Reggae Hit the Town, he is currently the owner of Worldisc, a world music and reggae publicity agency (www.worldisc.net).
