



THRILL OF LOVING SERVICE

by Pato Banton

After 15 years of recording and touring with the Reggae Revolution, I was growing weary of a corrupt music industry, mismanagement and band politics. I had been contemplating a change, something that would allow me to spend more quality time with my family and give me an opportunity to get back in touch with the community. I had enjoyed a very successful career, felt fulfilled and needed a new challenge.

At every crossroad on my journey through life I have learned that guidance is best found in moments of prayerful contemplation. After deep meditation and soul searching, the answer came through as a feeling that I should direct my efforts towards education.

Being involved with my dad's sound system (and the night life associated therewith) at just 8 years old, caused me to lose interest with school. I spent more time skipping than attending, and was

duly expelled at age 14. Although I never returned, I always yearned for the day when I could find the time for an academic qualification. So when my spirit guide pointed the way, my first thought was that it was time to achieve a long-cherished desire. My album *Life Is a Miracle* (2000) had just been nominated for a Grammy and Peter Gabriel's World of Music, Art and Dance WOMAD organization invited me to headline a world tour with many great artists, asking if I would be interested in doing music workshops for young people in the various countries.

The workshops gave me a chance to interact with a wide range of people on a personal level. I would talk about my chosen art form, global issues, spirituality and what had inspired me to play reggae music. I answered questions and got members of the crowd to join the band and me in a jam session. The tour took us from England to the Canary Islands, Singapore, Malaysia and Australia. The most memorable workshops also included visits to a youth prison in Sicily and an emotional day with a brass band of 70+ youths in the poorest neighborhood of Soweto, South Africa.

The final leg of the tour took us across the U.S. As I rushed around my hotel room getting ready, the phone rang. A sad voice calling from England explained that two of my sons had been shot in a drive-by-shooting!

Top: Summer play scheme, UK By Eye N Eye Art

Left: Pato live By Eye N Eye Art



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Workshop in Soweto By Eye N Eye Art

I had always tried to prepare myself mentally for the day when I would be on tour and receive bad news. Coming from a large family, having seven sons and four daughters of my own and living in a community where black-on-black crime had never been higher, it was only a matter of time before trouble would come knocking at my door.

They were only 13 and 14 at the time and as far as I knew were not involved in any gangs. They had gone to a party at the local community center and when they came outside, they saw a hooded man with a sawed-off shotgun sneaking up on one of the parents who was waiting in his car. As he took aim, one of my sons shouted "GUN!" which caused the guy in the car to avoid the blast, but at the same time left my boys in the line of fire. By saving another man's life, my son unwittingly risked his own.

After some quick investigating, I found the masked gunman to be the only son of someone I knew quite well. It took me two days to figure out how I could locate him and three days to decide on a course of action. The emotional me wanted to take revenge; the logical me wanted to pay someone

else to do it; but the spiritual me wanted to become a part of the solution to a much bigger problem. Another night of stillness gave me all the answers to my questions and equipped me with the tools I needed to take this mission forward. Even though I didn't fully understand everything that came to me, I knew I had the faith and patience required for whatever the future had in store. I informed the band, management, family and friends that I had come to the end of my musical path and was about to journey into the unknown. The feedback was mixed, but my mind was made up.

The poorest neighborhoods of Birmingham, UK are located directly around the city center. You can jump on a #8 bus in any direction and it will take you through areas where mostly black people live and where gang-related crime is at its worse. In search of a place to begin my mission, I spoke to a shopkeeper on the #8 route that had space in a building she was using for equipment repairs (next door to the Highgate Community Center). I told them of my desire to get involved with the local youths and that I wanted to move my rehearsal equipment and home-recording studio here to give young people a chance to make music. They thought it was an awesome idea – the foundation was set.

I told everyone about the plan and invited them to join me, but only four people came forward: Angus Jones (my sound engineer for 10 years), Winston Carr (toured the world with me as a fan, then friend, then roadie, then stage manager), my brother Major (who got his first taste working in the recording studio with me) and my sister Audrey (who loved music and wanted to help out in any way she could). We laid wooden floors and covered all the walls in carpet. We had a reception area, music technology suite with four computers, a 56-channel digital recording studio, fully equipped rehearsal room with wall-to-wall mirrors and dance floor.

The kids at the community center were all excited and very eager to get involved so we started an enrollment sheet. By the time we were ready to start I had exhausted all my finances. The landlords were so impressed with how



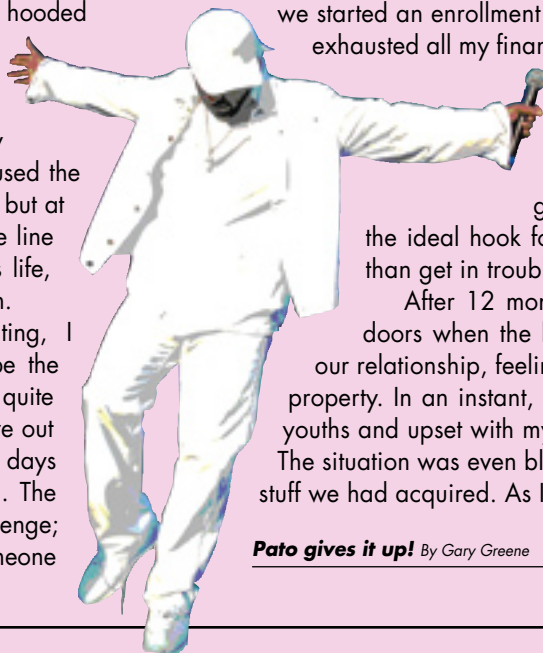
Muzik Links dance performance By Viv Taylor

nice the place was looking they agreed to suspend rent payments and become partners in the venture. We planned to generate an income commercially, while at the same time giving back to those less fortunate. It would be the ideal hook for the street kids who had nothing better to do than get in trouble.

After 12 months of hard work we were ready to open the doors when the landlords called me to their offices and ended our relationship, feeling weary about allowing local youths onto their property. In an instant, it was over. I felt sad for my team, sad for the youths and upset with myself for not protecting our dream contractually. The situation was even bleaker as I had no idea where to put all the new stuff we had acquired. As I sat down to contemplate my options, I heard a

voice say, "Hello, is anyone there?"

It turned out to be Christine



Pato gives it up! By Gary Greene

Braddock, Principal of Matthew Boulton College. They had heard about our set-up and were curious to know if there was a way to create a link with our services, as they didn't have a music department. I explained our situation, our desire to provide service to the community and offered to move my studios into the college. In less than an hour, my hopeless situation was totally transformed and I realized the truth in the saying, "As one door closes, another opens."

The following months were awesome! The principal dedicated an entire floor to the new music department, also allowing us areas for community activities. For the college we offered accredited courses in Sound Engineering, Music Technology, and DJ Skills, generating income, while also providing community classes in DJ Skills, Dance Lessons, Vocal Tuition, Studio Production and Live Performance. As the hired professionals did the renovating and decorating, our team took courses in teacher training and counseling skills. I also completed the level 2 teacher training course, while reading books on team management and curriculum development. We named our department S.M.A.A.T. (School of Musical Arts and Technology).

During this same period I attended a multicultural fundraising meeting with community workers from 16 different parts of the city. Viv Taylor (Head of Community Safety in the Handsworth area) was so impressed with our works that she convinced everyone to join forces under my umbrella organization, Musical Connections. As each community center received funds to purchase music equipment and computers, our team would volunteer services and set up the gear. We showed the community workers how to use equipment and computer software so they could teach the young people. In return, they agreed to send all interested youths to the college where we could nurture, educate, mentor and provide advice and guidance in various career routes.

There are no words that can convey the joy and satisfaction that is felt when a distant dream becomes a reality – especially when it concerns getting

involved with roughneck youths with bad attitudes and seeing them grow and progress. All young people love some aspect of music – the magnet that brought hundreds of youth through our doors. Music gave them a chance to break down race and turf barriers while pursuing and fulfilling their goals. It was so good to see rival gang members sitting in the same classroom, learning how to create their own music – even more amazing to see them in the recording studio, producing beats together and rapping on the same microphone!

There were many success stories, but the greatest thing was seeing students take our music courses, continue to teacher training courses and then go back to their own community centers to teach the next generation.

During the following five years I created Muzik Links, an organization employing the services of over 80 singers, musicians and technicians to provide outreach music workshops to young people in schools and training centers in four different cities. Muzik Links would also act as the final arena to prepare serious musicians and artists for the music industry.

From teaching kindergarteners motor skills to play percussion instruments, to providing outreach at prisons and centers for people with mental disabilities, my roles were diverse. I worked as Music Development Officer for the Birmingham City Council; Assistant Director of Creative Studies at South Birmingham College; Music Adviser at Lordwood

Girls School and Curriculum Development Officer at George Salter High School.

The whole team supported me when I joined forces with the West Midlands Police Force and Partnership Against Crime to deliver music-related activities to gang members and young people at risk. We even convinced some of the really talented gang members who wanted to make a change, to create a double CD



Spreading the good news By Eye N Eye Art

called *Stop the Gunz*. 12 months later, the police department said our efforts, "had considerably reduced the number of gun-related incidences across the city." It was at this point that I heard the call from my spiritual mentor, Yake Boda, to "go forth and gather the people in Praise!"

My time had come to pass the torch and continue on my musical journey.

With God, anything is possible. Through all this I have learned that the thrill of loving service is the most satisfying experience that life has to offer.

One Love Always. ☺



Pato Banton has been performing for over 25 years, with more than 10 albums to his credit and successful collaborations with the English Beat's David Wakeling and Ranking Roger, UB40, Peter Spence, Steel Pulse and Sting. Pato created the community networks Musical Connections and Muzik Links whose aims are to attract at-risk youth involved in crime and gang activities, giving them opportunities in professional recording, dance troupes and live performance. Pato is currently touring the U.S. with the Mystic Roots Band. His new studio album Destination Paradise is due for release on 08.08.08. www.patobanton.com and www.myspace.com/patobanton